Beyond Communication. A Critical Study of Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy
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by

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A mes trois génies
La moyenne et la petite
Et la grande
Honneth’s theory of recognition has attracted widespread attention since the publication of *The Struggle for Recognition* in Germany in 1992 and in 1995 in the English translation. The new model of “critical theory” that the book and subsequent articles presented has been debated in countries throughout the world, from a great variety of disciplinary angles in the humanities and the social sciences. To date, however, discussions of Honneth’s work have rarely included more than passing reference to his writings prior to his 1992 *magnum opus*. The present study aims to broaden the hermeneutic horizon in which Honneth’s theory of recognition is received, by proposing a critical review of Honneth’s entire work, from his very first texts to the latest publications.

This broadening of the hermeneutic gaze aims to achieve several exegetical and theoretical goals. The first and very simple aim of this study is to give a full image of the extent of Honneth’s contribution to contemporary philosophy. From the perspective of an immanent, genealogical reconstruction of Honneth’s work, *The Struggle for Recognition* is an amazing achievement in that the book manages to bring together in succinct and
coherent manner a great number of separate issues, topics, intuitions, theses, and arguments that were developed in the fifteen years preceding it, in rapidly evolving theoretical contexts. However, separated from this rich genealogy and from the equally rich sequels expanding it, the theses presented in *The Struggle for Recognition* might appear vague or insufficiently developed. One risks not seeing the full theoretical depth and breadth contained in some of its formulations. Consequently, readers who focus mainly on this book as the main or sole entry point into Honneth’s work risk having an impoverished image of his overall contribution to contemporary debates. This study’s first aim is to rectify this. As the book will attempt to show, the interpretation of *The Struggle for Recognition* and of Honneth’s mature theory of recognition more generally are greatly enriched when they are viewed against the backdrop of the rich work that preceded it.

The problems stemming from the potentially narrow basis on which the reception of Honneth’s writings occurs are compounded by the tendency of contemporary political and social philosophy to restrict itself to questions of normative justification. As a result, the narrow exegetical basis is paralleled by the narrowness of the theoretical lens. A broader, genealogical approach to Honneth’s later work helps to highlight the significant contribution it has made to issues we might call “ontological” in a weak sense, by contrast with the exclusively normative concerns of much contemporary philosophy: for example issues around the theory of intersubjectivity, a contemporary philosophy of history, or the theory of society. For example, as chapter 11 will attempt to show, Honneth has articulated a series of fascinating and highly original insights on the logic of social reproduction underpinning economic orders, challenging commonly accepted assumptions about the systematic nature of markets.

By attempting to highlight the full extent and originality of Honneth’s contribution to contemporary debate, from social psychology, social theory, critical sociology to moral and political philosophy, this book hopes to serve not just exegetical but also direct theoretical purposes. Indeed, this study attempts to make its own, independent contribution, on the back of Honneth’s work, as it were, via an immanent, critical argument that is threaded chapter by chapter.
My critique of Honneth can only be immanent since I am convinced that his theory of recognition represents a substantial renewal of contemporary social and political philosophy. But the critical line developed here is also immanent in a second sense, directly connected with the genealogical methodology. I am applying to Honneth his own method of critical exegesis, a method he so effectively articulated in *Critique of Power*, and in many other texts. Honneth’s original method of exegetical reconstruction consists in highlighting in the author he studies a fundamental “fork” in the conceptual road. At one stage, the thinker in question saw an alternative route and for a moment developed some of the features of that other model. But then stronger underlying premises took over and the alternative path was never revisited. Often, Honneth finds in the thinkers he studies highly evocative, programmatic indications not fully realised or later abandoned, for a social theory revolving around the notion of a struggle for recognition. In Horkheimer, this is the theory of “cultural action”; in Habermas, the brief vision of the history of the species as a process of moral conflicts rather than as dual processes of rationalisation. I find a similar “fork in the road” in Honneth’s own development. In order to characterise and give sufficient philosophical credence to this alternative theory of recognition hidden in the official one, the genealogical route is the most effective one as it allows me to identify important features of it in the main authors who influenced Honneth on his way to recognition, namely, in Marx, Feuerbach, Horkheimer, Adorno, Mead and Hegel himself. This explains why I spend so much time on these authors, sometimes launching into independent readings of these authors beyond what Honneth has said about them. The purpose of these readings is not antiquarian but directly systematic. To use another image: next to, or perhaps within, the intellectual tradition Honneth delineated as the cradle of his theory of recognition, from Feuerbach to Hegel to Marx, to Mead to Winnicott, there might well be another path, very close to the former, but “ending” at a different point, emphasising a different philosophical vision. The line I will try to uncover chapter by chapter is a Hegel-Feuerbach-Marx-Mead-Merleau-Ponty line. Between these two lines, key authors like Adorno and Habermas are approached slightly differently.

So what is the core feature of this “alternative theory of recognition” implicitly carried by the official one? It is based around the idea that recognition is only one, if perhaps the most important, of a number of interrelated yet
different constitutive relations of interaction of the human subject with its environments. This basic idea is for example well illustrated by Habermas in his readings of the Jena Hegel, with the definition of spirit as the articulation of three separate yet reciprocally dependent dialectics (language, labour and interaction) functioning as “media” that link the human subject to its natural and social environments. The critical implication of this basic idea is that it is an abstraction to reduce interaction to intersubjectivity and the latter to interpersonal interaction. Rather, both for descriptive and normative purposes, it is important to keep in view the number of ways in which human subjects and collectives form and define themselves through interactions with different types of environments. In particular, it is essential, including for purely normative purposes, to keep in view the embodied nature of the socialised subject; to also keep in view the fact that many forms of interpersonal interactions are materially mediated and so depend on “objectual” or “material” reality at some level or another; and finally that one of the most significant interactions impacting on the human subject are interactions with, or rather, within social institutions. All of this was to be found in the authors that helped Honneth formulate his theory of recognition. Instead of pursuing this substantive definition of interaction, however, Honneth preferred to restrict it to intersubjectivity defined narrowly as interaction between subjects, as “intersubjectivity”.

The book is structured into three parts. The first part is dedicated to Honneth’s early writings and attempts to retrace the conceptual line that took the young neo-Marxist gradually to Hegel and the theme of recognition via the reception of first generation Critical Theory and Habermas. The second part focuses on the philosophical foundations of the mature theory of recognition, by delving in some detail into Honneth’s readings of Hegel, Mead and the tradition of philosophical anthropology. The third part studies the different aspects of the mature theory of recognition and aims to highlight its theoretical relevance and significance. The conclusion briefly sheds light on the alternative immanent line that runs throughout Honneth’s thinking as a more substantive theory of interaction in which recognition is only one, albeit the most important, of the structural forms of engagement with the world defining the human subject.
Overall, the book aims to show that Honneth’s theory of recognition is a serious new candidate to fulfil the programme of Critical Theory. If that were true, then we could say that, in terms of paradigm, “recognition” has replaced, or at least displaced, “communication”. But it might also be the case that Honneth’s approach to recognition is still too indebted to Habermasian, communicative premises, which might explain his unwillingness to conceptualise interaction in a more substantial sense, despite what some of his key references indicated to him. In that case, we would have before us a new programme of research in Critical Theory: this time, to definitively take recognition “beyond communication”.
Part One

On the Way to Recognition: from Marx to Habermas
One of the most important exegetical keys to understanding the full scope and intent of Honneth’s social philosophy, this book will argue, is its complex relationship to Marx.\footnote{I have attempted to emphasise this aspect of Honneth’s work in “Les Horizons Marxistes de l’Ethique de la Reconnaissance”, *Actuel Marx*, 38, 2005, pp. 159-178.} Even if the emblematic author of reference for Honneth today is Hegel, the ethics of recognition upon which the recent work continues to build was in fact first developed as an intervention in discussions in critical social theory where the problem of the correct use and interpretation of Marxism was the central issue. At that time, the reference to Hegel was a means for non-Hegelian end, an alternative way to found a critical theory of society whose basic theoretical and practical premises were certainly not Hegelian but materialist.

A similar point can be made in reference to Honneth’s self-conscious positioning within Frankfurt School Critical Theory. After the more or less orthodox, historical materialism of the first generation of Critical Theory had been abandoned by the founders of the School in the face of historical catastrophes, and after Habermas’ own theoretical proposals had emerged out of a critical encounter with both Marxism and his predecessors in Frankfurt, Honneth saw the possibility of continuing the project of critical theory as it had been originally formulated, and which includes in its definition the irreducible reference to Marxist concerns and arguments, paradoxically at first, in a return to Hegel and his strong inter-subjectivism.

If these claims sound too strong at a systematic level, at least they will be difficult to reject on a genealogical one. The thesis that Honneth’s model is
Hegelian only to the extent that it wants to fulfil a programme that was best formulated by Marx, rather than Hegel, is supported first of all by the historical development of Honneth’s thought. From his first article “History and Interaction” (1977), to “Work and Instrumental action” (1980), to the first section of Social Action and Human Nature, to the passages referring to Marx in The Critique of Power (1985), to the texts on the Frankfurt School most of Honneth’s writings before The Struggle for Recognition were dedicated to the critical reading of Marx and the implications of it in the renewed attempt at a critical theory of society. The editor of many collections, Honneth’s first two collections, edited in collaboration with Urs Jaeggi, were both dedicated to the then current debates around the interpretation of Marx, to “Theories of Historical Materialism”. All the other articles of that period, those on Sartre, Bourdieu, Merleau-Ponty and the young Lukács in particular, were written from the perspective of the normative, neo-Marxist position established in the texts just quoted. Honneth started to turn towards Hegel only around 1990, around the time in which he was finishing The Struggle for Recognition (published in 1992). In Honneth’s early writings, Hegel featured very rarely, and only as one figure amongst others in the tradition of “social philosophy”. It is only once Honneth became aware of the path he needed to take in order to solve the problem of re-grounding critical social theory that he made Hegel his central reference. But the fundamental programme of research, notably in its relation to real politics, had been well delineated beforehand, in non-Hegelian terms. The reflective glance that Honneth casts in the preface to The Fragmented World of the Social, the English edition of his early articles, in 1995, shows this very clearly.

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3 Theorien des Historischen Materialismus was published in 1977 and Arbeit, Normativität, Handlung in 1980.

4 Honneth, The Fragmented World of the Social, pp. xi-xxv. See in particular the statement page xvii: “The attempt to reconstruct the legacy of Marxist theory from the perspective of the theme of recognition”.
Such a genealogical argument admittedly means little if the research of which the genealogy is established is marked by strong discontinuities. More than one social theorist has by now reneged upon his or her Marxist past, or rather, few have not. In the case of Honneth, however, not only are his most recent writings returning to key notions of the Marxist tradition; more deeply, it can be shown that the Marxist context of Honneth’s early writings has shaped his mature model in major ways, even when Marx no longer featured as the central reference and had been replaced by Hegel, Mead or Winnicott. In other words, even if Honneth himself is no longer a Marxist, his theory of recognition remains irreducibly linked to the concepts and aims of Marx’s own critical stance.

The general purpose of the following three chapters is to describe the genealogy and content of Honneth’s own version of a critical theory of society. We look at Honneth’s critical reading of Marx (chapter 1). This critique of Marx is fundamental for understanding his critique of the first generation of Frankfurt School Critical Theory (chapter 2). The relationship between the critical readings of Marx and of Habermas is extremely complex in Honneth. On the one hand, Honneth accepts some of Habermas’ fundamental objections to Marx’s original theory. Basically, it is from the perspective of a “communicative theory of society” that Honneth first intervened in the debates on the interpretation of Marx and Marxism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But Honneth’s reception of Habermas is far from uncritical. The complexity of this relationship stems from the fact that the many critical objections brought against Habermas are themselves inspired by Honneth’s early neo-Marxist position. It is not a coincidence that Honneth’s central concept, the struggle for recognition, is directly reminiscent of Marx’s notion of “class struggle”. One could say that Honneth uses Habermas to correct Marx, and Marx to correct Habermas. Recognition replaces communication as the central notion, which itself was a correction to the centrality of labour in a materialist theory of society. Chapter 3 attempts to describe this complex toing and froing from Marx to Habermas, and back to Marx, in Honneth’s idea of critical theory.
Chapter One

Honneth’s Marx. Social Action and Human Nature (1), and first articles

A theory of social action and social emancipation

In view of the early articles published by Honneth, the most appropriate way of characterising his early critique of Habermas, and his early research in social philosophy more generally, is by saying that it understood itself as the attempt to develop a new philosophy of praxis. By this was meant first of all, in the 1970s, for Habermas himself, but also for many other Marxist writers in the West, a theory of society that attempted to reflectively account for its link with the social life in which it is embedded, and in particular, that attempted to account for its links with the goals of social action understood as emancipation from domination.¹ In

theoretical terms, this led to the privileging of hypotheses in social theory that would make it possible to explain the possibility of, and justify normatively, the life of society as a praxis, or as “social action”. This therefore led to theories of society that would be able to maintain an image of individuals and groups as social, and indeed historical agents, rather than just characters in a world-historical play, or passive material for functional or systemic forces.

Such an attempt at a renewed philosophy of praxis was substantially linked with the attempts at “reconstructing historical materialism”, that is to say with a critical pursuit of the Marxist programme, involving both a critical reading of Marx and the Marxist tradition, and an assessment of how best to pursue the spirit of this programme once its letter had proven outdated, both in terms of its literal concepts and in terms of historical evolution. This intimate link between a renewed philosophy of praxis and a critical reconstruction of historical materialism obviously finds a foothold in interpretations of historical materialism, those interpretations namely that see it as itself entailing the idea of social action, the idea that “human beings make history”, as the German Ideology had put it. Indeed, this is a good summary of the fundamental intuition that Honneth brings to social philosophy: the notion of the real efficacy of individual and collective agency in the reproduction, and indeed in the historical transformation of society. And indeed Honneth wants to defend the interpretation according to which this is what Marx had in mind with the idea of a “materialist” conception of history.

Such insistence on the normative dimension in the interpretation of historical materialism finds a model and inspiration in Habermas’ early writings. Throughout them, from Theory and Practice (1963 for the first edition in German) to Reconstructions of Historical Materialism (1971), the leading insight is the discovery of “the uncontrolled element in the communication between citizens discussing and acting together”, next to the separate rationality of sci-

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2 See in particular Habermas’ long essay “Between Philosophy and Science: Marxism as Critique”, in Theory and Practice, pp. 195-252: “We want to assure ourselves of the structure (of Marxist theory) as a philosophy of history, explicitly undertaken with political aims, and yet scientifically falsifiable without feeling any embarrassment at exploiting the advantages of those born later: of understanding Marx better than he understood himself”, p. 212.
ence, technology and the laws of economic reproduction. In the well-known terms of one of the most important texts of that period, there is a second mechanism of social integration next to social labour, namely “interaction”, the reciprocal understanding between social agents over societal norms and values. Famously, whilst labour is required as the most basic condition enabling human beings to survive materially, interaction, the intersubjective agreement over norms, enables them to live together in a properly human society. As Habermas put it, labour liberates humans from outer, and interaction, from inner nature. This fundamental insight, the core intuition inspiring Habermas’ whole work throughout its different phases, also represents the most fundamental premise in Honneth’s thinking.

One crucial dimension to stress is that the link uniting these different strands—social action, the Habermasian communicative turn in social theory, and Marx’s historical materialism—is not a theoretical but a practical one, the “practical intention”, as Habermas puts it repeatedly in his earlier essays, of accompanying, or helping to bring about, social emancipation. The theory of social action is driven by the need and the hope of grounding social emancipation. One could say that the theory of social action, as social theory, is grounded in the theory of emancipation, in both the objective and the subjective senses of the term. First it is a theory of society that studies the possibility of emancipation through social transformation, in an objective, “social-scientific” sense, by inquiring into the sociological grounding of change, an inquiry that requires a series of answers to complex methodological and conceptual questions. This is the fundamental reason behind its favouring a normative premise, since it is only if the social order is conceived of as the result of practical, intersubjective relations amongst socialised individuals, that society can be seen to be at all transformable by those same agents. Functionalist theories or theories of social relations that conceive of the latter in purely instrumental terms leave no room in their conceptual grammar for any meaningful possibility of emancipation that would be the result of the active transformation of society by the social actors themselves. In this sense, the theory of social action has the ambition of giving a scientific description

3 Habermas, Theory and Practice, p. 75.
4 See, once again, the introduction to Theory and Practice, p. 1.
of a society integrated in normative ways because this is the condition for the possibility of transformation towards emancipation. But the theory of social action is also a theory of emancipation in a subjective sense of the genitive, in the sense that it conceives of itself as reflecting, as explaining, and justifying from within, the social movements aiming for emancipation. The theory of social action as a theory of emancipation is, in that sense, the theorising of social emancipation by itself.

This twofold relationship between the theory and the praxis of emancipation was obviously already a defining feature of Marx’s own social theory but it was also articulated in this sense in the most explicit way by the first generation of Critical Theory. In other words, because of its insistence on the strong unity of theory and practice, Honneth’s approach to Marx was from the beginning, even before he fully realised it, destined to veer towards Frankfurt style Critical Theory. Moreover, the classical link between theory and practice, which was developed and self-reflectively adopted by the first generation of Critical Theory, also means that the conceptual work of the philosopher is complemented by, and complements, the empirical research of social scientists. The theory of social action then is the theory of real, existing struggles for emancipation (or their default) as they are studied by the special sciences (psychology and sociology in particular). In summary, it is not exaggerated to say that the theory of social action entails both a theory of subjectivity (a theory of freedom, of the possibility of social and historical agency) and a theory of society, both of which however are driven by the more fundamental, practical intent of emancipation.

To sum up, in his earliest writings Honneth was revisiting Marx’s theses and was intervening in the contemporary debates around the interpretation of historical materialism in order to secure a praxis-oriented theory of social transformation, following in critical ways the communicative turn suggested by Habermas. The different critical re-readings of Marx of that early period were all attempts at “reactualising” the notion of social and historical action as positive transformation of society, with, within and against Marx. In the context of the Marxist tradition, Honneth was defending the “class-struggle” line of Marxist social theory versus the more functionally minded “historical-materialist” one. All the critical points made by Honneth in his early articles are inspired by the goal of securing the possibility of social and histor-
ical action. These critical points are all articulated amongst three major axes: a methodological, an anthropological and a conceptual one about work. These axes can be analytically distinguished but are in fact tightly interwoven.

**Methodological problems of Marxist exegesis**

The first critical axis of Honneth’s reconstruction of Marxist social theory concerns the change in methodology between Marx’s early and mature writings. Honneth consistently defends the same argument in all of his first texts, right through to *The Struggle for Recognition*. Drawing on German scholarship of the early 1970s, he argues that in Marx’s early writings, the critique of capitalism was underpinned by the notion of alienated labour, which was itself based on an anthropological image of the human being as a social being producing its own inner and outer natures, and indeed, to some extent, its own environment. By contrast, Honneth argues early on that in *Capital*,

Marx no longer describes capitalist social relations from the immediate standpoint of human subjectivity, as a relation of alienation, but rather immanently follows the capitalist suppression of subjectivity.

This shift corresponds to the methodological return to Hegel whereby “capital’s becoming autonomous can be presented in the same terms used to describe the process of the spirit’s coming to know itself”. Honneth accepts this specific, far from uncontested reading of Marx by the German

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7 Ibid., see also A. Honneth & H. Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, trans. R. Meyer, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 24. The extent to which Marx remained influenced by Hegel, especially in the methodology of *Capital* is obviously one of the most decisive questions in Marxist exegesis. For a clear, contemporary analysis of the methodological stakes of this question, see E. Renault, *Marx et l’Idée de Critique*, Paris, PUF, 1995, pp. 90-92. The work of J. Bidet represents without a doubt the most substantive contemporary attempt to critically retrieve, without dogmatism, the acumen of Marx’s
scholarship of the 1970s, according to which in the mature Marx, Capital does indeed take the place of Spirit, whilst the Hegelian criterion of scientific exposition is retained. This is the idea according to which the process of the scientific presentation should always remain self-immanent and develop through the dialectical transition between sublated and sublating categories, moving from the most basic and abstract categories to the most complex, in such a way, however, that the end returns to the beginning having clarified the whole movement of reality in the process.

On this reading, it is a mistake to take literally Capital’s metaphor of economic agents as “character masks”, and thus to argue that for the mature Marx social action is only a functional parameter in the reproduction of capital, and history the unfolding of structural laws determined in the last instance by the economic structure. Indeed,

> In the critique of political economy Marx abstracts from social relations of interaction, because he wishes theoretically to expound only those domains of reality which have already been subsumed by the capitalist process of valuations.8

Such abstraction, however, does not mean that Marx abandoned altogether, either the anthropologically grounded normative background developed explicitly in his early writings, or the action-theoretic perspective of his historical accounts of the social changes of his time. The anthropological background and the normative assumptions it carries cannot be simply abandoned since Marx continues, right up until Capital, to denounce abstract labour and the capitalistic valuation process as a defacing of human labour. Such critique of abstract labour, however, implies a normative view of the role of labour in individual and social development, whether or not such normative view must then be taken to entail an implicit or explicit moral theory. The action-theoretic perspective in Marx’s writings comes to light as soon as one compares the “functionalist” analyses of Capital with the “action-theoretic” texts of the historical studies. A brief bibliographical reflection might be warranted here.

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8 Honneth, “History and Interaction”, p. 100.
In 1977, Honneth acknowledges that “no systematic study of the categorical mismatch between Marx’s economic writings and his political or ethnological works” could be cited to buttress this argument of a discrepancy between the methodologies in the “systematic” economic and the historical writings.\(^9\) Clearly, this was no longer the case a few years later with the debate between G.A. Cohen’s and Jon Elster’s “analytical” reconstructions of Marx’s theory of history, which centred to a great extent on the diverging, at times indeed seemingly contradictory, methodological strategies in Marx’s approaches to modern history, between the economic-functional and the historical—“class-struggle” perspectives.\(^10\) Closer to Honneth’s intellectual landscape, two important post-Marxist studies, Jean Cohen’s \textit{Class and Civil Society} (1983) and John Rundell’s \textit{Origins of Modernity} (1985) provided late justifications for his early hypothesis. These two studies especially informed Honneth’s more assured rejection of functionalist readings of Marx in 1992, in \textit{The Struggle for Recognition}.\(^11\) Moreover, Honneth was able to connect his critical stance within Marxist exegesis with the insight gained in his early sociological work and buttressed by the readings of ground-breaking, anti-Althusserian Marxist studies, regarding the moral content of social struggles.\(^12\)

Ironically, therefore, Althusser’s famous structuralist interpretations of Marx’s development, and of the methodology of \textit{Capital}, suffer from an Hegelian illusion. Because he did not see how much \textit{Capital} was still indebted to Hegel’s Logic, Althusser misinterpreted Marx’s self-conscious abstract description of social life and social subjects as “character masks” making up a passive


material for structural forces. According to the young Honneth, Althusser “wrenches the analysis of capital apart from the unique historical context in which it is theoretically located,” and generalises it into a general theory of history and society.\(^\text{13}\)

It is only the tacit transformation of the restricted view of reality employed in Marx’s critique of political economy into the whole truth of Marxist theory of society that allows the Althusser School to reconstruct historical materialism upon the foundation of structuralist theory.\(^\text{14}\)

Later on we will see how this early critique of structuralist Marxism in fact announces a more general rejection of all functionalist readings of Marx, and indeed an even more general rejection of functionalist social theories. It is worth pointing out also that the ultimate reason behind the rejection of structuralist Marxism is a practical, and not just a theoretical one:

> How is a theory of society supposed to be able to understand in any way and to any degree the social learning processes in which it, as an interpretation of the given situation, could acquire political power, if it previously believed that it had to leave out of consideration all historical nexuses of action?\(^\text{15}\)

In his early writings, history is of interest to Honneth mainly as the context of social action, that is, as the context in which the transformation of society can potentially occur.

One significant attendant aspect of this rejection of an epistemological break between the early and the mature Marx lies in the question of the basic methodological position underpinning the continuity in Marx’s thinking. In most interpretations sharing the rejection of an epistemological break in Marx, this is found in an anthropological notion of the human individual and human society. We will see in the next section as well as in chapter 5 how Honneth’s anthropological reading of Marx led him, or perhaps was inspired by, the conviction that the normative content of social theory needs to be grounded in a philosophical anthropology. We will see how Honneth was able, right at the

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\(^\text{13}\) Honneth, “History and Interaction”, p. 100.


\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., p. 31.
beginning of his intellectual journey, to provide a sophisticated justification for what is a most unfashionable methodological foundation for a normative social theory.

Another aspect of the anti-break thesis, however, that is developed explicitly by Honneth is a critical stance towards Marx’s own methodological obfuscations. Honneth bemoans the fact that Marx’s continued use of Hegel’s speculative logical apparatus borrowed from the *Science of Logic* made the confusion about the lack of action-theoretical perspective in *Capital* even possible. The methodology of an analysis of contemporary society that self-consciously abstracts from all that escapes what has already been subjected to the reifying laws of self-valuing value, constantly risks forgetting its own, self-imposed methodological limitations. It is constantly on the verge of generalising from the analysis of the economic system to an analysis of society as a whole, and thus creates its own path towards empirically false and practically counter-productive conclusions. In particular, it runs the risk of remaining blind to forms of social suffering that are not directly traceable to the labour process, but are rooted in the social structure. It runs the risk of providing only a curtailed theory of class struggle.

Such a critical reading of Marx culminates in chapter seven of *The Struggle for Recognition*. Here, Honneth can take Marx to task against the background of what was now a specific counter-proposal, developed as a result of the perceived shortcomings of Marx’s own theory of social action and social transformation, of a moral struggle for recognition structured around three different, possible types of normative claims. Against this intersubjectivist perspective on social reproduction and social struggle, Marx’s references to class struggle in the late economic writings appear “utilitarian”, that is to say, appear to have lost sight of the moral content of social experience, and especially of the moral dimension of injustice. This confusion becomes visible in the already noted chasm between two models of social struggle, between the one presented in the economic, and the one of the historical writings.16 Already in Honneth’s early writings, however, the idea can be found that Marx’s repression of the anthropological and normative underpinnings of his

16 Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, pp. 149-151.
own thought leads to damaging conceptual confusions. The next two axes are directly related to that criticism.

**The anthropological core of historical materialism**

The second axis in Honneth’s critical reading of Marx focuses on the anthropological moment, on Marx’s transformation of Feuerbach’s philosophical anthropology.

In *Social Action and Human Nature*, Honneth and Joas set out the following programme: to ground a new philosophy of praxis by reconstructing the tradition of philosophical anthropology in order to uncover the anthropological preconditions of social action. The guiding motto was that of “practical intersubjectivity”, which must be read as a twofold thesis, with both emphases (on “practical” and on “intersubjectivity”) having equal value. Practical intersubjectivity designates first of all a decidedly pragmatist approach to philosophical anthropology. This is the idea that the intersubjective dimension of human socialisation processes is intimately connected to the human being’s specific types of response, anchored in its natural, organic constitution, to the demands and constraints of action. In other words, the sociality of the human being is already anchored in the structure of human needs and faculties. Conversely, practical intersubjectivity designates the intersubjective nature of all human practice, the fact that the key precondition for their ability to secure a “second nature”, a world through which they are able to survive and thrive, is their capacity to engage in strong forms of interaction. The intersubjective nature of human praxis designates the intersubjective genesis as well as the social character of all human capacities and achievements. One can easily see that the anthropological project and the project of reconstructing historical materialism complement each other. The return to anthropological arguments, indeed the recourse to later developments in social philosophy influenced by interactionist and intersubjectivistic thinkers (Mead and Habermas), is there to correct a certain Marxist reductionism in the anthropological characterisation of the human being, while the historical-materialist perspective, with its imperative of a dialectic of theory and practice, corrects the anthropological view by insisting on the “emancipatory” aspect of “sensuousness”: that is, the idea that the structure of human needs contains the seeds for a theory of social emancipation.
The two projects converge in the idea of “emancipatory sensuousness”. This was the title of a great study by Alfred Schmidt on Feuerbach, a motto that makes a perfect subtitle for Social Action and Human Nature. In this book, the great Marxist and Frankfurt scholar attempted to correct the history of misinterpretations of Feuerbach, especially those prevailing in the Marxist tradition, in order to demonstrate the contemporary relevance, indeed the importance of Feuerbach’s thinking for a better understanding of historical materialism, and for contemporary political and social concerns. Feuerbach was defended by Schmidt as a valid source of philosophical inspiration for a historical materialist tackling of contemporary problems, notably those around the denunciation of patriarchal social frameworks and ecological destruction. Honneth’s and Joas’ own study seems to owe quite a lot to Schmidt’s book on Feuerbach, as well, in fact, as his thesis on The Concept of Nature in Marx, which was written under Adorno’s supervision. In fact, one may even surmise that Schmidt’s arguments, provided strong arguments for the, at the time unfashionable, reading of Marx propounded by the young Honneth. The original German version of “History and Interaction” refers critically to Schmidt’s History and Structure, published in German in 1971 and to his Kritische Theorie als Geschichtsphilosophie, published in 1976. In his first article, Honneth critiques Schmidt’s underdeveloped concept of intersubjectivity. Despite this objection, however, Schmidt’s two studies represented important allies in the battle with structuralist Marxism. Honneth could find in them strong defences of a “humanist”, subject-oriented normative framework for a neo-Marxist critical theory of society.

Most of Schmidt’s study is devoted to a presentation of the full depth and sophistication, indeed the amazing innovativeness of Feuerbach’s critique of 18th century materialism, and more importantly of Kantian and Hegelian idealistic epistemologies and metaphysics. This corrected previous condemnations of Feuerbach’s materialism as philosophically crude. Indeed, in his

study Schmidt attempts to demonstrate the relevance of Feuerbach’s thought by emphasising the extent to which his “materialist existentialism” announces in extraordinary ways some of the most important thinkers of the 20th century, in the Critical Theory camp (Bloch, Adorno and Marcuse), or in the existentialist one (Sartre and Merleau-Ponty).

Feuerbach’s critique of transcendental philosophy also constitutes the starting point of Honneth’s and Joas’ book.

The thinking ego that presupposes itself forgets that it is not just a thinking being, that indeed it could not even exist as such, if it were not first of all a corporeal ego endowed with needs. Further, it forgets that it becomes an ego only by means of its relation to others (...) Hence, empirical, corporeal communities are prerequisite for all cognition.20

This announces Habermas’ later characterisation of the “mentalist” tradition and the process of “detranscendentalisation” to which Hegel submitted that tradition.21 However, we can already note a highly significant difference in the philosophical-anthropological conceptions underpinning the Habermasian and Honnethian normative models: whereas Habermas looks to the correction of the mentalist model in symbolic interaction where language provides the central medium of interaction, Honneth and Joas, from the very beginning, sought to achieve the same kind of revision with reference to Feuerbach and the corporeal grounding of intersubjectivity. Right at the beginning, the materialist arguments that inspire Honneth combine historical and anthropological materialism, by contrast with most other critical theorists.22

The initial departure from transcendental philosophy leads to the establishment of Feuerbach’s two fundamental principles, as Honneth and Joas clearly point out.

21 J. Habermas, “From Kant to Hegel and Back Again: The Move toward Detranscendentalisation”, in Truth and Justification, pp. 175-212.
First, his “sensualism”, the idea that the body is not only the foundation of experience and of knowledge, as in empiricism, but also “the medium and end of thought”. Feuerbach does not hesitate to call the body “the supreme principum metaphysicum, the mystery of creation, (...) ground of the world.” Such formulations encapsulate the essence of Feuerbach’s philosophical outlook. He intends to point to the unity of human experience, beyond the dualisms of sense and intellect, intelligence and will, the theoretical and the practical, and so on, and to the effective incarnation of this unity in the sensuousness of the human being. This is a programme that has, at first, a strictly philosophical purpose. Like Merleau-Ponty, Feuerbach wants to radically reorient philosophy in order to solve old conundrums, by showing the unity of subject and world in and through the human body, which becomes the real “transcendental” origin. But the scope of the project goes far beyond philosophical dispute. It is equally an aesthetic, ethical and political project. By emphasising the corporeal ground of all human experience, be it practical or theoretical, Feuerbach also puts the emphasis on all the interactions that are constitutive of the human subject. Just as Merleau-Ponty will argue much later, the emphasis on the embodied nature of human subjectivity, by reinscribing the human subject in the flesh of the world, leads directly to the idea of substantive forms of interaction (reciprocity, feedback mechanisms, processes of projection and introjections, and so on) between human experience and other ways of “being in the world”, be they experiences of other selves, social-cultural meanings, or even non-human forms of life. Feuerbach’s equally philosophical and political aim is to restore a full image of humanity and of the interactions that are constitutive of the human subject. The ultimate goal is to overcome all dualisms as a way to cure the different types of alienation from which humanity suffers. As Alfred Schmidt summarised perfectly, sensualism is a new philosophical-political programme that aims “to understand the primary world-experience of the pre-philosophical consciousness in its fundamental relevance”, as the real basis of philosophy, and more broadly to all emancipatory action. This is a philosophical and practical programme that can justifiably be seen

24 Quoted by Schmidt, Emanzipatorische Sinnlichkeit, p. 113.
25 Ibid., p. 110.
as a substantive anticipation not only of Merleau-Ponty, but also of Adorno, in particular if one thinks of the pages in *Negative Dialectics* that connect the deconstruction of idealistic identity-thinking through a return to the body as the origin of all knowledge, with the political utopia of a praxis in which all “senseless suffering” is finally abrogated.\(^{26}\)

Secondly, therefore, Feuerbach’s “anthrological materialism” amounts to a defence of “altruism”, an old-fashioned way of naming what came to be termed “intersubjectivism”. The transcendental ego seems to be a soul without a body, a consciousness viewing nature as though it was not also part of it, but it is also a being that seems separated from the flesh and blood community of other fellow human beings. The famous section 41 of the *Philosophy of the Future* anticipates in amazing fashion the intersubjectivistic arguments that will influence Honneth so profoundly:

That the most essential sensuous object for man is man himself; that only in man’s glimpse of another man does the spark of consciousness and intellect spring. And this goes to show that idealism is right in so far as it sees the origin of ideas in man; but it is wrong in so far as it derives these ideas from man understood as an isolated being, as mere soul existing for himself; in one word, it is wrong when it derives the ideas from an ego that is not given in the context of its togetherness with a perceptibly given You. Ideas spring only from conversation and communication. (…) It takes two human beings to give birth to a man, to physical as well as spiritual man; the togetherness of man with man is the first principle and the criterion of truth and universality. Even the certitude of those things that exist outside me is given to me through the certitude of the existence of other men besides myself.\(^{27}\)


\(^{27}\) Quoted in Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 16. See Schmidt, in his chapter on Feuerbach’s social philosophy, *Emanzipatorische Sinnlichkeit*, p. 239. See also this passage from *The Essence of Christianity*: “It is the other human being that constitutes the link between me and the world. I am and feel dependent on the world because I first feel dependent on other human beings”, (quoted by Schmidt, p. 245).
Beyond the emphasis on the “sensualism” and “altruism” at work in Feuerbach’s anthropological materialism, Schmidt’s research alerted Honneth to a third crucial idea: that Feuerbach himself, before Marx, had also developed a concept of praxis. In this case, however, praxis was grounded precisely in the corporeal intersubjectivity just delineated. It was Schmidt therefore, who pointed Honneth in the direction of a concept of praxis as “intersubjective praxis that is guided by needs”. This made him aware of the fact that the intersubjectivistic turn in which Habermas had firmly placed critical theory had been accomplished for the first time not by Mead, Pierce, James, or Dewey, as Habermas claimed, but by the thinker who had exercised the most direct influence upon Marx. The importance of such a correction to the genealogy of the intersubjectivistic turn cannot be underestimated: the philosophical critique of transcendentalism is now developed in reference to the organic constitution of the human subject, through a sensuous rather than a strictly symbolic philosophical anthropology; and secondly, this new philosophical beginning is achieved through a most fruitful and as yet under-appreciated connection to historical materialism.

With great foresight in this their first book Honneth and Joas had already highlighted the many traits that make Feuerbach an amazing forerunner of Mead and his interactionist arguments: the intersubjective nature of the subjectification process; the intersubjective nature of the subject’s certainty about the existence of external objects; the “ontogenetic constitution of things from the schema of the action that occurs in interaction”; a consensus theory of truth; a concept of reflection “understood as dialogue that has been transposed into

30 See the important reminder by Schmidt regarding Buber’s acknowledgement of Feuerbach’s discovery of the ‘Thou-principle’: “Feuerbach is the one who introduced this Thou-discovery that was called the ‘Copernican act’ and ‘primordial event’ of modern thought, one with as far-reaching implications as the I-discovery of idealism, and one that should bring about a second new beginning of European thought”, Emanzipatorische Sinnlichkeit, p. 239.
the interior of the human being”; a model of “role-taking”; an interpretation of conscience as “internalised attachment figure”.31

It is on the basis of this re-interpreted, “sensualist” model of intersubjectivism that Honneth develops a critique of Marx’s famous “historical” correction of Feuerbach’s anthropological materialism. In the remainder of this section, we look at Honneth’s early critique of Marx’s philosophical anthropology, and his reappraisal of Feuerbach as a central figure to lay down the normative foundations of a critical theory of society.

At first, Honneth and Joas seem to agree with Schmidt that the Marxian correction to Feuerbach’s “sensualist materialism” is indeed warranted and represents theoretical progress. This correction is for example famously expressed in *The German Ideology*, when Marx bemoans Feuerbach’s “contemplative” view of human sensuousness.32 Or, as the fifth “thesis” puts it: “Feuerbach (...) does not conceive sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity”. Marx, as is well-known, reinterprets Feuerbach’s fledgling concept of praxis through the notion of social labour, which combines the idea of an activity necessary to face the challenges of external nature, with the idea of an education of internal nature, leading potentially to full emancipation.

Here, however, it is not only Schmidt’s rehabilitation of Feuerbach, but also a number of other important studies in Western Marxism that helped to complicate the usual picture, propounded by structuralist and indeed by earlier strands of Marxist exegesis, of a Marx abandoning an early anthropological intersubjectivism for the more “scientific” type of functionalist, political-economic arguments. These studies provided essential arguments to rehabilitate Feuerbach and an intersubjectivistic, hermeneutic dimension in materialist social theory. In a later section in the first part of the 1980 book, Honneth and Joas come to discuss three positions in contemporary Western Marxism and their different attitudes to philosophical anthropology. Honneth’s early critique of Althusser’s structuralist reading is rehearsed,33 and this provides the young authors with the opportunity to highlight the inter-

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interpreters’ inability to see the normative component in Marx’s early theory of human essence, and the reductionism that underpins the theory of individuality. A striking example for them is constituted by Lucien Sève’s 1968 *Man in Marxist Theory and the Psychology of Personality.* By contrast, they find in György Márkus’ other classical study of that time, *Marxism and ‘Anthropology’: the Concept of Human Essence in the Philosophy of Marx* (1978), precisely the type of exegetical line that they need for their own reconstruction of Marxist philosophical anthropology. Márkus’ reading of Marx makes explicit a historicised theory of human essence in which work, “the form of activity specific to the species”, enables the human being to “relate himself consciously and socially to the nature environing himself”. As a result of this, Márkus shows, work is not just the means for the material reproduction of society, it also harbours an intersubjective dimension in the essential cooperative moment entailed in the division of labour, as well as a cognitive, educating dimension entailed in the differing of satisfaction that is constitutive of the work activity. Through this reading, Márkus thus

succeeds in effecting a mediation of anthropology and historical materialism that is able to bring the theoretical recognition of the organic conditions in which human sociality has its beginning into harmony with the construction of an open historical process using political and economic categories.

As can be seen, Márkus’ historicised philosophical anthropology shows eminently how a “sensualist” anthropology can indeed ground a theory of open, emancipatory social action.

Later still, Honneth and Joas discuss approvingly another one of the theorists of the Budapest School, this time, Agnes Heller’s early work on Marx’s theory of needs as well as her book on instincts. They approve of her rejection of naturalistic and behavioural theories of human subjectivity and society and clearly agree with her theory of objectivation according to which,

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societal institutions can be understood as objectivations into which the human being’s species-specific potentialities for action are gradually objectified; therefore the human being is not naturally endowed from the start with the capabilities that are characteristic of the human species, but only gradually acquires them as integral moments of himself in the process of the appropriation of the institutional system of norms, which process effects his socialisation.\textsuperscript{38}

As with Márkus’ defence of a historicised form of anthropological perspective in Marx himself, the young Honneth found in Heller a sophisticated construct allowing one to adopt a methodological perspective that refers to the natural preconditions of social action without adopting any a-historical metaphysics of “human nature”; in other words, exactly the type of construct that allows one to bring together anthropology with a historical materialist outlook. Read against the background of this brand of neo-Marxist literature, one is tempted to say that Honneth’s mature theory of recognition can very much be seen as being itself a proposal to solve this difficult programme. The stake of such theoretical endeavour is, as we said at the outset, to secure the normative basis for the critique of society. With the writers of the Budapest School, Honneth is convinced from the very beginning that it is only by reference to a normative concept of human subjectivity that critique is possible. He is also convinced that Marx himself more or less explicitly had adopted such methodological grounding for his critique of capitalism, even in the later economic writings. The fact that human needs and capacities are irreducibly historical makes the task of defining such normative via an anthropological route extremely difficult, but not impossible. This is what Honneth learnt with Márkus and Heller. The solution is in complementing this initial inquiry with its reverse: to emphasise not just the historical shifts in anthropological features, but to insist also on the anthropological conditions of historicality. As the introduction states very explicitly:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
Anthropology must not be understood as the theory of constants of human cultures persisting through history, or of an inalienable substance of human nature, but rather as an inquiry into the unchanging preconditions of human changeableness.\(^{39}\)

What also became clear with these writers, and not just with Habermas’ own attempt at “reconstructing historical materialism”, was the fact that one of the privileged vantage points to solve the difficult theoretical task of bringing together the anthropological and the historical outlooks, was through an inquiry into the processes of socialisation, since socialisation is precisely a mediating process between subjective appropriation, the mobilisation of individual endowments that are organically predetermined, within the specific nexus of a historical system of norms and values.\(^{40}\)

Indeed, next to his intervention in systematic questions of Marxist exegesis, Honneth’s initial interest was especially dedicated to empirical sociological studies into the socialisation processes in contemporary capitalistic societies, in particular the distinctive forms of socialisation processes occuring at the “lower” end of the social hierarchy.\(^{41}\) This already signalled his focus on the experience of social domination, for direct practical reasons, to study the possibilities of and obstacles to political emancipation, but also with a view to study the implications of such hermeneutic, subject-oriented focus in theory. On that score, Honneth’s thinking demonstrated from the very beginning a great sensitivity to the ambiguity of processes of socialisation, particularly those operating in the spheres subjected to social domination. On the one hand, it is undeniable that education and socialisation fulfil essential functions in the reproduction of a capitalistic order of domination. On the other

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 7.


hand, Honneth from the very beginning rejected totalising functionalist arguments that approached all subjective and intersubjective realities through such functional lenses only.\footnote{Althusser’s 1970 article “Ideology and State Apparatus” (trans. Ben Brewster, in \textit{Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays}, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2001) articulated such an approach in the most powerful form and was to play a tremendous influence in subsequent “continental” philosophy. We know for example its impact on the theory of Judith Butler. R. Foster’s critique of Honneth’s theory of recognition published in 1999, a critique that is a good exemplar of poststructuralists’ suspicion towards Honneth, is unmistakably post-Althusserian in inspiration.}

Heller’s rejection of theories of human instincts vindicates Arnold Gehlen’s notion of the “plasticity of human needs”, a notion that is a crucial part of Honneth’s theoretical framework.\footnote{See chapter 5.} But, in Heller’s as in Márkus’ case, the importance of their attempts at integrating the anthropological and the historical in an innovative interpretation of historical materialism resides not just in the strictly theoretical achievement that this represents, but in the fact that they are able as a result to propound a sophisticated account of the dialectic between first and second nature. Just as important is the substantive normative dimension that is thereby secured. The argument about the plasticity of human needs is intimately linked to a theory of social emancipation, a connection that Heller had made explicit in her well-known study on the centrality of the category of needs in Marx’s thought.\footnote{A. Heller, \textit{The Theory of Needs in Marx}, London, Allison and Busby, 1976.} As a consequence of Marx’s fundamental philosophical definition of human needs as potentially universal,\footnote{Schmidt is again a crucial reference here, as he powerfully articulated, notably in his \textit{Concept of Nature in Marx}, the historical concept of human essence present in Marx against anti-humanist readings that were prevalent in the 1970s.} she claims, “he can make a grounded normative critique of the historically established social relations as stages of the distorted fulfilment of human needs”.\footnote{Honneth & Joas, \textit{Social Action and Human Nature}, p. 101.} In the writings of the Budapest School, Honneth thus found a major source of encouragement to develop a project of critical theory inspired by historical materialism, on a renewed normative basis.
The impact of Schmidt’s studies, of the writings of the Budapest School, and of Habermas’ own extension of historical materialism in the mid-1970s, encouraged Honneth to venture decisively into the path of grounding the critique of society in a philosophical anthropology. As should be clear, anthropology in this sense is not the comparative study of the different “ways of being human” across the variety of human cultures, but rather the comparative study, grounded in biology, palaeontology and evolutionary theory, of what it means to be human as opposed to the other living beings. What became clear also with these writers, was that Marx himself had not fully developed his own model of interaction. At best, the image of “universal human needs” remained implicit in the later writings. Schmidt had been able to show the extent to which some of Marx’s most famous statements remained Feuerbachian in spirit, despite some of the harsh expressions in *The German Ideology*. Habermas was pointing to an entire dimension of social interaction that had been neglected by Marx (see chapter 3). All this drew Honneth’s attention to the limitations of Marx’s model of interaction, and led him to propose a drastic reappraisal of the potentialities hidden in Feuerbach’s own version of philosophical anthropology. Whilst the young Honneth agreed with the necessity to historicise materialist anthropology, he decided to focus much more critically on the damaging aspects of Marx’s reformulation of Feuerbach’s sensuous praxis into social labour, and to offer a re-reading of the latter that was much more positive.

As we saw, this rediscovery of Feuerbach was also guided teleologically, as it were, by the realisation that he himself, with his body-centred, intersubjectivist critique of transcendentalism, had already accomplished extended forays into precisely those three fundamental principles later developed in different ways in the writings of Gehlen, Plessner, and Mead, namely: the grounding of social theory in social anthropology, with the emphasis on the organic preconditions of social action; the pragmatist principle of an action-derived theory of human capabilities; and the intersubjective nature of all forms of human experience, including perception. In other words, from the perspective of the necessity to ground critique in philosophical anthropology, and with an eye to the development of the discipline in the 20th century, Feuerbach could be seen, not as an imperfect and imprecise anticipation of a more accomplished social theory, but on the contrary, as the origin of an underappreciated theoretical line, one that was certainly developed, but also led astray by
Marx himself, mostly because of the latter’s fateful methodological decisions regarding the possibility of social critique.

The problem that the young Honneth identifies in Marx’s reception of Feuerbach is the fateful conceptual and normative reduction of interaction that occurs when the two principles of “sensualism” and “altruism” are combined in the notion of social labour. According to Honneth and Joas, “Marx makes both of Feuerbach’s central ideas into fundamental premises of his social theory only at the price of neutralising that which is truly critical about them”.47

There is a difficulty with this early critique of Marx, however, a difficulty that is highly significant because it can be seen to announce one of the major weaknesses in Honneth’s mature theoretical model. This difficulty has to do with the fact that, whilst the 1980 study makes quite clear what is theoretically damaging about Marx’s rewriting of Feuerbach’s “altruism” into the category of social labour, it is far less obvious to what extent he loses sight of, or “neutralises”, the “emancipatory power” of his “sensualism”. In fact it can be shown that this very principle is abandoned very early on by Honneth himself. This in turn points to one of the key features that seem to be missing in his later model of critical theory.

Let us deal briefly with the reduction of “altruism” first. It is true that, as many passages attest, Marx fully accepted Feuerbach’s insight into the intersubjective nature of subject-constitution and subjective experience. The social nature of the human being, along with its capacity to produce, is for Marx one of the central features that need to be presupposed in any social-historical inquiry. As the German Ideology puts it, “intercourse”, the specific set of social relations, is as defining of a historical time as the mode of production. Despite the other criticisms aimed at Feuerbach, it can be shown that Marx continues to be immensely influenced by him, precisely on this count. The famous praise of Feuerbach in the 1844 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts remains valid throughout Marx’s writings, and constitutes the direct source of his humanism. According to the young Marx we owe to Feuerbach: “The establishment of true materialism and of real science, by making the social relationship of

47 Ibid., p. 23.
‘man to man’ the basic principle of the theory’.

However, in the transformation from anthropological to historical materialism, the intersubjectivistic principle—that “the togetherness of man with man is the first principle and the criterion of truth and universality”—is reinterpreted through the lens of “objectual activity”, as the first Thesis put it. With the historicisation of praxis and its transformation into a productivist paradigm, as world-shaping and world-transforming social action, Marx can claim to correct Feuerbach in a “practical” sense, a sense that Feuerbach himself had established as fundamental, according to his principle that “all social life is essentially practical” (Thesis 8). Intersubjective action, reinterpreted through the notion of “objectual activity”, indeed seems to make truly practical what in Feuerbach might appear at first to be a purely contemplative, passive take on interaction, with the emphasis on love as a paradigmatic experience. But this transformation also seems to reduce social interaction to only the form of interaction that is at play in the cooperation in work. This is the point most famously highlighted by Habermas in “Labour and Interaction”. In Honneth’s early words: “In Marx’s works, the anthropological analysis of the labour process is not matched by a comparable account of interhuman relations”. The recalibration of the “altruism” thesis into the category of “social labour” leads to a potential reduction of the spectrum of normatively regulated social interactions, a reduction, which Marx himself did not fully or explicitly carry out, one that remained only a negative possibility in his framework, but one that some of his successors would no longer even see as problematic and would take to its full conclusions.

In Chapter seven of The Struggle for Recognition, Honneth presents a slightly enriched version of the same thesis, once again inspired by Joas. This time, Honneth finds in the notes that Marx had written for himself whilst reading Mill’s Elements of Political Economy in 1844, an “intersubjectivistic” theory of labour. The intersubjective dimension of production lies in the fact that

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the producing subject works in anticipation of the other subjects’ needs and of their recognition of his or her own labour. This theory, however, already reduced intersubjectivity to a specific interaction within the labour process, and when it was abandoned because Marx no longer maintained its initial philosophical premises, the intersubjective moment also disappeared. Instead, a purely utilitarian definition of labour and of social struggle replaced the initial “expressivist” model.

**Feuerbach’s “sensualism”: a missed opportunity**

Honneth is not making the crude criticism that Marx totally ignored the intersubjectivistic moment; rather he bemoans the fact that he did not take the full measure of the critical potential inherent in intersubjective interaction, beyond relations of production. This is not, therefore, the part of Honneth’s early critique of Marx that is most problematic.

The most problematic aspect of Honneth’s early critique of Marx, as it unfolds in the 1980 book, relates rather to the “emancipatory” aspect of Feuerbach’s second principle, his “sensualism”, which Honneth also claims was largely overlooked by Marx.

Honneth and Joas ask whether in Marx’s transformation of Feuerbach’s sensuousness into “sensuous, objectual activity” and “sensuous, human activity” (Thesis 1),

> the aesthetic and contemplative dignity of ‘emancipatory sensuousness’ is preserved, and the human being’s powerful, inner, drive-fraught nature, which is not fully determined by social history, is sufficiently taken into consideration.\(^{51}\)

The problem arises as soon as one looks more carefully in what the “aesthetic and contemplative dignity” of Feuerbachian sensuousness precisely consists, an “aesthetic dignity” which Honneth and Joas emphasise in direct reference to Schmidt’s 1973 study. When one considers the full scope of Feuerbach’s “aesthetic” sensualism, the question arises: to what extent did Honneth himself continue to make full use of the resources of “emancipatory sensu-

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\(^{51}\) *Ibid.*
ousness”? This is the beginning of a critical thread that runs all the way to Honneth’s most recent writings. The claim I am making is that in his highly original rehabilitation of Feuerbach, Honneth had found a way of re-founding critical theory which he did not exploit to the full. He found in Feuerbach an anticipation of the intersubjectivistic turn in critical social theory, but overlooked the explosive resources hidden in the latter’s “sensualism”.

In order to get a better sense of what is at stake here, we need to open a large parenthesis and retrieve the main elements of Feuerbach’s “sensualism”, notably as it was reconstructed by Alfred Schmidt. As Schmidt shows very well, Feuerbach’s thought is premised upon the critique of the transcendental-idealist principle of a world constituted by subjectivity. In this scheme, the material and natural worlds are reduced to mere resources structured and shaped by the cognitive and indeed practical interventions of subjective forces; equally, inter-subjective interactions are hypostasised under the activity of a supra-individual self. Against this destructive scheme based on the chasm of subject and object, Feuerbach opposes the “unity of subjectivity, body and world”. “Sensuousness” is first of all, as we saw, a critical epistemological argument, emphasising the bodily, indeed sexual and gendered, nature of the knowing subject. It leads to a radical renovation of the transcendental inquiry: the bodily encounter with the world becomes the locus in which all relations to the world, not only originate, but more decisively, find their structural preformation and ultimate incarnation. It is at this point and no other (notably not in transcendental consciousness), that dualisms can be shown to be potentially dissolved: potentially, because the present state of humanity is, on the contrary, one of general alienation.

Most fundamentally, the dualism of body and mind is abolished. This should not be misconstrued as a crude reduction of transcendental activity. Rather, like Merleau-Ponty long after him, Feuerbach shows in the concrete being-in-the-world, in the human agent’s active, embodied presence to the world, the condition of possibility of all further relations to it, including theoretical attitudes. Notably, the sensuous experiences of the world, most especially the suffering experienced in need and desire and the experiences of fulfilment,

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however subjective they might be, harbour objective dimensions upon which knowledge can be based. One of Feuerbach’s central epistemological insights is that the affective experiences of the world, the “suffering” of the world in love and in need, indicate in the negative the “proper structure of the world of things”.53 As Honneth and Joas put it, directly following Schmidt: “Natural objects possess their own proper structures, which become experienceable as the resistance of objects in relation to the subject’s neediness.”54 Consequently, one should not radically separate perception and concept, empirical and conceptual dimensions of rationality.

If anything, the classical idealist scheme needs to be inverted, as it is the body and its affects that mark the origin of all inquiries. This is because, in sensuous experience, an inversion of subject and object takes place, which tends to turn on its head the clear distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. In perception, Feuerbach states, the I becomes the “object of the object”: “An object, i.e., a real object, is given to me only if a being is given to me in a way that it affects me, only if my own activity (…) experiences the activity of another being as a limit or boundary to itself”.55 Or in another passage: “How does the I manage to posit an other? Only because it is itself in the same relation to the object as the object is in relation to the I”.56

The impact of the world on human affectivity and the processing of that impact constitute not just the ground for the irreducible certainty of the world. The resistance of objects does not just persuade me of their existence; it does not just provide the objection to transcendental scepticism. In this inversion of subjective and objective poles, the polarity of subject and object itself loses its clear, dichotomous meaning. What is found, rather, is that point where world and self communicate, where the world “echoes” in the self, to employ a Merleau-Pontyian metaphor. In other words, we have here already a ‘chiasmatic’ scheme. As Schmidt notes, Feuerbach is the unacknowledged predecessor to Merleau-Ponty,57 in making the body “a medium through which the

essence of the world opens itself in full”. Other passages express in a particularly vivid ways this notion of an essential “openness” to the world, through which the problem of the transcendental ground is reformulated in radical fashion: “to be in a body means to be in the world. So many senses—so many pores, so many openings. The body is the porous I”.58

The redirecting of the transcendental inquiry towards the “pathic” experience of the world where the “autonomy (Eigenständigkeit)”, “indeed the ‘subject-character’ of objects”59 can be accessed for the first time by the subject, is thus Feuerbach’s proposed solution to the elusive overcoming of the transcendental subject-object dichotomy, which was the task of all post-Kantian philosophy. Through experiences of primary empathy with the world, communicative structures are established that enable all further theoretical and practical elaborations.

This is what the notions of the “aesthetic” and “contemplation” (Anschauung) indicate in Feuerbach. In order to grasp their full philosophical power, one must therefore forget for a moment the Marxian condemnation and the pejorative connotation of the term “contemplation”, when the latter rubs up against the productivist, “historical-materialist” paradigm. It is reductive and indeed inaccurate, to interpret the “aesthetic” quality that Feuerbach assigns to Anschauung to the model of the spectator removed from his or her own body, from history, and from society. “Contemplation” is synonymous with being-affected by the world, in one’s body. As we saw earlier, the sensualist principle is also coupled with the constitutive role of intersubjectivity. Indeed, the primary sensuous experience is sexuality and the embodied encounter with the other. And we also emphasised earlier that Feuerbach himself had argued for the primacy of praxis. In conclusion therefore, the “aesthetic” in Feuerbach designates that locus where the self opens to the world, the origin of all interactions with and within the world. Rather than a negation of praxis, it is the condition of all praxis.

One must go back to this deep, anti-dualistic dimension of contemplation in order to grasp fully the normative, utopian element, the “emancipatory”

58 Ibid., p. 122.
59 Ibid., p. 43.
aspect, of Feuerbach’s sensuousness. The utopia simply consists in the vision of an abolition of the different types of alienation that rob humanity of its own forces, an abolition, which entails concurrently an overcoming of the dualisms that plague categorical thinking. Such abolition of alienation and such reconciliation with the world, with one’s own body, with the social and the natural worlds, is made possible by the anthropological principle according to which being human is, in essence, being open to alterity. Social and political praxis therefore aim at realising what is already the essence of being human. It is a project for full reconciliation: of the “heart” and the “head”; of the self with itself; of human with human; of individual and society; of man and woman; of human with nature; of passion and action, and so on.

The normative “dignity” of the sensualist principle appears especially in the light of ecological crisis. The radical overturn of idealist philosophy helps one to envisage a new, more harmonious relationship to otherness, one that emphasises the possibility of harmonious communication, of the self with itself in its own body, of the self with other selves in love and friendship, of the self with other selves in society, and of humanity with the non-human worlds, the natural in particular. Feuerbachian contemplation is one that “is liberal with the object”, that “lets it be”. As chapter 5 will establish, the ecological dimension was a key factor in Honneth’s and Joas’ critique of Habermas, and a key factor in their decision to return to the tradition of philosophical anthropology. In Feuerbach, they found the first exemplary model of a theory of the “humanisation of nature” which would overcome the tragic ideal of the domination of both inner and external nature.

This is precisely the point where our critical thread begins. First, we can note the differences between Honneth’s early critique of Marx and Schmidt’s reading. Schmidt rereads Feuerbach in the context of Marxist debates in the 1970s. The discovery of the Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts* inspired new attempts to correct the “hybris” of Marx’s late understanding of praxis, which conceived of the external world only as material and resource for human action. In

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keeping with Marx’s more speculative, Feuerbachian, definition of praxis in the 1844 Manuscripts, these attempts aimed to outline the philosophical contours of a “reconciliation with nature”, a state of society viewed as “the complete unity of man with nature—the true resurrection of nature—the accomplished naturalism of man and the accomplished humanism of nature”.

Marcuse’s and Bloch’s utopian theories of emancipation were obviously the leading models at the time. But Schmidt’s reading, like those of Marcuse and Bloch, maintained some of Marx’s major criticisms of Feuerbach. This entailed a continued critique of Feuerbach’s naïve view of linguistic communication, a critique of his underdeveloped social philosophy, and more fundamentally, it maintained the historical-materialist critique of his a-historical, crypto-theological contemplative sensuousness. Feuerbach, according to Schmidt, was central in anticipating major themes in the early Marx. This was the most interesting aspect of Feuerbach, the influence he had had on Marx’s philosophical account of human beings’ relationship to nature.

Honneth and Joas on the other hand, return to Feuerbach in order to critique Marx. Their main critical point about Marx is that social labour, a historicised version of praxis, tends to reduce the field of social interaction to cooperation in work. Feuerbach, on the other hand, can be read as an amazingly clear-sighted forerunner of a tradition of thought that would take more than half a century to develop, namely an interactionist theory of society and subjectivity. Whereas Schmidt and the other writers of the “praxis-Marxism” of the 1970s rediscovered Feuerbach as a way of strengthening (indeed of justifying in the face of powerful anti-humanist readings) their renewed interest in the

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61 Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, p. 298.

62 See Marcuse’s notion of a “new sensibility” as the true basis of revolution, in his 1969 Essay on Liberation. In Counterrevolution and Revolt, Marcuse locates the source of this inspiration in Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts: “precisely here, nature finds its place in the theory of revolution”, p. 67. See also Bloch, and his idea of a co-productivity of human and non-human “subjects”, in The Principle Hope. As we remarked earlier, Adorno’s Negative Dialectics also propounded a type of utopian praxis based on the emancipatory elements implicit in human sensuousness. Schmidt notes the many Feuerbachian elements in Adorno’s critiques of idealism and classical epistemology.
young Marx, Honneth and Joas have the more radical gesture of suggesting a correction of Marx through a return to his source.

Despite the claim made in the introduction to their book, however, that the theory of social action must start afresh by reconsidering the problem of “the humanisation of nature”, their subsequent reconstructions of the arguments of philosophical anthropology show that they are themselves less interested in the “dignity” of Feuerbach’s “sensuousness”, with its profound philosophical significance and its ecological potential, than they are in his “altruism”, as an anticipation of the intersubjectivistic turn. It is this exclusive focus on the intersubjective and the failure to hold on to the second principle discovered in Feuerbach, his “emancipatory sensuousness”, that constitutes, in my eyes, one of the most problematic aspects of Honneth’s development. If true, that would be quite a paradoxical development. Honneth and Joas defined their own programme of research in social theory as the highly original, indeed controversial, attempt in 1980, to reformulate historical materialism through a return to, and development of, its anthropological foundations. No other author, even Alfred Schmidt, provided as strong a defence of Feuerbach as they did. No one gave as strong a defence of anthropological materialism as a valid basis for contemporary social theory. Yet at the very moment in which they made such a startling proposition, they immediately closed one of the two main directions that they had just re-opened. And indeed, the direction that they repressed, Feuerbach’s “sensualism”, was in fact the one that made his critique of idealism so prescient of later “detranscendantalising” models. It was in the redirecting of the metaphysical and the normative to the locus where the self truly opens to the world, in the sensualist inversion of Hegel’s dialectic, that Feuerbach’s critique of alienation and his humanist utopia of total reconciliation were grounded. The “altruist” principle is to some extent only a consequence of this.

The identification of the moments where the “sensualist” insight was encountered but not followed, and the revision of Honneth’s model on that basis, constitutes the main critical direction that this book will take in reconstructing his philosophical development. What this means, however, is that the mate-

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rial to revise or complement his later theory of recognition can be found in the very material from which his own thought emerged, indeed, in a sense, in the untapped resources of his own model. Honneth seems to put all the emphasis on the intersubjective dimension, at the cost of forgetting the different types of material mediations in which intersubjective interactions are imbricated, forgetting, for example, the role of the object in the constitution of the subject. As the analysis of Mead’s theory of perception will show in chapter 7, the fundamental importance of the pole of the object, even in an intersubjectivist theory of perception, was well recognised by the American pragmatist. We will see that the major kinship between Feuerbach and Mead on the one hand, and Merleau-Ponty on the other, one well encapsulated in the idea that through the body the human individual is “open to the world”, covers also this dimension of the “passive” empathy with external things. This dimension has a number of fundamental normative implications as it tends to dissolve the sharp boundaries that are otherwise assumed to separate human and non-human entities. In particular, it offers the philosophical ground for the type of ecological concern that seemed to inspire Honneth’s first book.

**Critical conception of labour**

The third main critical axis in Honneth’s “reconstruction” of historical materialism targets other conceptual confusions in Marx’s concept of labour. This critique integrates elements from the first two critical axes, the methodological and the philosophical-anthropological. The most relevant texts here are early articles that also articulated important methodological and conceptual considerations that were foundational for the development of Honneth’s thought.

In “Work and Instrumental action” (1980) Honneth’s aim was to offer a “critical conception of work”, a conception directly inspired by the Marxist project, but one that would also have learnt from the analysis of its unresolved conceptual confusions. Honneth reads Marx from the perspective of an intersubjectivist social theory. This allows him to separate analytically conceptual from normative dimensions in the notion of “social labour”, whereas the conflation of those dimensions implies a series of damaging theoretical and practical consequences.
The first confusion about the notion of “social labour” relates to the fact that the concept of social labour plays a “three-fold function” in Marx: first, it designates “the form of reproduction characteristic of human existence—the cooperative appropriation of nature”. Second, in reference to the materialist critique of idealist epistemology (including Feuerbach even though it is inspired by him), social labour is seen as the “practical context within which the human species gains cognitive access to reality”, the material basis of cognition and thus also the ground for the critique of science. And third, labour is entrusted with “the function of a conscious learning process, in which working subjects become aware of the fact that their capacities and needs go far beyond the possibilities permitted by the given social structures”. In brief, the Marxian concept of labour conflates social-theoretical, epistemological and practical-normative dimensions without sufficiently distinguishing between them.

The decisive point to stress here is that Honneth’s criticism about the conflation of conceptual and normative dimensions does not in fact target the method of tying together ontological and normative meanings in the one concept. On the contrary, the synthesis of social-theoretical, epistemological and normative dimensions in the one concept becomes a defining feature of Honneth’s own method. The reason for this is simple: such a synthesis allows the theorist to connect through an intimate link the critical analysis of society and the theory of emancipation. In other words, this is the only way to develop a conceptual framework with which one will also be able to conduct a valid immanent critique. Following Marx, therefore, Honneth sees clearly, right at the beginning, that a critical theory of society must be based on a categorical ‘monism’. This principle is fundamental for a reason that is obvious in the Marxist context: it ensures the unity of theory and practice, or negatively, it makes sure that theory will not sever its links with social reality and with its aims towards emancipation. The other article dedicated to the work question in the 1980s states this decision very explicitly in the form of a programme of research:

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How can we once again incorporate a concept of emancipation and an analysis of capitalism within the same social theory, given that the Marxian paradigm of labour can no longer serve as the categorical link between the two?65

Clearly, recognition will provide that concept that replaces labour to provide the new, required “categorical link”.

If not the “monistic” use of the category of social labour, what then is the problem with the notion? We saw earlier that Marx’s reinterpretation of Feuerbach’s intersubjectivism through the notion of labour led for Honneth to a truncated approach to social interactions. Above and beyond this theoretical element, the major flaw in the “three-fold” meaning of social labour concerns the “emancipatory side” of the concept. With Marx’s methodological shift from a critique of capital as alienation to a theory of capital as self-immanent process, the “action-theoretic” aspect of Marx’s theory of emancipation tends to recede into the background. In Capital, the dominant argument is that of the self-induced, systemic crises of capitalism, not that of class struggle. Beside the economic texts guided by a methodology of a functionalist kind, there are indeed other texts on political economy in which the theory of class struggle is retained and used as the main explanatory tool. The problem, however, is that between the early, anthropological writings and the later “action-theoretic” passages on emancipation through work, the concepts of work and the vision of its emancipatory potential change substantially, and the connections between those definitions of labour and its emancipatory potential are never convincingly established.

The first model of labour as “objectification” sees it along Hegelian-Feuerbachian lines, as the process through which individuals and society gradually come to “appropriate themselves”, realise their human potential, in the active, cooperative appropriation of external nature. The problem here lies with the critique of alienated labour, of a form of society in which the product of labour is wrested from the working subject, thereby robbing him of the possibility of

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“objectifying”, of developing and getting to know, his essential powers. If one holds simultaneously that alienation is rooted in the labour process and that emancipation is to occur through labour, one must give an account of how labour itself holds the key to the transformation from alienation to emancipation. But the young Marx nowhere makes this explicit, relying instead on Hegelian and Feuerbachian arguments about the objectifying and liberating powers of labour. Accordingly, the “gap between the anthropologically established character of work (...) and the historical situation of ‘alienated social labour’ has not been bridged convincingly”.  

Later on, in some passages of the economic writings, in particular in the Grundrisse, the speculative, anthropological vision of work as “life-activity of the species” is replaced by the “empirically rich image of the self-regulated work activity of craftsmen intimately familiar with their object”. Here the problem is that, in order to maintain the emancipatory character of work, Marx would have to show that “the working subjects would always already counterfactually anticipate the features of a self-contained, self-directed work procedure which embodied the worker’s knowledge”. But this is not compatible with the factual description of labour as “abstract labour”, as fragmented, dehumanised activity. In order to solve this problem, Marx then “switches to an instrumental model of argumentation in which the capitalist production process alone still takes the role of a medium that organises and disciplines the proletariat”.  

This is the idea of the “school of the factory”, the idea that capitalism produces the very weapons of its own demise by educating the proletariat: it brings together armies of workers, teaches them self-discipline and educates them beyond mere instrumental knowledge. But once more, this model of emancipation through work falls short of the intended goal. This time, labour

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68 Ibid.
is no longer itself the carrier of social emancipation, only one means for its realisation.\(^{69}\)

One further argument renders the category of labour problematic inasmuch as it is supposed to provide a nexus between critical social analysis and theory of emancipation. This is the fact that with Taylorisation, with the economic rationalisation of industrial work, all the emancipatory potentials of the work experience that Marx had continued to uphold, have become highly implausible: the polarisation in skills and knowledge required and the massive dequalification process brought about by fragmented, repetitive industrial tasks requiring minimum skills and knowledge make the notion of labour as practical-learning process implausible. Furthermore, the fragmentation of the workforce, both within and outside the workplace, makes the idea of a power of the proletariat equally implausible.\(^{70}\)

Finally, in many formulations, the historical, world-constitutive dimension of labour seems to be underpinned by a notion of history which continues to bear idealistic traits in that it characterises historical development as that of large, supra-individual macro-subjects, entire societies or indeed humanity at large. By contrast, Honneth had from the beginning tied his action-theoretic stance in social theory to a decisive rejection of idealistic philosophies of history. The 1977 article on “History and Interaction”, for example, had discussed at length contemporary philosophical analyses on history and appropriated their criticism of theories that hypostasise macro-subjects as unified historical agents. This was indeed one of the major objections to Althusser’s critique of subject-oriented philosophies of praxis: namely that Althusser unduly concluded from the correct critique of historical mega-subjects to the rejection of all hermeneutic perspective in the theory of historical agency. We have here another core intuition underpinning all of Honneth’s later thinking:

The critique of historicism is useless as soon as history is no longer thought as the product of a history-constituting macro-subject, in analogy to a world-constituting epistemological subject, but from that of an interactive praxis amongst subjects of action. Althusser makes no effort to distinguish between

\(^{69}\) Ibid., pp. 24-26.  
\(^{70}\) Ibid., pp. 27-28.
a concept of the subject that is overburdened by the philosophy of history and a conception of historical intersubjectivity.\textsuperscript{71}

With this, we have clearly reconnected with the initial point, that is, with the issues regarding the correct interpretation of Marx’s evolution towards a fully-fledged version of historical materialism. As said before, the critique of Marx’s notion of social labour integrates key insights from the previous two axes, the methodological and normative ones. What is worth noting now, however, in conclusion of this chapter, is that these three critical insights already outline implicitly the contours of the later theory of recognition.

Negatively, as seen from the vantage point of social theory after the intersubjectivistic turn, the paradigm of production demonstrates its inability to solve the problem it had set for itself. Too much confusion remains, preventing it from elaborating a consistent critique of modern society. In particular, the reductive view of social interaction caused by the primacy of the notion of social labour leads to reductive accounts of society, politics and history. The radical philosophical critique, the radical social critique, and the radical political intentions all fall apart because the notion that is supposed to hold them together is not capable of doing that. The recognition paradigm, from that point of view, is a correction and improvement, on the paradigm of social labour.

On the other hand, the theory of recognition remains substantially indebted to precisely this project. The problems that Honneth identifies in Marx’s theory relate to the conceptual means he employs to fulfil his programme, not to the programme itself. Indeed, Marx’s formulation of the general methods and aims of a critique of modern society remain: the aim is to offer an immanent critique of society, one that finds in the very process of social life the norms allowing the critique of its factual state. This means, as Marx had shown with great clarity, operating with a categorical monism so that the theory of social reproduction displays the very norms upon which the critique of society can be based. This means hermeneutically tying the theoretical inquiry to the social experiences in which this normative surplus negatively comes to light. Hence the role played in Honneth’s mature theory of recognition by, on the

\textsuperscript{71} Honneth, “History and Interaction”, p. 97, (English translation altered, JPD).
one hand, the historical sociology of social movements, and on the other hand by social psychology. And practically, it means explaining and justifying the efforts of the social forces that react against negative social experiences and enact the immanent norms of social life. The theoretical justification of the norms of critique must also be retained from Marx: this means grounding the critique of modern society in a philosophical anthropology that is centred on the essential ‘openness’, or vulnerability, of the human being. From that perspective, one might indeed describe Honneth’s ethics of recognition as a post-Marxist critical theory, with recognition correcting all that is supposed to be ill-conceived in Marx. But it is a post-Marxist position, later on a neo-Hegelian one, that attempts to fulfil a programme that was defined by Marx.

What then becomes of work with the replacement of social labour by recognition as central paradigmatic notion? The critical reading of Marx led to a correction of the concept of praxis, both at the level of the theory of society and at the level of the theory of historical action. The dimension that becomes central with the shift to recognition is intersubjective interaction: the communicative processes between socialised individuals. Taking this dimension seriously leads to the rejection of idealistic philosophies of history as well as functionalist explanations that ignore the participants’ point of view. With such an intersubjectivistic correction to the meaning of praxis, the paradigmatic experience is no longer work but communication. What then becomes of work? In the important 1980 article, Honneth wants to retrieve the normative elements of the work experience, which neither Marx nor later social theorists were able to account for adequately. At the time, however, Honneth’s intention could not be fulfilled because he had not progressed beyond the critical, “reflective” stage, as The Critique of Power will say, of negatively defining the features of a valid critical theory of society. In the mature model of the ethics of recognition, as we shall see in chapters 8 and 9, work is normatively discussed, but from the point of view of its social meaning, that is, inasmuch as subjects experience a specific kind of social recognition through their place in the division of labour. The problem with this new approach to work, via the concept of recognition, is that many of the other normative elements that were still present in Marx and which the early 1980 article had well identified are now missing, namely all the normative aspects of the subject and society’s “metabolism with nature”, those elements of social labour that are beyond the social relations between producers and consumers. In other words, the correction
of the reductive view of interaction in the theory of social labour itself leads to a reductive view of labour, when it is solely interpreted through the lens of intersubjective interaction. Once again, we are pointing here towards some of the detrimental consequences of the intersubjectivistic turn. The truncated view of work as a normative experience can be traced back to the reductive concept of interaction that Honneth operates with by focusing on recognition. Once again, as was the case with Feuerbach, the original background from which the ethics of recognition originated contained material that was not fully used in the later model, material that would have to be retrieved in order to correct the theory’s own specific abstractions.

In the mean time, we need to study more carefully how the negative outline of the ethics of recognition was gradually transformed into a positive proposal. The first step towards fulfilling the Marxist programme with renewed conceptual means was made when Honneth realised that the nascent alternative his early critiques of Marx were designating in fact echoed the efforts of the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. They, like no other tradition in the 20th century, had identified the methodological features of a critical theory of society, and their later successor, Jürgen Habermas, had developed the theory of social interaction that was missing in Marx. The critical reading of Critical Theory then became the next logical step in Honneth’s journey towards a new critical theory of society.
Honneth’s intellectual journey began with a critical reconstruction of historical materialism guided by the concept of praxis and the goal of relating theory to “a practical intent”. The general project was to propose a new model of social theory by recovering the dimensions of practical and historical intersubjectivity. The theory of social action was just as much a theoretical programme, a programme in social theory, as it was a programme with substantial links to “practice”. The conclusion of Honneth’s early research was that such a new model of social theory would have to take into account all the recently expressed reservations about Marx’s methodology, and would have to develop a new mode of relating to social reality, both in terms of its relationship to prescientific experience and in terms of its capacity to guide emancipatory practice. The ethics of recognition is the positive result of this inquiry which began at first in critical mode, through the critical review of major post-Marxist paradigms. However, in order to fully appreciate the development that took Honneth from
a critical appraisal of historical materialism to his mature model of recognition, two crucial mediating steps need to be studied in detail: his reading of the tradition of Critical Theory, in the restricted sense of the “Frankfurt School”, and his complex relationship to Jürgen Habermas. In this chapter, we focus on Honneth’s critical reconstructions of his intellectual precursors, the founders of the Frankfurt School. The next chapter synthesises his criticisms of Habermas.

**From Marx to Critical Theory**

As the previous chapter has shown, Honneth’s trajectory did not originate in Critical Theory strictly speaking but in a critical reappraisal of historical materialism. The critical perspective from which both Marx and contemporary readings of Marx were assessed was indeed directly influenced by Habermas and was guided by the latter’s emphasis on communication as an irreducible mechanism of social action. This was for example the perspective that Honneth and Joas had attempted to retrieve in Feuerbach, against all odds. This could lead to an image of the beginnings of Honneth as those of a “critical theorist” who early on had strong interests in Marx, like everyone else at the time. This, however, would slightly misconstrue the image one gets from Honneth’s early writings. The “Habermas” that inspires Honneth’s first articles, was the Habermas who was himself engaged in the same exercise, proposing various “reconstructions of historical materialism”: the neo-, or post-Marxist Habermas of *Theory and Practice*. In Honneth’s early articles, the “practical-intersubjective” perspective from which other interpretations of Marx are critiqued is indeed borrowed from Habermas, but these articles all refer to Habermas texts written well before 1981 and the *Theory of Communicative Action*.¹ The positive references to Habermas are all to the latter’s critical assessments of Marxist theory. On the other hand, the texts that are dedicated to Habermas’ own proposal, and in particular, those dedicated to

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¹ This is for example the material that one of Honneth’s earliest articles refers to: “From Adorno to Habermas: On the Transformation of Critical Social Theory”, in *The Fragmented World of the Social. Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. C.C. Wright, New York, Suny Press, 1995 (first version, 1979), pp. 92-120.
the communicative theory of society, have always been critical, throughout Honneth’s career.²

Instead of reading Honneth as a critical theorist interested in Marx, one should read him therefore as a neo-Marxist drawn to Critical Theory. In other words, whilst it is true that the project for a “Critical Theory” as it was characterised in Horkheimer’s famous 1937 article indeed describes Honneth’s own project adequately;³ one should not forget that such a project had emerged from the confrontation with other Marxist proposals in the late 1970s.

The first feature of a critical theory of society is that, by contrast with “traditional theory”, it is self-reflexively aware that it is part of the social-historical context that it studies. From this, Horkheimer and Marcuse drew the conclusion that it is only by complementing the philosophical work with factual knowledge about its social context of application, a complementing made possible through interdisciplinary collaboration with the other social sciences, that this crucial link between the theoretical and the empirical could be dealt with appropriately.⁴ The historicisation of epistemological claims is a classical argument in Marx, and of course in Hegel already.⁵ Indeed it is probably one

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of the core theoretical difficulties that they both tried to come to terms with throughout their thinking. It is this problem which in the end determines their conceptions of philosophy and of philosophy’s relationship to the other sciences. Whether or not they remain convinced of the importance of philosophy, they conceive of their theoretical activity as a meta-scientific reflection within the sciences, on the model of a dialectical relation between theory (for lack of a better word) and the sciences: an erroneous positivistic stance is avoided by theory’s meta-theoretical perspective, which links concepts together, shows their inner contradictions, and relates them to a certain historical formation or “spirit” or society; but the particular content of “theory” is itself borrowed entirely from the particular sciences. The method of immanent critique, which is central to the understanding of critical theory as a specific method in the social sciences, relates to this epistemological problem just as much as to the practical question of the reference point and application of theory. Indeed, the intimate link between these two questions, that is, between the critique of science and the critique of society, is what defines Marxist social theory, and in this it remains fully indebted to Hegel’s insights.

The first “Critical Theorists” were obviously fully aware of this. Their social-critical writings were always conducted in parallel with a critique of positivist science and self-reflective statements about the scientific status of their own claims. Indeed, the very same link between critical epistemology and critical social theory remains operative in Habermas. Honneth himself could be said to inherit these problems and their Hegelian solution. This is obvious first of all in his early texts on historical materialism, as they question the philosophical position of historical materialism in light of the latest accounts of the transformations of industrialised societies as documented by sociological research. Honneth himself, in other words, took Critical Theory at its word and applied historical materialism to it. One striking example is the already mentioned

article “Work and Instrumental Action” (1980), in which Marx’s concept of labour is critiqued for being outdated in light of the transformation of work as documented notably in the research of Harry Bravermann. In Horkheimer’s appeal to interdisciplinary collaboration between critical epistemology, the philosophy of history and society, and the social sciences, Honneth found articulated one of his own main methodological intuitions about the pursuit of the historical-materialist programme.

The second and third features of a critical theory of society are tightly connected to the first. The self-reflexive characterisation by social theory of its place within a historical state of society gives it an insight into the as yet unrealised rational potential contained in that period. As a result, Critical Theory is not so much a reflection of the age in thought, as a prolongation in theory of the emancipatory hope immanent within society. As Marcuse put it: “Critical Theory derives its goals from present tendencies of the social process”.8 In particular, this prolongation in theory of real progressive tendencies means that Critical Theory is the theoretical ally of social movements. Its task then is to explain the grounds for the social movements’ rejection of the current social order, justify the validity of that rejection, and articulate the positive goals of the movement, in other words, highlight the rational core upon which it is founded. As a result, thirdly, Critical Theory “is no longer only knowledge of the practical conditions of its own origin; at the same time, it is the controlled application of an action-guiding knowledge to present political praxis”.9 Or as Horkheimer’s programmatic 1937 article stated:

If the theoretician and his specific object are seen as forming a dynamic unity with the oppressed class, so that his presentation of societal contradictions is not merely an expression of the one concrete historical situation, but is also a force within it to stimulate change, then his real function emerges.10

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These are the famous criteria distinguishing critical from traditional theory: it is grounded in the critical experience and, when the situation has not made them extinct, in the emancipatory movements that practically aim to transform the social reality that it investigates. When, as in the late 1930s, the situation makes the realisation of emancipation impossible because social movements are turned into reactionary forces, critical theory becomes a defence of utopia.\(^{11}\) Otherwise, a substantial part of the critical theory of society, as theory, that is to say, as a set of logically connected concepts validly related to the empirical field, is to explain social struggles and justify attempts to overcome existing social contradictions. In return, Critical Theory relates back to social struggles, by providing a theoretical language to analyse the overall social situation, and thus helping them to clarify their aims and means. Indeed, this means that theory, for all its grounding in the social context, is structurally fated to be at times in conflict with the self-representation of the very social forces it is allied with. But the relationship between theory and practice is unambiguous, and it leads to a theoretical programme that is critical of both theory ("traditional theory", positivist sciences) and practice:

If we think of the object of the theory in separation from the theory, we falsify it and fall into quietism and conformism. Every part of the theory presupposes the critique of the existing order and the struggle against it along lines determined by the theory itself.\(^ {12}\)

These criteria and the specific programme of research they outline are direct applications of the Marxist dialectic of theory and practice. What is significant, however, is that such criteria are also direct consequences of the stance the young Honneth was taking in debates on historical materialism in the 1970s, before he had explicitly embraced the Critical Theory tradition. All the critical arguments brought forward by the young Honneth against the functionalist tendencies in the late Marx and the functionalist interpretations of Marx prevalent in the 1970s are inspired by the conviction that a proper critique of society requires the categories of praxis and social action as central notions. But such focus on praxis and social action (in theory itself) means

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precisely insisting on the different links between theory and practice that the initial programme of Critical Theory had already highlighted: the theory’s self-reflexive awareness of its social-historical embeddedness; the necessity therefore to engage in substantial dialogues with the social sciences; the affirmative, if potentially critical, relation to existing social movements; the practical ambitions of theory. Or to put it in genealogical terms, it seems as though Honneth’s distinctive critical stance in debates within historical materialism in the late 1970s naturally led him to define his own programme of research in the very terms that had been formulated under the name of “Critical Theory” by a previous generation of Marxist social theorists. All of this sounds pretty circular and this should not be surprising given that before all these later interpreters, Marx himself had defined his own stance in those very terms:

nothing prevents us from making criticism of politics, participation in politics, and therefore real struggles, the starting point of our criticism, and from identifying our criticism with them. (...) self-clarification (critical philosophy) to be gained by the present time of its struggles and desires.\textsuperscript{13}

The interesting point is that if such continuity in the definition of the “critical programme” is accurate, then all of Honneth’s later critical reconstructions of first generation Critical Theory and of Habermas in fact derive paradoxically from his faithfulness to this original programme as initially devised by Horkheimer and Marcuse. They are all immanent reconstructions, demonstrating how the different models of Critical Theory failed in upholding the original programme, because of their specific conceptual and empirical shortcomings. More specifically, such immanent critiques point to the failures of the different models of “Critical Theory” in adequately taking roots in “praxis”, either sociologically, by relating convincingly to social reality and the sciences that empirically study it, or politically, by providing a satisfactory model of how theory can relate back to social reality as the “self-clarification” of its own internal tensions. The ethics of recognition, by contrast, is conceived by Honneth as a more adequate realisation of the original programme. In terms of his development, the encounter with Critical Theory provided examples of major methodological and conceptual impasses, which served as powerful

counter-images. The ethics of recognition therefore grew directly from the first models of Critical Theory, in both positive and negative terms: positively, in terms of the definition of a programme of research; negatively in pointing to the conceptual and methodological traps to be avoided, in order precisely to fulfil the programme.

In order to study Honneth’s numerous criticisms towards first generation Critical Theory, this chapter takes chapters 2 and 3 of the *Critique of Power* as its main thread. In the next section, following chapter 2, I look at Honneth’s criticism of the flaws inherent in the initial approach to the Critical Theory project. The remaining sections focus mainly on Adorno’s late social theory, in respect to society, subjectivity and culture. It is in the critical engagement with Adorno’s post-war writings, more so than with earlier writings or other authors, that Honneth gradually defined his own model.

**Immanent critique of first generation Critical Theory**

Let us now outline briefly the criticisms levelled by Honneth at the founders of the Frankfurt School. These criticisms are significant for at least two reasons. First, they indicate basic methodological concerns that Honneth will also use in other contexts, against other, more contemporary theorists. They reflect some of his fundamental theoretical decisions. And secondly, as the end of the chapter will attempt to show in some detail, these criticisms also indicated in the negative the path that was to be taken for a more appropriate critical social theory, and thus showed the way towards recognition.

To a large extent, all the flaws of the first generation analyses and explanations can be traced back to their uncritical appropriation of Marx’s fateful reduction of social interaction to social labour and the idealistic strain that the latter concept retains. The early critical theorists continue to operate with a subject-object categorical scheme which leaves no room for non-instrumental forms of interaction and this basic conceptual error is the root of all further reductionist positions in social theory.

The basic, fundamental charge is that of a general reductionism in social theory. That reductionism is both conceptual and empirical. And it relates to three object-domains more specifically: society, subjectivity, and culture. Furthermore, this reductionism at the conceptual and empirical levels in the theories
of society, subjectivity and culture, is shown to have been taken to a radical extent in the development of first generation Critical Theory, with the shift from the critique of contemporary capitalistic reason to the critique of instrumental rationality.

For Honneth, the most problematic premise of first generation Critical Theory is a general philosophical one. In his long essay of 1987 published in the collection on *Social Theory Today*, edited by Giddens, Honneth summarised this point in the following way:

> a process of development of the forces of production is taken to be the central mechanism of societal progress; along with every expanded stage in the technical system of the mastery of nature, this process also forces a new stage in the social relations of productions. (...) The societal position and the practical function of critical theory were evaluated in terms of the extent to which the potential for reason present in the productive forces had already been set free in the new forms of societal organisation.14

The problematic aspect of such premises is that they continue to operate with a notion of history that sees it as the “life-activity of the species”, where the interaction of human society with nature is the main process determining all other forms of social action. Such exclusivist focus on labour as the core interaction determining the other forms of social interaction is the “productivism” which Honneth had already denounced with his critique of social labour. Marcuse’s early, enthusiastic discovery of the 1844 *Manuscripts* and the theory of alienation played a crucial role in taking Critical Theory along this path, as well as Lukács’ Hegelian interpretation of Marx.15 Such a view of human history is reductive first of all because it tends to cast all forms of social interaction in the restricted mould of social labour. The fundamental premise at the basis of Critical Theory’s initial project reproduces quite exactly Marx’s reductive gesture in the theory of society, its tendency to overlook the spheres of social action beside social labour. Secondly this view is highly

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misleading because it operates with a concept of humanity as macro-subject, as “all-embracing subject”, which in the end ignores the multiplicity that is constitutive of “historical intersubjectivity”. In it is already contained the tendency to ignore the dimension of class-specific modes of social experience, and therefore the tendency to simplify and even downplay the role played by class struggle. In these two senses, the model continues to operate with a subject-object model, in which nature is seen as the object of human activity itself hypostasised under the metaphor of “life-activity of the species”, and in which social inter-action, intersubjectivity are ignored in favour of a monolithic concept of the subject (as society or humanity at large).

Next to this first conceptual problem, Honneth identifies an attendant empirical problem, which must be subjected equally to criticism from the perspective of the critical theory programme. This time, the problematic premise concerns the diagnosis of the contemporary situation from the historical-materialist perspective as Adorno and Horkheimer saw it at the time. Both were so impressed by the totalitarian experience that they interpreted the modern, 20th century capitalistic system as developing itself along totalitarian lines. This totalitarian development of capitalism is explained as the seamless merging of the economic with the administrative and political systems. Friedrich Pollock’s theory of “state-capitalism”, which initially only applied to the National-Socialist situation, is generalised by Horkheimer and Adorno to become the description of modern capitalism in general. According to this view,

the category of State capitalism asserts a mode of organisation of capitalism in which the steering of the entire economic process by the mediating sphere of the competition of individual capitalists is transferred over to the centralised administrative activity of an apparatus of domination. The calculated interests of the major corporations and the planning capacity of the state organs come together in a technical rationality to which all domains of social action are uniformly subordinated.17

17 Honneth, Critique of Power, p. 72, and “Critical Theory”, pp. 67-68.
This quote, with its reference to instrumental rationality, applies to the middle and late period of first generation Critical Theory. More broadly, however, it gives a good indication of the fundamental vision of modernity underpinning first generation Critical Theory’s views on society, subjectivity and culture, even before the pessimistic turn after the departure from Germany. One already finds such views in outline in the articles of the 1930s.\(^{18}\) For Horkheimer and Adorno, despite several shifts in their works, the fundamental assumption about modernity remains: in a consistent extension of Marx’s critique of political economy, modernity is seen as an epoch, in which the specific logic of capitalistic valuation has become autonomous, to the point where it has been able to emancipate itself from the vagaries of social mediations, and has joined forces with the decoupled power of modern, centralised political institutions. The totally expanded economic logic and the logic of total political power have combined, and they reciprocally support each other in totally administering society. It is easy to see how such a totalitarian view of modern capitalism can be the logical end-result of a definition of social reproduction as social labour. If all spheres of society are determined in the last instance and are basically reducible to the sphere of production, then it is an overwhelming temptation to read the latter as having emancipated itself from those other societal spheres and as regulating them without resistance.

Beyond specific arguments of a strict social-theoretical nature, the core disagreement between Honneth and first generation critical theorists goes back to their fundamentally divergent visions of modernity, a divergence rooted without a doubt in the very different experiential bases of their thoughts. Whilst Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and the others developed a radically negative vision of modern society, Honneth’s is characterised by its underlying optimism, despite its stated critical impulse. These differences in the vision of modern society, stemming from radically diverging historical situations, are none so apparent than in Honneth’s consideration of the middle period in Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s writings, the period crystallising around the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For him, these writings produce such dissolution of praxis, both as a theoretical and a practical category, that they

become negative guidelines for a contemporary critical social theory. But such examples of the way in which theoretical problems are created by the fixation on historical events also led him to take another fundamental methodological stance, one he has never since abandoned. I am thinking of Honneth’s deep distrust towards “journalistic” forms of theorising: that is, on the one hand, theoretical claims that are too directly influenced by the events of the day and that therefore become obsolete as soon as the situation has changed; and conversely, interventions in the everyday life of contemporary societies from the position of the “intellectual” who has seen through the ideological veil, and unveils true reality to unsuspecting audiences. Honneth’s restraint as a public intellectual has made him less seductive than other haughty or more “radical” philosophers. It has also probably allowed him to avoid making statements that he could no longer responsibly uphold later on. The amazing consistency of Honneth’s thinking over the years is certainly to be attributed to the sobriety of his scientific stance.

After he established the conceptual premise and the empirical diagnosis that form the background of Critical Theory’s first models, Honneth identified a series of conceptual and empirical confusions that flowed directly from them.

Throughout their writings, the most basic concept with which the philosophers of the Frankfurt School approached the question of social reproduction was that of “the life process of a society”, the progress in society’s domination of nature, a premise of strict Marxist obedience. Accordingly, the central social science providing Critical Theory with its empirical “self-location” was to be political economy. This leads to a specifically Marxist form of “functionalism” in social theory as all mechanisms of social reproduction are in the last instance governed by the sphere of production, and the interdisciplinary research is framed by the results of political economy.19 Psychology, for exam-

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19 Honneth, “Critical Theory”, p. 67. The interdisciplinary programme and the central role played by economic theory in it were already explicitly established in Horkheimer’s lecture marking the opening of the Institute, see “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy” (1931), in Between Philosophy and Social Science, trans. F. Hunter, M. Kramer, J. Torpey, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1993, p. 11. See a rehearsal of Honneth’s critical reading of Horkheimer’s epistemology in “Max Horkheimer and
ple, was the second most important social science included in the programme of research, but was included only to solve a conundrum that had emerged as a result of the economic interpretation: given the presence of an emancipatory potential set free by the development of the forces of production, how can we explain why and how this potential is not realised; what are the psychological mechanisms explaining the fact that the dialectic between forces and relations of production cannot unfold? Because the model continues to be one where the economic basis determines superstructural domains, first generation Critical Theory had insufficient sensitivity for the conflictual dimensions of what it defined as the post-“liberal” stage of capitalistic development, in reference to the disappearance of market interactions amongst autonomous agents and the establishment of supra-national, monopolistic concerns. They thereby reiterated the tendency in Marx’s late writings to downplay class struggle in favour of functionalist explanations. Instead of asking how different classes experience, and participate in, social life, thus opening the possibility for an analysis of different kinds of social agency and resistance, the analyses focused on the blockage of a monologically conceived dialectic. As a result, they were already on their way to a self-defeating and self-contradictory theory of social action, leading to the severing of the link between theory and social practice.

To unlock the psychological mechanisms at play in such a blockage, Frommian psychology was marshalled. It provided a theory of the disciplining of instincts within the family at the hands of the larger social context. At the end of one of his trade-mark conceptual reconstructions, Honneth summarises the argument in the following way: “Parental rearing practices that reflect the external forces of society within the family fix the psychosexual development of the child at the level appropriate to the socially required system of behaviour”.20

Such a view of the mediation between social forces and subjectivities via socialisation processes clearly highlights the functionalism of Critical Theory’s first

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model. The individual subject and indeed society at large are treated as passive material that are directly moulded and exploited by the economic system for its own separate purposes. Despite its stated intention to avoid the economistic determinism of other contemporary Marxist schools, early critical theory was thus led to a reductionist view of the subject as unremittingly worked upon and constructed by functional forces. Conversely, it propounds a homogeneous vision of power which overlooks the potential for social struggle. This manifold “sociological deficit” leads to seriously truncated diagnoses at the empirical level. The critical theory of the 1930s in particular remained blind to precisely those aspects of its own society that it should have been alerted to given the terms of its research programme, namely the class-specific forms of experience that were at play during the rise of totalitarianism and the deep social, economic and political tensions characteristic of the time, for example between the interests of the great capitalist monopolies and the other sectors of a society traumatised by economic and political crisis. This empirical short-sightedness is replicated in the absence of a serious engagement with contemporary sociology, suspected of being one of the typical positivistic social sciences that participate directly in the system’s maintenance and expansion. Such orthodox version of political economy and the embrace of Fromm’s early theses provided only easy confirmations of the “state-capitalism” thesis. By contrast, the writers of what Honneth terms the “outer circle” of Critical Theory showed how the full depth of the social reality of the time could be more accurately approached. In the writings of Franz Neumann and Otto Kirschheimer, for example, could be found an alternative to the theory of state-capitalism, one interested in studying the conflicting interests and strategies at the heart of the Fascist state, notably between economic and political forces. Indeed, in the writers of “the outer circle” Honneth uncovers an anticipation of his own, “communicative” premises in social theory:

From the communicative processes in which the different groups negotiate their interests amongst themselves through the utilisation of their respective power potential, there emerges the fragile compromise which finds expression in the institutional constitution of a society.22

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21 A functionalist use of psychology already taken in 1932, as is evident for example in “History and Psychology”.
22 Honneth, “Critical Theory”, p. 79.
With the domain of culture, once more, Honneth shows Horkheimer consciously attempting to avoid the functionalism, economism and determinism of other Marxist readings. However, here again, the attempt fails, because the conceptual framework does not leave room for the consideration of normative agency on the part of individuals and groups.

Culture appears between the system of social labour and malleable human instincts in the obstinate form of organised learning processes that anchor the behavioural expectations required by the economy as libidinally charged goals of action in the individual psyche.23

Here again, the critical theory of society lacks the required empirical sensitivity toward subjective and group agency, because the place in the conceptual apparatus that would have made it possible is lacking.

The rise of totalitarian movements and the destruction of any emancipatory hope in the 1940s leads Horkheimer to shift the conceptual narrative of the “life process of society” towards the “dialectic of Enlightenment”. From then on, Critical Theory becomes synonymous with the despairing diagnosis of Western civilisation that is developed in that tradition’s most famous book. The history of the species is now read from the vantage point of the total catastrophe that befalls the world with the Second World War, and is reconstructed as the fateful development of a nihilistic streak in human rationality that was present from the very beginning. The new vision is encapsulated in the small quotation Honneth borrows from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: “From the fate of the present the insufficiency residing in the human domination of nature itself is disclosed: ‘The new order of fascism is reason revealing itself as unreason’”.24

Adorno’s late social theory, to which Honneth dedicates the third chapter of *The Critique of Power*, is the development of that radically pessimistic vision of human history. This period in German social philosophy represents the most telling theoretical counter-example for the young Honneth. In the remainder of this chapter, we need to show how Honneth identifies a process of radicalisation between the initial methodological and practical ambiguities in the

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early model and Adorno’s late social theory. As we shall see, from this analysis the first outlines of his alternative model centred on recognition started to emerge.

**Critique of Adorno’s late social theory: the severing of theory from practice**

Critical Theory’s first model retained the characteristics of a classical materialist theory of society. The mechanisms of social domination were traced back to a specific social formation organised around a specific dialectic of productive forces and relations of production. Even though the analyses of society, subjectivity and culture already showed clear signs of reductionism as a result of an overly functionalist perspective, the reference to the different dimensions of social action were retained. With the turn to the dialectic of Enlightenment, the new forms of social domination characteristic of modern society are now read along the lines of the unavoidable expansion of a catastrophic potentiality inscribed at the heart of human capacities. The rise of the totalitarian regimes, the demise of the liberal, market economies of the 19th century, and the appearance of state-centred, technocratically organised economies are seen as the ultimate manifestation of a rationality purely defined as the capacity to calculate the best means for predetermined ends. The turn to the dialectic of Enlightenment is thus underpinned by a radicalisation and dehistoricisation of Marx’s basic premise at the foundation of his concept of social labour, that is, humanity’s practical engagement with nature. This basic premise, combined with his critique of commodity fetishism, is reformulated into a radical anthropological thesis: the idea that reason, the capacity of human survival at the hand of hostile nature, is at the same time the cause of humanity’s reification of external, social and inner nature. Marx’s critique of reified thought and reified forms of experience, which were diagnosed by him as historical products of a specific mode of production, are generalised into the anthropological narrative of a “retrogressive anthropogenesis”. This collapse of history into the deployment of an anthropological destiny thus coincides with a radically pessimistic definition of reason. Transcendental reason is disclosed as a logic of identity that hypostatises the particular under the universal for the sake of prediction, control and, eventually, reproduction. In a nutshell, the history
of humanity becomes the history of humanity’s self-reification following its reification of the natural world.

Such radically pessimistic anthropological construction leads critical social philosophy, understood as a theory of social action, to a spectacular impasse, so the young Honneth argues forcefully. It leads to a complete dissolution of the programme of critical social theory. There are therefore major lessons to be learnt in this failure, if one is intent on pursuing this programme in a more promising mode.

The dissolution of the programme of Critical Theory can be witnessed at all the levels that were to be involved in its realisation. The sophisticated constellation of theoretical and practical activities that was to make the unity of theory and practice possible is destroyed as a whole and in every one of its specialised aspects. This is because the radically pessimistic anthropological grounding of Adorno’s social theory casts an absolutely damning suspicion over everyone of these aspects. In the totalising narrative of an irrepressible and now achieved trend towards domination rooted in the very structure of human interaction with the world, no human endeavour or form of experience escapes the suspicion of being a silent accomplice to abstraction and reification.

This is true first of all of theory itself, whether it is natural science, social or humanistic science:

So viewed, the sciences continue in methodically systematised ways the process in which society learns to maintain itself through the instrumental control of its external nature and then through the social control of its inner nature. They participate in the civilising course of the human domination of nature and of social reification precisely because they rationalise the socially stored knowledge of control that relieves society of its situational contingency.25

In other words, it is in the very achievements of science that its ultimate destructive function is hidden. Or to put it in anthropological terms: the very

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25 Ibid., p. 60.
means allowing “the species” to survive, to wit, its symbolic powers at the origin of scientific and cultural achievements, are also the powers that separate it from external and internal nature and thus constitute the root of its self-alienation, and ultimately, its self-destruction.

The direct consequence of this nihilistic view of reason’s achievements is firstly a radical separation between the moral impetus behind critical social theory and the methodological ways of implementing it: in order to continue to take the interests of the oppressed as the most fundamental source of inspiration for the critique of society, the latter is forced to renounce the use of any empirical, scientific discipline, since they are all involved in the deadly dialectic that one attempts to escape. The critique of epistemology thus leads to a catastrophic result: the creation of an insurmountable gap between philosophy and the sciences.

The second consequence will be a new conception of philosophy that has to show how the latter escapes the destructive dialectic that befalls other disciplines. It leads to a paradoxical definition of philosophy as “negative dialectic”, as the attempt “to transcend the concept by means of the concept”,26 in other words, the critique of reason by itself. Since all social injustice is traced back to the structures of transcendental reason, the truly critical activity becomes the critique of hidden forms of domination and instrumentalisation inherent in the categories present in all discourse and experience. In other words, philosophy, severed from the natural and social sciences, becomes the only means of salvation, whilst, on the other hand, it has been denied any capacity of articulating positive knowledge claims, lest it itself becomes one of the reifying discourses. The tenuousness of the methodological grounding is only too obvious.

The radical suspicion towards empirical sciences makes itself manifest especially towards sociology. The rejection of sociology as being one of the main avenues of reification, added to the dehistoricisation of the social-theoretical claims as a result of the deep-anthropological grounding, leads to a lack of sensitivity towards the social reality of the time, in particular a lack of appreciation for the differences between social contexts. The totalising diag-

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26 Ibid., pp. 62-63.
nosis therefore seems to play itself a severe kind type of “identificatory” trick with regard to the differences in the social, both diachronically and synchronically.

But the most serious problem is that this empirical short-sightedness, witnessed in the diagnosis of the post-war period and anchored in the totalising narrative, is combined with a principled rejection of any emancipatory politics and total pessimism towards the progressive value of any social movement. Both politics and social movements are themselves caught up in the dialectic of unreason, whatever their good intentions. With all this, it is the fundamental link between theory and practice that is definitively severed. Yes, the critical theory of society still thinks of itself as representing the interests of the oppressed, as the radical critique of all “senseless suffering”. But this has become an empty self-representation, which entails no requirement for theory to engage in any substantial way with the empirical social world; neither is theory grounded in its social context anymore, since the latter is diagnosed as totally reified, and the social agents as totally controlled and manipulated; nor does it have any intention of fulfilling any practical intent, of feeding back into progressive movements, since politics has become one of the functions of the system. Famously, the only form of activity for Adorno that does not participate in the general reification and self-reification, destruction and self-destruction, of modern society is the one that makes no use of instrumental reason. Only the artist and the work of art can offer examples of an escape from an instrumental reason that has fully actualised itself. This amounts to a total dissolution of the political intent of critical theory.

Honneth will develop his ethics of recognition with the explicit intention of avoiding such radical rupture, which occurs at all levels, between theory and practice. Every feature of his recognition model is marked by the desire to avoid the Adornian turn away from social reality, social struggles and the social sciences that study them. Given what we have seen about the origins of Honneth’s thought, it is clear that by attempting to restore the unity of theory and practice, he intends to fulfil the very programme of Critical Theory which he sees his founders to have led astray.

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The ethics of recognition therefore can be said to develop as a counter-model to Adorno’s social theory. This is a counter-model of a very special kind as it operates as an immanent critique. Honneth’s early critique of Adorno can be called immanent since it does not propose to offer a different definition of the ends and means of social theory, but proposes rather a correction of the older theory by taking as its core criteria the very criteria which the latter had set for itself. Such complex relation between old (Adornian) and new (Honnethian) Critical Theory, however, always threatened to make things more difficult for the new one. As we will see at the end of this book, Honneth gradually weakened his critique of Adorno and turned an increasingly sympathetic eye to his great predecessor, to the point where his current model of recognition now adopts some of Adorno’s key insights as its central arguments. In the end, we will have to ask whether in fact the recognition model was not always Adornian in its core.

But there is more. It is possible that, just as the young Honneth failed to make full use of what he had rediscovered in Feuerbach and the anthropological source of historical materialism, the same process of partial blindness to essential conceptual resources occurred in reference to Adorno as well. In order to see this, we need to return to the crux of Honneth’s critique of first generation Critical Theory. Habermas’ key distinction between instrumental and communicative action allowed Honneth to pinpoint the theoretical core of all subsequent problems. With this distinction, it becomes obvious that the progress in the domination of nature is not necessarily synonymous with an increase in social domination. This brings with it a different view of the natural sciences, and of the objectifying logic at play in them. This logic can now be acknowledged as an important part of human societies’ ways of surviving within external nature, of reproducing themselves materially, without leading to the conclusion, however, that in it is necessarily entailed a process of societal and psychological reification, since the two processes of material and social reproduction are now decoupled. This argument runs through Honneth’s career and remains a significant one today. The uncritical embrace of such argument, however, raises interesting questions, again in relation to the problem of the ecological crisis and the relation to nature. For all its alleged exaggerations and obfuscations, Adorno’s philosophy seemed to contain a thought which for many still carries a lot of weight. The link between the reification of nature and self-reification can be taken in two ways: first, as a grand thesis
about the nature of social reproduction in general, whereby social reproduction, because it is first of all an exercise in the domination of nature, is therefore also an exercise in domination more generally, and therefore also a process of societal and individual domination. But a lesser claim could also be read in Adorno: namely, that the objectification of nature, even if it does not constitute the sole mechanism of social reproduction, when it is taken to the extremes of exploitation and destruction, cannot leave human interactions untouched. The claim here is not that the reification of nature is synonymous with self-reification, but that the reification of nature cannot fail to have an impact on relations amongst ourselves and within ourselves. As a consequence, a programme of social emancipation would have to entail a programme of “emancipation of nature”, in the sober sense of a reappraisal of the basic assumptions we bring to our relations to non-human entities. But Honneth never envisages this possibility, either in his exegesis of Adorno, or, and more importantly, as a general argument. The rediscovery of Feuerbach and the initial reconstructions of historical materialism were inspired by the need to reframe social theory in order to include not just a stronger emphasis on “practical intersubjectivity”, but also a strong ecological moment. However, Honneth’s early proximity with ecological themes, through the emphasis on human beings’ “sensuousness”, was immediately obstructed by the Habermasian insistence on the necessity and normative innocence of an objectifying attitude towards nature. As we will see in the last chapter of this book, even when he returns to Adorno as his central reference, Honneth does not question this fundamental, anthropocentric premise.

**Critique of Adorno’s theory of subjectivity**

This point is all the more plausible if we turn to the later part of Honneth’s critique of Adorno in the third chapter of *Critique of Power*, that is, the pages dedicated to Adorno’s theory of the subject. In reconstructing that theory, Honneth himself shows the essential links between an attitude to nature and an attitude to oneself without seeing the plausible, critical potential inherent in them.

As Honneth shows, for Adorno the instrumental domination of nature impacts directly on the formation of subjects. First, in a synchronic sense, the reified world of the modern commodity economy produces “calcified” subjectivities.
In a diachronic sense, within the framework of the “retrogressive anthropogenesis” hypothesis, this is the idea of the self-denial demanded by the imperative of survival through labour: according to this hypothesis phylogenesis is a process of repression as all the subjective needs and instincts that were not useful for the tasks of social labour had to be repressed. As one of the most famous passages in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* states: “Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self, the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood.”

The speculative historical hypothesis is complemented by an anthropological argument. Adorno’s conclusion (shared by Horkheimer) that the domination of nature translates into forms of domination within society and subjectivities has a positive counterpart in a normative image of the interaction between self and world, famously captured in the notion of *mimesis*. Like Mead, Adorno defends the idea that the subject is constituted retrospectively, as it were, as the point that the experience of the world retroactively indicates. The subject gets to know itself as a unity on the basis of the unity and consistency within a multiplicity of experiences that have been made of the external world. Once again, whether he was aware of this or not, Adorno retrieves a thought that was at the heart of Feuerbach’s sensualism.

The subject finds itself retrospectively, as it were, in the image it has of nature. This simultaneously genetic and transcendantal hypothesis leads to a normative image of emancipation, a notion of communication that is not understood discursively as exchange of reasons, but rather “sensuously” as aesthetic empathy: “A mimetic relation to nature, in which things are valued not as objects for manipulative intervention but as counterparts to sensory

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30 See chapter 4.
31 The pages on “the primacy of the object” in the *Negative Dialectics* (pp. 184-193) are particularly close to Feuerbach’s theses on the objective dependency of subjective formation.
experiences, is the presupposition of a society freed from the repression of individual instincts and social power”.32

Accordingly, the logical relationship between instrumental control of nature and self-alienation goes in both directions: reified identity is to some extent the cause of the reification of nature (repression, retrogressive genesis), but it is also conversely the reflection of reified nature. An impoverished approach to nature under the constraint of control leads to an impoverished image of the ego itself, not just because there is a general logic of repression at play within society, which applies to all dimensions and interactions, but also because the subject reads herself in nature. Of course, given his uncompromising embrace of the “intersubjectivistic turn”, Honneth cannot accept such implicit normative theory of the subject, according to which the subject appears as the “correlate of nature”. For Honneth, such speculations are definitely made outdated by more consequent intersubjectivistic approaches to subjectivation.33 The subject’s formation is described as a process where an isolated subject faces an objective world, without reference to the interaction with others. But even if we agree with Honneth that it seems inadequate to think subjective formation without taking into account the constitutive role played by processes of intersubjective interaction, once again a question similar to the one raised in the previous section arises: does the move towards an intersubjectivistic theory of subject formation necessarily entail the abandonment of the theory of mimesis? Is it not replacing one abstraction with another when one simply replaces the model of mimesis with that of intersubjectivity narrowly conceived as inter-personal interaction? Should not the two principles rather complement each other? Because of his harsh stance against his precursors in The Critique of Power, Honneth did not see that Adorno’s theory of mimesis, his insistence on sensuousness as the ground of knowledge, the primacy of the object in subjective formation, all these theses overlapped in major ways with the very line of thought he himself had earlier attempted to retrieve as an important forgotten source for a renewal for social theory, namely Feuerbach’s “emancipatory sensuousness”. But we have already diagnosed the reason behind this blindness: in Critique of Power, Honneth repeats the gesture of his first book,

32 Honneth, Critique of Power, p. 65.
33 Ibid., p. 45.
of repressing those dimensions of affectivity that stem from the contact with the world, and restricting affectivity to the affective aspects of interactions with important others. In Feuerbachian terms, the repression of “sensualism” by “altruism”.

The notion of the subject underlying the reification thesis was not grounded solely in speculative anthropological arguments. It was also developed through a psychoanalytical theory of socialisation that fleshed out in concrete, social-psychological terms, the general theory of reified subjectivity. This theory was encapsulated in the motto of the “end of personality”. The thesis was well prepared in the works of the 1930s with the reference to the Frommian theory of a functional moulding of personality within the family context. This thesis was sharpened with the addition of another argument, the idea that post-liberal economics, by undermining the independence of the liberal individual through the total control of society by technocratic forces, had undermined the power of the father within the family context and led to the fragilisation of the super-ego function. With the loss of a super-ego, the modern subject, so the thesis went, was delivered over to externalised institutions of socialisation. Those institutions and especially the culture industry could directly tap into the individual’s instincts, direct them towards functionally pertinent goals, and exploit them for economic profit and administrative control. Instead of strong individualities resulting from the internalisation of strong father figures, the society of individuals without super-egos was therefore one of weak individualities who hadn’t learnt the power to resist. Honneth shows that the thesis about the weakening of the super-ego in Adorno’s work, was related to the thesis regarding the impossibility for the modern ego to conquer a position of autonomy in the face of the total monopolisation of power by the economic-political system. This in turn led to the regression of the ego to a narcissistic level where pulsional energies could be vicariously satisfied through their projection in idealised characters, like the idols fabricated by the culture industry, or the charismatic leaders of totalitarian politics. On this second model, the organic drives let loose as a result of the loss of

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a strong enough ego are once again the direct material of economic-political manipulation.

Here again, Honneth diagnoses Adorno’s reductionist view of socialisation and subject-formation in modernity as the result of his monological and idealistic premises. In this paradigm, the “organic instinctual potential” is viewed as “the inner psychic complement to external nature, which the subject must learn to control effectively”. In other words, even the subject’s instinctual potential is conceptualised via the scheme of an object under the control and domination of the subject. The father figure takes on such an importance in this model precisely because it is the paradigmatic example of a subject mastering an external world simply understood as consisting of objective states of affairs: the father becomes the internal equivalent to the process of instrumental control. Consequently, the constitution of the ego is conceived as the mastery over an internal world that is not distinguished conceptually from the objective, external one.

Later on, in the development of his own model of critical theory, Honneth will famously ground the normative and critical dimensions of social theory in a theory of the subject informed by psychoanalysis. Here, the critique of Adorno’s late theory of the subject by Jessica Benjamin seems to have served as a crucial inspiration. Honneth underlines very well the immanent contradictions that for him plague Adorno’s psychoanalytical model of subject formation: how could the subject feel powerless in the realisation of its own ego demands (the alleged source of narcissistic regression), if those demands have been externalised in the group-ego? The objections that derive from comparing Adorno with later object-relation theory, however, are borrowed directly from Benjamin. They pointed the young Honneth in the direction of Winnicott to complement the overcoming of the dialectic of Enlightenment model with an intersubjectivistic one. Such confrontation brings to light the collapse in Adorno of the difference between the internalisation of normative values

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35 At the time, Honneth quotes only her article in *Telos*, “The End of Internalisation: Adorno’s Social Psychology”, *Telos*, 32, 1977. Later on, her books become a major source of inspiration, especially for the development of the social psychology and the theory of social pathologies in *The Struggle for Recognition*.

36 Honneth, *Critique of Power*, pp. 87-88.
in the construction of a super-ego, and the formation of an autonomous ego modelled on parental behaviour for the cognitive mastering of the environment. As a result, and following Benjamin, a series of critical distinctions can be aimed at an Adornian theory of subjectivity: the world is not just made up of objective states of affairs but also of normative and symbolic facts that are intersubjectively constituted; the formation of the self touches on separate mechanisms in relation to those two dimensions; the confrontation with the objective world is made possible by, and is fundamentally different from, the encounter with significant others; the link between rationality and socialisation must be approached through the concept of communication rather than instrumental control, and so on.

In all the premises used by Adorno and Horkheimer in their diagnosis of a “dialectic of Enlightenment” the same fundamental philosophical mistake is repeated, namely the reference to an outdated categorical scheme of subject-object. This basic categorical mistake is repeated at all levels, from the theory of social reproduction, understood solely through the category of social labour, to the theory of history, which remains idealistic in constructing a unified narrative of a single macro-subject, to the theory of subject formation. Indeed, Honneth identifies the same mistake with similar consequences in the theory of social domination. The idealistic philosophy of history, the idea of the history of the species as extension of the domination over nature, exerts such a powerful pull on Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s thought that “they even also want to conceive the manner of functioning of intra-social domination according to this model”, as the “structural analogue to the process of instrumental control”. Accordingly,

> Just as the instrumentally acting subject subsumes natural processes under the abstract perspective of control in order to be able to make it subject to his goal-oriented manipulations, so too the socially privileged subject arranges all other members of society according to the perspective of control in order to let them become organs for the execution of socially allocated work assignments.\(^37\)

Once again, but this time from the perspective of the interaction between social classes, what amounts in the end to a crudely instrumentalist vision of social life underpins the analysis of society: that of passive subjects submitted without mediation to a homogeneous and all-pervasive violence. Honneth’s theory of a struggle for recognition, of course, will be the direct opposite of this view of society and social interaction. It holds that society is the fragile, always contestable, product of conflict-ridden relationships around the interpretation of core social norms and values, so that, despite the intersubjectivist premise which seems to let the subject arise from the group, no subject, group or class is simply the product of socialisation and social reproduction, a bundle of psychic material moulded by functionally structured social violence. However, it is crucial to repeat that this alternative critical theory of society was formed indeed in quite radical opposition to its predecessors, but also, in another sense, in full faithfulness to them, inasmuch as it upheld the very programme they had formulated. In Honneth’s mind, it is only if one makes room within theory for a sufficiently robust concept of social action, which implies an image of social subjects as autonomous agents capable of resistance, that the unity of theory and practice which separates critical from traditional theory can be achieved. Adorno’s social theory, on the other hand, proves for him the theoretical confusions and self-defeating practical conclusions one is forced into when one operates with instrumentalist and functionalist images of social reproduction and social domination. This negative lesson will have a lasting impact on Honneth’s subsequent thinking.

**Social action as cultural action**

This conflict between the “generations” of Critical Theory around the conceptualisation of social action makes the theory of culture particularly important. One important implication that derives from Honneth’s early adoption of the programme of Critical Theory, and his rejection, on the very basis of that programme, of the functionalism of his predecessors, is that one of the main tasks

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38 We might recall that this intuition was already at play in Honneth’s very first sociological writings.
of social theory is to account for the contingency at the heart of all forms of social interaction: the social uses of language, of cultural practices and institutions, the forms of interaction, primary and secondary processes of socialisation are never unidirectional but contested and contestable practices which always contain the potential for transformation. Adorno’s concept of the “culture industry”, systematising theses that were already developed in Critical Theory’s first model, provides the last building block between the analyses of subject formation and the theory of society. It is also the final point of contention for Honneth, one, moreover, with special significance in the development of his own thinking.

Honneth summarises Adorno’s striking analysis of the capitalistic appropriation of modern media and of the capitalistic control over education and entertainment, his famous proposition that contemporary capitalism transforms culture into an industry, as follows:

According to this model, on the basis of a monopolistic economic system, the modern reproductive techniques of film, radio, and television are fused with the rapidly spreading entertainment industry into a cultural-industrial complex whose manipulative products make it possible to control individual consciousness at the level of motivations. Adorno is also convinced that, in aesthetic presentation as well as in informational content, the products of the culture industry affect the members of society in such a way that they willingly undertake administratively sanctioned tasks.39

In Adorno’s critical theory of modern society, as the mediating factor between subjectivity and society, culture is not just one dimension of social life amongst others, to which modern capitalistic methods of value-creation have been applied. It is in fact the driving force of contemporary capitalism, firstly because it has become one of the main avenues for profit, and more importantly, because it plays an irreplaceable functional role in the new economy: the moulding of subjectivities to create good consumers and obedient citizens. Instead of repeating the conceptual, methodological and sociological objections that have already been raised in relation to the theory of society or the theory of the subject, it is more interesting at the end of this chapter to

39 Ibid., p. 77.
see briefly how the critique of Adorno’s concept of the culture industry gives vital indications about an unacknowledged yet highly significant stage in the development of the “struggle-for-recognition” model.

Honneth’s first model, resulting from his critical readings of Marx and the contemporary versions of historical materialism, was that of a new “philosophy of praxis”, a theory of “practical intersubjectivity” where social praxis was redefined in its normative dimensions to avoid idealistic and reductionist conceptions of social action. This was the intuition at work in the 1980 book written with Hans Joas and underpinning the rereading of both historical materialism and theories of intersubjectivity. One must say, however, that compared with the sophistication and detail of the critical readings at the time, this model itself, as a positive proposal, remained largely undeveloped. It was more suggested than presented, encapsulated in notions such as “historical intersubjectivity” and “the humanisation of nature”. The intent was clear: to rescue a strong sense of social agency, both in materialist and in emancipatory terms, but none of the many problems linked with such a position had been addressed. However, with his attention moving to Critical Theory as the best methodology to fulfil the Marxist programme under revised conditions, Honneth was now on his way to answering this challenge.

The first three chapters of The Critique of Power present a number of alternatives to the theoretical decisions made by Horkheimer and Adorno. Brought together, these alternatives constitute a much more robust alternative model of Critical Theory, one in which Honneth now engages himself fully. The basic thrust of this new model lies in a new concept of social action now understood as “cultural action”. This explains why the critiques of Adorno’s negativistic theory of society, and in particular the rejection of the culture industry thesis are so central. However, in what constitutes a trademark of Honneth’s methodology, the entrance point leading into that alternative theoretical path remains immanent as it is located at a bifurcation in the theory that is critically reconstructed. The theory is shown to hesitate between two incompatible solutions, one of which was abandoned even though it was in fact the more satisfactory one from an “action-theoretic” perspective. In the present case, it is in Horkheimer’s own writings that sketches of a much more adequate conception of society can be found, one that emphasises the contingency at play in social life and the contestability of established modes of social
reproduction. This is especially visible in Horkheimer’s approach to culture. Honneth shows that in a number of passages, Horkheimer himself had developed a “social struggle”-conception, rather than an “institution-theoretic”-conception of culture. In these passages:

The category of culture (...) denotes a field of social action in which social groups create common values, objectify them in the institutions of everyday life, and hand them down in the form of symbolic utterances. The dimension of social reproduction that Horkheimer thus seems to aim at with the help of such a concept of culture is one in which cognitive as well as normative self-interpretations are produced and secured within the medium of social action. These patterns of value orientation, produced within specific groups and communicatively reinforced, mediate between the system of social labour and the formation of individual motives since within them the economic constraints upon action are reinterpreted within the context of everyday practices and thereby accumulated in a socially effective manner. The natural potential of human drives and the socially independent forces of economic reproduction are refracted by the foundation of everyday interpretive accomplishments in which subjects reciprocally secure social meanings and values. Through the filter of these collective norms of action that are fixed in the group-specific interpretations of ‘law’ and ‘morality’ and that are symbolically represented in the habitualised forms of ‘fashion’ and ‘lifestyle’, the constraints upon action pre-given from above and the action motives repressed from within first become effective in subjects socialised in a life situation. The ‘cement’ of a society (...) consists in the culturally produced and continuously renewed action orientations in which social groups have interpretively disclosed their own individual needs as well as the tasks required of them under the conditions of the class-specific division of labour.40

This passage proposes the outlines of a model of social theory that represents a sophisticated solution to the difficult programme of an “action-theoretic” concept of “social action”. It should be read, I would argue, not just as the

development of an under-thematised possibility found in Horkheimer, but as the temporary solution that Honneth himself had found to the problem that arose for him as a result of his first research into historical materialism. Indeed, the theory of “cultural action” represents the systematic development of Honneth’s early, anti-Althusserian intuitions regarding the theoretical significance of questions of socialisation and social reproduction in his very first writings.41

The concept of cultural action Honneth uncovered in the interstices of Horkheimer’s writings offers a substantive defence of individual and group action that still acknowledges the factuality of social life, and especially the division of labour, without falling into the traps of functionalism. It is a particularly effective solution to the problem of social reproduction that avoids hypothesising a totalitarian, homogeneous source of power and therefore moves away from the concomitant vision of a homogeneous and passive social reality. On the contrary, it interprets the reproduction of society as a whole as the integration of the distinct modes of participation of the different classes and groups, via the specific ways they have of becoming experientially involved in social life. These specific ways, “filters”, or “interpretations” of systemic and institutional demands, allow social groups to enter social life in ways that are meaningful to them, both synchronically, in terms of their participation in overall social life from their specific social location, and diachronically, through class-specific modes of socialisation. The emphasis on the irreducibility and multiplicity of group-specific perspectives on social life helps to retain the motif of class struggle, but reinterprets it in a normative sense. The idea of a fragile and always contestable consensus as the core mechanism of social integration and reproduction, which from now on represents Honneth’s core intuition in social theory, is well substantiated in this model.

Several implicit features of this model make it particularly seductive for the young Honneth. First, in the acts of everyday cultural interpretation and linguistic mediation, individual agency is retained: individual motives and actions continue to be a deciding factor in social reproduction, but framed

41 See in particular, “Reproduktion und Sozialisation” and “Zur Latenten Biographie von Arbeiterjugendlichen”.
and determined by group-specific “cultural” values. This “influence”, however, is non-deterministic since it is conceived of as the result of inter-subjective, linguistic and more broadly symbolic, inter-actions, as the product of subjective accomplishments through exchange. Without the constant renewal of cultural interpretations of social constraints, these would be inoperative. In other words, socialised subjects cannot be conceived of as passive material for social forces. On the other hand, these subjective accomplishments are not the result of self-transparent, conscious decisions. Their social, class- and group-specific dependencies are central features. As a result, this theory of the habitus harbours the possibility of subjects becoming reflexively aware of their social situation and of its inherent inequalities without renouncing the full depth of social, institutionalised life.

Obviously, what applies to subjects applies also to groups. Honneth’s position here is strikingly close to Bourdieu’s. Indeed his largely positive review of Bourdieu’s work dates from that period. The focus on group-specific forms of cultural action helps retain the notion of society as an antagonistic field, constituted through relations of power and violence. Class struggle, as said, is reinterpreted in a normative sense as struggle around the interpretation of social norms. Therefore, just as in Bourdieu, an implied feature of the model is that pre-reflexive forms of habitus can always become reflexive and critical, especially in the experience of injustice when the gap between functional and subjective needs has become too great.

Perhaps most importantly, this model of social theory centred on the concept of “cultural action” continues to acknowledge the autonomy and determining nature of the institutions of society. The proposal manages to find a way

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43 In an early review written with Rainer Paris, “Zur Interaktionsanalyse von Politik”, Leviathan, 7(1), 1979, pp. 930-939, the young Honneth had already flagged the necessity to develop an “action-theoretic” approach to political struggles “from below”, that is, by focusing on the class-specific frames of action and interpretation that different groups bring to the political struggle.
between a reductionist, functionalist view of social reproduction, and a naïve “culturalist” one. In particular, the division of labour continues to apply its constraints upon groups and individuals, but not in direct, automatic fashion; it is “accepted” by groups and individuals via the filters of cultural frames of action-orientation. This is tremendously important in the light of later critiques of Honneth that accuse him of defending precisely a “culturalist” position, of reducing the economic order to an order of recognitive relations. In Horkheimer, with the thesis of class-specific hermeneutic and symbolic filters explaining the participation of social classes in the social order, Honneth had found a non-reductive way of emphasising the active achievements of social subjects in the reproduction of society, without losing sight of its institutional depth.

Finally, the theory of cultural action helps to solve a problem that is one of the major challenges for critically minded social theories: namely, the representation of, and reaction to, social domination by the subjects and groups that are socially dominated. This theory gives an image of the social order as based on an unequal compromise that reflects the state of unequal class relations at a given time. On the one hand, such an account explains the experience of injustice as the acceptance by dominated groups of the very order that does injustice to them. The focus on the normative and cultural integration of society means that these groups are not just temporary losers in a power struggle. On the other hand, they should not be seen either as the passive, unreflective subjects of social violence that Adorno’s social theory postulates. To some extent, the oppressed agree to the unjust social order as the class-specific cultural patterns filtering social injustice make injustice liveable and acceptable. But the normative integration cuts both ways. Precisely because the integration is normative and not functional or simply the result of power-relations, the possibility always remains that the injustice can be represented as such and the order rejected on the basis of that representation. The culture that makes injustice liveable can also provide the resources for counter-cultural practices and acts of resistance. This is true first of all in the sense that counter-cultural practices can structure entire lifeworlds. In these, the situation of injustice is to some extent entrenched in the form of a status quo that cannot be completely challenged because the power relations are too stacked against the minority group in question. Yet the counter-cultural practices can also create an everyday culture that is a direct, if often unsuccessful and only implicit
rejection of the hegemonic order; in any case, such practices can help develop a self-contained, autonomous minority culture. From such an ambiguous aspect of class-specific interpretations of the normative order, we move without discontinuity to more decisive forms of resistance and rejection. Because the culture of social groups provides an interpretive filter that gives access to the social order, they can also in favourable cases provide the resources for a representation of what is wrong with existing norms, and even of how to challenge and change them. Cultural valuation frameworks can in some circumstances help the relevant groups act on the fact that the norms are always renegotiable, in the interpretation of their scope (for example, the scope of social rights) and even of their very validity, for example by comparison with other norms.

A later passage in the book makes this link particularly apparent between social hermeneutics and the theory of social emancipation. This link in fact characterises Honneth’s own fundamental vision in social theory, the idea of social theory as an hermeneutic of injustice. As is so often the case with him, the passage is first of all an immanent reading of Horkheimer but can be read more generally as Honneth’s own model at the time:

Critical activity is thus also the reflective continuation of an everyday communication shaken in its self-understanding. On this basis, social struggle can be conceived as the cooperative organisation of this everyday critique: it would be the attempt by social groups, forced by the conditions of the class-specific division of labour and excessive burdens, to realise within the normative structures of social life the norms of action acquired in the repeated experience of injustice.44

On this model, Critical Theory originates in and leads back to the experience of oppressed groups as they gradually realise, in the cognitive sense, the reality of their domination which was so far made liveable by the frames of their own specific life-world, and realise, in the practical sense, on the basis of that cognitive discovery, a transformation of the situation, which is both a transformation of their own self-understanding, and therewith, of society at large. The critical theorist can fully play the role that was prescribed by the initial

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44 Honneth, *Critique of Power*, p. 29.
Strikingly, beyond the few indications found interspersed in Horkheimer, it is in Walter Benjamin, amongst all the authors of the first generation of Critical Theory, that Honneth finds another theoretical programme that looks most likely to succeed in retaining such a link to praxis. Beyond the “functionalist reductionism” of the authors in the “inner core” of the Institute, Honneth finds in Walter Benjamin a social theory that is especially sensitive to class-specific experiences and cultural achievements. By contrast with Adorno’s blanket rejection of modern forms of cultural expression, Honneth finds in Benjamin a writer for whom “the conflict between classes was a continually live experience, as well as a theoretical premise of every cultural and social analysis”. Benjamin, for Honneth, was able to see that “it is the cultural struggle of social classes itself that determines the integrative ability of society”. As a consequence, Benjamin was able to view cultural phenomena not just as the effects of a totalitarian process of reification, but as empowering and expressive elements, as the cultural dimension of social struggle. This is confirmed by another study, where Honneth interprets Benjamin’s messianic conception of history as a theory of recognition. Benjamin sees justice in the duty, repeated for each generation, of giving the “tradition of the oppressed” its right, by wrenching it from the interpretation imposed by the winners. This, Honneth claims, amounts to elevating the invisible subjects of domination to the status of integral partners in communication, that is to say, to recognising them at last, beyond a past invisibility that history, as the historical self-assertion of the winners, has fatefuly entrenched.

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45 Honneth, “Critical Theory”, p. 82.
The first two chapters have shown that Honneth reread both Marx and the first generation of Critical Theory from the vantage point of Habermas’ communicative theory of society. His constant concern in these reconstructions was to highlight the areas of social interaction that cannot be accounted for in terms of social labour or instrumental rationality. His aim was theoretical of course, to redress one-dimensional or confused conceptions of society, modernity, and subjectivity. Ultimately, however, these reconstructions had a practical aim, or indeed a ‘critical-theoretical’ one. The reduction of social action to social labour, by overlooking the fundamental role of group-specific interpretations of norms and values in social integration, tends to minimise the place within the theoretical construct of what is however demanded by its critical, practical ambition: namely, a place of transcendence within the immanence of social life, an area where the experience of injustice can become the springboard for practical struggles towards emancipation and the ground of the critical
theory of society. Honneth’s embrace of the Habermasian turns in philosophy (the intersubjectivistic turn) and in social theory (the communicative theory of society) therefore served the purpose of an actualised historical materialism: one clarified conceptually and made practically more apt.

But because the aim behind Honneth’s embrace of Habermas was itself not strictly Habermasian, but a means for a distinct end, Habermas in his turn was read critically from the perspective of a philosophy of praxis project. Whilst Honneth approached Marx and the critical Marxists of the 20th century from the vantage point of a broadly Habermasian communicative vision of social integration, Habermas himself is critiqued from the expectations of a neo-Marxist programme in social philosophy, one that is actually well encapsulated in Horkheimer’s famous definition of Critical Theory, as interdisciplinary research guided by the dialectic of theory and practice. Habermas, therefore, is used by Honneth to correct Marx’s conceptual and methodological confusions, but is in turn critically read by Honneth from the Marxist perspective of the theory of class struggle.

This chapter attempts to delineate the most significant critical strands in the numerous readings Honneth has dedicated to Habermas, which have paved the way for the model of recognition. There are five such major critical standpoints on Habermas in Honneth’s writings.¹

**Habermas’ concessions to functionalism**

The crux of Honneth’s critique of Habermas is that despite his diverse attempts at devising a normative critical theory of society, one that would make room for the communicative mechanisms at the heart of social integration, he himself continued to uphold a form of functionalism in social theory. This amounts to saying that he in fact did not manage to avoid the theoretical shortcomings and the practically deleterious implications that come with social theories premised upon the thesis of a “dialectic of Enlightenment”.

The communicative turn in social theory was not completely effected by its founder, and with the important functionalist element that remained within it, some grave critical and practical shortcomings ensued.

Honneth makes this claim twice in the last three chapters of *The Critique of Power*, showing how a functionalist element was kept in the early books, and reemerged in the mature theory of society propounded in *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

Chapter 7 returns to Habermas’ earliest philosophical interventions, at the heart of the “positivism dispute”,2 in order to retrace the genealogy of his theory of knowledge-constitutive interests. This genealogical method provides a useful entry point into Habermas’ vision of the dual integrative mechanisms of social labour and communication as the two parallel processes of social reproduction. It shows how early this insight had been gained by Habermas, and as we have noted, the extent to which, in Habermas as in all previous critical theorists with a “left-Hegelian” penchant, the reflection into the core mechanisms of social reproduction was intimately linked with epistemological questions. In both areas, in knowledge and society, the fundamental question remains that of the nature of rationality. In other words, these social philosophers are convinced that the same structure of modern rationality that can be seen at work in the theoretical achievements of the sciences and techniques is also the driving force behind the major social phenomena of modernity. This proximity between Habermas and his predecessors in their approach to modern society, as a societal expression of a form of rationality, explains the fact that in their accounts of the systematic character of social evolution in modernity, they share basic premises, despite all the well-known differences in method and description.

His careful genealogical reconstruction allows Honneth to locate precisely the moment when Habermas started to overcome the theory of social labour as the sole mechanism of social reproduction and discovered the importance of communication. Honneth shows how in his contribution to the “positivism dispute”, Habermas came to generalise his initial attack, limited at first to a

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critique of epistemology, against positivistic generalisations about scientific method, from the natural to the social sciences. This generalisation allowed him to see into a second process at play in social life, beyond mere material reproduction based on objective, “purposive-rational” modes of reasoning. This is the irreducible fact that “individuals united within societies are capable of maintaining their lives only when, beyond the reproduction of their material existence, they also continuously contribute to a renewal of their social lifeworld”.

As Honneth writes, we find here “the touchstone of the communication-theoretic turn of critical Marxism”. In such a reconstruction of Habermas’ early development, Honneth could find an image and an anticipation of his own train of thought. This was true not only in strict “social-theoretical” terms, in terms of the successful overcoming of the productivist interpretation of historical materialism. In the early Habermas, Honneth could also find a striking confirmation of the necessity to graft reflections on the nature of mechanisms of social reproduction to philosophical-anthropological considerations; basically, to ground the theory of action, as social action, in a theory of the dialectic between first and second nature. Such a focus on the anthropological origin of different types of knowledge and on the different mechanisms of social integration uncovered the deepest, purely philosophical basis of Habermas’ theory: namely the pragmatist perspective, which rephrases traditional questions of epistemology, social and political philosophy from the vantage point of the demands and constraints of action upon the human being’s specific abilities.

Chapter 8 of *The Critique of Power* then shows how the spheres of labour and interaction, which arose in Habermas’ social theory as the direct result of the discovery of the communicative moment in social integration, were fatefuly

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3 Honneth, *Critique of Power*, p. 221.

4 *Ibid.* Honneth also shows, however, that this discovery was only gradually translated into the dichotomy of “labour and interaction”. In his famous essay on “Technique and Science as ‘Ideology’”, for example, Habermas continues to employ arguments that embed social reproduction through normative understanding into the development of the forces of production. See for example, J. Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, trans. J. Shapiro, London, Heinemann, 1971, pp. 96-97.
reified and separated from each other. This separation resulted from a dualistic theory of action that distinguished between purposive-rational and communicative action, that is to say, between a social action characterised by the mastery of technical, rule-base tasks aiming for the control and prediction of objective events, versus the social action that arises out of the coordination of individual actions around consensually accepted norms. This is the difference between a form of social action aiming for material, versus one aiming for social reproduction strictly speaking. In the words of the famous essay on “Technique and Science”:

In terms of the two types of action we can distinguish between social systems according to whether purposive-rational action or interaction predominates. (...) So I shall distinguish generally at the analytic level between (1) the institutional framework of a society or the sociocultural life-world and (2) the subsystems of purposive-rational action that are “embedded” in it.5

The grain of Honneth’s criticism throughout the end of his dissertation is that, under different guises, according to the respective stages in Habermas’ development, the analytical distinction is consistently projected into real social subsystems, in which one or the other mechanism of social integration dominates: purposive, technical rationality for the economy and the State; “interaction” for the family and the lifeworld more generally. A double reification thus occurs: a reification of spheres of social action, and a reification of their opposition. This reified distinction and opposition between spheres of social life is seen by Honneth as the crux of all of Habermas’ later shortcomings in social theory. The second reification, as we shall now see, is probably the more serious of the two because it exonerates scientific, technical and administrative rationality from communicative control.

In his genealogical reconstruction, Honneth diagnoses such reification as having been caused by Habermas’ exaggerated concern with the “technocracy thesis”. This referred to the diagnosis propounded by conservative sociologists Hans Freyer, Helmut Schelsky and Arnold Gehlen, a diagnosis largely shared by Critical Theorists of the first generation, notably Marcuse, of an autonomous development of technological progress, and as a result, of

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an irreversible technologisation of the modern forms of social and political rationality. On that model, democratic politics, for example, is replaced by the reign of experts. The State becomes a “technical State” in which solutions to highly complex issues can only be realistically conceived as the technical solution to technical problems. Despite having already analysed by then the necessity of critiquing the monolithic theory of “instrumental rationality”, and despite his explicit critique of Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensional society, Habermas shared with his predecessors the vision of a technological rationality let loose, having autonomised itself from social control, and infecting all other areas of social life. All later social theoretical constructions remain faithful to his initial vision.

The core of Honneth’s critique of Habermas’ early social theory basically boils down to his surprise at seeing the latter’s uncritical acceptance of the conservative sociologists’ diagnosis. Honneth shows how Habermas had intended to reject their conclusions, not by questioning their descriptions, but only by unveiling their ideological premises in approaching modern society, the way in which they had developed the “false consciousness of the correct praxis”, that is to say, had correctly diagnosed the autonomisation of technical, purposive-rational forms of action and their gradual dominance over intersubjectively reproduced spheres of social life, but had misconstrued its meaning. Beyond political misgivings, the crucial question was the question of social domination: in the conservative description of technocratic hegemony, the problem of power and its maldistribution in society simply becomes irrel-

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6 Claus Offe has shown the strong similarities, beyond the obvious divergence in political interpretations, between the conservative diagnosis of the “technocracy thesis” and Marcuse’s “emancipatory” theory of one-dimensional society. See Offe, “Technology and One-Dimensionality: A Version of the Technocracy Thesis?” in, eds R. Pippin et al., Marcuse. Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia, Massachusetts, Bergin & Garvey, 1988, pp. 215-224. This is also a feature of Andrew Feenberg’s interpretations, see for example his Heidegger and Marcuse: Catastrophe and Redemption of History, New York, Routledge, 2005.

evant, whilst one of Habermas’ central concerns by contrast was precisely to locate the place and mechanisms of domination in the new situation.

We will see in a moment how the uncritical acceptance of the thesis of an autonomisation of technological rationality led to major distortions in Habermas’ attempts at dealing with those two aspects: the maintenance of a strong concept of democratic politics and the critique of power. In a sense, Honneth’s ethics of recognition is the attempt to correct these distortions whilst retaining the communicative framework. Before we deal with the consequences of the “functionalist” prejudice that operates in Habermas, it might be useful to consider this insufficiently contested diagnosis a little further.

The distinction between two types of social action, which applies at first only at the “analytical level” is immediately translated by Habermas into a distinction between real spheres of action. Initially he only states that these spheres are characterised by forms of social action in which a particular type of rationality (purposive-rational or communicative) “predominates”. But the tremendous impression that the technocracy thesis makes on him quickly leads to the vision of a reduction or purification of the types of rationality of social action at play in each of the two spheres, and thus to a hardening of their distinction. With this development, a new type of functionalist prejudice enters critical theory, different from the initial one, since the areas of communicative interaction have indeed been identified, but functionalist nonetheless. As Honneth writes, “From now on, the dualism of normatively regulated and non-normative spheres of action accompanies the development of Habermas’ social theory”. And later on, “Habermas unintentionally lets the analytical distinction pass over into a difference between empirical domains of phenomena so that in the end the fiction is produced of a society divided into communicatively and purposive-rationally organised domains of action”.

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8 Honneth, *Critique of Power*, p. 253. Obviously the literature on these questions is enormous. I refrain from quoting that literature, focusing instead on Honneth’s own reading of Habermas and its importance for his later theory of recognition.

In the next chapter of *The Critique of Power*, Honneth is careful to note the difference between the models of social theory presented in *Knowledge and Human Interests* and other texts of that period, and the later model in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. With Habermas’ move from a philosophical methodology grounded in hermeneutics to one anchored in pragmatic linguistics, the notion of communicative action is defined in a more complex way: “communication is no longer simply set over against purposive-rational action; rather, it is conceived as a process of understanding that includes all aspects of human rationality as internal points of reference”. The change in the definition of communicative action impacts directly on the characterisation of its social function: “it now defines not a specific form of social action that can be separated from other modes of action, but a special form of the coordination of goal-directed action”. Despite these important changes, however, the same issues arise as before. The functionalism that crept into social theory because of the prevalence of the technocracy thesis returns in a new yet comparable form, with Habermas’ attempt to integrate systems theory into his action-theoretic perspective. The narrative of structural differentiation between system and lifeworld reinstates the dualism that was condemned in the earlier work. Once again, if in a different way, an analytical distinction is reified into separated areas of social life:

The methodological dualism of “system integration” and “social integration” that was initially only supposed to describe two complimentary perspectives in the analysis of one and the same process of evolution is transformed along the path toward the rationalisation of social action into the factual dualism of “system” and “lifeworld”.

As the quote indicates, this dualism is caused, just like in the work of the 1960s, by the evolutionary dimension that Habermas very early on included in his reflections on social theory. The distinction between system and social rationalisation leads to the well-known thesis according to which

Inasmuch as (power and money) do not merely simplify linguistic communication, but replace it with a symbolic generalisation of rewards and punishments, the lifeworld contexts in which processes of reaching understanding are always embedded are devalued in favour of media-steered interactions; the lifeworld is no longer needed for the coordination of action.¹³

With this, so Honneth shows, system and lifeworld become factually, not just analytically, opposed. This, however, only reproduces at the higher level attained by Habermas’ mature social theory the problematic distinction drawn in the earlier work between the rationalisation of social norms and the rationalisation of means-ends relations.¹⁴

Despite the great changes that affected Habermas’ social-theoretical models, a distinct functionalism therefore remains operative throughout. It is an idea that is directly reminiscent of the previous generation of Critical Theory, that posits that the spheres of society that rely on discursive exchange and the intersubjective formation of norms and values for their constitution and reproduction, have been gradually invaded by instrumental forms of discourse and rationality. For Habermas, this constitutes the specific pathology of modern society, the one that a critical theory of society has to correctly diagnose in order to point towards its possible overcoming.

This functionalist core in Habermas’ writings brings with it a number of problems according to Honneth’s reading.


¹⁴ See “Technology and Science as ‘Ideology’”, Toward a Rational Society, trans. J. Shapiro, London, Heinemann, 1971, p. 96: “The rationality of language games, associated with communicative action, is confronted at the threshold of the modern period with the rationality of means-ends relations, associated with instrumental and strategic action. As soon as this confrontation can arise, the end of traditional society is in sight: the traditional form of legitimation breaks down. Capitalism is defined by a mode of production that not only poses this problem but also solves it. It provides a legitimation of domination which is no longer called down from the lofty heights of cultural tradition but instead summoned up from the base of social labour”. See Critique of Power, pp. 260-262.
First, Honneth notes that the dualism that arises out of the concern to secure a place for the autonomisation of functionally differentiated subsystems contradicts the fundamental insight behind Habermas’ work in social theory:

The concept of symbolically mediated interaction determines the special place occupied by Habermas’ theoretical approach in the tradition of a critical social theory going back to Marx. (...) He is, from the beginning, on the watch for a reductionism that interprets society as a norm-free relation of instrumental or strategic action. Everyday linguistic understanding about action-guiding norms is recognised as the supporting dimension of societies. For the first time in the history of Marxism, communicative understanding is treated systematically as the paradigm of the social.\(^\text{15}\)

By reintegrating functionalist strands in his theory of society through the dualisms of labour and interaction, of system and lifeworld, Honneth sees Habermas as reverting back to a vision of modern society he had done so much to overcome. The critical remark is an immanent one at first. It puts the finger on a structural ambivalence, or hesitation, in Habermas, that has traversed all his thinking, between the emphasis on the practical and hermeneutic dimensions of social life, a necessary condition if one is to maintain the possibility of a conceptual account of social transformation, and the apparent inevitability of a description of modern society in systemic terms. In a sense, this is in fact the structural hesitation of Critical Theory in general. However, given that Habermas is seen by Honneth as having provided a crucial breakthrough in “critical Marxism”, with the insight into the irreducibility of communicative interaction, the deleterious consequences of his unrepentant functionalism are particularly worth studying.

If we refer to the programme of research established early on in the reconstruction of historical materialism, the retention of a functionalist strand becomes a major obstacle to the methodological imperative of a categorical monism that would make possible a substantial linking of the analysis and the critique of society. The communicative theory of society seems to be able not only to highlight and correct the conceptual problems attached to the the-

\(^{15}\) Honneth, *Critique of Power*, p. 243.
ory of social labour, it appears capable at first to fulfil the programme of an immanent critique, by analysing contemporary injustice and domination as pathologies of communication. But the reintroduction of functionalist arguments destroys this substantial link between theory and critique and warps the model of social critique that emerges from the theory.

This is the well-known problem emerging from Habermas’ dualistic approach to society, that it ends up upholding the theoretical fictions of a norm-free domain of social reproduction (the economy and the administration), and of a power-free domain of social integration (the family and the public sphere). Not only are these fictions highly debatable at the theoretical and empirical levels, they are also extremely damaging for the scope and validity of critique.

We will look into some of the practical and critical implications in the next section. Theoretically and empirically, Honneth argues against the notion of “non-normative”, delinguistified sub-systems. He argues that the systems of action that are alleged to be organised in pure purposive-rational terms, notably the economic and the administrative orders, in fact always include normative dimensions, if only because they are intimately intertwined with structures of social domination. As Honneth writes, the institutions of the economy and the State are never just embodiments of purely objective, instrumentally rational considerations, they are framed within “political-practical principles”, which themselves depend upon (distorted) communicative processes. The same can be said of economic and administrative institutions. What falls out of view, in the end, is the centrality of struggle in the organisation of society. Injustice is explained in functional terms, as encroachment of one system over others, whilst the actual distortions of communication under the constraint of asymmetrical power relations tend to fall out of view, both at the theoretical and diagnostic levels. Conversely, the view that communicatively integrated spheres of social action are power-free is equally doubtful. It tends to purify the communicative integration of society from the effects

16 Honneth, Critique of Power, p. 298, in which Honneth refers directly to Joas’ critique in “The Unhappy Marriage of Hermeneutics and Functionalism”. See also the same critique, in reference to the earlier work, Critique of Power, p. 262.
of social domination, of power, the very problem that was supposed to be the target of critical theory. Once again, domination is now externalised into the encroachment of intersubjective spheres by technical, instrumental processes. As Honneth writes, beyond all other differences in premises and methodology,

Habermas’ theory of society ultimately seems to agree with the pessimistic social critique (...) we find in the negativist current of contemporary Critical Theory. Both of these models’ respective diagnoses assert that systemic powers have become independent in a way that threatens to dissolve the social core of society.17

It is obvious that the latter consequence constitutes the greatest concern within the tradition of critical Marxism if, as I have argued, Honneth’s project consists in the attempt to carry out its programme, with its specific constraint of a substantive unity of theory and praxis. The underlying concern implied in The Critique of Power that Habermas’ dual theory of society leads to a severing of the link between theory and practice becomes the focal point of many of the other texts dedicated by Honneth to his teacher.

**Class struggle deactivated?**

Two sets of issues need to be discussed separately as a result of this initial critique of Habermas’ undue allegiance to functionalist arguments. The first relates directly to the theory of social domination propounded by social theory. From Honneth’s perspective, this requires a consideration of the problem of the place within the theoretical apparatus that is occupied by the notion of asymmetrical power relations, of conflict between groups around the norms of social integration, and of the role of group conflict in the theory of social reproduction.

“Moral Consciousness and Class Domination”, an article published in 1981, four years prior to The Critique of Power, constitutes a decisive stage in Hon-

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neth’s development in this respect. The article is based on the rejection of one of the most important premises in first generation Critical Theory as well as in Habermas, the idea of “institutionalised or deactivated class struggle”. For all the writers in Critical Theory before Honneth, the hypothesis of a deactivation of class struggle was an unquestionable, factual aspect of modern society. As we know, it shaped the interdisciplinary programme of research in a major way as the aim of the empirical inquiries was precisely to search for the causes and mechanisms explaining this deactivation and how it was maintained. Indeed, the image of a totally administered society, of a seamless integration of cultural manipulation and repressive socialisation, of a political system fully attuned to the imperatives of neo-capitalism, arose directly from the experience of the hopeless improbability of a social transformation arising out of the struggle between antagonistic classes.

Despite all other conceptual and diagnostic divergences, Habermas himself, in Legitimation Crisis as well as in subsequent writings, bases his investigations into contemporary society on a similar premise of a deactivated social struggle. His own diagnosis is no longer guided by the thesis of a totally administered society but by the thesis of the autonomisation of economic and administrative systems. In both cases, however, functional dominance of technical spheres over the lifeworld, passive adaptation of exploited classes to the domination order, and the compensation of the underprivileged through material retributions, are postulated. Honneth describes Habermas’ new version of deactivated social struggle in this way:

Its basic idea (...) is that late capitalistic state interventionism dries up the political and practical interests of wage workers by means of a policy of material compensation and the institutional integration of the wage policy of the labour unions. The stabilisation of late capitalism is said to have succeeded up to now because the economically dependent strata could be kept in a sort of apathetic followership by means of quantifiable compensations

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18 It is quite significant that Honneth has selected this early article twice for republication in edited collections, first in Fragmented World of the Social, and recently again in Disrespect. The arguments presented in this article set up essential features of Honneth’s overall project.
(income and free time) which can be obtained by routes which are relatively free of conflict.\textsuperscript{19}

In other words, in Habermas’ picture income and free time correspond \textit{mutatis mutandis} to the pulsional gratifications provided by the culture industry in Adorno’s, Horkheimer’s and Marcuses’ models.

Against the grain of all his predecessors, Honneth emphasises by contrast the continued presence of group conflict in modern society, not only as an empirical fact, but also as a core element in the integrative mechanisms of these societies. The issue therefore is not just empirical, but conceptual. It is, as we have seen, a necessary prerequisite for a theory of society that aims to propound an image of social integration as social action, in the strong, “praxis” sense of the term. More specifically, the conflicts between groups over the interpretation and indeed over the very validity of the norms governing social reproduction is part and parcel of the model of “cultural action”. In order to justify this empirical and conceptual claim, Honneth is forced, beyond the reference to relevant sociological studies, to provide an alternative explanation for the phenomenon that is difficult to contest, of the “latency” of class conflict in modern society. From the point of view of the “cultural action” model, however, the solution is not difficult to formulate: rather than postulating the actual resting of class conflict, or the ideological self-obfuscation of dominated classes, the model of cultural action suggests instead that class conflicts have become invisible, precisely as a result of class domination. This then leads Honneth to attempt to uncover the “hidden morality” that is present in the experiences of injustice made by dominated groups. Accordingly, in a move that is quite close to Bourdieu’s theory of social capital, the fact that the moral discourses and practices of dominated classes are not registered as normatively relevant results from a combination of social-cultural and economic factors that tend to rob dominated classes of the resources that would enable them to represent and express their experiences of injustice in an acceptable way. Moreover, the rules of public discourse are predetermined in such hegemonic fashion that these experiences and their expressions would not pass the test of public

validity. The latency of social conflict results therefore from the fact that social suffering is not visible or audible to class society, both because its expressions are inadequate according to the prevalent norms, and because society excludes it in advance in any case. The fragile consensus over the functioning of late capitalist society is at best pragmatic on the part of the lower classes. As soon as the theorist views social reality from this perspective, however, the change in the sociological outlook leads to a major change of paradigm: “an analysis of society which accurately describes the reality of capitalist class relations must construct its fundamental concepts in such a way that it can grasp the normative potential of socially suppressed groups”.

With this programmatic claim, Honneth declares his intention to fulfil for the first time what was always one of the key ambitions of the Critical Theory programme, one however which the various functionalist arguments accepted by earlier theorists had so far always defeated: namely, the methodological ambition whereby not only the empirical but even the conceptual guidelines of critical social theory would be found in the experiences of social suffering and injustice.

By contrast, Habermas’ theory of social crisis and social domination appears misguided on both the sociological-empirical and conceptual levels. Empirically, because he equates levels of normativity with degrees of formality

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20 Ibid., p. 219.

21 This highlights the significant overlap between Honneth’s project in critical social theory and Bourdieu’s critical sociology. It is no wonder that Honneth later on would use the inquiries conducted by Bourdieu on the “place of social suffering in the contemporary world” (gathered in The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society, Stanford University Press, 2000) as a key empirical reference point. We return to this aspect later in the book, but it was important to show early on that Honneth’s project contained a constitutive “Bourdieuian” moment right from the beginning. The review in the 1990s of recent work in the sociology of poverty shows unequivocally Honneth’s great sensitivity to the new forms of social suffering, see “Wiederkehr der Armut” (in Desintegration. Bruchstücke einer soziologischen Zeitdiagnose, Frankfurt/M., Fischer Verlag, 1994). The idea that “social suffering” is the key epistemic and normative guideline of a critical social theory was already hinted at indirectly in Honneth’s article on the young Lukács, “A Fragmented World: On the Implicit Relevance of Lukács’ Early Work”, in The Fragmented World of the Social, pp. 59-60.
and universality in the expression of normative claims, his theory tends to remain blind to the whole sphere of social suffering that exists “behind the façade of integration of late capitalism.” This empirical short-sightedness is directly related to the problematic conceptual premise according to which the economic administration of society has autonomised itself in such a way that it can regulate conflict in its own terms. In the terms of post-class-struggle literature, with its strong reliance on systems-theoretical arguments, the economic system achieves this deactivation of conflict by compensating disadvantaged groups through the redistribution of money and time. This of course requires that one accepts another premise, to wit, that the compensation of social injury through economic goods is always minimally sufficient. Beyond the strictly “social-theoretical” critique of Habermas’ use of the language of systems-theory, we encounter here one of the most original aspects of Honneth’s model of social theory, as he has consistently argued against the reduction of social suffering to its utilitarian dimensions. This is one of his earliest intuitions, expressed already in his early critical reconstructions of Marx, and one, of course, that will later form the core of the mature model of recognition.

In the end, Honneth simply denounces as overly naïve the idea according to which the absence of overt conflict signals the disappearance of class struggle. But this simple point has a major theoretical impact as it puts in doubt the adequacy of the language of “systems” of social action, and notably, of “non-normative subsystems”. The systems-theoretical idea according to which the non-normative steering of the economic system can meet with an at least partial normative agreement only plays into the hands of the system of domination. This comes at a high price, since the argument then makes one blind to the “hidden morality” of the experience of injustice, as it reads the absence of conflict as the absence of suffering:

> It is concluded from the factual recognition which the current legitimating ideology enjoys, simply because the members of society carry out the reproductive tasks assigned to them, that a normative, though fragile, acceptance of the justifying ideology of the welfare state, supplemented by technocratic arguments, has taken place.22

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If, on the other hand, it is no longer accepted that the economic system is a norm-free, self-regulating system, then the chasm between material compensations and the reality of social domination is much more palpable. The “consensus” that would seem to be granted even by the dominated groups appears in a very different light, as the unjust result of unequal and asymmetrical relations of power between struggling classes. The integration of late capitalist society appears as what it is, an ideological construct.

In the end, the whole discussion revolves around two competing visions of social rationalisation. In Habermas’ narrative, social evolution follows the course of ever more formal, decentered and universalisable practical knowledge contents. The engine propelling the history of the species accordingly is fuelled by the immanent force of moral reason. In sociological terms, the ever greater formality of moral reason is incarnated in enlightened groups that are able to exercise the capacity to take a decentered view of the world. In other words, the moral level attained by a historical world is read in the advanced consciousness of the enlightened (and privileged) groups. By contrast, in faithfulness to the Marxist heritage, Honneth advocates the thesis that “a social analysis derived from Marxism must see as its task today the identification of moral conflicts connected to the social class structure, which are hidden behind late capitalism’s façade of integration.”

Such a programme sounded perhaps counter-intuitive to many in 1980 or 1985, when the notions of class and class conflict had receded in the academic background (although not in social reality). Twenty five years later, the tremendous rise in social inequality within and between nations makes the idea of social integration as premised upon unequal relations of power, the old idea of class struggle, again a notion with direct descriptive and critical appeal.

**Critical theory without practical import**

The concerns raised above in relation to the downplaying of class conflict in Habermas’ social theory, despite having strong empirical content were of a theoretical nature. They concerned problems in the analysis of modern society. A second set of problems linked with this downplaying of class struggle

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is of a direct practical nature. Given the fundamental importance of the theory-practice imperative in Honneth’s programme, these concerns could well have been as equally if not more important sources of inspiration for his critical approach to Habermas.

Here it is worth quoting a full page from *Social Action and Human Nature* that brings together many of the themes discussed so far. If we have the chronology of Honneth’s writings in mind, this is a very interesting page to highlight because it shows that some of the features of the “cultural action” model developed in *The Critique of Power* were already well in place in Honneth’s initial writings.

Inasmuch as they must be aimed exclusively at identifying and describing the universal rules informing social action, the categories of this theory can no longer be translated systematically into a framework of historiographical categories that would be open enough to explain the genesis and collective development of socially critical, system-bursting orientations of action which are tied to everyday plexuses of experience. Thus the actual history of social movements becomes completely insignificant in comparison with the logical sequence in which systems of norms, each of which is based on the preceding one, have evolutionarily achieved general recognition and acceptance. Thereby the categories and concepts employed by the theory of sociocultural evolution have become so remote from the experiential plexus of the real historical happening that they can hardly be translated back into the action perspectives of collective actors. If it were conceived as an evolutionary theory in this fashion, historical materialism would have relinquished every possibility of providing explanatory interpretations of history that intervene instructively in a present-day situation of social confrontations. Because the explanatory evolutionary models are constructed without any possibility of linking them back hermeneutically to the unique experiential situation of subjects acting in the present, they cannot be introduced into historical praxis for the purpose of supplying practical orientation for the acting subjects.24

Already in this first book, Honneth was thus thinking of “socially critical, system-bursting orientations of action which are tied to everyday plexuses of experience”.

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24 *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 166.
This was already a powerful way of articulating the idea of group-specific social experiences that can become the source of critical theory and emancipatory practice. In addition, the page also demonstrates the central role played by the “practical-political imperative”, to quote an expression from *The Critique of Power*, in Honneth’s work. In the 1980 book, Honneth and Joas critically discuss Habermas’ turn towards systems-theoretical arguments in his contributions to the theory of social-cultural evolution in the 1970s, at the time when his project was explicitly described under the title of “reconstructions of historical materialism”. As the quote demonstrates explicitly, one of the main concerns was precisely the one that inspires Honneth’s thinking: the conceptualisation of social action as agency of emancipation for a new philosophy of praxis. In Habermas’ turn towards evolutionistic arguments, and most especially in his embrace of the system-theoretical perspective, the young authors saw the danger that social action would be conceptualised as a functional response to “system-threatening” challenges, and no longer as a normative response of social groups to disruptions in social life manifested notably in the experiences of injustice and in social pathologies. Already in these early texts, they highlighted the externalisation of domination, from the immanence of social integration, into the dialectic between forces of production (society as functional system) and relations of production (society as normatively integrated and thus capable of “moral learning”). But the last page of the book no longer argues strictly on this theoretical level. Instead, it also rejects Habermas’ evolutionistic and system-theoretical transformation of historical materialism on the basis of its negative consequences for the realisation of the programme of a non-reductive theory of praxis that not only originates in social experience, but as importantly, relates back in a substantive way to social and political practice.

In summary, a great part of Honneth’s critique of Habermas stems directly from the tradition of Marxist writings focusing on class struggle as the key to social reproduction and social emancipation. As in the tradition of Marx’s writings and Marx interpretation, this line of argument runs up against the more functionalist line, which emphasises the quasi-autonomous development of Capital. Honneth’s critique of the Habermasian downplaying of class struggle can be read against the larger background of this old and as yet unresolved debate.
A critical conception of work

We saw in the first chapter how the question of work was one of the predominant entry points into the critical reconstructions of historical materialism for the young Honneth. At the end of “Work and Instrumental Action”, the lack of a satisfactory normative approach to work is detected in the great majority of empirical and conceptual models in 20th century social sciences and social theory, from the American and German sociology of work in the post-war era, to Scheler, Arendt, and finally, Habermas. The high sensitivity displayed in the early writings for a more robust approach to work was probably largely instrumental in Honneth’s decisive criticism of the reductive implications of functionalist arguments in social theory.

The criticism of Habermas on this point runs as follows. By distinguishing sharply between instrumental and communicative action, by showing how the normative integration of society occurs through mechanisms of communication, Habermas is able to avoid the problems entailed in the notion of social labour. On the other hand, the consequence of this strong analytic separation is that all the rich normative connotations that were present in Marx’s notion of work are no longer retrievable for Habermas, since work is now reduced to the sphere of instrumental action. It only designates those activities which society must perform in order to ensure its material survival. This sphere is now seen as consisting only of empirically tested technical rules that are structured according to the logic of instrumental mastery, efficiency and productivity. All the normative potential that Marx had inherited from Hegel in his rich concept of work, as a medium of subjective self-awareness and intersubjective cooperation, have disappeared.

The concept of work occupies such a marginal position in (Habermas’ social theory) that the practical morality embedded in instrumental action, on the basis of which working subjects could react to their experience of the impoverishment of instrumental work activity under capital, is completely excluded from its conceptual framework.25

By contrast, Honneth in his early project wanted to move beyond the alternative: social labour or instrumental action. He intended to steer a middle

way between the communicative theory of society and its ground-breaking theoretical implication, whilst retaining a strong interest in the normative aspects of work. The latter implied, as the quote above makes clear, to be able to maintain the link to the Marxist inspiration by keeping up the conceptual possibility of a strong critique of the alienating effects of Taylorised work organisation. Critically following Marx, Honneth wanted to devise, as we saw in the first chapter, a “critical concept of work”, where the term critical referred just as much to Habermas as to Marx; it was supposed to

grasp the difference between an instrumental act in which the working subject structures and regulates his own activity on his own initiative, according to his own knowledge, in a self-contained process, and an instrumental act in which neither the accompanying controls nor the object-related structuring of the activity is left to the initiative of the working subject.26

The model for this early project of a renewed “critical conception of work” was sought in the French sociology of work of the 1980s, which managed to highlight the “variety of everyday work practices in which workers in an industrial concern systematically violate and subvert the rules of production”.27 In these covert practices, both cooperation and the recollection of the practical meaning of work for the subjects appear as low-key realisations of what Marx had in mind in his critique of alienated labour.

With this programme, Honneth did not renege on his critique of Marx’s use of the notion of social labour. Instead, he intended to make a more differentiated use of Habermas’ emphasis on normative types of social action, and apply it to the crucial experience of work, without re-mythologising it, as it were, as the central mechanism of social integration. He was interested in the “moral-practical knowledge” that constitutes the experience of work, which recedes into the background with the dualistic social theory of Habermas. This chimes in quite well with the social-political model presented towards the end of The Critique of Power, in which the question of the normative and critical potentials of work organisation and work experience takes centre stage. As Honneth writes, with the dualism of system and lifeworld,

26 Ibid., p. 49.
27 Ibid., p. 48.
Habermas abandons within his social theory the normative orientation to another domain, namely the communicative organisation of material reproduction which, under the title “self-administration” belongs to the productive part of the tradition of critical Marxism.  

This remark makes explicit the political constellation in which Honneth’s early work was situated and sheds light on the critical perspective adopted in *The Critique of Power*. Critical Marxism here means first of all a version of that historically and conceptually self-reflexive brand of Marxism that is often associated with the name of Western Marxism, against the dogmatism of Second International and Leninist interpretations. It also means, however, a strong reliance on Marx’s spirit, against the dissolution of the Marxist programme at the hands of first generation Critical Theory, Foucault, Habermas, and so many other contemporary social theorists.

Naturally, in light of the revolution that has taken place in the organisation of work and production in the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, Honneth’s “critical conception of work” will have to be reworked. The initial intuition was based on a basic empirical premise, one we already encountered in the critique of Marx, that with the Taylorisation of work, much of contemporary, rationalised and fragmented work has become “meaningless”. The post-Fordist shift has radically transformed the structure of the workplace and the content of most work experiences, by including the worker into the production process and relying on a partial devolution of autonomy, creativity and responsibility to the worker. Taylorism is no longer sufficient to accurately describe the contemporary organisation of work, even though many Taylorian elements remain operative within contemporary production. The question arises as to what becomes of Honneth’s early appeal for a “critical conception of work” in the changed conditions of the post-Fordist work context. We will see in the conclusion that Honneth’s latest texts on the critique of contemporary capitalism can be read to a certain extent as a renewed attempt to deliver, with some delay, on his project of a critical conception of work.

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Beyond the linguistification of critical social theory

Most fundamentally, Honneth’s critical distance towards Habermas stems from his alternative way of conceptualising the normativity at the core of social integration. This is related to a deep philosophical divergence in the use of philosophical-anthropological arguments. All of the ethical and political differences noted above in fact flow from this anthropological disagreement. The heart of the problem for Honneth lies with the problematic emphasis on language in Habermas’ social theory.

This relates directly to the previous critiques of the dualism of system and lifeworld and the evolutionistic theory of human history to which this dualism is tied. The previous sections have detailed Honneth’s scepticism towards the notion of system rationalisation. For him, this brings Habermas back in the orbit of “negativist” and “functionalist” diagnostics of modernity that are so damaging for critical theory. But he finds the notion of a rationalisation of lifeworlds just as prejudicial, especially for its practical implications. In this case again, we are confronted with a theoretical proposal that undermines the core requirement of the programme it is supposed to fulfil, notably in severing the links to the practical realm. Indeed, we could say that Honneth’s critique of Habermas’ theory of social rationalisation is the flip side of his critique of Habermas’ functionalism.

Habermas’ correction of the Weberian vision of modernity as a process of rationalisation involves, as is well-known, a decoupling of rationalisation processes along the analytical distinction between instrumental and communicative reason. Whilst systems rationalisation marks a progress in functional efficiency as evaluated through the lens of instrumental, means-ends logic, social rationalisation is propelled by the universalising, decentering force immanent in the logic of linguistic exchange aimed at understanding. The crucial problem that Honneth discovers in this theory of social rationalisation is the following: since the normative dimension of social interaction is identified with a tendency immanent in the logic of linguistic exchange, the sociological anchoring of critical theory (the pre-theoretical experience which critical theory is supposed to formalise), once again is situated outside of the social agents’ experience.

For Habermas, the pre-theoretical source of legitimacy which secures a foothold in reality for his normative perspectives has to be the social progress
which develops the role of the linguistic rules for reaching understanding. (…) However, such a process is typically something which could be said—with Marx—to unfold behind the backs of the subjects involved. Its course is neither directed by human intentions; nor can it be grasped within the consciousness of a single individual.29

In social rationalisation, just as much as in systemic rationalisation, the link with praxis has been severed. Honneth’s ethics of recognition is developed precisely as a response to this problem.

A way out of this dilemma can only be provided by the idea of developing the communication paradigm constructed by Habermas more in the direction of its presuppositions regarding the theory of intersubjectivity—indeed in the direction of its sociological presuppositions. (…) (This) is the proposal not simply to equate the normative potential of social interaction with the linguistic conditions of reaching understanding free from domination, (…). (This) is the thesis that moral experiences are not triggered by the restriction of linguistic competences; rather, they are shaped by the violation of identity claims acquired in socialisation.30

These passages, extracted from Honneth’s 1993 inaugural lecture at the Otto-Suhr Institute at the Free University in Berlin provide a clear summary of the progress that took Critical Theory from a paradigm of social labour, to a paradigm of communication, and finally to the paradigm of the struggle for recognition. At first, they seem to imply that the initial motive behind the shift from communication to recognition was only a limited one: namely, the problem of the fulfilment of the criterion of the grounding of theory in pre-theoretical experience. At first, the disagreement seems to be limited to the relation between the social-theory part of critical theory and its relation to sociological literature. This limited point, however, obviously has a tremendous impact on the overall model, since it leads to a full-blown paradigm shift.

Indeed, it could be easily argued that the exceptionally clear articulation presented in the 1993 lecture of the point of departure between the communicative theory of society and the theory of recognition was just as much ret-

30 Ibid.
rospective as it was projective. By this, I mean that the introductory lecture helped Honneth shed light on his own, alternative path whilst explaining in what way it bifurcated so markedly from that of his intellectual father. Honneth seems to have taken the decision very early on to broaden the meaning of intersubjectivity and communication and to include other layers of social interaction, both at the descriptive level, in the characterisation of social interaction, and at the normative levels in regards to political and critical issues. This led him from the beginning to an anthropological overhaul of Habermas’ communication paradigm. Whilst he recognised the decisive advance made by Habermas in introducing the notion of communicative action in the “critical-Marxist” tradition, one of the fundamental ways in which he wanted to correct the critical and practical deficits of that theory was by downplaying the focus put on language in it, and by propounding a broader, richer philosophical anthropology.

The exclusive focus on language in Habermas’ philosophical outlook, to the detriment of other aspects of the anthropos and of social interactions, can be detected from the very beginning. It is not just a product of the late turn to transcendental pragmatics. The early theory of “knowledge-constitutive interests”, for example, aims to “detranscendentalise” human subjects and communities, and to re-ground “the achievements of the transcendental subject in the natural history of the human species”.31 But it does this already through a largely exclusive focus on linguistic capacities. Habermas’ famous slogan captures well what Honneth attempts to correct and complement: “What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language”. This intuition is without a doubt the most basic premise in Habermas’ entire work. It constitutes the most fundamental axiom upon which the theory of communication is built: that human beings owe their achievements, in particular their ability to create a “second nature” through social institutions, to their distinctive linguistic ability. Against this “linguistified” philosophical anthropology, one of Honneth’s fundamental philosophical moves consists in insisting on the fact that the capacity for social action is actually rooted in the organic endowments and limitations of the human being, organic

dispositions that precede linguistic ability, and concurrently that the normative depth of social life exceeds its linguistic dimensions. The restriction to language also limits the full gamut of active and transformative capacities recognised in social agents and groups. The next chapter studies the detail of this alternative philosophical anthropology of social action. It details in particular the content and aims of Honneth’s programme for an “anthropology of practical intersubjectivity”.

The divergence between Honneth and Habermas therefore reaches to a deep philosophical and philosophical-anthropological level, which revolves in particular around the question of nature. This is particularly visible in the introduction to *Social Action and Human Nature*. This text aimed to justify the early project of a reconstruction of German philosophical anthropology, by locating it, in good historical-materialist fashion, in the social-cultural context of its time, notably in respect to the emancipatory demands and social pathologies of the time:

> The themes of various social movements lead all too clearly in this direction. The ecological, the counter-cultural and the women’s movements (...) have in common at least a concern with themes having to do with nature: with external nature and a humane relationship to it, as well as with the inner nature of the human being and its humane development. The prominence of these themes is due to a historical development in which the history of social movements is joined with a heightened awareness of the destruction of the environment and the exhaustion of the supplies of raw materials in a complex manner that is difficult to disentangle. In this development, crucial parts of the conception of progress guiding liberal and leftists were shaken to the ground.32

This passage shows that Honneth’s intellectual journey started on the basis of a very strong concern with ecological issues, and their implications for a regeneration of critical social theory. The pathologies of late capitalism can be diagnosed under the general heading of the problematic relationship of human society to nature, taken both in the sense of inner and outer nature. These pathologies force social theory to reconsider its frameworks, its concepts,

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methods and assumptions in light of its own unsatisfactory conceptualisation of nature. It forces it to a renewed effort in philosophical anthropology, the discipline that is specifically dedicated to the study of the specificity of “human nature” (with all the historicist reservations formulated in chapter 1) by contrast with other natural entities.

In this context of a general reassessment of the overall apparatus of critical social theory, Habermas constitutes a reference that needs to be critically revisited, as his linguistic approach to the theory of society leads to a truncated consideration of nature.33 In particular, the dualism of the two forms of action: communicative action geared to social integration versus instrumental action grounded in the necessities of material reproduction, seems to lead fairly directly to a reductionist and instrumentalist vision of nature. This was formulated very explicitly in the first chapter dedicated to Habermas in the Critique of Power:

In principle, Habermas has no objections to the well-coordinated procedures of the exact natural sciences as these are methodologically defined by the modern philosophy of science, so long as they are employed only for the scientific solution of questions that result directly from the task of the technical control over the processes of nature. This consequence, which follows necessarily from the approach of an anthropologically transformed transcendentalism, is the source of Habermas’ dogmatism with respect to methodological question of the natural sciences against which today an ecologically motivated critique, supported by post-empiricist developments in the theory of science, raises significant objections.34


34 Honneth, Critique of Power, p. 218.
The problem of the place of external nature in Habermas is paralleled by the problem of his account of the fate of inner nature in social evolution. This time, it is the exclusivist focus on language as the medium of social integration which poses a problem:

The investigation of the basic structures of intersubjectivity is directed exclusively to an analysis of rules of speech so that the bodily and physical dimensions of social action no longer come into view. As a result, the human body, whose historical fate both Adorno and Foucault had drawn into the centre of their investigation (...) loses all value within a critical social theory.35

It was to a large extent the perception of a truncated version of philosophical anthropology in Habermas, rooted in an instrumentalist approach to external nature and a disembodied account of the self that put Honneth on his own path towards an alternative, anthropologically grounded critical social theory. Of course, as we saw in the first chapter, before the philosophical anthropologists of the 20th century, it was in the critical reconstruction of Marx that Honneth had discovered an anticipation of the critique of Habermas’ abstractions, and the opening of an alternative line of thought. The grounding of social theory in “emancipatory sensuousness”, whose normative power Alfred Schmidt had demonstrated, alert Honneth to the extra-linguistic dimensions underpinning human subjectivity and interaction, and especially, their organic, or “natural”, preconditioning. In particular, it helped to correct any fateful, rigid separation with external nature. As embodied, social action can more easily be shown to be in and of “nature” than social action understood exclusively as linguistic exchange. We can see here once more how close the young Honneth’s key intuitions were to Merleau-Ponty’s general philosophical programme as well as to the latter’s own social philosophy.36

The shift that has occurred in the last few pages, from the local problem of the link between theory (of society) and practice (sociology and real social movements), to the more speculative project of an “embodied” philosophi-

cal-anthropological grounding of critical theory will appear to many readers to be rather unconvincing given our “post-metaphysical” assumptions. From Habermas’ perspective, for example, it would make little sense to question the fact that the symbolic capacities that make possible human beings’ capacity to build a “second nature” are channelled and utilised in and through language. It is important, therefore, to clarify a possible misunderstanding about the status of language in Honneth’s alternative vision of philosophical anthropology. The point is not to deny the fact that language is the privileged mode of expression and the medium allowing for the realisation of humanity’s symbolic powers. But there is a fundamental difference to be maintained between the origin and the scope of the symbolic capacities and their medium of expression. The fact that language is the privileged medium of normative and symbolic expression does not mean that the normative and symbolic aspects of subjective formation and social interaction are strictly encompassed in linguistic formations. This point was made in particularly vivid fashion by Honneth in a later text published in 2000, “Recognition Relations and Morality”, which incorporates the elements developed in the mean time in The Struggle for Recognition. The chapter targets more particularly Habermas’ ethics of discourse, and identifies its exclusive focus on language as a problem for contemporary normative theory. Honneth shows clearly that one should not confuse the level at which normative claims have to be analysed, namely in language, and the phenomenal domain from which moral experiences stem. Habermas is therefore critiqued for confusing the “dimension of validity” and the “phenomenal domain of moral experience”, and as a result of this, of restricting the scope of moral experiences to the experience of the distortions done to immanent norms of linguistic use: “In the ethics of discourse, language is considered as the central medium of validity of morals, whilst morality itself is analysed under the primary interest of the extent to which it can pass for a sphere of linguistic praxis”.

This critique of the narrowing of the normative field as a result of the exclusive focus on language is valid more generally against the fundamental anthropological premise governing Habermas’ social theory. The fact that the human world differs from animal worlds because it is not just symbolically, but also

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linguistically constructed and reproduced, in other words, the fact that humans develop and step into second nature through the development of language, should not lead to the false generalisation that the human symbolic worlds are only made up of language.

In fact, beyond Habermas, the tendency to confuse the medium of symbolic (not just normative) interactions with their origin and their scope affects much of contemporary social theory, for example those that develop from post-metaphysical readings of Hegel. The specificity of the human capacity to act normatively, because it is made possible by the use of language, often tends today to lead to a repetition of the classical separation between Nature and Spirit. Honneth’s initial intuition as it is formulated in Social Action and Human Nature seems to have been a rejection of this dualism. As he makes clear in the 2000 article, this does not amount to a naïve oversight of the capacity for normative integration that lies within the power of human language. But the acknowledgement of the caesura which language use introduces in the natural realm does not necessarily have to lead to an ontological dualism, to the imperative of “leaving nature behind”.38 The counter-example of Merleau-Ponty is most informative here, since his project can be read precisely as the attempt to jointly acknowledge the power and specificity of the “invisible”, that is, the distinct, symbolic realm of human ideas, norms and values, whilst uncovering its roots and co-existence in the ‘visible’, that is, in the flesh of the world of which the human body’s flesh is only a section. Merleau-Ponty, especially in his last period, showed precisely how the characterisation of the “natural history of the human species” did not necessarily have to be achieved at the cost of a radical separation from the natural itself.39 Such a philosophical programme corresponded quite exactly, at least in its broad inspiration, to Honneth’s early project.

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38 This is the motto of Pippin’s “subjectivistic” reappropriation of Hegel. See his “Two Cheers for Subjectivism: Leaving Nature Behind”, in ed. N. Smith, Reading McDowell, pp. 58-75.

It is easy to see how the narrowing of moral experience as a consequence of the linguistic turn is directly related to the problem discussed above, of a certain blindness to the persistence of class struggle in late modern societies, and to the “hidden morality” present in invisible experiences of injustice. When normativity in general is identified with the normativity that is immanent in language use, the converse tendency is already at play: only that which makes itself heard in normatively adequate ways is also normatively relevant. The linguistification of social theory runs the risk of becoming blind to the normative claims that are non-discursive, or discursively inadequate. By contrast, the broadening of the anthropological picture on which Honneth’s social theory rests serves the aim of making theory sensitive to the whole sphere of experience which fails to make its way, not only in social theory, but also and more pressingly, in public discourse. The practical implications of such a theoretical gesture are so evident and powerful that they could be construed as having in fact motivated that gesture.

**On the way to recognition**

We are now in a position to retrace the path along which Honneth gradually came to the realisation that the Hegelian notion of a struggle for recognition was the best option for a historically and theoretically relevant pursuit of a historical-materialist programme of research in social theory.

The first model of social theory that was implicit in the writings of the early 1980s was well summarised by expressions such as “new philosophy of praxis”, “historical intersubjectivity” and “emancipatory sensuousness”. The solution for realising the programme of a new philosophy of praxis, was seen in the return to Marx’s early writings and especially to their Feuerbachian inspiration. This return to Feuerbach presented the advantage of combining several crucial criteria that had been identified as necessary conditions. First, following Habermas’ decisive insight, it helped to reemphasise the central importance of intersubjectivity and normativity in the theory of social integration. This was to be held up against the reduction of interaction in Marx’s correction of Feuerbach’s “altruism” into the notion of social labour. Secondly, the return to Feuerbach would also draw the attention to the rootedness of social action in the need-structure of human beings, insisting
both on the natural preconditions of action, and just as equally on the social
and historical determinacy of human needs-structures. The regrounding of
historical materialism in a fully-fledged materialist and interactionist anthro-
pology à la Feuerbach had the advantage of reconnecting critical social theory
with the theme of the “humanisation of nature”, thus to overcome any trace
of dualism, and of insisting on the intersubjective structures of mechanisms
of social integration. Already then, Mead’s programme for an “anthropology
of practical intersubjectivity” was read as the realisation in a terminology and
through a methodology acceptable for 20th century theoretical concerns, of
the insights developed earlier by Feuerbach.

The second model of critical social theory which evolved from there and
which formed the implicit background of The Critique of Power and the writ-
ings of that period, was centred on the notion of “cultural action”. This notion
pointed to the integrative mechanisms forming the counterpart to power
relations within a given society. The question was no longer that of securing
the foundations of social theory by looking at constitutive problems of social
integration and social transformation. Once the intersubjectivistic turn in phi-
losophy generally and in social theory specifically was secured, the question
became that of explaining more precisely the modalities of “historical inter-
subjectivity” from a Marxist perspective, that is to say, on the basis of a class-
struggle constitutive of social integration. In the research programme devised
by the first generation of Critical Theory, one could find already a sophisticated
characterisation of the programme that critical Marxism should endeavour to
adopt for an application of the Marxist vision of society adapted to advanced
capitalist societies. But the authors of the Frankfurt School remained trapped
in the implicit functionalism of their definition of reason as instrumental rela-
tion to external nature. As we saw, Horkheimer’s concept of “cultural action”,
which he failed to develop satisfactorily, would make it possible to combine
the notion of social action, as the truly normative result of the integration of
group agencies, with the conflictual aspect requested by the Marxist prem-
ise. Furthermore, the emphasis on habituation that is implicit in the notion
of “cultural action”, the emphasis on embodied forms of social integration
and possibly of social injury, retained the “organic”, “sensuous” element that
had been regained with the rereading of Feuerbach. This model of social inte-
gration conceived as the overall product of group-specific, antagonistically
related, interpretations of the division of labour already gave Honneth the
to the central mechanism that could replace work as the linchpin of a the-
ory of social integration that would be substantially connected with a theory
of emancipation: namely, the notion of the “experience of injustice”. Through
their cultural actions, dominated groups can interpret an unjust social order
in order to make it minimally liveable and bearable. This explains integration.
But the same capacity can also just as well provide the cognitive and practical
resources leading to its denunciation and possibly its transformation. More-
over, from the idea of a society integrated through interconnected yet antago-
nistic cultural actions, the idea of a critical theory of society grounded in the
experiences of injustice made by dominated social groups grew naturally, if
only implicitly.
The theoretical bridge that made possible the shift from the models of
“historical” and “practical intersubjectivity”, to that of “cultural action” and
the “experience of injustice”, and finally to the model of a “struggle for rec-
ognition” was, unsurprisingly, found in Habermas. Here, Honneth’s idio-
syncratic use of immanent criticism comes to light once more. In The Critique
of Power, whilst the reifying dualism resulting from the distinction between
types of action-coordination is the main thread of the critique of Habermas,
an alternative possibility is discovered in Chapter Three of Knowledge and
Human Interests, which develops precisely the kind of theory of society that
Honneth was looking for at the time, for the development of the concept of
“cultural action”. In this chapter, Habermas showed how Marx’s productivist
pre-understanding of social action made him incapable of fully developing
the difference he had, on the other hand, perfectly seized, between “synthe-
sis through social labour” and “synthesis through social struggle”. Habermas
embraces this very possibility and develops the idea that

the system of social labour develops only in an objective connection with
the antagonism of classes; the development of the forces of production is
intertwined with the history of revolutions. The results of this class struggle
are always sedimented in the institutional framework of a society, in social
form.40

40 Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, p. 60.
Habermas’ idea here is that the evolution of the forces of production brings with it unequal distributions of life-chances and power, which the subjects could not have agreed to. The development of the forces of production therefore brings about a structural conflict amongst classes. The communicative reproduction of society under the conditions of an asymmetrical division of labour is structurally antagonistic.

If production attains the level of producing goods over and above elementary needs, the problem arises of distributing the surplus product created by labour. This problem is solved by the formation of social classes, which participate to varying degrees in the burdens of production and in social rewards.\(^{41}\)

This leads Habermas to develop the idea of two connected logics of social development: that of social labour, scientific-technical progress, the development of the processes of production on the one side; and that of “social-formative process” on the other,

marked not by new technologies but by stages of reflection through which the dogmatic character of surpassed forms of domination and ideologies are dispelled, the pressure of the institutional framework is sublimated, and the communicative action is set free as communicative action.

These passages seem to repeat the usual dualism in Habermas’ social theory, but in fact a different model of social evolution is detected in them by Honneth because of the important implications that are entailed in the idea that social integration functions as a result of the diverging interpretations of the institutional framework, of the norms regulating the “burdens of production and social rewards”, between classes that are antagonistically related. At the risk of underplaying Habermas’ (very Marxian) emphasis on the irreducibility of productive development, Honneth argues that with the idea of a conflictual, fragile and open-ended compromise over the institutionalisation of fundamental norms regulating social labour, we have moved from a dualistic model of “the embeddedness of purposive-rational organisations in a communicatively reproduced framework of institutionalised norms”, to

“the institutionally mediated relationship of morally integrated classes”.42 Honneth then argues that, from the idea of a “moral conflict” between classes over the norms organising the division of labour, Habermas should be forced to conclude, and indeed implicitly argues, that “social interaction (is) a struggle between social groups for the organisational form of purposive-rational action”.43

Honneth then generalises this claim by arguing that Habermas in fact offers a fully-fledged, if only implicit, “second version of the species’ history” along this alternative line. In it, according to him:

Habermas takes the concept of communicative action as an indicator for the action mechanism through which the organisation of all social domains of action is regulated. The development of the species’ history takes place as an interaction between communicatively integrated groups in which the organisation of social reproduction is socially “negotiated” (emphasis A.H.).44

This reading of Habermas’ chapter seems a little tendentious since, as noted, Habermas continues to argue in a dual way, speaking in favour of the “inter-dependence” of social labour and social communication, rather than the supervenience of the former on the latter. What allows Honneth to make his strong conclusion is the philosophical scheme that Habermas uses in this text to develop a version of theoretical-practical progress.

The scheme that allows Habermas to formulate more precisely the specific logic of “synthesis through struggle” is that of Hegel’s struggle for recognition. Here Habermas reuses the argument he had presented at greater length in the crucial article “Labour and Interaction”. This article had not only established the distinction between the two forms of social reproduction, more importantly it had demonstrated how Hegel had formulated in his Jena lectures a sophisticated solution to the problem of their interrelations: concretely, how language, labour (as mere technical production and then as socially organised production) and interaction (that is, normatively mediated social interactions), are irreducible, yet inter-dependently related

42 Honneth, *Critique of Power*, p. 274.
to each other in the general reproduction of society. Social interaction and language are obviously related. But equally related are “labour” and symbolic exchange: already at the individual level of the use of tools, labour is a symbolic activity that demands the “naming” of the thing worked upon and of the tool. This interrelation between language and labour becomes all the more obvious in the social division of labour. Yet, as Habermas writes: “More interesting and by no means as obvious as the relation of the employment of symbols to interaction and to labour, however, is the interrelation of labour and interaction”.

In his ground-breaking article, Habermas accounted for this interrelation through a scheme that is according to him abandoned once Hegel adopts a monological definition of Spirit. This is the scheme of a struggle for recognition developed in the Jena lectures, and the initial version of a “dialectic of moral life” in Hegel’s theory of crime and fate in his earlier writings. According to this dialectic, the “destiny” or “fate” that strikes the criminal makes him realise his dependency on the others, a dependency that his actions at first had negated. The struggle between the criminal and the injured parties brings about their reconciliation, that is, the realisation of their original interdependency, the fact that they are selves only in the interaction with the other. This dialectic can be applied to social agents, and thus explain the synthesis of labour and interaction, when it is realised that social labour is not just an instrument of material reproduction, but also has recognitive effects in the institutions of exchange and property. These, as Honneth will expound at length in his most famous book, are structured around struggles for the recognition of the social identity of the individuals at play. With the social dimension of material production, Habermas argued already in 1968,

the labour process, by means of which we free ourselves from the immediate dictates of natural forces, enters into the struggle for recognition in such a manner that the result of this struggle, the legally recognised self-consciousness, retains the moment of liberation through labour.  

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46 Ibid., p. 161.
In other words, by moving the analysis to the level of the institutionalisation of social labour through the legal system, Hegel is able to integrate labour and interaction without reducing one to the other. He also seems to make recognition an overarching concept, despite the irreducibility of labour and interaction, by analysing both from the perspective of their recognitive effects for self-consciousness.

In a corresponding passage of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas again highlights the innovative aspect of Hegel’s early scheme of a struggle for recognition to explain the moral and practical evolution of society, next to the evolution in instrumental knowledge. And as Honneth will do in his 1992 book, Habermas again highlights the fact that this scheme will not be reproduced later on:

Synthesis through labour brings about a theoretical-technical relation between subject and object; synthesis through struggle brings about a theoretical-practical relation between them. Productive knowledge arises in the first, reflective knowledge in the second. The only model that presents itself for synthesis of the second sort comes from Hegel. It treats of the dialectic of moral life, developed by Hegel in his early theological writings of the Frankfurt period, and in the Jena philosophy of mind, but which he did not incorporate into his system.47

The “dialectic of moral life” and the struggle for recognition have the same progressive structure: an initial, only implicit complementarity is ruptured by a criminal act, but the reaction to this negative act brings to the consciousness of the opposing parties their essential interdependence and thereby brings the “moral life” of society to a higher realm of integration. In other words, social integration progresses through stages of conflict and reconciliation, and is premised upon a pre-existing fundamental interdependence of individuals and groups.

Honneth gives a great explication, or perhaps rather his own extension, of what Habermas has in mind with this recourse to Hegel’s idea of a “dialectic of moral life” and of a “struggle for recognition”, and gives it a social-theoretical translation which is a clear anticipation of his own theses:

47 Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, p. 56.
The dialectical movement of the suppression and restoration of a communication that concerns mutual recognition characterises the universal pattern according to which the species’ evolution always proceeds again at each established stage. Initially the unequal relations of life that emerge with the formation of social classes permit the experienced disunity of a social interaction situation to come to consciousness in the suppressed class. In the practical conflict that breaks out with this, the enemy parties fight over the norms that institutionally determine the organisation of production and, hence, the distribution of life-chances. The social struggle finally first comes to rest when the ruling class—through force or from insight—recognises the alienated dialogue partner in the suppressed class and has agreed to an institutional organisation of society in which the conditions of mutual recognition are initially again restored on a more just level of development. But so long as the newly negotiated system of institutions again prescribes normatively an unequal distribution of burdens and advantages, the struggle between the classes for social recognition is continually set in motion again. To this extent the evolution of the species takes place as a dialectic of class antagonism that proceeds in moral stages of will-formation.48

This page shows how the shift to the model of a “struggle for recognition” was triggered by the efforts to “reconstruct” historical materialism once the problematic aspect of the paradigm of social labour had been identified. The page also gives a strong justification for the interpretation that reads Habermas’ early solution to this problem as a “moral” theory of social integration, as opposed to a more classical historical-materialist one insisting on the dialectic of forces and relations of production. In the “dialectic of moral life”, in the “struggle for recognition”, it is the normative fabric of society itself that is supposed to be at stake: established as unjust by newly emerging relations of production, denounced by the dominated groups, re-established around new norms once the struggle has been pacified, and so on. If all this is true, however, then we understand how Honneth could make the claim that, beyond the persistent dualism apparently at work in this chapter, implicitly Habermas was in fact committed to an exclusively normative theory of social integration where the systems and institutions of social labour are no longer

48 Honneth, Critique of Power, p. 272.
simply embedded in the communicative sphere, but are themselves the object of conflictual interpretations over social norms and values, in other words, are in fact institutionalised through the state of class struggle at a given time.

The passage from *Knowledge and Human Interests* and Honneth’s explication of it also give incontrovertible indications that the shift from the model of “cultural action” to that of a “struggle for recognition”, from the neo-Marxist writings of the 1980s to the neo-Hegelian analyses of the early 1990s, in no way represented a rupture in Honneth’s theoretical and political thinking, but rather an organic development of his deepest intuitions, indeed of a programme of research whose basic premises had been articulated in the very first book. *The Critique of Power* only showed in a negative way, through the immanent reconstruction and critique of the tradition of critical social theory, what a new “philosophy of praxis” maintaining the theory of class struggle should look like. It found in Horkheimer and Habermas under-developed insights that would allow for the construction of this new model. Habermas was especially relevant, as he drew attention to the extraordinary potential contained in Hegel’s theory of the struggle for recognition, and its capacity to explain social integration in both antagonistic and normative ways. From that perspective, Honneth’s next book, *The Struggle for Recognition*, appears to be simply the positive attempt to develop more fully the fundamental idea of a “dialectic of moral life” as the central mechanism of social integration, one that informs and is in no way opposed to, material integration.

The text that best illustrates this continuity is the article that, not for contingent reasons one would surmise, opens the English edition of *The Fragmented World of the Social*: “Domination and Moral Struggle”, which was published for the first time in 1989. This article states very clearly how the recourse to a Hegelian model of conflictual social integration served the purpose of a neo-Marxist programme of critical social theory. The last page of the article especially underlines the continuity from Marx to Hegel, in the most explicit terms:

> The conviction that a human being can only achieve a satisfactory identity by experiencing the integral accomplishments of his or her own labour is a basic premise underlying the Marxist concept of labour. A person’s “dignity” or “respect”, terms Marx did not hesitate to utilise at various points in his work, presuppose that through autonomous labour he or she can give
visual form to his or her own abilities. It is this “conception of an aesthetics of production” that serves as a normative framework underpinning Marx’s diagnosis of alienation and reification. (...) The philosophical-historical interpretation which provides the overall framework within which Marx’s analysis of capitalist society is embedded thus incorporates a perspective that derives not from the logic of labour but from the logic of recognition (Sorel/Gramsci): under the economic conditions of capitalism the process of mutual recognition among human beings is interrupted because one social group is deprived of precisely those preconditions necessary to obtain respect. This premise—one would locate today in a theory of intersubjectivity—remains concealed in Marx’s own work since he restricts his concept of human identity to a productivist description. (...) A paradigm of recognition thus elaborated could, in my view, be a worthy successor, on a more abstract level, to be sure, of Marx’s paradigm of labour. In it the theory of emancipation and the analysis of society can be connected once more in a theory of action; for the practical contents of such a process of struggle for recognition are constituted by moral norms, norms by means of which capitalism can be criticised as a social relation of damaged recognition.49

With such declarations, however, as with the previous long quote from The Critique of Power, the price to pay for the direction that Honneth decided to take by following Habermas’ reliance on Hegel’s early theory of the dialectic of moral life was also apparent from the very beginning. As we have just remarked, Honneth could only interpret Habermas’ reference to Hegel’s theory of crime as a model for the mechanism of social integration, because he tended to repress the other aspect of social integration, which Habermas at the time very much continued to hold as equally important: namely, material reproduction. The move to the struggle for recognition as the ultimate key to the social relied on a tendency to read unilaterally Habermas, and the third chapter of Knowledge and Human Interests. It relied on a tendency to repress the material dimensions of social reproduction, and on the concurrent promotion of social interrelations.

This tendency can also be seen at work in *The Critique of Power*. The model of “cultural action” presented in the chapter on Horkheimer and the idea of a “struggle for recognition” in the middle Habermas chapter are not fully compatible. As we saw, in the Horkheimer chapter, the class-specific interpretation of the division of labour fully acknowledged the constraints exercised by the economic system upon society. Based on that model, the division of social labour appears to be a system with its own logic of development. In the model of recognition, however, as Honneth reads Habermas’ fourth chapter of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, the whole of social life is seen as developing along the one-dimensional moral dialectic of class antagonism. No institution of social life appears to escape the logic of moral development; consequently the thesis must be that social reproduction as a whole, communicative and material reproduction, are now seen as depending upon the state of the moral fabric of society at a particular moment. Honneth uses the word “co-determination” to indicate this imprecise notion: “The apparently purposive-rational organisations are also codetermined by moral-practical viewpoints that must be conceived as results of communicative action”.50

“Co-determining” as it is used in this sentence seems to imply a dual logic of material and moral points of view, but the page from which the sentence is extracted in fact makes social interaction “the overarching action mechanism”. This hesitation in fact structures the whole model of the ethics of recognition and can be followed throughout Honneth’s writing. It is a conundrum that became one of the main critical points raised in the reception of his mature work. We will study this conundrum in more detail in chapter 11. More generally, this hesitation also points to a more general tendency in Honneth, to reduce the realm of interactions that constitute the webs of social life to the sole “moral-practical viewpoint” of intersubjectivity narrowly conceived as inter-personal interaction.

Part Two

The Philosophy of Recognition: Hegel, Mead and the Anthropology of Practical Intersubjectivity
Chapter Four

Philosophical Anthropology of Practical Intersubjectivity. Social Action and Human Nature (3), and writings on intersubjectivity

The picture of the path that led Axel Honneth to his famous model of a “struggle for recognition” is not quite complete. The model seems to arise naturally from within the immanent, critical reconstructions of the different stages in the tradition of “critical Marxism”, from Marx to Habermas. Yet something is still missing: namely, a more detailed study of the content that is dealt with in the middle part of Social Action and Human Nature, that is, the rediscovery and rehabilitation of German philosophical anthropology for the purpose of an actualised “critical Marxist” project. This aspect of Honneth’s early work has already been introduced to some extent in the section on Feuerbach. As we saw, Honneth’s original project can be read as the attempt to correct the abstractions and confusions entailed in Marx’s concept of social labour by redirecting historical materialism to its origins in anthropological materialism. Equally, as we saw in the previous chapter, the reference to anthropological materialism is also the opportunity for Honneth to conduct a retrospective correction of the intersubjectivistic turn: the source of Habermas’
philosophical paradigm-shift, from the “philosophy of consciousness” to the paradigm of intersubjectivity, can be shown to be situated neither in American pragmatism, nor in Wittgenstein, but much earlier, in the thinker who most influenced the founder of historical materialism. This genealogical work underpins a critique of the “linguistification” of social theory performed by Habermas. As a result of these converging theoretical and critical decisions, Honneth’s philosophical programme was well summarised in the slogans of an “anthropology of social action” or of an “anthropology of practical intersubjectivity”. These mottoes designate the attempt to develop a “new philosophy of praxis” that would overcome the abstractions found in both Marx and Habermas, by correcting their restricted anthropological premises. The retrieval of the grand tradition of German philosophical anthropology would help to generate a more substantive image of the social subject since, following in Feuerbach’s footsteps, this tradition grounds the capacity for action, and especially of social action, in the “plasticity of human needs”, that is to say, in the factuality of the human organism, to wit, the paradoxical factuality of a natural being that is destined to develop a second nature.

We need to return to this aspect of Honneth’s early work for a number of reasons. The first reason is to fully understand his later usage of Mead’s social psychology. The reading of Mead that forms the centre of The Struggle for Recognition was prepared by a first encounter in Social Action and Human Nature. The central exegetical premise underlying this study of Honneth’s thinking is that it is decisive to study the genealogy of his arguments in order to fully appreciate the depth and implications of his intervention in critical social theory. This premise holds especially for Honneth’s use of Mead. In particular, as I will attempt to show, the changes between the two readings of Mead, between the 1980 and the 1992 books, are quite significant. The restriction of interaction to inter-personality can be identified in a particularly explicit way in Honneth’s reading of Mead.

Beyond the reading of Mead, it is also worthwhile reminding ourselves of the most important arguments that were developed in the tradition of German philosophical anthropology because they inform in a substantive way Honneth’s idea of a “formal anthropology”, one of the most striking and controversial aspects of his method. Moreover, as the theory of ontogenesis, a sequel to “philosophical-anthropological” problematics, plays a central role
in Honneth’s mature model, the study of German philosophical anthropology clarifies other controversial aspects of his strategy, namely the strong links between his social-theoretical arguments and psychoanalytical arguments on ontogenesis. Finally, it is also possible to present Honneth’s intellectual journey the other way around: Honneth’s early reappraisal of philosophical anthropology, beyond the immediate context of a “reactualisation” of historical materialism, substantially informed his broader interest in the defence and illustration of intersubjectivity as the paradigm of contemporary social philosophy, and more broadly of philosophy in general.\(^1\) This other fundamental premise in Honneth’s thinking should not be simply identified with the communicative theory of society. Whilst they are obviously connected, they are also relatively autonomous. In other words, Honneth’s continuing interest in the phenomenon and notion of intersubjectivity, his defence of the intersubjective stance as a paradigm of philosophy, are not simply the effect of his adoption of Habermas’ communicative theory of society. One could just as well speak of converging and mutually reinforcing intuitions: the communicative turn in social theory and the intersubjectivistic paradigm reciprocally support each other in helping to build a normative, praxis-oriented, intersubjectivistic theory of society.\(^2\)

It is a fact worth noting, for example, that Honneth never discusses any of the theories that adopt an individualistic methodological premise in inquiries about social ontology. Despite the fact that he clearly presents his work as an intervention in the debates over conceptual models of the social, he has never engaged in the central debate that has structured the social sciences since their emergence until today, namely the debate between individualism and holism.

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This is astonishing because individualistic methodologies today dominate the social sciences. If Honneth’s purpose is to defend the intersubjectivistic premise in social theory, then one would expect him to engage with the opposite side. But Honneth never refers to models following methodological individualism, despite the vast sociological literature he puts to use in all his writings. Nor does he refer to the philosophers who write in social and political philosophy from an individualistic perspective, despite the fact that in the last decade his philosophical references have become more and more located in the American debates, where generally speaking individualistic premises are favoured. We can also note that although he frequently refers to Weber as the fundamental reference in social theory, he has never dedicated a full study to his methodological insights, whereas he has referred more substantially to classical sociologists like Simmel and Durkheim.

By contrast, it is striking to note that he has constantly opposed the versions of the anti-individualistic premise that tend to dissolve subjective agency in favour of systemic or functionalist arguments. We can therefore conclude that he seems to see his methodological opponents in the different versions of structuralism, functionalism and in systems-theories. It is as though Honneth made the deliberate choice from the beginning to refrain from discussing methodological individualism as a constellation of thought too far removed from his intuitions and concerns. By contrast, he has set out to explore quite systematically the tradition he has chosen as his favoured theoretical option. If we go through the list of philosophers and social theorists he has written about, it is obvious that there is an attempt at providing a systematic critical reading of the contemporary tradition of an intersubjectivistic approach to the social, from Rousseau and Hegel to Durkheim, Habermas, Bourdieu, Boltanski and Castel.

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Philosophical origins of the intersubjectivistic turn

Before we study Honneth’s early intervention in the defence and illustration of the intersubjectivistic paradigm, it is important to situate the problem in social-theoretical, and, more broadly, in philosophical terms. This detour needs to start with the treatment of intersubjectivity in the phenomenological tradition as this involves a series of arguments which Honneth probably has in mind when developing his own, as a tradition not to follow, indeed as one to oppose.4

Husserl was probably the philosopher who coined the term “intersubjectivity”, at least the one who gave its philosophical prominence in the European tradition. Whilst the fifth of the Cartesian Meditations published in French in 1931 is the most famous text, the question of intersubjectivity emerged for Husserl as early as 1905.5 The three volumes of Husserliana (volumes XIII-XV) devoted to the problem of intersubjectivity demonstrate that this question, despite a widespread prejudice, which Honneth to some extent probably shares, was at the forefront of Husserl’s concerns from the moment he established his method.6 Between 1905 and 1920, Husserl wrote more than 1500 pages of notes and reflections on this question.

The classical critique of Husserl is that, despite his clear acknowledgement of the danger of solipsism entailed in the reconduction of a Cartesian-like transcendental subjectivity, and despite his stated intention to avoid solipsism in the Fifth Meditation, his insistence on solving this problem via a new epoche, which, by reducing transcendental experience to the “sphere of belonging”, excludes all traces of otherness, means that he remains incapable of doing justice to the phenomenon it purports to analyse. The concept of “empathy” appears as an ad hoc solution for a methodology leading structurally and from its very beginning into an impasse. This critique was most forcefully put by Habermas in his critique of Husserl, in the 1971 lectures on social theory:

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This is a fundamental methodological postulate of a philosophy of consciousness whose starting point is solitary reflection on the activities of the individual’s own subjectivity. It excludes in principle the possibility that the others constituted by and for me could have exactly the same relation to me that I have to them as my intentional objects. Rather, in the phenomenological attitude, I am methodologically forced to assert myself as the primary and foundational original ego against all other egos that guarantee the intersubjectivity of my world.7

Current interpretations of Husserl’s treatment of intersubjectivity tend to correct this type of critique and highlight the fact that for Husserl, not just in his unpublished research manuscripts, but also in the *Cartesian Meditations*, the intersubjective milieu is the necessary condition for transcendental consciousness for the constitution of an objective world, let alone for the world of culture and society. These more sympathetic readings defend Husserl’s monadic reduction by stressing the fact that Husserl like few other philosophers before him insisted on the intersubjective dependency of world constitution for transcendental subjectivity itself.8

The most interesting aspect of these debates for us is that they highlight two dimensions of intersubjectivity that were already well differentiated by Husserl, and are essential in Honneth. First, “intersubjectivity” designates the special problem of the constitution of the meaning of others, the mystery of the apperception of another body as a lived, intentionally enlivened organism. Secondly, intersubjectivity designates more generally the “intersubjective community” in which the ego is always already embedded and which already appears with the primordial forms of intentionality, at the level of passive genesis. Intersubjectivity in Husserl is not reduced to the specific problem of

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8 See for example this passage from the *Krisis* (§50): “everything becomes more complicated as soon as we consider that subjectivity is what it is—an ego functioning constitutively—only within intersubjectivity”. E. Husserl, *Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970 p. 172.
“other minds”, but more profoundly leads to the question of “transcendental intersubjectivity”, that is to say the intersubjective constitution of the world, where the focus is no longer on the transcendental-subjective constitution of the other, but on the dimensions of sharing and commonality that are constitutive of the objective world, and that lead to the separate dimension of a “We”.  

There is no doubt that the philosophical situation in which Honneth’s project grew led him to embrace the classical critique of a transcendental-phenomenological treatment of intersubjectivity. The consequence of such a critique is the abandonment of transcendental phenomenology’s premises and methods. This paves the way for a stronger sense of intersubjectivity where the notion becomes the inspiration for a full-blown paradigm shift. Intersubjectivity no longer designates a special problem. The arguments about the “world-constitutive” aspect of intersubjectivity and the social, supra-subjective constitution of the world are radicalised to the point where they signal the necessity to adopt a new methodological approach. The ‘monadological’, subjectivistic method no longer seems adequate if all constitution of meaning occurs on the basis of pre-existing shared processes.

Intersubjectivity is now the name for an entire new philosophical paradigm, no longer just a specific problem (other minds, the Other), or the search for a transcendental ground (transcendental intersubjectivity). Naturally, the intersubjectivistic paradigm is also interested in intersubjectivity as a special problem, and as a ground for experience and meaning. But most of all, ‘intersubjective’ in the strong sense means a certain view of the social and implies an complete methodological refurbishment, which transfigures the

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9 “The intersubjectively identical life-world-for-all serves as an intentional ‘index’ for the multiplicities of appearance, combined in intersubjective synthesis, through which all ego-subjects (and not merely each through the multiplicities which are peculiar to him individually) are oriented toward a common world and the things in it, the field of all the activities united in the general ‘we’” (ibid.). In this passage, Husserl moves from the monadological perspective (a common world diffracted into each ego-perspective) to one where the “common world” becomes the primary “index”: the underlying, social referent for all subjective intentional activities.
vocabulary and grammar in which conceptual objects and questions are formulated. Axel Honneth’s philosophy is intersubjectivistic in this fundamental, paradigm-shifting sense. In adopting the intersubjectivistic paradigm, Honneth of course follows in the footsteps of Habermas. Broadly speaking, Habermas’ Hegelian gesture of “detranscendentalising” the subject is also shared by Honneth. It seems plausible to assume that he has never really devoted any serious reconstructive study of Husserl, in contrast to his studies of some of the latter’s intellectual children (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Derrida), simply because he felt that Habermas’ rejection of the alleged individualistic methodology of transcendental phenomenology was definitive.

Next to Husserl, it is important to mention a second philosophical source of Honneth’s “intersubjectivism”, namely the work of Michael Theunissen, which was tremendously influential in setting up this paradigm. For instance, Theunissen’s essay “Society and History” published at the time of Habermas’ publication of Knowledge and Human Interests, is the first significant critical study of the new generation of Critical Theory, and puts forward arguments from a “metaphysical” perspective that announce a long line of anti-Frankfurt School statements, from Henrich to Kompridis.10 Beyond the disagreements, however, some key interests were shared between Theunissen and the young Critical Theorists, notably regarding the necessity to reread the history of philosophy from the perspective of intersubjectivity as a new paradigm, and the centrality of Hegel in that enterprise. In any case, the influence of Theunissen’s voice in the post-war German philosophical debate has been so decisive that there is no doubt that his writings have had an impact, if only indirectly, on Honneth’s thought.

Theunissen’s influence on the philosophy of post-war Germany stems firstly from his influential book on intersubjectivity: The Other. Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber.11 In his concise reconstructions


11 The book’s date of publication, 1977, is worth noting. The book was exactly contemporary to Honneth’s first writings. Honneth quotes the book extensively in his
of Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre’s theories of intersubjectivity, Theunissen gave a sophisticated interpretative critique of Husserl that still holds today despite the focus of contemporary Husserl scholarship on the great wealth of new material. Theunissen’s book continues to be relevant in contemporary debates because he emphasised, like no one else before, the “alteration” dimension, the moment of “self-othering” or “becoming other” that is already at play in Husserl. By focusing on some lesser known passages of *Ideen II, Formal and Transcendental Logic* and the *Krisis*, Theunissen demonstrated that for Husserl, the transcendental I is assured of its being a human, physical, mundane I only through the mediation of the Other. This is the profound result of “empathy” in Husserl. The notion is not primarily used to account for the way in which we can gain access into the other self; rather, it makes ego look at itself from the perspective of the other, and thus makes it become an other for itself. Sartre’s “being-for-the-other”, for example, was already shaped to a large extent in Husserl’s unpublished research manuscripts: “through empathy into the alien representation of ourselves as human beings, we attain ‘the givenness of ourselves as a spatial thing like all others’”. Even as a human being I see myself ‘from the standpoint of external perception’. Already in Husserl, therefore, there is some concept of “perspective-taking” and “decenteredness”, concepts that are central in Habermas’ studies on Sartre, “The Struggle for Recognition: On Sartre’s Theory of Intersubjectivity”, (1988) in *The Fragmented World of the Social* and “Erkennen und Anerkennen. Zu Sartres Theorie der Intersubjektivität”, in *Unsichtbarkeit. Stationen einer Theorie der Intersubjektivität*, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003, pp. 71–105.


14 Theunissen, *The Other*, p. 90: “The alteration that I undergo through the Other is, as alteration, a depotentialisation in the negative sense, a disempowerement of my I. For integration takes from my I the power that it has as an ordering I. In its original purity, the constituter of all others is, through alteration, turned into the one constituted amongst all others. This depotentialisation has the form of a decentering”.
and Honneth’s Mead-inspired theories of subjectivity. Honneth notes this striking and unexpected convergence in relation to Sartre, but Theunissen should have drawn his attention also to Husserl in that respect. The overlap with Merleau-Ponty, who was enormously inspired by *Ideen II*, is also significant.

Nevertheless, after he demonstrated the central role played by intersubjective interaction not only in the constitution of the objective world, but also in the constitution of the I as physical, mundane I integrated in the world of other subjectivities and in the world at large, Theunissen maintains the accusation of solipsism, or at least of methodological subjectivism, and ends up formulating a critique similar in its form to Habermas’. Despite Husserl’s claim at the end of the Fifth Meditation that “the illusion of solipsism is dissolved”, he maintains the need for pure egology as the foundational perspective of transcendental philosophy. “The illusion of solipsism is dissolved”, he writes, “even though the proposition that everything existing for me must derive its existential sense exclusively from me myself, from my sphere of consciousness, retains its fundamental validity”. It is this contradiction between the acknowledgement of a dependency towards the Other inasmuch as I am a mundane I, and the radical independence from the Other as transcendental subjectivity, indeed the transcendental constitutive originarity of my consciousness towards the Other, that Theunissen critiques, quoting the same texts as Habermas:

Certainly the loneliness into which I am, in the first instance, driven by the Cartesian-phenomenological epoche is broken through, to the extent that the Others are no longer merely phenomena of my universal world phenomenon, but ‘transcendental realities’. It still does not disappear, however, so long as I also do not find an original partner through the ‘discovery’ of transcendental intersubjectivity.

What Theunissen condemns in transcendental phenomenology, and in transcendental philosophy more generally, is the contradiction whereby the

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16 Husserl, as cited by Theunissen in *The Other*, p. 163.
17 Theunissen, *The Other*, p. 163.
acknowledgement of intersubjectivity does not lead to an acknowledgement of the Other as equally operative in the constitution of meaning. Husserl gives a sophisticated account of the presence of the Other as Other, of my becoming-other from the perspective of the Other, but not of the Other as “original partner” in a transcendental sense. Theunissen’s fundamental argument is in favour of this “original partner”, the idea of a genuine relationship to the Other, not just ethically but even ontologically and certainly methodologically. This is the emphasis not just on the I as an Other I, but on the other I as a You, a Thou, where what matters is not just the irreducibility (which Husserl defends), but the equiprimordiality of the Other. Theunissen’s reconstruction of the philosophy of “dialogicalism”, and more specifically, of its most eminent representative, Martin Buber, aims at uncovering and describing another way of thinking the Other, one where the Other is an “original partner” in the intersubjective relationship.

When both partners are equiprimordial, when neither the I nor the Thou prime over the other, both are equally active in the constitution of the meaningful experience at stake. Love and dialogue are the two central examples, but other forms of “encounter”—as Buber calls the locus of intersubjectivity—would fit here. Clearly, then, the locus of meaning-constitution lies between the two subjects. Meaningful, or meaning-constituting experience, can no longer be situated in one of the poles of the relation, as in transcendental philosophy. Such polarised relation typically arises in the “I-It” relationship, in Buber’s famous terminology. In the I-It relationship, or in the subject-object structure of the transcendental model, the subject faces the world and accesses it through intentionality. This is the structure at the core of transcendental and transcendental-phenomenological conceptions of subjectivity. Here, the I and the It are disconnected and their relation external: “the ontological condition of disconnectedness is the pre-existence of the relata before the relation”. The world appears to an interiority as perspectively ordered from the point of view of that interiority. As a consequence, the I is not just disconnected from its world, it at least implicitly determines and dominates the world it faces. By contrast, the I-Thou relationship is characterised by the immediate encounter

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19 Theunissen, The Other, p. 283.
between two partners of equal rank, where none determines or dominates the other. The relationship is therefore one of relationality, connectedness and mutuality. The spiritual, meaningful moment, occurs neither in the I nor the Thou, it emerges in-between the two, which means also that it does not occur in a third. The two paradigm cases are language and love. A real conversation, for example, “is carried out not in one or the other participant, or in a neutral world that encompasses both and all other things, but in the most precise sense between both, in a dimension so to speak that is only accessible to both of them”.20 Equally: “love does not get attached to the I so that it only has the Thou as a ‘content’, as an object; it is between the I and the Thou”.21

Two dimensions of this strong model of intersubjectivity can be especially highlighted as they provide the key to Theunissen’s later research, and illuminate indirectly the framework in which the recognition paradigm was developed. First, what was referred to so far as “experience of meaning” in a purposefully vague manner, is for Buber and Theunissen after him, most significantly, the encounter of the creature with its creator. The backgrounds for Buber’s and Theunissen’s dialogicalisms are theological. The ‘between’ is indeed firstly the encounter of the human with the human, the “inter-human”; it is also the sphere between the human and the non-human worlds when the latter are addressed as Thou; but primordially, it is the sphere where the human meets the divine, the relation between the “essence man” and “the originary ground of being”.22 This follows a characterisation of spirit as the “realm that is concealed in our midst, in the between”.23 This is a crucial phrase that not only captures the fundamental intuition at the basis of Buber’s dialogical writings, but at the same time summarises the thought that constantly guided Theunissen’s in his philosophical inquiries into the intersubjective nature of spirit. A passage in Luke’s Testament encapsulates this fundamental intuition: “The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you” (17:21).24

20 Ibid., p. 277.
21 Quoted by Theunissen, The Other, p. 272, from Buber’s Schriften über das Dialogische Prinzip, pp. 18-19.
22 Theunissen, The Other, pp. 274-275.
23 Ibid., p. 271.
24 Ibid., p. 383.
This neo-testamental definition of spirit is particularly significant in our context, because it captures the intuition that inspired Theunissen’s turn towards Hegel and formed the basis for his ground-breaking interpretations of him. The Habermasian-Honnethian model of intersubjectivity obviously sheds such theological clothes, which has significant philosophical and political implications. For example, Honneth’s reading of Levinas, who was obviously indebted to Buber, is overdetermined by this difference between theological and non-theological backgrounds to the theory of intersubjectivity. More indirectly, Theunissen’s “relational” or “dialogical” reading of Hegel had as much impact in post-war German philosophy as did his earlier critique of Husserlian intersubjectivity. In complex ways, as we shall see in the next chapter, it played an important part in the reading of Hegel that was at the foundation of the “Frankfurtian” model of intersubjectivity.

Another important dimension of the Buberian “between” has a more direct influence over Honneth’s model of intersubjectivity in that it seems to anticipate the predominance of the social over the subjective moments. In the I-It relation, the relata are disconnected, they exist separately, prior to the relation. The I in question is a subject relating intentionally to his/her world as an object. In the I-Thou relation, by contrast, there are no pre-existing subjects. Subjectivities are indeed at play, but they are brought to existence by the relation itself. Precisely, they are no longer subjects, understood as “subjects-of-experiencing”. The paradox of the subject is that it determines the objective world but is precisely, for that very reason, dependent upon it for its content. Being disconnected from the objective world, it exists independently of it, but this independence gives it no meaningful sense of self. It therefore relies upon the very reality from which it is disconnected. On the other hand, the I of the I-Thou relation, the Thou-I, since it meets an Other yet does not determine it, remains independent from it. It is empty as subject, but full as person or self. The Thou-I is not a subject but a true subjectivity. To put it differently, the Thou-I is more than an individual, which any individual entity can be, including a non-human one; rather, it is a person. In formal language,

therefore, one could summarise all this in the following way: in the intersubjective relation, the relation exists before the relata, yet this is precisely the relation that makes subjectivity, or selves (as opposed to mere subjects) possible. Subjectivity directly arises out of intersubjectivity, but is true, “full” (Buber), complete subjectivity. In other words, intersubjectivity is the condition of possibility of subjectivity in the strong sense of an autonomous selfhood. Habermas, and Honneth following him, will give a sociological, “non-metaphysical” transcription of this fundamental conceptual schema.

Such a detour via the philosophical background of intersubjectivism shows that the critics of Habermas and Honneth who denounce their “a priori intersubjectivism” largely miss the point. These critics argue on the basis of a logical argument that seems difficult to object to: for the self to be able to see itself from the perspective of an other, the self must already have a sense of itself as self. When we study Mead at greater length in chapter 5, we will see how an intersubjectivistic theory of ontogenesis actually denies this point and shows precisely how a familiarity with oneself can itself be constructed as an effect of consistent interactions with significant others. Similarly, recent psychoanalysis shows precisely how intersubjective relations can form the inner world of the young child and allow for the emergence of a sense of self. And finally, we will see in the last chapter how Honneth in fact gives up his alleged “a priori intersubjectivism” in the light, not of the metaphysical arguments, but of recent results in genetic psychology. This shift, however, changes little in the normative dimensions of his recognition theory. But before we touch on all this, the reference to Buber and Theunissen already responds to the criticisms of Frank and Henrich, as their models show the conceptual possi-

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26 See two beautiful pages of The Other, pp. 282-283. One sentence captures the two dialectics and the two separate senses of subjectivity: “While the It-I is only the subjective correlate of the experienced and utilised object, the Thou-I, precisely because it does not make anything dependent upon itself, remains independent in itself”.

27 For a concise summary of the arguments and the relevant literature in the debate between the “intersubjectivist” and the philosophers of self-consciousness (Henrich, Frank), see D. Freundlieb, “Rethinking Critical Theory: Weaknesses and New Directions”, Constellations, 7(1), 2000, pp. 80-99.
bility of autonomous selves arising, qua autonomous, out of a prior, primary relationship.  

The work of Michael Theunissen will reappear at key moments in the different stages in the construction of Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition. His critical study of phenomenological theories of intersubjectivity concluded with the remark that Buber, who had performed the move from transcendental to a truly “dialogical” methodology in his account of intersubjectivity, had only approached the I-Thou in negative fashion. As a result, a more positive, constructive approach was required if the critique of the paradigm of consciousness was to be fulfilled.  

This in a sense set the programmatic scene for much of post-war German philosophy. Different methods, competing references, between classical German idealism (Henrich), American pragmatism (second and third generation Frankfurt School) and French post-structuralism, would be drawn upon by German philosophers. In any case, Theunissen’s presentation of “the philosophy of dialogue as counter-project to transcendental philosophy” seemed definitive and set the scene for future philosophical research. Theunissen’s critique allowed the critical theorists to see themselves as being entitled to develop in their own ways a theory of intersubjectivity that would no longer have to refer to the phenomenological tradition. Their materialist, “post-metaphysical” convictions however, rather than a theological reading of Hegel, led them to a retrieval of a different Hegel and to the extensive use of the great sociologists (Weber, Durkheim, Parsons) and of German philosophical anthropology.

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28 See pp. 285-290, in The Other, which present Buber’s idea of the primacy of the “between” as the solution out of the alleged “vicious circle” of a priori intersubjectiv­­­­­­­ism: “equi-primordiality that is envisaged here means the same primordiality on the basis of the origination from the same—or, to put it better, the same origin (…) the encounter happens at the same time to I and Thou” (p. 286).

29 Theunissen, The Other, pp. 289-290 for the delineation of the basic thread of Theunissen’s critique of Buber’s negative-ontological method.

30 This is the title of the third, positive, part of the book.

31 But Theunissen also notes the fact that the “dialogical” principle developed by philosophers of the early 20th century, despite their common theological and indeed religious concerns, was prepared by Fichte and Feuerbach, The Other, p. 268.
Habermas and the intersubjectivistic turn

Intersubjectivity is thus a term pointing to different meanings and levels of inquiry, depending on the stream of (European) philosophy concerned. In the phenomenological tradition, “intersubjective” refers firstly to the special problem of the “apperception” of the other consciousness in an alien body, and more broadly to the multitude of subjective perspectives from which an objective world is confirmed in its objectivity. In the Buberian-Levinasian tradition, intersubjective explicitly means “inter-human”; sometimes inter-individual (where non-human entities, including things, are also individuals). The emphasis is on the ethical encountering of an Other, mostly an other human person, but primordially the Great Other. As a result, the experience of the “encounter”, the locus of the “between”, has primacy over the subject and the object. The “inter-” is shown to be the origin of proper subjectivity.

In the tradition in which Honneth’s work has grown, a similar shift from the subject-object to the “inter-subject” scheme is accomplished, but instead of a religious, the shift has a sociological and anthropological basis. The shift is as radical as in the Buberian tradition, since the objective dimension of rationality is grounded in a more fundamental intersubjective dimension. With Habermas, inter-subjectivity becomes the full paradigm. This means first of all that it becomes the methodological perspective from which all other philosophical problems are reformulated. It also means that it becomes the main explanatory basis in specific analyses. And more simply, it means that it becomes the first and main object of philosophical inquiry.32

Habermas shares with Theunissen the rejection of the paradigm of consciousness and of transcendental arguments. In his language, this equates with the critique of the “subject-object paradigm”, of “mentalism” and “monological” models of rationality.33 Like Theunissen, Habermas believes that this para-


33 The critique of Husserlian transcendental methodology, notably in relation to its applicability in social theory, is a continuous thread in Habermas’ writings. The critique of the transcendental perspective was already articulated in Knowledge and
digm, which posits the relata (typically the subject and the object) as separate and related only a posteriori, which thereby posits the relation as arising from the relata, has been exhausted both conceptually and in practice, and must be replaced by a new one. Habermas uses the same basic formula as Theunissen to describe it, in reference to the same central text, namely Hegel’s speculative logic: “subject and object are relata that exist only with and in their relations.”

Like Theunissen, Habermas believes that with this reversal of the relation between relata and relation, the categories of subject and object become outdated and need to be replaced by new categories that name the fundamental types of interactions with the world. However, the source of Habermas’ insistence on intersubjectivity, on the primacy of relation over the relata, is not located in the faithfulness to an extra-philosophical inspiration; it is a vision of rationality as historically constituted. The Hegelian-Marxian gesture of historicising rationality is the most fundamental motive, and the true genealogical beginning, behind the shift to intersubjectivity. This was, for example, what led Habermas’ earliest rejection of transcendental phenomenology as a method. Husserl’s vision of structures of intentionality arising from and remaining dependent on, the implicit background resources offered by a lifeworld shared with others was indeed a decisive advance in the theory of rationality and society. It showed the social origin and the social essence of reason even in its most formal and abstract usage. But the method that Husserl continued to employ, even in his latest manuscripts, to account for the intersubjective genesis and structure of reason was not adequate to its object. Habermas’ project, therefore, can be said to start in full with a Left-Hegelian twist to phenomenological intersubjectivism:

The argument with which Habermas opens his objection to the phenomenological programme of the “Krisis” is of a philosophical-historical nature. He is convinced that Husserl, in calling for a contemplative ideal of knowledge,

*Human Interests* (see for example the famous postface from 1965, pp. 304-306); it formed an important part of the critical review of the theories of social action in *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (see pp. 111-112), which prepared the critique of phenomenological methods in *The Theory of Communicative Action* II, pp. 129-130.

34 Habermas, “From Kant to Hegel and Back Again: the Move toward Detranscendentalisation”, p. 182.
falsely neglected the context of interests in which this ideal was originally introduced.35

Notwithstanding his return to Kant in questions of ethics and politics, Habermas remains Hegelian (and indeed Marxian) in his most fundamental epistemological stance, in accepting the Hegelian “detranscendentalisation” of reason and the subject. With Hegel a new theoretical consciousness emerged, which was to have the most decisive influence on Marx: that the self-transparent, meaning-constituting transcendental subject is in fact doubly determined, from underneath and from above: from underneath, by his/her participation in nature through his/her body; from above through his/her incorporation in symbolic, supra-subjective, historically determined worlds. Being doubly determined, the transcendental subject turns out to be twice undermined.

The emphasis on the historical relativity of rationality leads to a paradoxical result. At first, it seems to lead to scepticism or relativism, since all objective and normative references become relative to the categorical frameworks that prevail at a given time. No subject, no particular discourse or practice seems to be able to excuse itself from the social-historical reality in which they exist, and to grant an “objective” observer’s position. But scepticism and relativism are defeated in Hegel and Marx by the combination of two specific philosophical methods that are also maintained, mutatis mutandis, by Habermas and Honneth. The first is the to and fro between conceptual critique and the reception of the positive results of special scientific inquiries, in other words, the immanent critique of scientific inquiry. Scientific discourses are trusted in their capacity to develop their own internal empirical and conceptual requirements, thus providing trustworthy epistemic resources. On the other hand, their tendency to lose sight of the locatedness of their specific claims is kept in check by the meta-scientific epistemological critique offered by the philosophical reconstruction of their claims. As a result of this zigzagging, fallible yet trustworthy, temporary yet credible knowledge claims can inform philosophical inquiry. On the basis of this critically corrected positivistic material, a second methodological gesture, the genetic one, attempts to reconstruct the

35 Honneth, Critique of Power, p. 205.
stages that account for lines of evolution leading to the present state of affairs. This genetic programme, being both positivistically enriched and logically rigorous, can claim to culminate in hypotheses about the teleological logic underpinning the developments studied. With these two methods, the critical and the genetic, the relativism and scepticism that seemed to threaten historised rationality are transformed into robust knowledge claims. This is one of the key dimensions of the replacement of the theological grounding by the sociological and the anthropological one. The focus on the genetic, both for society and the subject, justifies the strong universalism of theoretical claims, instead of the recourse to a metaphysical ground of universal truth.

The methodological focus on the genetic and the historical leads to an approach in the theory of society that attempts to perform a reconstruction of stages of development defined as ideal-types of integration. Subjects for their part are seen as social agents from the perspective of their gradual insertion into pre-existing symbolic institutions, learning to integrate the social world through the development of their capacities. The central motto is that of “individualisation through socialisation”. The dual genetic perspective on society and subjectivity also provides the link between the two special areas of inquiry via the question of social integration, which combines the problem of socialisation with the problem of social reproduction.36

If we focus on the fate of the transcendental subject, the emphasis is now placed on how subjects come to develop their autonomy in contexts of meaning that are always already pre-constituted, framing the meaning of their actions and experiences. “Intersubjective” in Habermas often points to that supra-subjective symbolic order, in which actions (linguistic or other) take place. It is clear that taken in this sense, “intersubjective” is very close or indeed equivalent to “social”. Intersubjective here means what is between subjects in the sense of what is shared by all socialised participants of a given society (a language, a certain world-view, norms, values, etc.). This is quite different from the interpersonal interpretation of intersubjectivity since the focus is here on the temporal, ontological primacy of the social. We can formulate this distinction by reference to Theunissen: in the latter’s “dialogicalism”, even though the relata

36 On this link, see T. McCarthy, The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas, pp. 333-334.
emerge from the relation, they are simultaneous to it. In theological terms, Christ being past as Christ and to-come as Messiah is also present as the already operative promise of this “to-come” that has already been realised. In Habermas’ vision of relationality, on the other hand, the socialised subject arrives late in a social order that precedes it.

The second, most common, meaning of “intersubjective” in Habermas refers to the inter-personal dimension, where “intersubjective” is closely related to “interactive”, and “communicative”. This is different from the previous sense which is more static and takes the social as a fact. In this second sense, the focus is on the coordination of the actions of the different social agents through a process of communication, which, ideally at least, is geared towards reaching an understanding. From this perspective every social agent is normatively a participant in the reproduction of society, conceived of as a general consensus over basic norms achieved through processes of communication. In this dimension of the social, the norms are indeed binding, thus creating the factual, meta-subjective aspect of the social, the authority of the social over the individual. But they are also “consensual”, premised upon the at least ideally achievable, and in any case normatively demanded, agreement between all the individuals involved. Involving second-order discussion and procedures of description, justification and application, these communicatively redeemable norms obviously presuppose the argumentative use of language. “Intersubjective” here is very close to “communicative”: what happens between the subjects is an ongoing, more or less explicit, discussion over the social norms; in a sense, inter-subjective here designates the in-between discussion over the in-between.

The insistence on this specific sense of intersubjectivity as communication obviously constitutes Habermas’ key innovation in social theory. This sense of “intersubjective” presents aspects that seem to be contradictory with the first, as the latter tends to highlight the primacy of the social, as institutionalised fact, over the individual. The apparent contradiction can already be found in Hegel, and the solution is already proposed by Hegel with the dialectic between particular and universal, which finds in the notion of Sittlichkeit its sophisticated resolution. This is the idea according to which leading a life according to the universal is the best way for the individual to fulfil himself or herself as particular, and that, conversely, the satisfaction of the partic-
ular reproduces the universal. The same dialectic is at play, under suitably changed methodological premises, in Habermas and Honneth.

The third meaning of intersubjective in this paradigm is methodological. The essential social determinacy of subjectivity and subjective capacities means that reason is no longer to be conceived as “mono-logos”. The ground of truth is no longer reachable in and by the self-reflecting subject, but amongst the community of speaking subjects arguing about objects (epistemic objects, ethical norms, political actions, social rules, institutions, and so on). As a result, reason can no longer be defined substantively but simply as procedure. Once again we verify that the historicisation of rationality is not necessarily synonymous with the relativisation of its claims. Indeed, the theory of rationality becomes a theory of “rationalisation” that is able to identify the ways in which the formal features of rational procedures progress through learning processes. Being formal and tied to a specific stage in the progress towards pure argumentation, these features are locally universal, so to speak, universal at their specific levels, but local in the ideal-typical scale of argumentative procedures. “Intersubjective” in this sense therefore points to the procedural aspect of rational discourse and action in society. It could be qualified under the more precise term of “intersubjective testing”, that is to say, the fallible verification of truth claims in a community of speakers (the community of experts in a field of expertise, the community of agents for ethical questions, etc.) sharing basic norms of conduct and argumentation.

Linguification of philosophical anthropology

Obviously, Honneth follows Habermas wholeheartedly in his shift towards intersubjectivism. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, Honneth’s agreement with the necessity of a paradigm-shift towards intersubjectivism is not uncritical in regards to the specific content of the shift. In particular, he identifies as the crucial source of many problems the philosophical-anthropological premise that underpins Habermas’ intersubjectivism, namely the central, indeed quasi-exclusive role played by the structures of language in the theories of social evolution and socialisation. Before analysing Honneth’s counter-proposal in the philosophical anthropology of intersubjectivity, it might therefore be useful to remind ourselves of the deep and
variegated anthropological dimensions within Habermas’ emphasis on the pragmatic force of language as the core mechanism of social and subjective developments.

Even before Habermas’ turn towards pragmatic linguistics in the 1970s, the anthropological model at the basis of his earlier research relied upon the centrality of language. The theory of knowledge-constitutive interests and the dualism it introduced, between technical forms of action aiming for success and practical forms of action aiming for understanding, already presupposed that the properly human mode of social integration originates in the capacity of human beings to coordinate their actions through the binding force of language use. As early as the positivistic dispute, even before the texts on labour and interaction and the critical reappropriations of Hegel and Marx, as Honneth retraces very clearly,

Linguistic communication is the medium in which individuals are able to secure the commonality of their action orientations and world-representations necessary for mastering the collective task of material reproduction.37

We have already quoted the famous dictum from the 1965 lecture: “What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language”. In the more developed theory of society presented in The Theory of Communicative Action, this basic anthropological insight continues to operate. The lifeworld, that social plane that makes up the ground for all forms of human praxis is defined by Habermas in purely linguistic terms: “we can think of the lifeworld as represented by a culturally transmitted and linguistically organised stock of interpretive patterns”. And more pointedly: “Language and culture are constitutive for the lifeworld itself”.38 In this model,

37 Honneth, Critique of Power, p. 222. See also S. Haber, Critique de l’Antinaturalisme. In chapter III, Haber studies in great detail the shifts in Habermas’ relation to naturalist positions in social theory. Despite important twists in the reference to a naturalistic background, a constant thread remains visible: the natural origin of anthropos is not an argument that can be taken to conduct naturalistic analyses at the level of social theory. Instead, “the entire normative weight which was previously (in certain texts of the young Marx and in some Marxist authors) tied to Nature is now transferred to the situation of linguistic and dialogical interaction”, p. 163.

38 Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action II, p. 124.
the “resources” of the lifeworld that are transmitted to socialised agents and used by them mostly unreflectively in their everyday acts of communication are available to them through the language they use, which “constitutes”, that is to say structures and “stores” the stock of knowledge they require. Culture frames the background assumptions in which discussions take place, but this unproblematic stock of symbolic resources is “linguistically organised”. As a result, the logic of rationalisation that is supposed to take place within the lifeworlds is driven by the potential for decentering, reflexivity and learning that is inscribed in the very structure of linguistic exchange. The momentous upheavals characterising the rise of modern society, notably the splintering of the different value spheres and the immense consequence this has for societies and subjectivities alike, as the bonds of homogeneous communities are loosened and each of the structures of social and personal life is allowed to develop to its full potential, these momentous developments themselves are propelled fundamentally by nothing other than the differentiated referentiality to separate domains of reality and the complex of validity claims inherent in all communicative action.\(^{39}\) Because rationality is equated with the potential for rationalisation inherent in communication, in brief, because rationality is reinterpreted as communication, it is not exaggerated to say that for Habermas the rationalisation of society as a whole is commanded by the power of language.

If we focus on more specific aspects of this, for example the theory of social evolution, we note the same process of “linguistification” of social-theoretical explanations. In his attempt, following the seminal works of Mead and Durkheim, to reconstruct “the phylogenetic line of development that leads from symbolically mediated to normatively guided interaction”, Habermas hypothesises that this evolution occurred through crossing the threshold “to grammatical speech”, as the developed system of pronouns allowed the human being to take different perspectives upon itself and the world, the psychological equivalent to communicative action. The anthropogenic power of language structures becomes fully explicit when Habermas refers to this evolution from symbolic to grammatically guided interaction as a “process

of hominisation”.40 The argument is certainly faithful to Mead, but there is no doubt that Habermas emphasises far more than does Mead the fact that the development of human rationality is coextensive with the development of grammatical language.41 Similarly, in reading Durkheim, Habermas seeks above all the traces of a “linguistification of the sacred”: the idea already touched upon by the French sociologist that the passage from primitive forms of social integration, where the individual is fully immersed in collective consciousness expressed and structured in the sacred forms, to more reflective and differentiated modes of social integration, is actually a process triggered by and carried through by the emergence and development of communicative discursivity.42 The theory of speech acts developed in Book One of the Theory of Communicative Action, which aims at uncovering the rational core of language, as well as the linguistic nature of rationality, therefore unveils the formal structure underpinning the genetic story that is told at the beginning of Book Two.

Equally, the evolutionary dimension, which, through retrospective reconstruction, ends by formulating a general anthropological thesis about hominisation at the phylogenetic level has, of course, its ontogenetic counterpart. At this level again, the logic of language use and exchange plays the guiding function.43 This is one of the results of Habermas’ study of Mead’s theory of the ontogenetic origin of the moral validity of norms: “To the extent that language becomes established as the principle of sociation, the conditions

40 Ibid., p. 86. See also p. 23 and the critique of Mead, where Habermas makes the speculative hypothesis that “one can imagine that the communicative employment of signs with identical meanings reacts back upon the organism’s structure of drives and modes of behaviour”.


42 Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action II, pp. 77-90: “The universalisation of law and morality noted by Durkheim can be explained in its structural aspect by the gradual shifting of problems of justifying and applying norms over to processes of consensus formation in language” (90).

43 The best study on this point remains T. McCarthy’s The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas, chapter 4, section 4.
of socialisation converge with the conditions of communicatively produced intersubjectivity”. 44

The thesis that language becomes the principle of sociation refers to the fundamental intuition behind Mead’s symbolic interactionism: the idea that plural individuals manage to live together in and as one society thanks to the power of language, as the latter enables ego to take the attitude of the other (to evoke in herself and internalise, the other’s response to her behaviour) and thereby is the medium through which plural projects that are at first irreconcilable, or even antagonistic, can be coordinated. If this is true at the level of the species, though, this is true also at the level of every individual development. 45 The child learns to decentre her perspective, to take the attitude of the other, which, once again, is the process by which ego develops itself not only cognitively but also morally, as she gradually masters language, or more accurately, as Habermas constantly insists, communication, with the full-array of pragmatic modalities and in particular the power of illocutionary force. As Thomas McCarthy reminds us, the “reconstructions of historical materialism” in the 1970s coincided with attempts at critical unifications of the theories of subjective formation and socialisation. In those attempts, the synthesis of empirical developmental studies took as its foundation the universal formal rules structuring communication that speech acts theory had identified. 46

Here again, even if communicative competence is broader than linguistic competence, the ideal-typical stages reconstructed by the philosopher acting as social-scientist are underpinned by the formal framework established in the study of the pragmatic rules of linguistic understanding.

44 Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action II, p. 93.
46 McCarthy, The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas, p. 337. The main text on this topic is “Moral Development and Ego Identity” (1979), in Communication and the Evolution of Society, trans. T. McCarthy, London, Heinemann, 1979, pp. 69-94. Habermas goes as far as mapping the different types of differentiation of the subject from the non-subjective (the natural-objective, the social-normative and the intersubjective-linguistic) with the different types of utterances (affective versus cognitive, prescriptive and evaluative).
It is only in one of his last books, *The Future of Human Nature*, that Habermas for the first time uses a philosophical-anthropological line of argument that is not exclusively tied to the pragmatic logic of communication.\(^{47}\)

**The retrieval of philosophical anthropology: avoiding misunderstandings**

The previous chapter has established how many of Honneth’s criticisms of Habermas, which turned mostly around the problem of the connection of theory and practice, were based on a fundamental disquiet about the strong link between the theory of social action and the logic of agreement through linguistic exchange. We see here that the “linguistification” of social theory in Habermas can be linked to a similar linguistification of the philosophical-anthropological background of social theory. Against Habermas’ linguistified philosophical anthropology and against his dualistic theory of society, Honneth’s research programme started with the project, deployed in *Social Action and Human Nature*, of developing an anthropology of social action that would analyse interaction no longer with such strict ties to the logic of linguistic understanding. This explains why it seemed important for Honneth at the start of his reflections, to systematise and reconstruct conceptually the line of research studying the biological foundation of communicative action. This was important to avert the turn towards abstraction that had been diagnosed in Habermas’ theory, in particular in relation to real social movements and political praxis.

Before turning to *The Struggle for Recognition*, it is therefore important for us to take a glance at the arguments that Honneth extracted from his rereading of German philosophical anthropology. These arguments were supposed to “flesh out” the anthropological image underpinning the theory of social action. This has a strong bearing on the understanding of the theory of recognition. It is very important to keep these arguments in mind when we move to the study of Honneth’s mature theory of social action as they form the

\(^{47}\) See Haber, *Critique de l’Antinaturalisme*, pp. 245-252.
background intuitions that this theory attempts to systematically develop and coherently bring together.

As we already highlighted in the previous chapter, the introduction to Social Action and Human Nature anchors the retrieval of philosophical anthropology in the scientific and political context. The social movements of the 1970s and 80s are read by Honneth and Joas as pointing to the same basic theoretical question: “the relationship of the human being to nature and of nature in the human being”. The key problem for social theory in late capitalism is that of “the humanisation of nature”. This in turn entails a constellation of problems: the problematic conquest of nature by humans, and the counter-effects on human culture itself, as “second nature”; the development of “inner nature”, the effect of the civilising process on subjectivity; and finally, the clarification of the “natural” origins of humans’ ability to develop a “second nature”, the paradox of the natural roots of the power of human beings to transcend nature.

Here, a long overdue methodological clarification is in order. Honneth, and Habermas before him, have been taken to task by many critics for grounding the normative parts of critical theory, and thus also their political theories, in theories of human nature. This was already the crux of Theunissen’s influential critique of Critical Theory. Despite the rejection by Habermas of the naturalistic grounding of critical theory shared by most of his predecessors in Frankfurt, Theunissen argues, Habermas’ turn to a theory of knowledge-constitutive interests leads to a “transcendentalisation” of essential forms of human interaction (to nature, to society and to self) which is itself akin to a kind of “naturalisation”. In the end, the analytical distinction between types of interaction and the method of reconstruction that is supposed to highlight their underlying formal structures appears to hypostasise “anthropologically fixed structures”, which destroy the possibility of any truly historical rupture. A new, sophisticated form of naturalisation of the historical subject is at play, which destroys true historicity, both in strictly social terms, but also in relation to the non-human world:

48 Honneth & Joas, Social Action and Human Nature, p. 3.
there can be no question of a historicity that is at work in the cultural determinations of the human beings. No historical event could break through the bell-jar that encloses the traffic between humans and things. No encounter could exert sufficient force to break the rules according to which human beings communicate with one another.\(^4^9\)

Despite their vastly diverging theoretical options and methodological presuppositions, the objections raised by critics of Habermas like Henrich or Manfred Frank, as well as by critics of Honneth like Zurn and Kompridis, share the same type of concerns, formally speaking, as the ones already raised by Theunissen in 1969. All these authors question the methodology whereby a theory of social interaction is elaborated on the basis of overt anthropological reconstructions, in order then to draw substantive, universalistic normative implications, at the moral and political levels. This naturalistic grounding, the critics argue, does not warrant the universalistic position claimed by Habermas and Honneth in normative questions.\(^5^0\) And this naturalistic grounding that does not say its name amounts to a destruction of historicity: it dramatically truncates the ability of social action to create new meanings and, being too tied to specific cultural contexts, it unduly generalises from one situation to all. The latter is first of all a methodological mistake but also, and more seriously, a mistake that prevents critical theory from being sufficiently responsive to unknown historical demands.\(^5^1\)

The introduction to *Social Action and Human Nature* answered these criticisms in advance by clarifying the relationship between philosophical-anthropological arguments, the theory of society, and normative claims. First of all,


50 This is the core of Zurn’s early critique of Honneth, in “Anthropology and Normativity: A Critique of Axel Honneth’s ‘Formal Conceptions of Ethical Life’”, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 26(1), 2000, pp. 115-124.

the analysis of the political context in which the rereading of philosophical anthropology is occurring is decisive: it is the state of societies suffering from the pathologies produced by global capitalism that demands such a re-reading. To approach social theory from the perspective of the “humanisation of nature” problem is not first and foremost a methodological decision: it is a decision demanded by the practical urgency of the time. It is in the immanence of the social movements themselves that the problem of nature arises, including that of the natural preconditions of social action. Secondly, as we noted earlier, it is inaccurate and unfair to interpret Honneth’s methodology as a naïve, direct anthropological grounding of social, moral and political arguments. With Joas, Honneth rejected this interpretation in the clearest possible terms:

Anthropology must not be understood as the theory of constants of human cultures persisting through history, or of an inalienable substance of human nature, but rather as an inquiry into the unchanging preconditions of human changeableness.52

The “anthropological” moment in Honneth should not to be equated with, for example, the Feuerbachian method of Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, which appeared to develop a critique of modernity on the basis of a theory of human nature in its relation to external nature.

The quote above also answers the criticism that the grounding of critical social theory in anthropological arguments is tantamount to a destruction of historicity, with the implication that it becomes unable to develop a theory of radical social transformation. The anthropological gaze is not directed at the content of human nature, but at the natural preconditions of human praxis. It in no way predetermines the possible directions of social development. Indeed, the turn to the question of the natural preconditions and dimensions of social action is a privileged way of correcting the problems inherent in Habermas’ overly rigid connection between interaction and communication. The emphasis on the radical plasticity of human nature that is one of the main results of philosophical anthropology speaks precisely in favour of the open-endedness of historical praxis. Indeed, it grounds the possibility of open

social transformation in the very plasticity of human needs. This strand in Honneth’s thinking culminates in the last page of *The Struggle for Recognition*, with its declared agnosticism in relation to the concrete political implication of the model of recognition: the critical theorists leave it to the contingency of politics and history to decide how the ideal of recognition might be realised.

Instead of a naïve grounding of social theory in anthropology, Honneth and Joas outlined the correct way of interpreting their project in the following passage:

> Our approach to anthropology regards itself as self-reflection of the social and cultural sciences on their biological foundations and on the normative content of their bodies of knowledge, considered in relation to determinate historical and political problems.\(^53\)

This necessity for theory to return to the problem of the relationship between man and nature is first of all, as we just recalled, a necessity imposed on theory by existing social movements. But it also serves as a major normative and explanatory corrective. The point is not to ground, but to question social theory from the point of view of a naturalistic knowledge about the subject and society: what are the hidden premises of your picture of the subject and society; how coherent are they; to what extent do they accord with the substantive knowledge developed by the sciences of human development?

> In our opinion, anthropology should (not) be understood as the basis of the social and cultural sciences, which has a priori precedence over them (…). Rather, anthropology is a reflective step in the scrutiny of the suitableness of social-scientific theoretical frameworks that has become autonomous. (…) This process of self-reflection draws its questions from the problems of the social and cultural sciences and returns to them with its theories clarified and internally differentiated by anthropology.

Social theory in the European tradition is tied around the three interrelated problems of individual and social development, and the reciprocal influences of each on the other. Honneth and Joas argue that it is fanciful to pretend to treat seriously questions of social evolution, social integration and sociali-

sation whilst ignoring the sophisticated results arrived at by philosophical anthropology.

Arnold Gehlen: organic preconditions of social action

With this constellation of epistemological and practical requisites to redeem a programme studying the “humanisation of nature”, the two authors engage in their “contribution to the discussion of philosophical anthropology with systematic intent”. As we saw, the first part of the book provides a discussion of the anthropological strand that is operative within the historical-materialist tradition. This first part indicated explicitly in what framework the question of “social action” was addressed. The conclusion of that first part was that historical materialism should paradoxically be corrected by a return to its repressed anthropological heritage, in order to retrieve its “altruistic” and “sensualist” dimensions, in other words, the full array of normative intersubjective interactions, and to refocus on the organic preconditioning of social action. This conclusion obviously converges with the general desideratum of a widening of the anthropological in the study of Habermas, a retrieval of the body and an extension of the theoretical gaze beyond language.

The third and last part of the book inspects critically the tradition of “historical anthropology”. We have already studied the critical arguments brought up against Habermas in it. This part intends to “investigate the historical process of civilisation in which human nature has up to the present day changed and shaped itself within its organically set bounds”. In other words, it historicises, and critically assesses historical accounts of, precisely that anthropological content that is extracted from the materialist tradition (Part 1), and from German, 20th century philosophical anthropology (Part 2). The first two parts characterised those “organically set bounds” of human action, which the third part investigates from a historical perspective.

As often in Honneth’s writings, we encounter an explicitly embraced methodological circle. On the one hand, the axiom of intersubjectivity provides the principal hermeneutic grid through which the tradition of philosophical anthropology is reconstructed. On the other hand, this tradition is explored precisely to find anthropological arguments in favour of a conception of social action as normatively constituted, that is, as based on intersubjective interactions around norms. This methodological circle undergirds, as we will now see, the structure of the second section of the book.

Everything begins, first of all, with Arnold Gehlen. In the work of Arnold Gehlen, Honneth and Joas find the “attempt to construct a systematic anthropology” aiming for a theory of action. This is the perfect starting point for them since, by contrast to other contemporary attempts at philosophical anthropology, most notably Max Scheler, in Gehlen “the special position of the human being is not accounted for through the classical dualisms of body-soul and body-mind, but by the structure of human action”. And also: “he conceives of the human being’s organic peculiarities as the presuppositions for, and his cultural achievements as the results of, the ‘capacity for action’ as the unitary structural law of human life”.

The second key moment is the move from Gehlen to Mead. This shift corresponds to the necessity to move from a solipsistic to an intersubjectivistic model. Gehlen’s work, however, remains decisive as a pragmatic approach to the anthropological preconditions of social action.

The fundamental idea borrowed from Gehlen is the following: “he finds the explanation of the specifically human capacity for action in the biological thesis that the human being is a defective life form”. The human being can

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58 Ibid., p. 51. The main book they study is Gehlen’s classic: Man, his Nature and Place in the World.

be described as a defective life form if the way humans survive in nature is compared with that of animals: the human being needs a greater amount of time to develop its capacities; it does not have natural protections against the elements and the attacks of other animals; it is not adapted to a specific environment with a dedicated system of organs; in particular, its senses are quite mediocre compared with the performances of animals, and so on. In terms of natural evolution, “man is to a great extent unspecialised”. In order to survive, human beings therefore have to compensate for their organic deficiency. Under-specialisation and lack of adaptation, however, which are at first life-threatening, turn out to be the origin of the superiority of the human animal over the other species. Through the “loss of restrictive determinations”, a gap opens up between the human living being and its environment. This gap is the condition of possibility for the development of autonomous action, as opposed to instinctual adaptation, as well as for learning, instead of the eternal repetition of pre-programmed behavioural responses. This gap between organism and environment, the extent of human beings’ lack of evolutionary specialisation, is extreme. This is expressed in particular in the great diversity characterising the modes of survival developed by human groups. The great plasticity in the modes of human adaptation to the environment as well as in the types of social organisation shows that there are many possible human responses to the challenge of survival. A contrario, however, this also demonstrates that the extreme “changeableness” in being human can be brought back at least negatively to an invariant biological pre-condition.

The diversity and plasticity in the human forms of adaptation to the environment underline also the centrality of social and cultural factors in human survival, since the latter provide precisely those conditions already granted to other organisms who benefit from evolutionary specialisation:

In the case of the human being, decisive organic specialisations do not occur even after the species has arisen, (...) inasmuch as the socio-cultural mechanism of environmental adaptation encompasses the continuous alteration of the natural environment and the cultural self-shaping of the social world.60

60 Ibid., p. 51.
This passage delineates two key dimensions of the social and cultural dimensions of human adaptation. First, there is the instrumental aspect of cultural learning by which groups, and even humanity at large, improves upon its stock of knowledge and technical capacities, and progresses in instrumental rationality. Once a certain threshold has been reached, this capacity leads to an inversion of the logic of adaptation: the latter is no longer simply a response to natural challenges, but the active “alteration of the natural environment”, enabling efficient use of natural resources, planning and prediction. This means that the exact nature and content of adaptation to the environment changes all the time with the transformations in the environments themselves. We are here clearly in a historical-materialist framework.

But there is also a more reflexive, a kind of second-order learning process, which designates the capacity of human groups to self-reflexively learn about themselves and to alter and shape themselves, qua social and cultural creations, for the sake of survival. The human race constantly re-makes itself, down to its organic and psychic make-up, through constantly renewed psychic and physical disciplining. In the context of a critical reception of Habermas, this second point indicates that the origin of normativity and of normative progress itself, the source of normative rationalisation, is ultimately grounded in the biological underdetermination and underspecialisation of human organisms. It is in the very materiality of the human system of needs and capacities that the potential for moral learning (the “cultural self-shaping”) finds its source, even if language obviously plays the central role as the medium of choice in this process of reflexive learning.

The ontogenetic side to this in the social-cultural account of human survival is also decisive. Given the utmost vulnerability of the human newborn, given the fact that, organically speaking, “man is born prematurely”, it relies absolutely on its community for its survival, and conversely the community therefore relies on structures of social protection of the vulnerable to reproduce itself. This, again, points to an essential invariant precondition of all human life, an unchangeable condition of social and cultural variations: the human individual’s dependency on other members of its species. This confirms the anthropological grounding of intersubjectivity from a highly specific point of view.
Despite the critique of Gehlen in the confrontation with Mead, the former is the starting point in Honneth’s and Joas’ reconstruction of modern philosophical anthropology because, once his framework is corrected in an intersubjectivistic sense, the rest of his model can guide the whole programme of research. On the basis of Gehlen’s hypothesis, that “there is ascertainable a complex relationship between the loss of restrictive determinations and the origination of learning possibilities”, the basic conclusion that will provide the thread for the rest of the inquiry follows:

These altered organic preconditions of ontogenesis lead to a rupturing of all three sides of the triangle consisting of impulsional system, perception of triggering stimuli and motory reactions, which is characteristic of instinct-governed life forms. Gehlen inquires into the structure of human impulses, perception and voluntary movement in order to demonstrate human action’s function of compensating for the human being’s organic deficiencies.  

The rest of the second part of the book takes this three-part structure as its guideline. The study of Helmut Plessner looks at human motility as communicative expressiveness (pp. 70-90). The study of Agnes Heller, which we briefly mentioned in the first chapter, looks at the human structure of needs (pp. 91-101). And finally, the study of modern anthropological accounts of perception critiques the work of Klaus Holzkamp from the perspective of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception (pp. 102-117). But Gehlen was the one who most clearly showed that it is in and through action that “the human being frees himself from the dangers to his survival inherent in the organic starting situation of a deficient life form”. Indeed human impulses, perceptions and movements, being essentially undetermined, always run the risk of being overwhelmed by the profusion and initial lack of structure of inner and outer experience. There is too much to feel, too much to perceive, and too much to do for an unspecialised being like the human being. Action, however, introduces structuring principles into experience: first in terms of a reduction of the inner and outer landscape, organised as they are initially along purposive lines; and secondly because the lack of specialisation is

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61 Ibid., p. 53.
compensated by the capacity to learn and self-shape, a capacity, however, that is constantly inspired and guided by the demands of action.\footnote{Ibid., p. 57.}

**First reading of Mead**

However, whilst Gehlen is the author who proposed the decisive insight into the organic precondition for the capacity of (social) action, and into the pragmatic origin of the human capacity to build a second (inner and outer) nature, Mead is the second key reference because he is the one who helps to perform an intersubjectivistic correction to Gehlen’s fundamental hypotheses. Given the central place taken by Mead in Honneth’s early and middle period, including *The Struggle for Recognition* and after, we need to take some time to highlight the features of Mead’s social theory that are the most relevant for Honneth’s social theory.

Habermas once again played a decisive role in drawing the attention of Honneth and Joas to the importance of George Herbert Mead for a normative theory of social action.\footnote{See for example On the Logic of the Social Sciences, pp. 25 and 55, or Communication and the Evolution of Society (1976), pp. 73, 82.} Joas at the time was editing Mead’s work in German and was writing a seminal presentation of his work.\footnote{His G.H. Mead was first published in 1980.} We should not forget to mention the fact that Tugendhat’s crucial book, *Self-consciousness and Self-determination*, which was also decisive for the theory of recognition, published for the first time in 1979, proposed a striking use of Mead for an analytical theory of subjective autonomy.

In *Social Action and Human Nature*, Honneth and Joas approach Mead from precisely this angle of the anthropological grounding of the human capacity for social action. The perspective is very broad, reminiscent of Marx’s reflections on “the history of the species”, for example in *The German Ideology*, and of Habermas’ intersubjectivistic correction of Marx’s speculations in *Zur Rekonstruktion des Historischen Materialismus*. The general point of the inquiry concerns the basic features explaining the evolution of the human species. The perspective is not as yet focused on the normativity inherent in inter-
personal interaction, as will be the case a decade later in *The Struggle for Recognition*. Mead rather offers the precious intersubjectivistic twist to Gehlen’s ground-breaking insight into the organic preconditions of social action. More specifically, he represents a perfect reference point because his is a similar naturalistic, genetic theory of praxis (both as the object to explain and as the paradigmatic explanatory concept), but devised from pragmatist and intersubjectivistic points of view.

Mead’s fundamental methodological assumption is a functionalist one: “all that (is) psychical in nature (is) to be investigated from the standpoint of its function in behaviour; all behaviour (is) to be examined with respect to its functionality for the reproduction of the individual and of the species”.65 The explanation of the psychical in terms of behaviour means that inner life, consciousness, or the mind, are observed and explained “from the outside”. Not only are they accessed in their external expressions in the physical world, and in terms of their functionality in enabling life-supporting behaviour, without recourse to internal experience as a source of explanation, but most importantly, they are even causally explained from the external conditions, from the situation of action, and more precisely, with reference to the physical environment and the partners in interaction.

The functionalist and behaviouristic rejection of introspection as a method, and of inner life as the place where the origin and structures of meaning can be studied, directly announces the later critiques of transcendental philosophy. We now see concretely what Habermas was pointing to at the outset of the second volume of the *Theory of Communicative Action*, when he claimed that transcendental philosophy and all recourse to introspection were made redundant at the turn of the 20th century by pragmatist arguments. The focus on behaviour obviously justifies the term behaviourism with which Mead characterises his own endeavour, but as Honneth and Joas emphasise and as the quote above makes clear, we should not confuse the rejection of inner life as the sole origin of meaning, with the rejection of inner life altogether. The quote above shows that Mead’s interest, unlike other behaviourists, is

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precisely to account for the emergence of inner experience from social life. The anti-intuitionist stance is directly linked to the intersubjectivistic premise. This means that the “outside experience” that is said to determine individual inner experience is not conceptualised on the model of an isolated subject facing a threatening external world, but as the overall conditioning environment constituted by social life:

Social psychology is especially interested in the effect which the social group has in the determination of the experience and conduct of the individual member. If we abandon the conception of a substantive soul endowed with the self of the individual at birth, then we may regard the development of the individual’s self, and of his self-consciousness within the field of his experience, as the social psychologist’s special interest.66

This is the strong sense of intersubjectivity that was delineated above: that the subject emerges from relations with others, and does not pre-exist them. The rejection of introspection and intuition is linked also with the other two fundamental methodological premises, the pragmatist and naturalistic. The rejection of the attempt to gain direct access to the psychical, as we just saw, means that psychology must restrict itself to the study of external behaviour. This study is undertaken, as in Gehlen, from the perspective of the “capacity for action”, that is to say the study of reactions that can be objectively described and functionally explained, of organisms that face structural challenges arising within the environment, actions for the purpose of survival and reproduction, of the individual and the species. And secondly, these actions combine instrumental with social aspects, on the basis of the strong intersubjectivism noted above. Hans Joas’ characterisation of Mead’s basic position in epistemological questions provides a good summary of the way those three dimensions, the pragmatic, the naturalistic and the intersubjectivistic are internally connected: “Knowledge arises from the practical engagement of members of society with an environment that they must reshape, and from their communicative collaboration and exchange of opinions”.67

66 See the very first page of Mind, Self and Society, p. 1. See also, p. 49: “selves must be accounted for in terms of the social process, and in terms of communication”.

67 Joas, Mead, p. 47.
It is important to stress the fact, as the two authors do in their study of Mead, that instrumental and social actions are substantially linked. Given his intersubjectivistic perspective, which is entailed in the very definition of his theoretical programme (as social psychology), it is clear that action in Mead is taken mostly in the sense of “social action”. The method is naturalistic in that it seeks to incorporate the results of biology, ethology and evolution theory into its framework. It claims to be a social science incorporating the advances in the natural sciences. More specifically, Mead foreshadowed the rise of cognitive science with the constant recourse of his psychological arguments to neurological structures. As he writes: “we have to take into account not merely the complete or social act, but what goes on in the central nervous system as the beginning of the individual’s act and as the organisation of the act”.68

In other words, the combination of the naturalistic and the pragmatist foci coalesce in the study of the emergence and construction of the moments of action in the nervous system, leading to the idea that all forms of human dealing with the world (objective and social) have a bodily equivalent.

By contrast with Gehlen, Mead’s starting position is not solipsistic, that is to say, he does not set up the initial questioning in terms of an individual organism coping with a threatening external world from the precarious position of evolutionary under-specialisation. He is concerned with the mystery of communication and social action. The guiding question is the coordination of subjective actions such that the agents are able to cooperate, and thereby survive and thrive, by coming to an agreement on a common definition of the action situation and the meaning of the acts taken in it, whether in speech or through gestures.

We are particularly concerned with intelligence on the human level, that is with the adjustment to one another of the acts of different human individuals within the human social process; an adjustment which takes place through communication: by gestures on the lower planes of human evolution, and by significant symbols (...) on the higher planes of human evolution.69

68 Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, p. 11.
Since communication, as Mead understands it, aims at cooperation for the sake of survival, Honneth and Joas emphasise that “(his) goal is not a theory of interaction, or of instrumental action, but the linking together of both of these theories through enquiry into the function of communication and self-consciousness for cooperation”.70

The naturalistic methodology leads to a comparison, as in Gehlen, between animal and human forms of organic response to the environment. The intersubjectivist focus, however, leads more precisely to a comparative study of animal and human forms of sociality. As in Gehlen, the under-specialisation and lack of differentiation of the human organism, which is initially synonymous with extreme vulnerability, in fact is the condition of possibility for the development of the tools for survival and superiority over other living forms. By contrast with Gehlen, however, the point of the paradoxical evolutionary superiority of human organisms, is not that the individual taken in isolation becomes better equipped to cope with external challenges. Rather, the emphasis is put, much more so than in Gehlen, on the fact that this evolutionary under-determination is the ground for the capacity of human being to learn to coordinate its actions with the other members of its species in ever more efficient ways. In other words, the initial evolutionary defect of the human form gives rise to the possibility of communication, which in turn ensures the survival and indeed the victory of the species over nature and other natural beings, with the creation, beyond the development of techniques, instruments and tools, of a realm where normative rules, and not just instrumental ones, apply. This capacity to develop modes of social action thanks to rich forms of communication, in ways that are greatly more complex and sophisticated than those of animals, turns out to be the real genetic condition behind the development of techniques and instruments. In the language of the early Habermas, interaction is the condition of possibility of labour.

With animals, a primitive type of social act exists, one that Mead famously described as “conversation of gestures”: “It is that part of the social act which serves as a stimulus to other forms involved in the same social act”. To quote a famous example, in the dog fight, “the act of each dog becomes the stimulus

70 Ibid., p. 61.
to the other dog for his response. There is then a relationship between these two; and as the act is responded to by the other dog, it, in turn, undergoes change." The conversation, however, lacks one crucial dimension to be a fully communicative act. Neither of the dogs “says” to itself: “If the animal comes from this direction he is going to spring at my throat and I will turn in such a way”. In other words, whilst each dog adapts its behaviour according to changes in the other’s behaviour, the sense that there is a conversation in the strong sense emerges only for the observer. The meanings of the gestures are not shared by the agents: each reaction is a different take on the overall situation, from each of the two perspectives. Qualitatively different is the situation where one agent acts towards another on the basis of the anticipation of the other’s reaction to it. In this case, the situation has an overall meaning not only for the observer, but also for the participants. Mead calls the meaning shared in this second type of gestures “a significant symbol”. Gestures of this type are more than just stimulus-responding and stimulus-provoking gestures, because they have meaning, are significant, for both agents and not just for the external observer. Social interaction between animals is only mediated through gestures. Social interactions amongst humans, whilst a large proportion of them remain pre-symbolic, occurring through simple gestures, can also be mediated by significant symbols, and obviously, most specifically in the case of language.

Habermas provides, as always, the most concise summary of these two processes and the shift from the more primitive to the more complex:

In gesture-mediated interaction, the gesture of the first organism takes on a meaning for the second organism that responds to it. This response expresses how the latter interprets the gesture of the former. If, now, the first organism “takes the attitude of the other”, and in carrying out its gesture already anticipates the response of the second organism, and thus its interpretation, its own gesture takes on for it a meaning that is like (...) the meaning it has for the other.72

71 Mead, Mind, Self and Society, p. 43.
72 Habermas, Theory of Communicative Action II, p. 11.
The crucial argument upon which Mead’s construction relies turns around the specifically vocal aspect of symbolic gestures in the human realm. A key feature of the voice is that it is perceptible and its effects are therefore graspable simultaneously by the addressee and the addressed: “the vocal gesture becomes a significant symbol when it has the same effect on the individual making it that it has on the individual to whom it is addressed or who explicitly responds to it”.73 Because the vocal gesture affects in a similar way the addressee and the addressed, it enables the former to evoke in herself the response that her symbolic action will require from the other. This forms the basis of the crucial concept, the “capacity to take the attitude of the other”, that is, the capacity to evoke in oneself the reaction that the other will have to my own attitude: “Gestures become significant symbols when they implicitly arouse in an individual making them the same responses which they explicitly arouse, or are supposed to arouse, in other individuals”.74 By using significant symbols, ego can internalise the response provoked in alter by his gesture, he “encounters himself as the alter ego of his alter ego”.75 Mead uses this capacity of the self to become the other in itself, to apprehend itself as a “social object”, as the fundamental explanatory structure for all intersubjective, or more precisely, communicative social phenomena. First of all, symbolically mediated communication explains the possibility of action-coordination beyond the preconscious circle of instinctual action/counteraction. Since the significant gesture activates in the agent doing it the same attitude that it activates in the addressee, it creates the possibility for one meaning to be shared by the two agents facing each other, and thus the possibility of adjustment between the two. Indeed, the capacity to take the attitude of the other is the basic ground explaining the emergence of human language. But first of all, it explains the arresting puzzle of the coordination of actions amongst self-interested, complex individual beings. Mead already propounds a communicative theory of

73 Mead, Mind, Self and Society, p. 46.
74 Ibid., p. 47.
society, an explanation of action-coordination and social integration, through communication.

However, as Habermas remarks, the role-taking mechanism explains action-coordination not just by identifying the medium of coordination, but also by emphasising the normative dimension in the integration of behaviours. In this case,

ego takes over alter’s normative, not his cognitive expectations. (...) Through the fact that I perceive myself as the social object of an other, a new reflexive agency is formed through which ego makes the behavioural expectations of other into his own.76

This explains the even more arresting puzzle of the normative coordination of individual, centrifugal actions, the amazing fact that free-riders are exceptions and fully individuated egos do manage to self-restraint in order to live in accord with each other. By taking the role of the other, ego “comes back to himself”, and adapts his behaviour to the other’s, he is thus “able to exercise control over his own response”.77 Thirdly, the internalisation of normative expectations that occurs with the emergence of significant gestures creates not just the condition of possibility for efficient, that is other-directed, instrumental and moral actions, but is even the ground of symbolic and conceptual thinking, since it is the process that allows the agent to manipulate symbols that have a unicity of meaning.78 This verifies the claim that Mead is one of the first to have gained insight into the full scope of an intersubjectivistic shift. In his model, the entirety of the human subject’s faculties and capacities, not just moral ones, but also symbolic and cognitive faculties, originate in the relations with others.

In their initial encounter with Mead, however, Honneth and Joas attempted to distinguish their reading from that of Habermas. In the chapters dedicated to Mead in the Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas focuses on the linguistic dimension of Mead’s interactionism. Even though Mead argues that the emergence of specifically human minds, selves and societies depend upon the

76 Ibid.
77 Mead, Mind, Self and Society, p. 254.
78 Ibid., pp. 47, 88-90.
emergence of language (since only through language can the other be properly internalised), Habermas argues that his analyses fail to put sufficient emphasis on the linguistic dimension of interaction. _The Theory of Communicative Action_ thus argues that Mead was unable to clearly see the link between societal rationalisation and the pragmatics language use, for example, the substantial qualitative difference between symbolically mediated communication and grammatical speech. Habermas therefore does not hesitate to describe his entire project in social theory as making explicit the linguistic aspect that remains implicit in Mead and Durkheim. According to him, Mead and Durkheim, as they were still grappling with the paradigm of “consciousness”, did not see the profound revolution that occurs, with the development of grammatical language, the differentiation of perspective through the system of pronouns, and the differentiation of types of reference and validity claims, a revolution that manifests itself in the passage from ritual to normative social integration. In other words, Habermas, like Tugendhat, rephrases Mead’s theory of interaction through the prism of pragmatic linguistics. This is the basis for his critique of the confusion in Mead between ontogenesis and phylogenesis. Mead explains the progress from symbolically mediated (coordination through sharing of meaning) to normatively guided interaction (coordination through reciprocal adaptation of behaviour) via the logic of role-taking. However, as Habermas remarks, this logic is not given in all times, but is itself the result of phylogenesis. What Habermas aims at with this remark is this: only the development of the specifically human, that is linguistic, form of communication can explain the emergence of a truly normative community in which the internalisation of norms through socialisation (through taking the role of general others) is possible. In other words, Mead’s vision of “rationalisation”, of moral progress, should be supported by a stronger focus on the true agent of such progress: human language and its decentering power.79

Honneth and Joas do not put the emphasis on language as the medium of role-taking, but rather on a different aspect of Mead’s model: namely, the radical sociality underpinning all forms of human action, including actions that might appear to be purely instrumental, or strictly limited to the individual. In order to insist on the extraordinary scope of intersubjective dependency

79 Habermas, _Theory of Communicative Action_ II, p. 45.
in Mead’s theory of the human subject, they turn in particular to some of his lesser-known texts, notably the *Philosophy of the Act*, in which even the constitution of permanent objects in perception is shown to rely on the “taking the attitude of the other” mechanism. The radical intersubjectivistic theory of perception that arises from these reflections will represent an important reference point in the final critical remarks of this book, and so again it is important now to characterise it succinctly. The point of this succinct characterisation is to continue to highlight the line of argument already encountered with Feuerbach and running through to Merleau-Ponty, which Honneth therefore continuously encountered yet consistently refused to embrace.

First of all, according to Mead, and as Honneth and Joas reconstruct it, for a bundle of external qualities to be unified into the one “thing”, the perceiver must be able to change his or her perspective in relation to the same object, so that one perspective, can be connected with another, and the different perspectives united into one object. This ability is well accounted for by the capacity to “take the role of the other”. If I am able to take the perspective of the other in social actions, I can also project myself into his or her “decentered” perspective upon an object. Just as the different perspectives are unified in successful communication, the perspectives on the object are unified in successful perception. In other words, human perception is dependent on skills that are acquired as a result of social interaction.

But in fact, human perception also depends upon another mechanism that is just as constitutive, namely the cooperation between hand and eye. This feature is a classical argument of evolutionary psychology. In the human being, the hand is no longer enslaved to locomotion and becomes free to manipulate and cooperate with the eye. A sophisticated coordination of movement and perception arises as a result of this. Mead describes the constitution of a permanent object of perception through a complex array of processes of role-taking that integrates this organic specificity of the human being. First the primary experience of pressuring my own hand against my own hand can be projected into external objects. In touching an object, I “sense” a self-identical thing behind the diversity of secondary qualities because it feels like my
hand did when it countered the pressure of my other hand. In other words, I grant the object the capacity to counter-pressure my pressure, which gives it its identity. In doing that, however, I “take the role” of the object in me: I evoke in me the reaction to my touch, as the reaction of one object. But in taking the role of the object in touch, I already rely on the capacity of role-taking acquired in socialisation.

With the coordination of hand and eye, a more complex transferring and role-taking process takes place. In seeing an object as the one thing, and with the ability of hand and eye to cooperate, I evoke in me the pressure that I felt from myself when my hand touched my hand, and that I later learnt to project in objects through touch. But with the distance between the object and me, the object’s ‘counter-pressure’ is only a virtual one, a virtual counter-pressure to what is only a virtual pressure from me (since I only see the object and do not touch it). To put it in figurative speech, the pressure from me and counter-pressure opposed by the object are projected and channelled back through my eyes. The crux of the argument once again lies in this capacity to transfer to the distant object an experience made tactually upon myself. As Mead writes: “The essential thing is that the individual, in preparing to grasp the distant object, himself takes the attitude of resisting his own effort in grasping”.81 This transfer, however, once again, because it is a process of role-taking, is made possible by the capacity to put oneself in another perspective, a capacity learnt in socialisation. At all levels therefore, the perception of single permanent objects in space depends on a capacity acquired in socialisation. As Mead writes, “knowledge gained from social experience is the precondition for the synthesis of ‘things’ out of the chaos of sense perception”.82 The result is astounding and the young Honneth found it most striking: even the perception of objects, that is, a case when the individual seems isolated in facing an inert world, relies fundamentally on our dependency on the others. The axiom of intersubjectivity is here defended in the most radical fashion. No dimension of human experience, not even the one that would have seemed

82 Honneth & Joas, Social Action and Human Nature, p. 70.
a most obvious example of subject-object relation, escapes its constitution in and by the social relation.

Already in 1980 therefore, Mead represents the point around which the entire project turns: “the concept of practical intersubjectivity that Mead elaborates (...) supplies the fundamental prerequisite for an anthropology of social action”.83 This insight remains a fundamental background premise in Honneth’s thinking until the shift around 2000, when Mead’s functionalism is seen to come in the way of the normativity of recognition. In Mead, Honneth found the perfect model that would enable him to broaden the scope of intersubjectivity beyond linguistic exchange. Communication now becomes synonymous with an intersubjectivity pitched at a more fundamental level than language, reaching to the very perceptual capacities and habitual behaviour of individuals. This does not negate the central role played by language as the main medium through which humans develop their common world. But it focuses on a deeper sense of interaction, below or beyond language.

Whilst Mead is used by Honneth and Joas as the strongest defender of the intersubjectivist thesis, they also draw the attention to the fact that despite a common misrepresentation of Mead as being narrowly interactionist, focusing solely on the intersubjective relations between agents,

He does not at all accord central importance to the form of action termed interaction, but rather to human beings’ manipulation of physical objects. (…) Mead’s goal, then, is not a theory of interaction, or of instrumental action, but the linking together of both of these theories through inquiry into the function of communication and self-consciousness for cooperation.84

Mead therefore provides a model that not only helps to “flesh out” the communicative paradigm, rooting “spirit” and intersubjectivity in the organic conditions of the human being, but a model also that is the best way out of the dualism of the types of action. With Mead, one learns how to link together the instrumental and social dimensions of human rationality. We will see how, paradoxically, the movement within Honneth’s own theory of society made this precious advantage of Mead’s theory of practical intersubjectivity recede.

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83 Ibid., p. 70.
84 Ibid., pp. 61-62.
into the background, how Honneth’s reading of Mead itself became the very kind of interactionist one which was denounced in 1980.

The same point applies to what I see as Honneth’s failed encounter with Merleau-Ponty. In *Social Action and Human Nature*, the review of Merleau-Ponty is once again a missed opportunity, after the overlaps with Feuerbach were also missed. As we saw, the book’s middle part, which lists the positive results established by philosophical anthropology, is shaped like a tree. The trunk is constituted by retrievals of Gehlen and Mead, the latter correcting in an intersubjectivistic sense the path-breaking analyses of the former. Gehlen’s triangle of impulse, perception and motory reaction then provides the three special parts of the further investigation: Heller’s theory of needs help to develop the theory of the plasticity of human instincts; Plessner’s theory of expressiveness helps to underline the specificity of human behaviour, caught up between organic determinacy and lack of specification. The last branch of the tree should therefore propose an anthropological refoundation of the theory of perception, along similar lines as the other two branches: one that would emphasise organic and intersubjectivistic dimensions. This part of the programme, however, only receives a negative treatment, with the critical review of the German “Critical Psychology” research programme, a programme of research in psychology from an historical-materialist perspective devised by Klaus Holzkamp. Honneth and Joas identify in this programme the core premises which the book as whole intends to denounce as inadequate for the project of a materialist theory of society: the primacy of social labour over other forms of interaction as the basic mechanism of social reproduction; an instrumentalist prejudice that curtails the specificity of normative interaction and remains blind to the intersubjective constitution of human experience, including perception; the lack of insight into the importance of the subjective hermeneutic moment in critical claims. The positive counter-part to this critique, which would therefore have to show the direction that a more adequate anthropology of perception needs to take, is the review of Merleau-Ponty’s early work. Unfortunately, only two pages are dedicated to him, despite the

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fact that the theory of perception has been identified as one of the three main areas to develop for a full “anthropology of practical intersubjectivity”, and despite the acknowledgement that “Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception is, beyond all doubt, the philosophically boldest and most significant contribution to the theory of perception made in this century”.  

Beyond the narrow focus on the theory of perception, Merleau-Ponty’s work would have provided Honneth with exactly the kind of broadened, “embodied” account of intersubjectivity and social interaction that he was looking for in Mead to correct the abstractions in Habermas’ own theory of communicative action. All the theoretical requirements that emerge in Honneth’s early work as necessary prerequisites for a successful pursuit of a materialist critical theory of society were developed in sophisticated fashion by Merleau-Ponty himself: the “pragmatist” approach, reformulating classical problems of philosophy from the perspective of the demands and constraints of action; the emphasis on the intersubjective origin and structure of human experience; the emphasis on the pre-linguistic, bodily dimensions of intersubjectivity, both in terms of genesis and in normative issues; the sensitivity, at the same time, for the essential role of language in human interactions; the close relationship to the natural sciences and the sciences of behaviour; the critical relationship to both Hegel and Marx; the rejection of deterministic approaches to social and historical action and the emphasis on the contingency and creativity of social movements, and so on.

What is more, it is quite plausible to argue that Merleau-Ponty’s intellectual vision, despite all the shifts in his work, remained constant in its core concerns and intuitions. For example, the late writings, especially *The Visible and the Invisible*, can indeed be read as manifesting an “ontological turn”, and the retrieval of an underlying Schellingian-Bergsonian vitalistic strand, but, as the late lectures on nature demonstrate incontrovertibly, this turn in fact also reconnected with key themes and methods already to be found in *The Structure of Behaviour*. However “ontological” the last period might have been, it was still grounded in critical-conceptual reconstructions of contemporary biology and ethology. A similar point can be made regarding Merleau-Ponty’s work

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in political philosophy and the philosophy of history immediately following the Second World War, as well as the work of his “Saussurian” period, in the manuscript of *The Prose of the World*. In all these cases, the core intuition remains the interactive openness of the human being on account of its specific mode of incarnation.

Therefore when Honneth concentrates mainly on the early works and reduces Merleau-Ponty’s contribution to the theory of perception, he fails to see how much this theory of perception in fact opened the way for a much broader theory of social action, one which developed extensively his own most defining intuitions. No philosopher proposed more insightful developments regarding the problems of social and historical action from an intersubjectivist perspective, no one had given a richer and more detailed account of “historical intersubjectivity”, notably of its anthropological grounding, than Merleau-Ponty, over the course of his entire work. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself repeatedly used the language of recognition, notably in *Humanism and Terror*, to describe the ideal of free, “practical intersubjectivity”. But more than just confirming his intersubjectivist intuition, a closer and more sustained engagement with Merleau-Ponty would have made it impossible to forget the many material and natural dimensions of interaction that need to be kept at the foreground for a successful theory of communicative action.

The last great German philosophical anthropologist we have not yet discussed, who showed the young Honneth an alternative way of grounding intersubjectivity for the purpose of social theory, was Helmut Plessner. Like Mead, Plessner continues to offer fundamental arguments throughout Honneth’s *oeuvre*. It should be sufficient here to outline the core concepts that Honneth borrows from him. Paradoxically once more, Plessner was rediscovered by Honneth and Joas thanks to Habermas, yet his work was used against what was perceived as the abstract interpretation of communication in the latter. Honneth and Joas repeat with him the same criticism they hold up at the time against most other social theorists, namely that he continues to rely on an outdated monological framework. They acknowledge, however, the fundamental advance that philosophical anthropology realises with his work, a progress captured in his concept of “expressiveness”. This is Plessner’s idea that “the tension within the human being between the organismal body and the object-instrumental body, thus man’s excentric position”, is “the constitu-
tional root of all capabilities that are specific to the human being”. Critically, however, Plessner fails to embed his analysis in a intersubjective account of the self’s constitution.87 The “organismal body” translates the phenomenological *Leib* already analysed by Husserl, the body lived from the inside, whose flesh is animated by intentionality.88 The “objectual-instrumental body” corresponds to the *Körper*, the objectified body over which the subject can dispose instrumentally, for example in expressive gestures and especially in speech. Plessner’s central thought to articulate those two bodies is that of “excentricity”. The specificity of the human experience derives from the position of the human individual in the world, since the latter is at the same time bound to a *Leib*, whilst forced, because of evolutionary under-specialisation, to step out of the *Leib* in order to instrumentally fashion and use the *Körper*. The Honneth-Joas critique of Plessner is, unsurprisingly after the reading of Mead, that the subject can identify her body (*Körper*) as her own only as a result of interaction with others, whereas Plessner takes this capacity of identification too much for granted: “The ability to identify something as one’s own requires, after all, an anticipatory apprehension of the unity of one’s own *Körper*, a unity which is never perceptible as such”.89

Habermas had already confronted this conundrum. His solution, as the earlier mention of his work in genetic psychology would intimate, was couched in the terms of linguistic pragmatics. Accordingly, the subject learns to appropriate its own body by learning to differentiate between fundamental perspectives on the world via the acquisition of the pronominal system (I-perspective; You-perspective; It-perspective):

would it be more plausible to derive the structure of the mirror-I directly from the structure of linguistic communication—and the formation of the self from the acquisition of linguistic competence, in particular from the practical acquisition of an understanding of the system of personal pronouns.

87 Honneth & Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, p. 84.

88 The complex relations between the lived body and the body as objective body in the world are explored at length by Husserl in his notes on intersubjectivity.

Honneth’s and Joas’ criticism of this Habermassian solution gives an excellent concluding characterisation of the impetus that took Honneth to recognition:

Habermas is mistaken when he too hastily identifies the fundamental structure of intersubjectivity with speech. It is, ontogenetically speaking, beyond all doubt that the acquisition of the ability to identify one’s objectual-instrumental body [Körper] as properly one’s own clearly precedes the ‘practical acquisition of an understanding of the system of personal pronouns’. Similarly, it cannot be maintained that the demarcation from each other of communicative and propositional content of utterances is prerequisite for the human being’s consciousness of his bodiliness under the twofold aspect of his organismal bodiliness [Leib] and his objectual-instrumental bodiliness [Körper]. A critique of Plessner’s anthropology from the standpoint of the theory of intersubjectivity must avoid narrowing a theory directed at the basic structures of intersubjectivity down to a theory of language and must develop its critique ontogenetically, drawing perhaps upon the germinal ideas presented in Mead’s writings of his late period.90

In this passage, many of the features of the programme of research that Honneth had set himself at the beginning of his career are well summarised. Through the critique of the linguistification of social anthropology, an alternative model of “practical intersubjectivity” needs to be constructed, one that would give a naturalist version of intersubjectivity, one also that could form the central argument in a re-actualisation of historical materialism which, following Habermas, would locate the central mechanism of social integration at a higher level of abstraction than social labour, namely at the level of normative interaction. These two directions in Honneth’s early work, the re-actualising reconstruction of historical materialism, and the anthropologically informed, broadened theory of intersubjectivity, basically summarise the project underlying much of the preparatory work leading to the “ethics of recognition” as it emerged in the writings of the 1990s. The author that brought these two directions together was Hegel. We can see now the internal logic which paradoxically led from Marx to Feuerbach, all the way back to Hegel, for the purpose of a re-actualisation of historical materialism. Hegel

90 Ibid. I’ve added the German terms.
became the central reference (with Mead) because, on Honneth’s reading, he was the author who first defended an intersubjectivistic paradigm, and simultaneously, an intersubjectivistic, normative theory of society, with the most clarity.
The background is now well in place for us to study the most famous aspect of Honneth’s work to date, the one that has attracted the most attention so far, his proposal for a new social theory based around the Hegelian notion of a “struggle for recognition”. In this chapter, we focus in particular on Honneth’s turn to Hegel, on the originality of his reading of Hegel and on some of the problems associated with it.

Honneth’s Hegelianism is noted by most commentators as a matter of course. Usually, the grounding of the recognition model in Hegel’s Jena writing is mentioned in one line without any attention being paid to the content of this reading, as if those writings were sufficiently known to all, and Honneth’s reading of them was simply retrieving some well-established arguments in them. Sometimes, it is not even noticed that his model for the “struggle for recognition” makes no reference to The Phenomenology of Spirit, and Honneth is lumped together with other scholars who write on recognition from totally different perspectives.
Just as it is crucial to be aware of all the work that preceded The Struggle for Recognition in order to gain a full understanding of the scope of the model developed in it, it is crucial to avoid taking Honneth’s Hegelian references for granted, and indeed to misunderstand their theoretical content.

To begin with, we can remark that Honneth’s turn to Hegel after his first books was perhaps well prepared by the development in his thought, but still signified a significant departure from the key references he had used previous to 1992.¹ In Honneth’s first two books, as we have seen, not only did Hegel feature only as a minor figure, in fact he was rejected without mitigation. When Honneth’s project consisted mainly of a critical reappropriation of historical materialism, Hegel was synonymous with a kind of speculative logic which exerted a deleterious influence on Marx as it led him to repress the “praxis” aspects of social reproduction and social transformation through the subjectification of Capital and self-reproducing Value.² He was also seen as having exerted another fateful influence, this time indirectly, because of Lukács’s reinterpretation of Marxism through the lens of his philosophy of history. This reinterpretation, which led to a metaphysical conception of the subject of historical praxis, played a crucial role in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s thinking. In The Critique of Power, therefore, Hegel was seen as the main influence behind the idealistic vision that misled the first generation of Critical Theorists in their approach to history.³ One of Honneth’s most firmly held initial convictions has always been that Critical Theory could only be seriously pursued if it rid itself of all vestiges of such idealist philosophy of praxis. As a result, in his early work, Hegel was for him only an ambiguous figure: he was the one who had provided Marx with the crucial insight into the historical and social

² See chapter 1.
determinacy of reason, but also the main reason behind the idealist fallacies pursued by Marx himself and first generation Critical Theory.

We saw at the end of chapter 3 that the idea of going back to the early Hegel to renew the theory of social action was first sketched in Habermas’ influential writings of 1968 in which the non-material logic of social integration was sought in the model of a “dialectic of moral life” which was articulated in Jena through the struggle for recognition. Habermas’ suggestion in Chapter III of *Knowledge and Human Interests*, that Hegel’s theories of crime, punishment and a “dialectic of moral life” offered the most appropriate philosophical model for thinking the specifically normative dialectic of social rationalisation, would have struck Honneth, at this stage in his thinking, for two important reasons. First, this suggestion emphasises like no other competing model at the time a normative core of social integration, beyond the mere instrumental constraints of material reproduction; and second it can be given a Marxist twist if, as Habermas suggested, crime is interpreted as the injustice prevalent in the unfair appropriation of surplus production. All that was needed then, from Honneth’s point of view, was to generalise the notion of social injustice beyond the problem of the “appropriation of surplus production”. As we saw in chapter 1, Honneth believed that Marx’s project could be meaningfully retained if social interaction was extended beyond social labour. The consequences of this correction would be that injustice would have to be detached from the injustice resulting strictly from the unfair division of labour, and social conflict would have to be interpreted more broadly than solely as the conflict between the owners’ of the production apparatus and the active labour force. With this correction, Habermas’ suggestion would read as follows: with Hegel’s early “dialectic of moral life”, with his idea of a constitutive “struggle for recognition”, he had given the solution to the problem of establishing a normative theory of society that would retain the essential idea of class struggle, without repeating the conceptual confusions and empirical outdatedness that are attached to models which continue to think class struggle through the lens of social labour. Hegel would then paradoxically supply a crucial insight to pursue the historical materialist theory of society understood as a “critical theory of society”.

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4 See especially “Domination and Moral Struggle”.
A second powerful element in Hegel’s Jena texts would have been particularly appealing to Honneth, this time in relation to his conviction that the re-foundation of a materialist social theory would have to occur via the retrieval of arguments drawn from philosophical anthropology. This second element, encapsulated in the thesis of a “primary sociality”, became the central element in Honneth’s mature social-philosophical thinking and has remained so until today. We will now characterise this element through a succinct summary of the main arguments that Honneth extracted from his reading of the Jena Hegel. This Hegelian theme, which comes to form the core of Honneth’s mature thinking, the idea of an essential sociality of the human subject, relates to the minimal conditions of identity and the fundamental prerequisites for autonomous action. It is a concept that operates both at explanatory and normative levels, as the fundamental precondition of communicative action.

**The Jena Hegel: the primacy of intersubjectivity**

Let us begin with a brief characterisation of the texts that Honneth focuses on in the first part of *The Struggle for Recognition*, texts from Hegel’s “Jena period”. Hegel arrived in Jena in 1801 at the age of thirty, and the six years that he spent there, culminating in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, were the most decisive years in his philosophical development. The rich chronology of published texts, lecture manuscripts and system fragments from the Jena period basically document the fast transformation of the young “popular theologian” into the systematic philosopher that he came to be known as on the basis of his Berlin writings. This transformation corresponds to the gradual development of a basic intuition, borrowed from Hölderlin and Schelling, that underneath and prior to the distinction between subject and object a primordial point of unity, Being (Hölderlin) or the Absolute (Schelling) exists that explains the possibility of their relation. This is the basic insight which Hegel attempts to articulate throughout the different system drafts of that period until he is finally able to reformulate it in his own language as a theory of Spirit. Spirit, defined famously as the subject that is also substance, is precisely that unity.

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of subject and object, but a dynamic unity that encompasses both ontological levels of reality and levels of self-reflective consciousness, and can thus be shown to progress through stages of ever greater complexity and self-knowledge, from the alienation of Spirit in natural laws and natural entities, until the full assumption of Spirit in human society and particularly the state, and in Spirit’s specific modes of self-representation, art, religion and philosophy.

During his time in Jena, Hegel took a very active part in the Critical Journal of Philosophy, the journal founded by his friend Schelling, where he published a number of long studies on the directions of post-Kantian philosophy. He published his first book, The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s Systems of Philosophy. He wrote the dissertation that opened the doors of academic teaching to him. He also took extensive notes for his lectures, a material that he refined every year, on such diverse subjects as the philosophy of nature, logic, ethics and political philosophy.

The texts of that period that Honneth focuses on are Hegel’s first attempts at systematically exploring the conceptual logic and the complex interrelations of what he would later call “subjective” and “objective spirit”, in other words the conceptual delineation of the different types of human faculties and interactions, and their realisation in social life, in social, economic, legal and political institutions. The first text was an article published in 1802 in the Critical Journal of Philosophy. This text conducts a critique of ancient and modern conceptions of natural law from the perspective of a holistic definition of social life. Honneth only refers briefly to this text at the beginning of Chapter 1 of Struggle for Recognition, because the notion of Sittlichkeit, which Honneth intends to retrieve for contemporary social theory is presented more substantively in another text of the same year, The System of Ethical Life. In this text, the idea of “absolute ethical life” is developed at length. The term indicates an ideal point in social life where individuals have developed their individual theoretical and practical capacities to the full, and where their reciprocal interactions have also been fully developed. This ultimate stage of development thus represents the full incarnation in the “real” world, of what “Spirit” is about in itself. Already then, “recognition” features prominently as the name of the social interaction that makes subjects fully engage with each other. “Absolute ethical life” and “recognition” encapsulate perfectly the key intuition that Honneth from now on consistently borrows from Hegel, the
vision of social life as a common substance in which all share and participate, by contrast with nominalist visions that reduce social life to an aggregate of separated individuals. The systems drafts from 1803 and 1805 are crucial in introducing the scheme of “struggles for recognition” and grant this scheme a logical importance in the study of social integration which it was never to have again in Hegel’s later writings, including in the Phenomenology of Spirit, despite the all-too famous “master-slave” dialectic. These three texts, the System of Ethical Life, and the 1803 and 1805 “philosophies of spirit”, are the three main texts to which the first part of Honneth’s 1992 book is dedicated.

The Struggle for Recognition, however, does not begin immediately with the analysis of these texts, but with considerations on Machiavelli and Hobbes. Why such a start in a book of “social philosophy”? The book gives a series of justifications for this surprising start. It is not just that Aristotle and Hobbes stand for the two types of abstract, question-begging positions which Hegel had criticised in his 1802 essay on natural law. More precisely, since Hegel’s model of a struggle for recognition becomes the central piece in Honneth’s proposal for a new social-theoretical model, it is important to contrast it against previous models of social integration, and most especially against the model in which conflict already featured centrally as a mechanism of social integration. A series of scholarly works by Ludwig Siep, Karl-Heinz Ilting and Manfred Riedel published at about the time of the publication of Honneth’s book, which clarified Hegel’s position within classical political philosophy, emphasised the importance of Hobbes in that respect. The reference to Hobbes therefore has a “local” sense, as it were, within the context of German scholarship. This is a constant in Honneth’s way of proceeding, his consistent regard for the state of the scholarship in the context of his own research. More importantly though, Parsons’ critique of utilitarian theories of action, that is, on his interpretation, of atomistic and ends-oriented visions of human

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6 See in particular the studies by these authors gathered in Manfred Riedel’s Materialien zu Hegels Rechtsphilosophie 2, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp, 1975. See also Ilting’s “Hegel’s Auseinandersetzung mit der Aristotelischen Politik” Philosophisches Jahrbuch, 71, 1963, pp. 38-58. We might also recall that one of Habermas’ earliest texts was a long study of Hobbes in “The Classical Doctrine of Politics in relation to Social Philosophy”, reprinted in Theory and Practice, pp. 41-80.
action, famously started with a historical reconstruction and what he termed “Hobbes’ problem of order”. Moreover, in Hobbes’ “utilitarian” (Parsons) social theory, it is not just “struggle” that features centrally, but also already the idea that “recognition”, in the form of reputation and honour, are the main sources of power of human beings over other human beings. In other words, by launching his work with a review of Macchiavelli’s and Hobbes’ revolutionary approaches to social integration, Honneth was in fact situating his reconstruction of Hegel within the context of 20th century social theory, as a fundamental alternative to rational-choice and utilitarian models. Finally, beyond Honneth’s specific interest in devising a new “theory of the social”, the reference to Hobbes showed right at the beginning that he was also pursuing another aim: namely, to make an original contribution in political philosophy on the basis of the new social-philosophical model. Honneth intended to use his Hegelian model of social conflict to open a third way in the discussions around the theory of justice, between neo-Aristotelian and individualistic positions (utilitarian or not). This political-theoretical interest, which is linked to but separate from the social-theoretical one, is well evidenced by the collection that Honneth edited at the same time as The Struggle for Recognition, in which he presented the communitarianism-liberalism debate to German audiences, with translations of the main contributions of that debate, and an important introduction by Honneth himself.8

A reading failing to keep these multiple contexts of relevance in view will misconstrue or at least greatly underestimate the pages that immediately follow the reference to Machiavelli and Hobbes. Honneth’s reconstructive reading, or “re-actualisation” as he says following Habermas, of the Jena texts is puzzling

in many respects. It is sometimes very far from the text but it never leaves the
genre of textual analysis. It clearly aims at uncovering key concepts for the
purpose of contemporary social theory, yet only refers to Hegel scholarship.
In order to fully appreciate the importance of the first part of *The Struggle for
Recognition*, it is necessary to keep in mind the diverse theoretical targets that
Honneth aimed to achieve with his 1992 study. After substantial work of criti-
cal analysis of past and contemporary social theory had enabled Honneth *ex negativo* to sketch a delineation of what a valid social theory should look like,
his dissertation was to allow him to finally make his own, original contribu-
tion to the fields of social theory and social philosophy, one that would have
to bear the comparison with the previous great models, and most especially
with *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

With this in mind, we see how seriously we have to take Honneth’s claim
that, with the study of the Jena Hegel, we encounter an alternative “concept
of the social”. The focus is not on Hegel, but on the ontology of the social,
even before any concept of subjective identity and agency. Honneth’s basic
intuition is that, with the young Hegel (following Habermas’ decisive indica-
tions), we discover a truly original vision of the social, that is to say an original
way of accounting for the logic through which individual actions are coordi-
nated in such a way that they don’t interfere with each other, but, on the con-
trary, can complement each other. We discover, therefore, nothing other than
an alternative to the concepts of “social labour” and “communicative action”,
indeed an alternative to all other ontologies of the social, be they critical, func-
tionalist, systemic or genealogical. This is clearly a startling claim to make, if
only from the point of view of the history of social theory. But this is exactly
the claim underlying the project presented in the book.

The young Hegel is situated by Honneth between Aristotle and Hobbes. As
was suggested a moment ago, this is not a historical point, but a systematic
one, relating to the issue of the fundamental philosophical model at the core
of a conception of the social. From Hobbes, Honneth claims, Hegel borrows
the notion of inter-individual struggle as constitutive of social life. This dis-
tinguishes him from Aristotle, inasmuch as the concept of “human nature”

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at the heart of Aristotle’s theory of social bonds is “dynamised” through the idea that sociality is the product of antagonistic relationships. From Aristotle, however, Hegel borrows the fundamental intersubjectivistic premise: that “the people (Volk) comes earlier, according to Nature, than the singular”, the rejection of the atomistic premise according to which “the being of the individual is the first and the highest”. The result is a construct which becomes the cornerstone of Honneth’s thinking, a premise that remains unquestioned and influences all his subsequent work, until and including his most recent writings, despite and beyond later shifts: the thesis of the primacy of intersubjectivity.

This thesis is most clearly explicated right at the beginning of the Hegel reconstruction, in the pages dealing with the 1802 treatise on natural law. The scope and import of these pages far exceed the exegesis of Hegel. They articulate Honneth’s fundamental intuition in the most explicit terms:

Every philosophical theory of society must proceed not from the acts of isolated subjects but rather from the framework of ethical bonds, within which subjects always already move. Thus, contrary to atomistic theories of society, one is to assume, as a kind of natural basis for human socialisation, a situation in which elementary forms of intersubjective coexistence are always present.

The most decisive intuition at the heart of Honneth’s thinking is encapsulated in the two little words: “always already”. The fundamental idea is this Aristotelian-Hegelian one, that the intersubjective element is the condition of possibility, both genetically and conceptually, for all forms of interactions not just between social agents, but even for actions by social agents taken individually. There is no longer any mystery to social action and social integration as soon as one realises that individuals always already have been connected to each other through the sharing of fundamental trans-subjective elements. The social bond always already unites those who later come to be

10 Ibid., p. 15.
12 Ibid., p. 12.
individualised, and who often forget the communal ground underpinning their individualisation. Individuation is therefore never simply a pure separation. Precisely, pathological social phenomena consist mainly in the ignorance of the underlying mutual interdependence of social subjects. As can be seen, the notion of recognition understood in this deep-ontological sense, as the fabric of social life in which subjects always already come to be, entails as a structural feature the notion of sharedness, or mutuality. “Intersubjective coexistence” means that, like it or not, members of society are always related prior to any further specified social relation, even the most nefarious, that is, even those that on the surface entail a denial of such “sharedness”.

One could see a circle in this: the social, which is the object to be understood, looks to be already assumed as pre-existing. That there is no such circle, however, comes from the fact that sociality is thought of as a basic structure which can be developed and extended later in a number of ways. This is the idea of an “embryonic” sociality, upon which further, more complex processes of social integration can develop. These “initial forms of social community” are thus the condition of possibility, both conceptually and genetically, for all further differentiated stages of social life. Most importantly though intersubjective interdependency has conceptual, not just genetic, primacy. This is a simple but absolutely determinant thought in Honneth’s work, the very same that inspires Hegel in his 1802 critique of classical and empirical natural law theories: the capacity to relate socially to other human beings no longer has to be imported from outside, as the result of a rational calculus or as the consequence of practical reason. Sociality is a basic structure of the human being, so that the integration of social actions, however difficult it might be, simply relies on a capacity of human beings which is in fact constitutive of them.

The primacy of intersubjective interdependency has genetic significance, both in an onto- and phylogenetic sense. Once more, we note that the genetic perspective is a structural trait of the intersubjectistic premise about social life. The genetic study of sociality enables the theorist to provide two important justifications to the theory of a priori intersubjectivity: it can first validate the claim itself, by showing the dependency of the formation of subjectivity upon intersubjective relations; and it also shows the detail of the developments of subsequent forms of sociality on the basis of that primary sociality.
To emphasise sufficiently the idea of *a priori* intersubjectivity, another passage is worth quoting. Again, this is a passage where Honneth discusses a specific text by Hegel, but one that also articulates his core intuition:

For Hegel, there is no need to appeal to external hypotheses (about societal organisation), for the simple reason that he has already presupposed the existence of intersubjective obligations as a quasi-natural precondition of every process of human socialisation.\(^{14}\)

To put as starkly as possible the amazing aspect of Honneth’s theoretical gesture we could state that it is in Hegel’s concept of *Sitte* that Honneth proposed to find the solution to the problems of critical social theory as it emerged from his previous studies. *Sittlichkeit* thus is seen by him as providing the answer to the conundrum of a valid reactualisation of historical materialism, as the next step to be done in order to salvage the project of a critical theory of society, as nothing other than the alternative to 20th century functionalist theories!

**Recognition as central concept for social theory**

The idea of a pre-existing social interaction, however, is clearly not equivalent at first to that of recognition. One of Hegel’s most genial intuitions in Jena was to transform Hölderlin’s ontological solution to the Kantian dualisms (the problem defining German idealism), that is, a unity in Being underneath the divide of subject and object, into a primary intersubjectivity at the root of subjectivity, by using Fichte’s logic of recognition as the latter presented it in his *Foundation of Natural Law*.\(^{15}\)

To recall, with the circle of recognition, Fichte had shown that the self-consciousness which his earlier systematic writings had identified as absolute


\(^{15}\) Honneth dedicates a detailed study to Fichte’s argument in a long article reprinted in *Unsichtbarkeit*: “Die Transzendentale Notwendigkeit von Intersubjektivität”. For the shift from the Fichtean to the properly Hegelian model of recognition, see the excellent presentation by F. Fischbach, *Fichte et Hegel: la Reconnaissance*, Paris, PUF, 1999.
transcendental origin, that is, as the origin of all theoretical and practical experience, was incapable of founding itself, and that it in fact relied on a circular, reciprocal conditioning by another consciousness as free as itself. His ground-breaking idea was that a consciousness comes to know itself as radically free only when it is “called to” its own freedom by another consciousness, which in turn must also itself be called to freedom, since the argument for one consciousness is clearly true also for the other. Fichte had discovered the necessity of reciprocal recognition as the condition of autonomy. The common, objective realm of the law, in which freedoms reciprocally limit their own sphere of action in view of others, thus became the very condition of self-consciousness since it was the necessary moment allowing a consciousness free in itself, to realise that freedom for itself. But as the reference to the law indicates, Fichte had interpreted his own argument negatively, through the idea of self-limitation. He read the reciprocity of recognition in the following way: by simultaneously limiting their actions inasmuch as the latter risk encroaching upon the “sphere” of the other subjects, the acting subjects indicate to each other both that they are free and that they recognise the other as free. As a result, they let each other’s free “personal spaces” arise, so to speak. But clearly, the “appeal” to the other to be free is therefore paradoxical, or negative, since it is the result of self-restraint and self-limitation. Hegel’s ground-breaking theoretical gesture consists in giving a positive interpretation of the circle of recognition. He borrows the formal scheme of circular, mutual recognition as condition of self-consciousness, but applies the logic of mutuality inherent in it directly and affirmatively, to a variety of intersubjective relations. In Hegel’s model, recognition is not the indirect positive outcome of negative, reciprocal self-limitations, but the direct reciprocal affirmation of consciousnesses by each other, which transforms them into true (free) self-consciousnesses.

Honneth shows how this transformation of Fichte’s initial solution enabled Hegel to transform the Aristotelian notion of a teleologically developing ethical life into the more dynamic model of a series of “intersubjective process(es) of mutual recognition”:

He now sees a society’s ethical relations as representing forms of practical intersubjectivity in which the movement of recognition guarantees the
complementary agreement, and thus the necessary mutuality of opposed subjects.\textsuperscript{16}

Primary sociality then indicates a dynamic scheme of inter-subjective interactions of mutually related social agents. The logic is more dynamic for two reasons: first because the intersubjectivity that is thus delineated is “practical”, the outcome of subjects’ attitudes towards each other (which will lead to struggles and reconciliations); and also because, once established, it continues to evolve into other forms of interaction. But the fundamental intuition remains: such reciprocal interactions are possible only on the basis of a primary ability to relate, which is situated at the core of the subjects in relation.

On Honneth’s reading, another crucial transformation has occurred with Hegel’s adaptation of the Fichtean scheme. We could characterise this transformation as the shift from social holism to intersubjectivism properly speaking. It is absolutely essential to emphasise this second transformation in order to fully grasp the distinctiveness of Honneth’s social-theoretical thinking. It is also, in my opinion, where an important part of the ambiguities and difficulties in Honneth’s social-theoretical model originate. What is meant by this distinction between social holism and intersubjectivism? In the holistic model, which Hegel very early on seemed to be drawn to, the integration of subjects is explained by showing how they always already belong to a common element. In the intersubjectivistic model, this common element is no longer characterised as an element that is external to the subjects belonging to it (for example, as a substance separate from its accidents, or as an element separate from the bodies present in it), but simply as consisting of the reciprocal interactions between the subjects. To use a metaphor we will refer to extensively in the rest of the book, Honneth seems to interpret the adoption of the recognition scheme as a “flattening” of social reality. For Hegel, according to Honneth, and this is the view he now himself takes on social life, the latter consists in nothing but the inter-relations between subjects recognising each other. Social integration is now “horizontal”, as it were.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. 16.
This does not mean that Hegel renounces the idea of “primary sociality”. All that was said above remains true: the key idea remains that subjects are “always already” related to each other through normatively relevant relations. But the nature of such relations is now more precisely characterised as made up of relations between subjects. We will see, however, that such interpretation is equally debatable for Hegel and for Mead, and that it raises a number of questions in social theory.

With this double transformation of the intersubjectivistic model through the adoption of recognition, some crucial subsequent theses complement the model of social integration.

First, the development of that primary sociality is geared towards the concurrent development of individuality in such a way that, at the end of the process of recognition, a unity of universality and particularity is made possible, that is to say, in more contemporary terms, the full development of both individual and community, with the related idea that the two developments reciprocally require each other. This, as we know, is precisely what Hegel articulated through the notion of *Sittlichkeit*: an integration of the two dimensions of universality and particularity.\(^{17}\) Such a consequence of the primacy of intersubjective interrelation is equally foundational in Honneth’s thought: “Public life (has) to be regarded not as the result of the mutual restriction of private spheres of liberty, but rather the other way around, namely, as the opportunity for the fulfilment of every single individual’s freedom”.\(^{18}\)

In other words, one already finds in Hegel the thesis that individuation occurs through socialisation. The three spheres of recognition obviously denote three separate, fundamental ways in which subjects can fulfil their autonomy and identity. It is crucial to note that the two processes of socialisation and individuation go hand in hand: the struggle for recognition is both community- and subjectivity-building. Or to put it differently, the different concepts of community studied by Hegel in his Jena texts of social and political philosophy have corresponding models of subjectivity; and conversely, the study of the establishment of identity features in the subjects struggling for recognition is


at the same time the study of different (ascending) meanings of *Sittlichkeit*, of social integration, from the family to “absolute ethical life”.

The second central implication of the “dynamisation” of Hegel’s initial social holism is the discovery of the conflictual aspect of social life. The final mutuality of “opposed subjects”, this unity of fully individuated subjectivities within fully developed sociality that characterises *Sittlichkeit*, is attained paradoxically as a result of a series of ruptures of sociality that have to be worked through. The “movement of recognition” is an essentially negative one, even though, as said, the actual content of recognition itself is affirmative. In giving a formal summary of the logic of “negativity” in *The System of Ethical Life*, Honneth more broadly summarises his own view of the dynamic logic of that process:

The structure of any of these relationships of mutual recognition is always the same for Hegel: to the degree that a subject knows itself to be recognised by another subject with regard to certain of its abilities and qualities, and is thereby reconciled with the other, a subject always also comes to know its own distinctive identity and thereby comes to be opposed again to the other as something particular. (...) Since, within the framework of an ethically established relationship of mutual recognition, subjects are always learning something more about their particular identity, and since, in each case, it is a new dimension of their selves that they see confirmed thereby, they must once again leave, by means of conflict, the stage of ethical life they have reached, in order to achieve the recognition of a more demanding form of their individuality. In this sense, the movement of recognition that forms the basis of an ethical relationship between subjects consists in a process of alternating stages of both reconciliation and conflict. It is not hard to see that Hegel thereby infuses the Aristotelian concept of an ethical form of life with a moral potential that no longer arises out of the fundamental nature of human beings but rather out of a particular kind of relationship between them. Thus, the coordinates of his political philosophy shift from a teleological concept of nature to a concept of the social, in which an internal tension is contained constitutively.19

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“Internal tension” is contained “constitutively” in this concept of the social precisely because of the logic of individuation through socialisation: each stage of sociality entails the possibility for the recognition of some features of individuals’ identity, but by securing their sense of self-worth, it opens new dimensions of self which themselves require further recognition. The negativity at the heart of the social is a direct consequence of its intersubjective structure, but, unlike Hobbes where the social nature of human beings also leads inevitably to conflict, this time the conflict has a positively normative source: the desire of human subjects to be recognised in all their features; as well as a positive normative outcome: more individuation and more socialisation.

A third decisive implication of the adoption of the recognition paradigm is the three-fold character of those basic types of interaction that characterise social life from now on. Despite the great variations in the accounts of this “negativity” or tension between the different Jena fragments, and despite the methodological changes which result in the introduction of new domains of subjective formation (language, work), the succession in the types of struggles is always the same. This is the most well-known aspect of Honneth’s rereading of Hegel: the three spheres of recognition.

The first recognition is the one operating in the family. In the family, the individual is recognised in his or her natural individuality. In the System of Ethical Life already:

> In the relationship between ‘parents and children’, which represents ‘the universal reciprocal action and formative education of human beings’, subjects recognise each other reciprocally as living, emotionally needy beings. Here, the component of individual personality recognised by others is ‘practical feeling’, that is, the dependence of individuals on vitally essential care and goods.20

In 1805, Hegel describes this first type of recognition as “intuition (Ahnung) of ethical life”. This means, as in 1802, that “the volitional subject is able to experience itself for the first time as a needy, desiring subject only after having had the experience of being loved”.21

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20 Ibid., p. 18.
21 Ibid., p. 36.
Honneth remarks that the logical concept of “intuition” has acquired a pejorative connotation in 1805 (with Hegel’s increasing critical distance towards Schelling); it designates an imperfect, underdeveloped moment, anticipating rather than fully grasping, the reality in question. This negative connotation, however, has a positive side, and this positive side has enormous implications for social theory. Basically, it points to the idea that the intimate relationships of the first sphere are indeed only an imperfect model of full social interaction (because they are limited to the “needy”, emotional side of the subject and therefore cannot be unduly universalised), yet represent nonetheless the genetic precondition of social life. This argument confirms the decisive importance of “primary sociality”. It is in the primordial opening of the self on the other, the constitution of a self through affirmative attitudes towards it, that all further social relations are grounded.

To speak of ‘love’ as an ‘element’ of ethical life can only mean that, for every subject, the experience of being loved constitutes a necessary precondition for participation in the public life of a community. (...) Without the feeling of being loved, it would be impossible for the idea of an ethical community ever to acquire what one might call inner-psychic representation.22

We will see in the last chapter that Honneth’s recent changes to his theory of recognition in fact entail nothing other than an even greater and decided emphasis on precisely this argument.

The “negativity” that disrupts this first unity stems from the child’s education, which leads him or her into civil society where he or she now counts as a universal subject endowed with abstract rights.23 Recognition now is more universal, but also more abstract.

But that new recognition itself shows its own limitations since the individual is recognised only abstractly, not in his or her individual worth. A new “struggle” towards the recognition of the individual’s identity in its social

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22 Ibid., p. 39.
Specificity therefore becomes inevitable. Honneth interprets the phrase “the individual intuits itself in everyone as itself”, which characterises “absolute ethical life” in the System of Ethical Life, as a description of a substantive “solidarity”, in which the abstract universal recognition through the law is enriched by the sense, almost affective in nature, of a commonality of ethical life between the subjects, of a concern for the other individuals in their individuality. According to Honneth, this becomes inaccessible for Hegel in 1805, because, following Habermas’ ground-breaking reading in “Labour and Interaction”, Hegel has replaced his Aristotelian, “holistic” background assumptions with a “subject-theoretical” one, and now understands Spirit in terms of a supra-individual self-consciousness gradually coming to know and externalise itself. As a result of this shift to the paradigm of consciousness, the State is now the higher realm of Sittlichkeit, in which subjects and community can be integrated. The State is seen as the incarnation in concrete reality of Spirit expressing itself in external sub-systems but ultimately retaining the control over them, as a kind of giant subjectivity. In the place of democratic and egalitarian, “horizontal” interactions, ethical life is now organised “vertically”, its members reduced to mere moments, or “accidents”, of that ultimate subject. The key insight behind the third sphere of recognition, “solidarity”, which Honneth had identified in the 1802 text, has therefore been the casualty of Hegel’s strong institutionalism, itself the product of the shift to a consciousness-model of Spirit.

Despite this negative development in the speculative logic underpinning Hegel’s social theory, however, Honneth argues that the different moments that constitute the process of struggle remain the same between the different Jena texts. At first, a party suffers from some moral injury by feeling one of their features not recognised, for example in the other’s legal act of appropriation. The violent reaction that ensues is a provocation destined to attract the

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24 This is Honneth’s highly stylised reconstruction of the System of Ethical Life. The same order is said to be at play, despite the changes in Hegel’s methodology and his introduction of other spheres of subjectivation (language, work), in the other Jena texts. Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, pp. 49, 64-65.
26 Ibid., p. 59.
other’s attention and re-establish the unacknowledged normative value. But an escalation occurs, as the aggressed party in turn takes the initial attack to be directed not so much at its property, but rather at its own self.\textsuperscript{27} Once the struggle is resolved, two fundamental realisations on the part of the subjects in conflict have been brought about. On the one hand, the conflict allows the subjects to realise ever greater aspects of their own individuality since it secures public acknowledgement of them. On the other hand, “the route by which subjects gain greater autonomy is also supposed to be the path to greater knowledge of their mutual dependence”\textsuperscript{28}

It is therefore the struggle for recognition itself, on Honneth’s reading, which ensures the integration of the two mechanisms of individuation and community-building.\textsuperscript{29} Struggle for recognition explains the mechanism that makes the two processes reciprocally in need of each other: individuation occurs through socialisation, and the community is strengthened as ethical life through the increase in individual autonomy. Conversely, the antagonistic, conflictual logic driving these processes is itself a necessary consequence of the reciprocal link between individuation and socialisation, between individual autonomy and being part of a community, since individuals engage in conflict, not to secure their self-interest, but to assert the recognition they require from the others.

As a result, in his reading of Hegel, Honneth argues that it is the struggle for recognition that is the dynamic force driving the normative development of society. Already then, he sees the struggle for recognition as history-moving force, the force of moral progress:

> the conflict that breaks out between subjects represents, from the outset, something ethical, insofar as it is directed towards the intersubjective recognition of dimensions of human individuality. (…) This struggle leads, as a moral medium, from an underdeveloped state of ethical life to a more

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 41 and 79.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{29} See this other passage: “The social conflicts that shattered natural ethical life prepare subjects to mutually recognise one another as persons who are dependent on each other and yet also completely individuated”, \textit{ibid.}, p. 24.
mature level of ethical relations. With this reinterpretation of the Hobbesian model, Hegel introduces a virtually epoch-making new version of the concept of social struggle, according to which the practical conflict between subjects can be understood as a dynamic moment occurring within collective social life that is ethical in nature. This newly created concept of the social thereby includes, from the start, not only a field of moral tensions, but also the social medium by which they are settled through conflict.\textsuperscript{30}

We find here the basic formal model of the struggle for recognition as it is later fleshed out and actualised historically, sociologically and psychologically in later parts of the book and in subsequent writings: the primary relationality of human subjects is the condition of possibility of social integration, but the process of integration itself, rather than being the teleological unfolding of a natural potential, is in fact a negative process whereby subjects move through stages of reconciliation and conflict.

We need to pause for a moment and show briefly how such a formal model could indeed be taken as the solution to the most pressing problems of social theory that Honneth had identified earlier. The Hegel-inspired model of social integration, which Honneth implicitly presents at the beginning of his 1992 book, is fully normative since the “movement of recognition” revolves around the normative aspects of human identities, instead of being limited to the coordination of rational-instrumental interests or the avoidance of injury and death. This normative model of integration retains the fundamental Marxist feature of social theory which Honneth had identified as crucial: the notion of the social as a field of tensions where social conflict is fully normative, to wit, engages the recognition of the agents’ sense of value as a condition of their identity, and not just the utilitarian concern over the distribution of surplus production. The fundamental lesson of philosophical anthropology is also confirmed in this model. That is, with the vision of the social as a form of “practical intersubjectivity”, as constituted by the interactions of practically related subjects, and with the concurrent model of the subject as a being structurally dependent upon the others for its formation – the idea of “individualisation through socialisation”. Since all aspects of subjectivity are at stake in the

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., pp. 17-18 (Translation slightly altered, JPD).
“movement of recognition”, as the struggle for recognition erupts over denials of recognition that potentially touch all dimensions of subjectivity and can be expressed in any number of ways (through verbal, but also direct physical, or other, more symbolic or hidden forms of aggression), the over-linguistification of Habermas’ intersubjectivistic theory of society is thereby avoided. Finally, the idea of a primary relationality as the basis for later, more specific forms of social relations provides the basis for a monistic social theory. All coordination of action in the end relies upon the fundamental sociality of the human subject as its most basic condition of its possibility. All these features of the neo-Hegelian approach to social theory explain Honneth’s puzzling statement that “In his Jena writings, the young Hegel (well ahead of the spirit of the age) pursued a programme that sounds almost materialist”.31

The potential for universality in the socialised agent, which Marx described as the species-character of the working subject, which Habermas had reframed in terms of linguistic pragmatics as the ability to constantly decentre one’s perspective, becomes the mutual recognition that is always already present between members of a shared social life and can always be expanded. The lynchpin is that of a “framework of ethical bonds, within which subjects always already move”. With it, the great correction to Habermas’ suggestion is fully apparent, and with it also the great difficulty that Honneth from now on will have to face. Whereas Habermas had suggested a return to the notion of the “struggle for recognition” to account for only one of the two mechanisms of social integration, because he approached the problem from the perspective of a critique of social labour, Honneth reduces all interaction to “horizontal” intersubjectivity. The intersubjectivistic premise, the idea of horizontal “coexistence”, is indeed a powerful one, one, however, which collapses other “vertical” interactions, notably the relations of socialised subjects to the thick reality of the social, in particular the complex world of institutions.

31 Ibid., pp. 67-68.
German Hegel scholarship at the time of *The Struggle for Recognition*

Every philosophical generation (in the European tradition) is largely defined by its relationship to Hegel.32 Today, the philosophical situation is shaped to a large extent by the new approaches to Hegel that major Anglophone readings of Hegel have proposed in the last twenty years, through the interpretations of Pippin, Pinkard, Redding and others. The core intuition underpinning these “non-metaphysical” readings of Hegel consists in the reconfiguration of his notions of reason and spirit in intersubjective and normative terms. Hegelian reason is reinterpreted as the system of basic norms of knowledge and action that a social world has come to accept as such, that is to say as authoritative and thus normative grounds underpinning all practices of knowing and acting, on the basis of processes of reflexive self-clarification. Hegelian reason, on that account, is seen as having an essentially Kantian character, insisting as it does on the normative and self-legislating aspects of rationality. From such a perspective, the main correction that is brought by Hegel to the basic Kantian image of self-determining rationality and freedom, is the element of sociality, as self-legislation is for Hegel the product of a whole social world reflecting on what counts for it as basic ground for belief and action. This emphasis on “the sociality of reason”, however, does not lead to a sociological or cultural-relativist dissolution of the rational content of normative and cognitive claims. Rather, what counts in the definition of the norms is not just the self-reflection of the social world on its concrete existing practices, but rather the normative moment of justification, in terms of “reason-giving”, by that social world, of its own norms. The norms are indeed historically produced, but they must be able to be justified in practices of normative self-clarification: not every institution and practice can pass the test of “giving and accepting reasons”. Historical progress and the passage to modernity, thus, no longer correspond to the alleged assumption of a cosmic force gradually expressing itself into earthly reality, as in classical “metaphysical” readings of Hegel. Historical progress rather is synonymous with the increase in transparency, reflexivity and intersubjective universality within and thanks to those

processes of normative self-legislation and self-clarification. Basically, force, tradition and authority give way more and more to intersubjective testability and contestability. In that reading, Spirit is the overall social and cultural achievement of this process of normative and intersubjective self-reflection. The focus on the normative and the intersubjective makes this new vision of Hegelian Sittlichkeit appear very close to Habermas’ and Honneth’s own visions of modern societies. Indeed, the mechanism of “reason-giving”, seen as the core mechanism explaining normative integration, seems very close to Habermas’ emphasis on the redeemability of validity claims as the core normative process in action coordination. Equally, one of the key dimensions in these non-metaphysical readings of Hegel is the necessity of “mutual recognition” to account for social reproduction: if reason for Hegel is nothing substantive or metaphysical, but rather the self-legislating practice of a whole polity reflectively attempting to justify its own norms, then mutual recognition is a necessary prerequisite.

These non-metaphysical, intersubjectivistic, “Kantian” readings of Hegel, however, had not gained their current position of force when Honneth was writing The Struggle for Recognition. In the following pages, I briefly summarise what seem to have been the main influences that guided his reading of Hegel. The retrieval of these references does not serve a historical purpose. Given the hegemony of the “American” readings of Hegel today, it is important to recall earlier Hegel scholarship as the latter sheds a different light on Hegel’s thinking. These alternative exegetical premises and conclusions were determinant in Honneth’s approach to Hegel. They indicated to him a series of exegetical premises, which he never abandoned, even in his recent writings, after he became engaged in substantive dialogues with American interpreters. Secondly, Honneth’s overall position in social philosophy can be characterised in interesting ways by identifying the originality of his own reading within the hermeneutic context in which it emerged. This grants us an interesting perspective on his model of recognition. Basically, this genealogical retrieval will help us highlight the extent to which his interactionist reading of Hegel led him to a repression of the institutional and the material moments in the theory of society.

Honneth’s reconstruction of the Jena Hegel took place within the context of a general reappraisal, or rediscovery of the Jena Hegel in Germany in the
1970s. This resurgence of interest in the Jena Hegel was sparked by the philological efforts at the Hegel-Archive in Bochum, which was responsible for the publication, finally, of a definitive and complete edition of Hegel’s works. The resurgence of interest in the Jena Hegel culminated in the special issue of the Hegel-Studien, “Hegel in Jena” in 1980. This renewed interest led to a major revision of established interpretations regarding many of the aspects of the system, notably the logic and the philosophy of nature. It also led to the development of new perspectives in the study of Hegel’s social and political thought and most especially, a rediscovery of the Jena system drafts. The impact of this rediscovery can be compared with the discovery of the 1844 manuscripts in Marx scholarship. Honneth’s return to Hegel is heavily indebted to these philological efforts, and most obviously, to the new editions of the texts of the Jena period. It is worth noting, however, that the Bochum editors generally favoured a “classical” approach in their interpretation of Hegel and in particular gave “metaphysical” interpretations of the Absolute and of Spirit, and did not hesitate to highlight serious ambiguities in Hegel’s political stance.

Outside of Bochum, Michael Theunissen’s masterful interpretations of Hegel’s work were decisive in defining the context of Hegelian reception during Honneth’s formative years. In Sein und Schein, Theunissen had famously uncovered communicative freedom as the central critical and constitutive concept in Hegel’s Science of Logic, well before the “social” readings of today. Following on from his critical reconstructions of the theories of intersubjectivity in the phenomenological tradition, Theunissen had uncovered in Hegel, and especially in his speculative logic, a most promising model of radical “dialogicalism”: “Hegel’s normative ideal of the absolute relationship implies that of an absolute equality of rank (Gleichrangigkeit) of the members of the relationship”. For Theunissen, Hegel’s definition of the concept is synonymous with freedom in a communicative sense: “Communicative freedom means that the one experiences the other not as limit but as condition of possibility of its

own self-realisation”.\textsuperscript{35} This is a striking anticipation of the key idea at the heart of Honneth’s own interpretation of the Jena Hegel. Similarly, Theunissen insisted on the paradigmatic significance of love as the first exemplar of such a radical “dialogical” interaction.\textsuperscript{36}

But Theunissen’s reading of the Logic as a theory of radical freedom was premised upon two important premises which played a decisive, negative influence on Honneth’s interpretation of the Jena Hegel. First, Theunissen’s ground-breaking reading of the Science of Logic interpreted it, not as is done today, as a semantic or pragmatic theory of meaning, commensurable in its aims and arguments with the analytical literature on conceptual semantics, but as an ontology, if a critical one. Theunissen sees the first two books of the Science of Logic as Hegel’s critique of traditional metaphysics, and the third book on “subjectivity” as its “christological” correction, leading to a fully-fledged alternative ontological proposal. For Theunissen, Hegel’s “christological” definition of Spirit remains unashamedly metaphysical, despite the critical programme deployed in the first two books, as it is based on an understanding of Absolute Spirit as an ultimate level of reality that underpins all other ontological realms. This conviction that Hegel’s thought was structured through and through, inclusive of the logic, by “christological traits”, basically by a theology of Love,\textsuperscript{37} had been established most impressively in Theunissen’s master study of the Absolute Spirit passage of the Encyclopædia.\textsuperscript{38} For Theunissen, who agreed on this point with other German scholars, the most proper way to understand the System is therefore to read it from the perspective of the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: it is in Hegel’s interpretation of the Revelation and in particular in the vision of the presence of Christ amongst the community that his fundamental intuition is founded, an intuition that inspires all his critical deconstructions of pre-Kantian metaphysics as well as Kantian and other transcendental arguments.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 46.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 42.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 42.
\textsuperscript{38} M. Theunissen, Hegel’s Lehre vom Absoluten Geist als Theologisch-Politischer Traktat, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1970.
With an interpretation like this one, Theunissen represented for Honneth a strong source of inspiration in a positive as much as in negative sense. Beyond the great emphasis on Hegel’s notion of intersubjectivity and the paradigmatic importance of love, what Honneth might have learnt from Theunissen’s reading was crucial in its negative consequences. Once a metaphysical reading of the Logic is accepted as the most convincing one, the only available option for Honneth, given his own point of departure, is that, if one is interested in retaining Hegel’s decisive insights regarding the theory of social life, one somehow needs to retrieve these insights without reference to the logical-ontological framework. One therefore has to try to “reactualise” Hegel: this means reformulating the core arguments regarding social philosophy in a language that is purified of all metaphysical ambitions. Given, however, that such a reading can only be performed in defiance of Hegel’s own, explicit intentions, such a methodology works on exegetical assumptions that are the exact opposite of today’s mainstream readings. Thus, from the beginning, Honneth’s reading of Hegel defined a third way between traditional metaphysical and current non-metaphysical readings: it was “non-metaphysical” in the normative claims extracted from Hegel, but “metaphysical” in the basic assumptions about Hegel’s explicit intentions. To put it differently, it was metaphysical on the exegetical, and non-metaphysical on the systemic level.

Honneth found substantial support for such an alternative approach in two other major studies of Hegel. Charles Taylor’s 1975 book on Hegel, which has become the example par excellence of a pernicious “metaphysical” interpretation in today’s consensus, seemed to put in the clearest way yet, the metaphysical interpretation of Spirit as the unfolding “self-realisation” of a “cosmic” principle through the natural and human worlds. In Taylor, however, Honneth found confirmation not just of this exegetical premise, but also a decisive indication, well before current “sociality” readings, that Hegel’s notion of *Sittlichkeit* is a major argument for a non-individualistic and non-utilitarian version of social theory. Taylor was the one who at the time demonstrated most conspicuously how Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit* could be construed as a

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public life that allows individuals to become fully individuated and to realise themselves.\textsuperscript{40}

The second key reference, in fact the most direct and obvious one, was of course Habermas. Honneth simply takes for granted the critique of Hegel’s mature definition of Spirit as “monological”, as reason reflecting upon itself and in that unfolding realising itself as Spirit.\textsuperscript{41} Strangely enough, in \textit{Struggle for Recognition}, Honneth mentions Habermas’ decisive study, “Labour and Interaction”, only in relation to a minor point and in a footnote.\textsuperscript{42} However, as we saw in chapter 3, this early article had already suggested the use of the “struggle for recognition” scheme to account for the normative aspect of social integration beyond its material dimensions. According to Habermas, in Jena Hegel had for a moment defended a definition of spirit that did not draw on the “mentalistic” or “monological” framework of subjective self-reflection. Instead, spirit was seen at the time as the unity of three distinct yet interconnected dialectics: language, labour and interaction. Habermas explicitly drew the attention to the “Durkheimian” aspect of Hegel’s reflections then, that is, the way in which they pointed already to the idea that individualisation is not obstructed or misshaped, but made possible by, socialisation.\textsuperscript{43} This “Durkheimian” aspect is obviously also a defining feature of Honneth’s own model. The contrast established between a truly “intersubjective” Hegel in Jena and a “subjectivistic” mature Hegel was clearly an enormously important influence on Honneth. To this day, this remains the stumbling block between Habermasian and neo-Hegelian, American solutions to the problem of social reproduction, despite the many parallels that otherwise exist between them. Habermas has always maintained his ultimate rejection of Hegel, despite the great inspiration he has always found in his \textit{Sittlichkeit}-critique of Kantian individualism, because of his unrepentant “metaphysical” interpretation of

\textsuperscript{40} See Honneth, \textit{The Struggle for Recognition}, p. 88.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., pp. 59-62. See also Habermas, \textit{The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}, pp. 43-48.

\textsuperscript{42} Honneth, \textit{The Struggle for Recognition}, p. 33.

\textsuperscript{43} Habermas, “Labour and Interaction”, pp. 146-147.
the mature Hegel.\textsuperscript{44} This line has also been that of Honneth: from Struggle for Recognition until today, Honneth has never questioned the reading of the mature Hegel as “metaphysical”.

Another important criticism raised by Theunissen was equally shared by Habermas, and also played a great influence on the young Honneth: this was the rejection of the Philosophy of Right for its “repression of intersubjectivity”, the repression by Hegel of his own vision of communicative freedom in favour of a substantialist vision of the State.\textsuperscript{45} The deep distrust of the post-war German scholars towards the ambiguities of Hegel’s mature social and political philosophy had a positive counterpart in the rediscovery of the Jena texts as untapped but promising resources for the resolution of moral, social and political problems. Ground-breaking publications by Ludwig Siep had also drawn the attention to the richness of the concept of recognition, or rather of the struggle for recognition, as “principle of practical philosophy”.\textsuperscript{46} In the

\textsuperscript{44} See again in a more recent text, Habermas, “From Kant to Hegel and Back Again”, pp. 200-201.

\textsuperscript{45} M. Theunissen, “The Repressed Intersubjectivity in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, in eds. D. Cornell et al., Hegel and Legal Theory, 1991 (German first edition 1982). Theunissen’s condemnation of the Hegelian State corresponds to his critique of the subjective logic. In both cases, Theunissen sees Hegel as being unfaithful to his own normative ideal of an absolute relationship of equals (God/creature, State/subject, etc.). In both cases, Hegel is said to have remained too dependent upon figures of authority, in the theology and politics of his time. Theunissen’s strong misgivings about the political implications of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right is largely shared by Habermas. Habermas himself developed a version of this criticism of Hegel in a number of earlier writings, “Hegel’s Critique of the French Revolution” and “On Hegel’s Political Writings”, both reprinted in Theory and Practice. It is highly significant that Habermas continues to refer to Theunissen’s influential critique in his most recent writings on Hegel, for example in “From Kant to Hegel and back again”, p. 176. For Habermas, there is clearly no reason to change his mind over this. For a recent account of these questions, see W. Mesch, “Sittlichkeit und Anerkennung in Hegels Rechtsphilosophie: Kritische Überlegungen zu Theunissen und Honneth”, Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie, 53(3), 2005, pp. 349-364.

\textsuperscript{46} L. Siep, Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie: Untersuchungen zu Hegels Jenaer Philosophie des Geistes, Freiburg, Karl Alber Verlag, 1979.
long 1974 study of the *Hegel-Studien*, Siep had followed in great detail the different steps in Hegel’s implicit critique of the Hobbesian contract, and was able to demonstrate that the struggle for recognition had been devised as an alternative mechanism to account for social integration. In the book that followed, Siep emphasised the double genetic aspect of social struggle in Hegel: its importance for socialisation theory and also for the philosophy of history.47 He also demonstrated the constitutive aspects of crime and violence in Hegel, and the fact that the *Philosophy of Right* no longer used the notion of recognition, but had replaced it with the notion of objective spirit.

Finally, another decisive reference in Honneth’s initial “reactualisation” of Hegel was the dissertation published by one of his life-long intellectual partners, Andreas Wildt’s *Autonomie und Anerkennung*,48 which he uses as his main guide line in rereading the Jena texts. Wildt’s central exegetical hypothesis is that in his Jena fragments, Hegel was attempting to answer the question of full self-determination, from the perspective of Fichte’s programme. Fichte’s question, which Wildt argues also became Hegel’s, centred on the following conundrum: how can the subject have the full self-reflexive knowledge of itself whilst at the same time depending upon otherness and others for its self-realisation? How can the subject be both determined and, as freedom, “universal” indetermination? Wildt showed brilliantly how, within the framework of post-Kantian reflections on the conditions of self-relation and self-identity, Hegel’s critique of Kant’s overly legalistic and formalistic moral philosophy led him to his fundamental insight into *Sittlichkeit*. Kant had already recognised that the essence of morality consists in wanting the good of the other for its own sake. This, for Wildt, is the crux of Kant’s moral universalism, beyond overly prescriptive and in the end misleading characterisations in terms of imperative. According to Wildt, Hegel expanded this thought and made it the basis of his theory of society. Kant’s moral universalism is transformed by Fichte into the notion of recognition: practical reason demands the circular


acknowledgement by each subject of the freedom of the other subject. This in turn means that there can be autonomy for an individual subject only to the extent that there exists a reciprocity of rights and duties. This reciprocity is the social-theoretical translation of the fact that to act freely is to encompass the well-being of the others into my deliberations. This leads to a conception of the subject whereby the latter can achieve a positive self-relation, the condition for full self-realisation, only to the extent that it recognises others as included in its actions.\(^49\) And this delivers a normative concept of society as fundamentally cooperative and participatory, where the good of each is the concern of each.\(^50\) But this social-theoretical translation of Kant’s fundamental moral insight does not itself commit the mistake of reducing its scope by restricting the interpretation of the core insight to an overly legalistic and formalistic language. In Hegel’s synthesis of Kant and Fichte, reciprocal interaction is located at such a deep level that it makes the institutions of Sittlichkeit dependent upon the non-institutional morality of primary concern for the others, and not the other way around.\(^51\) Love becomes the primary inter-relation, not only genetically but even conceptually, as the paradigmatic example of a core interaction in which the well-being of the other is part and parcel of individual agency.\(^52\) All these exegetical suggestions find their way into Honneth’s own reading of Hegel, and indeed directly influence his own model of social theory.

To sum up this rapid overview of the context of German Hegel scholarship at the time when Struggle for Recognition was written, the following exegetical premises were shared by the most important scholars of the time: a reading of the Logic as ontology underpinned by a metaphysical premise; a strong distrust (or even distaste in Theunissen’s case) for the politics of the mature Hegel, leading to a rejection of the potentialities offered by the Philosophy of Right;\(^53\)

\(^{49}\) Wildt, Autonomie und Anerkennung, pp. 173-179.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., pp. 109-110.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. 103

\(^{52}\) See the analysis of the 1805 lectures, Autonomie und Anerkennung, p. 66.

an emphasis on the communicative dimension in the pre-Berlin Hegel and the adjoining thesis of a “repression” of intersubjectivism in favour of a return to the substantialism of the State and a philosophy of Spirit along monological lines; and finally, a rediscovery of the “Hobbesianism” of the young Hegel and the normative importance of struggle in his social philosophy.

All of these features are reappropriated by Honneth in his own reading of the Jena Hegel. The context explains in particular the amazing fact not sufficiently noted by current commentators, that Honneth borrows the Hegelian scheme of a “struggle for recognition”, not as it is developed in the Phenomenology of Spirit, but in its Jena exposition. Following Habermas, Honneth reads the Phenomenology as organised by a subjectivistic framework that makes a strong intersubjectivistic reappropriation of Hegel too difficult and cumbersome. He sees in it precisely the type of grand theory of consciousness, premised on a reflexive definition of Spirit, which prevented Hegel from fully developing the intersubjectivistic insights outlined especially in the System of Ethical Life. Later in this chapter, we will see that Honneth partially corrected his initial disinterest in the late Hegel, with his new approach to the Philosophy of Right in the 2000 Spinoza lectures, published as Suffering from Indeterminacy. With this later publication, the Habermasian exegetical prohibition on the political Hegel is lifted.

An interactionist reading of Hegel

Despite the influence played by the context, however, Honneth’s reading of the Jena texts is highly original. To begin with, unlike any other commentator

54 Very recently Honneth has devoted a more careful and sympathetic study of that most famous Hegel passage on recognition, see “From Desire to Recognition: Hegel’s Account of Human Sociality”, in eds Dean Moyar, Michael Quante, Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide, Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. 76-90. But this study is only concerned, as the title indicates, with the passage from “Desire” to “Recognition”. Rather than struggle, and in conformity with the shift in his understanding of recognition (see last chapter), Honneth now emphasises in (Hegelian) recognition the moment of acknowledgement of the other’s moral status, as the source of normativity and indeed of symbolic life itself.
he placed the accent on the earlier rather than the more developed, later texts from that period. In fact, he sees the purest expression of Hegel’s intersubjectivistic stance in the theory of society to have been located in a very narrow period, around 1802, when Hegel was still caught up in his early Aristotelianism, but had already made sufficient room for the specificity of modern sociality, in particular for the irreducible place to be accorded to the economy. Despite the fact that the “struggle for recognition” is thematically much more developed in the 1803 and 1805 fragments, Honneth sees Hegel’s genuine “intersubjectivistic” phase to have been expounded in the System of Ethical Life. Habermas, Siep and Wildt, by contrast, had all emphasised the “progress” that is made within a few years from 1802 to 1805. Indeed, Habermas sees the “interactionist” theory of Spirit to be most explicitly expounded in the 1803 and 1805 lectures on Spirit.

The originality of Honneth’s reading of the Jena Hegel is without a doubt the product of the methodological presuppositions and the motives that inspire his interventions in social and political theory. As we recalled at the outset, the methodological premise is that of a conceptual “reconstruction” and re-actualisation that makes no attempt at a system-immanent exegesis. The varying conceptual frameworks used by Hegel during the course of his rapid transformation in Jena are of no interest to Honneth, whether Schellingian, Hölderlinian, Fichtean or otherwise. The only thing that matters to Honneth is the conceptual content of Hegel’s different propositions, and the use of such content for the purpose of contemporary social theory. Such a position, it has to be said, is mostly anathema in Hegel scholarship, even though the American interpreters have let in some fresh air in this respect. For most Hegel scholars, it is simply unHegelian to try to make sense of Hegel without reference to the logical frameworks used by Hegel himself. But Honneth is totally uninterested in these internal debates. His approach to Hegel is unapologetically external: Hegel is a central reference for him as a thinker who propounded for the first time a crucially new way to think of social reproduction. Honneth sees Hegel as performing the same kind of intellectual discovery for social theory as he earlier saw Feuerbach do so in regards to the anthropology of the subject.

This unabashed external approach to Hegel is the reason behind the strength and the weakness of Honneth’s readings of Hegel. Let us start with what
could appear to be exegetical weaknesses in light of the letter of Hegel’s texts. For a reader attentive to the context and the immanent logic of Hegel’s difficult 1802 study on ethical life, for example, it might be surprising to find in it a theory of “individuation”. The strong Spinozist features of the text seem on the contrary to lead to a form of dissolution of the individual in the universal community. Whilst one might agree that Hegel’s point in this text is to “make the experience of the dependency of the particular identity of each individual on the community the object of a universal knowledge”\(^5\), it might be a bit of a stretch to equate this with a normative theory aiming to highlight the conditions under which each individual might have been fully individualised. This is in fact the first great contentious point in Honneth’s readings of Hegel. For Hegel, the realisation, both cognitive and practical, of each individual’s dependency on the community is not at first synonymous with inter-subjectivity taken strictly: the crux is on the singular-universal relationship, not on the singular-singular interactions. The question may be asked whether the 1802 Hegel had a theory of inter-subjectivity at all, and not rather of the social substance of the individual. In fact, the 1802 text can easily be read, following Siep, as interested in the “vertical” relations of individuals to the whole, and not in “horizontal” reciprocal relations between individuals. This could be supported by the fact that it is very difficult to find passages in the System of Ethical Life in which subjective rights are truly enshrined, either at the legal or political levels. Similarly, some passages seem to make it counter-intuitive at first to approach this text as a theory of “self-determination as self-realisation”. On the contrary, the last part of the text seems to perform the very dissolution of individuality into the community’s substance which the mature Hegel has been accused of performing, notably in the great interpretations of the 1970s, for example in Theunissen.\(^6\)

\(^5\) Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 23.

\(^6\) Numerous passages from those last Jena lectures could be quoted to support this. A particularly striking one is this one: “the universal will is the will as that of all and each. It is of unsurmountable strength against the individual and is his necessity and the power oppressing him (niederdrückende Macht). And the strength that each one has in his being-recognised is that of a people” (p. 153). Even if the strong description of the “power” of the universal over the individual is given a dialectical twist and the
These remarks can be linked to the changing status of struggle in the Jena texts. As Honneth but also Siep before him emphasise, in 1802 crime negates three forms of “natural ethicality”. It negates them post ante, and has the function of sublating the natural into the ethical, anchoring the three spheres of ethicality in a community that is thereby described for the first time as being a viable form of communal life. In 1803 and in 1805, on the other hand, struggle comes first, as the condition of ethicality, and as an explicit replacement of the social contract, and therefore as condition of higher ethical spheres like economic exchange, contract and other juridical institutions. The meanings of family and economic sphere change in important ways as a result of this. The family in 1802 is still the old oikos whereas in 1803 and 1805 its model has become the bourgeois family in which the individual indeed develops the first features of an identity within a restricted realm of “totality”. The economic sphere in 1803 is no longer an ambiguous moment to be tamed by the “absolute government”, but itself a form of sublation of the individual into the universality of the “people”. As a result, the genetic significance of the negative moment seems to change significantly between 1802 and 1803/1805. Whereas in the later fragments struggle can indeed be interpreted both in phylo- and ontogenetic terms, it seems difficult to read the “crime” chapter of the System of Ethical Life other than in strict phylogenetic terms. Honneth might argue that the two dimensions are in fact interlinked, that the evolution of the species brings with it different types of personality. Indeed he himself interprets the violent opposition described in 1802 as “social conflicts”. But a few lines later, he returns to the interpretation in interpersonal or interactionist terms, whereby the “other” in the definition of spirit as “finding-oneself-in-the-other” is interpreted most concretely as a real personal other.

The common element in all these remarks is that Honneth seems to favour an “interactionist” reading which interprets recognition as interpersonal relation and sees in this the ultimate substance of ethical life and social reproduction. Such an interpretation is at loggerheads with all the interpretations that reciprocal necessity of the individual performing of the universal power is emphasised, it is beyond doubt that in the case of fully developed ethical life, recognition is no longer horizontal but a relation between particular and universal.

57 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 23.
focus on the substantial, supra-individual reality of the objective spirit and ethical life. For example, Honneth’s reading would fall under the very criticisms formulated by Siep’s influential interpretations. In an explicit rebuke of Habermas, Siep consistently argues that the most accurate characterisation of the structure of recognition in general, as it gradually emerges through the first drafts and finally receives its full picture in the *Phenomenology*, is as a dialectic of inter-subjective relations and of relations between individual and community. This, according to Siep, can also be found in the *Philosophy of Right* with the conversion of the recognition theme into the notion of objective spirit: “in Hegel’s theory of recognition, what matters is not recognition and self-discovery of the individual in its irreplaceable individuality, but his/her recognition as member of a people”.\(^5\) Siep constantly emphasises the fact that two separate recognitions are at play in Hegel: “recognition is the knowledge of the reciprocal conditioning of the consciousness of one by the other, and of the individual consciousness by the universal one, and vice-versa”, so that: “each finds the universal consciousness only in the other, but both come to the unity and recognition only through the universal consciousness objectified in the *Sitten*, rules, institutions, the spirit of the people.”\(^6\)

This analysis is indeed dedicated to recognition in the *Phenomenology*, but it also highlights the key elements of the structure of recognition that Siep tirelessly highlights against the theory of communicative freedom: that inter-subjective interaction in Hegel relies on the reciprocal interaction between the individual and the universal, that inter-subjective interaction understood in a strict sense as interaction amongst individual persons is mediated by the reciprocal relation between the socialised subjects and the *institutions* of the social. Siep in fact demonstrates that the singularity/universality dialectic is structural of Hegel’s social and political thought well before 1807. He reads it in fact as the common underlying structure of all Jena texts and beyond, rather than the structure of interpersonal or inter-subjective relation. Already in the material before Jena he locates Hegel’s argument that the “finding oneself in

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the other” motto is mediated by the argument of an individual life lifted up to the universality of the community, and more precisely, mediated through the objectification of the community, the institutions. Such notions as “totality”, “infinity” which were central for Hegel around 1800, articulate the universal essence of the individual, to which the individual must elevate itself in order to live an ethical life. The “identity” between subjects, the famous Hegelian definition of freedom as “finding oneself in another”, the expression that encapsulates Honneth’s fundamental intuition about the primacy of intersubjectivity is, according to Siep, only possible for Hegel on the basis of this sharing of a common life form, which is supra-subjective. Otherwise, without the trans-subjectivity of ethical life, the struggle for recognition ends up in an impasse: in the death of one or two of the opposed subjects.

By contrast, Honneth’s reading appears to reduce the institutional moment to an aspect of the more fundamental interdependency of all subjects. Recognition in this reading means universal mutual dependency, a horizontal dependency of each on each, not the dependency of each on all, of the individual on the social taken as a “fact”, as in Durkheim. Honneth acknowledges the difference between his and Siep’s readings as a difference in the use of the “struggle for recognition” for contemporary social and political theory. He opposes Siep’s attempt at devising a “normative theory of the institutions” (and equally Wildt’s attempt at “an enlarged conception of morality”), and presents his own rereading of Hegel as being conducted from the “perspective of a normatively loaded theory of society”. This is the crux of Honneth’s thinking in social theory in general, and not just of his reading of Hegel. This is also where the strength of his intervention lies, where what could appear as a weakness for readers of Hegel immersed in his texts, or what might appear as a truncated social theory to other social theorists, is also what constitutes the originality and power of Honneth’s position. The decisive issue is the link between recognition and institution. We will see this issue re-emerge in the later chapters as one of the main problems uncovered by critical commentators of Honneth’s own model of social theory, notably in regards to the economic question. The notion of “primary sociality”, which encapsulates Honneth’s own vision, as well as what he finds most fruitful in Hegel, must

be taken at the deepest “ontological” level, as a thesis about what constitutes the actual ontological stuff that social life is made of. Honneth obviously does not ignore the separate reality of institutions, of “objective spirit”, over and against subjectivities. His main idea is that ultimately, all social institutions can be described as specific forms of interaction, as practices whose specificity, for example of being legal, economic or political forms of action, are best characterised in terms of the attitudes that human subjects take towards other human subjects in them. What makes the specificity of the intimate sphere are the emotional, embodied aspects of the interaction, the fact that it is the idiosyncratic individuality of the subjects involved that inter-act in this sphere. The legal-economic sphere, with the institutions that regulate it, is a sphere where the self-centred interests of all subjects are interconnected in negative fashion, through reciprocal self-restraint. The sphere of solidarity is one where the affective bond linking the intimate partners in the first sphere has been extended to the entire community, as it were. Honneth’s vision here is Durkheimian in a sense, in highlighting the “solidarity” that is characteristic of “organically” organised modern societies. It is the vision of the social agent whose actions are guided by the consideration of all other agents in society. The reduction of the social to the intersubjective, however, sounds of course rather non-Durkheimian if one looks at it no longer from the aspect of “organic” social interaction, but from the aspect of the social considered as an objective “fact”, external to the individual particularisations of it.

The normative element has not been mentioned yet. This is because it is important to emphasise the fact that Honneth’s reading of Hegel and his theory of modern society generally are not limited to the scope of a theory of justice. The latter is of course an important aspect of his project. But one does not take the full measure of Honneth’s project if one reduces it to the normative taken in a narrow sense. Indeed, Honneth’s bold move is to attempt to correct modern theories of justice precisely through an alternative ontology of the social.61 Honneth’s overall project consists, as the end of Struggle for Recognition explicitly states, in finding an alternative to contemporary liberalism. This entails specific moves in political philosophy, but more fundamentally, it entails a

61 We look at the detail of the implications of the recognition model in contemporary political philosophy in chapter 11.
renewed critique of Kantian premises, from the perspective of Hegel. The originality of this project lies precisely in the new reading of Hegel, and the insistence on intersubjective interaction as the stuff of social life, which then opens the door for an intersubjectivistic correction of Kantian political models. Seen in this light, the neo-Hegelian model of social theory that is implicit in *Struggle for Recognition*, can, surprisingly perhaps but arguably, continue to be read as being inspired by Marxist concerns. Of course, the core themes that constitute Marxist dogma have been abandoned, but the spirit remains Marxist in both a critical and a positive sense. Critically, the main thrust is a rejection of liberal positions, both at the philosophical and at the political levels. Positively, the alternative solution attempts to achieve through new theoretical means Marx’s vision of a realisation of individual freedom in and through a liberated society, where the quality of individual freedom depends on the quality of social relations.

Besides the question of the separate reality (ontological or simply normative) of institutions, however, another dimension of social interaction, one generally not noted by the commentators of Honneth, seems to suffer from the interactionist stance adopted by him in the social ontology underpinning his model of justice, namely the importance of material mediations in relations of recognition. A passage from Merleau-Ponty can help to establish the link:

> The originality of Marx is not to reduce philosophical and human problems to economic problems, but to find in the latter the exact equivalent and the visible figure of the former. (...) The nexus between the two sets of problems is in the Hegelian idea that each system of property and production implies a system of relations between human beings so that our relations to others can be read in our relations with nature, and our relations with nature can be read in our relations with others.62

Merleau-Ponty’s reflection is particularly helpful in showing that the most obvious way of bringing together Marx and Hegel for a normative theory of society through the problematic of recognition, is by linking recognition to the social organisation of production and distribution, in such a way, however,

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that neither is reducible to the other. Indeed, this is the most obvious way to interpret recognition in the Jena texts, since the struggles for recognition in these texts typically irrupt when property is injured and the parties struggle over the moral injury that this represents. In “Labour and Interaction”, Habermas had clearly established that “recognition and labour” could be said to be interrelated once “labour” was interpreted as the social organisation of production and distribution. Yet such an interpretation means precisely that the dialectic of their interrelations does not entail the reduction of either.

More broadly, Merleau-Ponty’s argument that there is not just a single type of fundamental interaction at the heart of social life, but two—not just intersubjective interaction but also “our relations with nature”—points to a much broader range of phenomena beyond recognition through labour and property. This is an aspect that was well discussed in the German literature on the Jena Hegel of the 1970s and 1980s. For Siep, the theoretical and indeed critical superiority of the recognition paradigm stems notably from the fact that recognition applies not just for “the structure of only one specific type of action”, “but that it attempts to indicate the structure of a learning process of individual and communal consciousness which determines the diverse forms of interaction each time in a specific way”. These forms of interaction include: language, work, contract, exchange, and not just interpersonal relation. Siep’s fundamental argument is that for Hegel, the dialectical interpersonal interaction of negating otherness whilst seeing oneself in it, can only function properly if the self “is recognised not as individual, irreplaceable self-consciousness, but rather as individuality in the speculative sense,

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63 See in particular the 1805 lectures, pp. 124-132. See the amazing, most likely intended, repetition of this thought by Merleau-Ponty: “The reason why there is a specifically human history is that the human being is a being who invests itself outside, who needs other human beings and nature in order to realize itself, who particularizes itself by taking possession of certain goods, and thereby enters into conflict with other human beings”, Humanisme et Terreur, p. 122.

64 Habermas, “Labour and Interaction”, pp. 159-160.

65 Siep, Anerkennung als Prinzip der praktischen Philosophie, p. 22.
as manifestation of the universal in a particular function”. The “particular functions” which Siep sees Hegel as addressing are the different types of intersubjective interactions through which the individual relates to the whole: language, work, love, contract, exchange, life in a socio-economic group, life in the State, and so on.

Wildt also emphasised the other types of interaction beside the inter-subjective one. In reading the 1805 drafts in particular, Wildt argues against Habermas that one should not interpret the “middle terms”, the Mitten, in which the individual “I” is also already embedded and thus relating to, interacting with, external others (persons or objects), as mediations between subject and object, but rather as ways of synthetically uniting infinity and finitude, indeterminacy and determinacy, as ways of equating “empirical consciousness” and “absolute consciousness”, in other words of bringing the individual consciousness to its own truth as “totality”. Totality here primarily has the meaning of “intensive totality”, where the one moment (the individual consciousness) is also the whole. According to Wildt’s Fichtean reading, the whole process of mediation, and struggle for recognition, is about the establishment of the necessary conditions of full autonomous self-identity, not about intersubjectivity, even though, undeniably, intersubjectivity is an important mediation towards self-determination in Hegel’s eyes. If indeed interaction in Hegel is about the establishment of practical identity, then, as Wildt argues in reading the 1805 fragment: “the full self-experience of the practical subject in his/her ego-identity is possible only through objective mediations”. In other words, the human subject is not just dependent upon others qua individual others, and on the institutions of the social, however they are conceived, but also on instrumental, material mediations, involving resisting matter, tools, material and symbolic objects, and so on. In his use of Wildt’s ground-breaking exegesis, Honneth does make full use of that aspect of his reading which emphasises the fact that the objective mediations are to be read not just negatively as

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66 Siep, *Praktische Philosophie im Deutschen Idealismus*, p. 178. Siep explicitly rejects Habermas’ “dialogical” reading of Hegel’s recognition as “pre-stabilised harmony of the true needs of all”.


symptoms of a theory of spirit now relinquishing the early intersubjectivism for the misguided paradigm of consciousness, but also invite an expansion of the forms of interaction through which human beings practically define their own identity and indeed fulfil their attempt at self-realisation.

From that perspective, it is significant, for example, that Honneth retains only the deficient aspects of Hegel’s analysis, in 1805, of the type of individual realisation at stake in the work experience and in the utilisation of tools. Honneth is interested in these first moments only inasmuch as they represent negative transitions towards the first real inter-subjective experience: sexuality. But another reading would have been possible, one that would highlight the extent to which, however deficient these forms of interaction might be by comparison with intersubjective interaction, they are nonetheless presented by Hegel as necessary moments, and indeed as moments that carry their own specific normative weight. These other dimensions of interaction had been well underlined by Habermas in his rediscovery of the Jena Hegel. However critical they are of each other, the work of Siep, Wildt and Habermas offered Honneth an invitation to conceptualise the interaction at the basis of individual self-realisation in broader terms than just I-Thou intersubjectivity. This lack of interest in the practical dimension of self-experience, or self-constitution, or indeed in the aspect of “communal work” that Wildt highlights in illuminating fashion, is all the more surprising given the materialist and action-theoretical programme that the return to Hegel was supposed to achieve. A more thorough engagement with the passages in the Jena texts that deal with the interconnection of intersubjective and material interactions would have been quite an obvious direction to take if one takes an article like “Work and Instrumental Action” as a starting point, given the interest, in this earlier text, in the specific forms of recognition that are at stake in the work experience. A different, but no less interesting, image of Hegel as a “materialist” would have emerged. It is as though the focus on the intersubjectivist turn had overshadowed the obvious parts in the Jena Hegel that were directly announcing a revised version of historical materialism. The concern with the correction of Marx’s unilateral focus on production seems to have led to the obfuscation of directly material forms of practice.

69 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, pp. 35-36.
Suffering from Indeterminacy

In his 2000 Spinoza lectures, Honneth did not renounce upon the key tenets of his general approach to Hegel and maintained them as basic premises in his rereading of the Philosophy of Right. The political condemnation of the work still holds. The theory of the State is still rejected as "authoritarian liberalism", as a fateful parting away from the great analysis of intersubjective freedom in modernity that the earlier chapters are seen as offering. The political indictment of the book, the indictment of the political moment is stark: "in Hegel’s theory of the State, no trace can be found of the idea of a political public sphere, of the idea of a democratic will-formation". This idea of a political public sphere, however, would have been the natural realisation in the political of the intersubjectivistic insight, which Honneth now reads as being developed by Hegel in the earlier chapters of the book. Honneth continues to denounce Hegel’s "strong institutionalism".

Nor does Honneth change his standpoint regarding the most important exegetical decision that has to be made in any reading of Hegel, and especially in any reading of the Philosophy of Right: the interpretation of the Logic and the use of logical categories in spheres outside the Logic. Honneth uses the same exegetical rules as in Struggle for Recognition: the systematic scaffolding holding together the Philosophy of Right can only be incorporated in the exegesis at "the risk of downplaying our post-metaphysical standards of

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72 The expression denotes a classical theme in the scholarship on Hegel’s political philosophy.
rationality”. Accordingly, Honneth thinks we can now only have an “indirect” access to the book, renouncing both the help of “the methodological indications from the Logic” and the “underlying conception of the State”. Accordingly: “it is often rather non-salient, everyday expressions in common language which receive a central role in the attempt to reactualise Hegel’s philosophy of right”. This, as we noted, directly contradicts the exegetical premise that is generally accepted in immanent Hegel scholarship.

The “indirect”, “reactualising” reconstruction of Hegel proposed in Suffering from Indeterminacy also reconnects with most of the themes that had guided the reconstruction of the Jena texts. This is surprising given the great suspicion towards the Philosophy of Right that arose from the context of German Hegel scholarship in the 1970s. This shift in Honneth’s attitude towards the mature Hegel can be explained by the emergence of a new context of Hegel interpretation, created by the flurry of sympathetic and modernising accounts of Hegel’s social and political philosophy that appeared after the publication of Struggle for Recognition, and which all contributed to the rescue of the Philosophy of Right from its general condemnation by the earlier generation of German scholars. Amongst those new interpretations, most of which came out of English-speaking countries, one of the most decisive was without a doubt that proposed by Robert Williams. In two important studies on the place

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74 Ibid., p. 78.
77 An important reference in German, however, was the reconstruction of Hegel (thinking with Hegel against Hegel) from the point of view of intersubjectivity, by
of recognition in Hegel, Williams showed that, contrary to Habermas’ and Siep’s critical remarks, and despite the fact that the concept hardly appears in the same function after 1807, the structure of recognition remains the main categorical scheme underpinning Hegel’s mature ethics and political philosophy.\(^7^8\) Agreeing with Williams, Honneth reconstructs Hegel’s mature theory of *Sittlichkeit* as a theory of self-determination through self-realisation in the conditions of modernity, within an intersubjectivistic paradigm linking individual and social flourishing. In other words, Honneth now finds in the 1820 book the same basic project that he had interpreted Hegel as fulfilling in 1802. Beyond the logical and systemic verbiage, Hegel in fact intends to offer a normative theory of social justice, which in the shape of a reconstruction of necessary conditions of individual autonomy tries to account for which social spheres a modern society must comprise or make available in order to ensure for every single of its members the chance of a realisation of their self-determination.\(^7^9\)

And this, says Honneth, is nothing other than developing a theory of recognition. The great progress, however, between the early and the mature theory of recognition, is that the latter now adds to the idea of a reciprocal assent to the other’s normative status, the practical, behavioural, “habitual” dimension of recognition:

To reciprocally recognise each other means not only to encounter each other in a specific, approving way, but implies also and primarily to comport oneself towards the other in a way that is demanded by the corresponding form of recognition.\(^8^0\)

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\(^7^9\) Honneth, *Leiden an Unbestimmtheit*, p. 34 (all translations mine).

\(^8^0\) *Ibid.*, p. 82.
The “social spheres” that Hegel identifies as conditions of individual self-realisation are therefore interpreted by Honneth as “practices of interaction” between subjects. According to the intersubjectivistic perspective, such interactions are the condition for the kind of differentiated types of recognition that allow not only for individual self-realisation, but contain also “processes of education” through which subjects learn, via socialisation, to limit their instincts, impulses and desires, in normative acknowledgement of others. This famously occurs in the sphere of Sittlichkeit which is thus read by Honneth as consisting of those “practices of interaction which must be able to guarantee individual self-realisation, reciprocal recognition and the corresponding processes of education”.

We can hypothesise that this new pragmatic light cast on the Philosophy of Right, which reads in it a normative and sophisticated theory of action, is influenced not just by the literature previously mentioned that deals specifically with Hegel’s social philosophy, but also more fundamentally with the decisive “non-metaphysical” readings of Pippin, Brandom and Pinkard. However, just as The Struggle for Recognition departed in important and original ways from the great German scholarship of the 1970s and early 1980s, Honneth’s reading of 2000 also keeps a strong originality.

Against the normative theory of justice presented in the third section of the part on Sittlichkeit, Honneth, as many other commentators, interprets the first two sections of the Philosophy of Right as critical reconstructions of the two necessary yet limited, and if left unchecked, potentially pathological, models of freedom, which the more integrated model of self-realisation through recognition incorporates. These models correspond to the first two moments in the famous three-fold definition of the will in §§ 5-7 of the Introduction: the negative moment of freedom which subjective rights enshrine; and the “optional” moment at the basis of moral freedom. Honneth thus reads Hegel’s methodology in the Philosophy of Right as a prime example of “methodological negativism”:

Hegel conducts his analysis in negative fashion, attempting to locate the appropriate “place”, the specific “right” of the two incomplete models of

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81 Ibid., p. 90.
freedom through the indication of the social ills to which they lead when applied in totalising fashion.\textsuperscript{82}

These “pathologies of individual freedom” leading to “social ills” are then addressed in the “therapeutic” moment of the work, the third normative part on Sittlichkeit:

the passage to Sittlichkeit must also lead, together with the overcoming of pathological conceptions, to the insight into the communicative conditions which constitute the social presupposition for all subjects accessing the realisation of their autonomy to the same extent.\textsuperscript{83}

It is clear that the main lines behind Honneth’s interpretation of the third section of the Philosophy of Right remains in perfect continuity with those of the Jena texts in The Struggle for Recognition, and more generally with Honneth’s basic presuppositions in social theory. They amount to what we could term an “action-theoretical”, “interactionist” and “normativist” reading. It is “action-theoretical” and “interactionist” in that it defines the different orders of social life in terms of basic forms of social action, which must themselves be defined in terms of the forms of intersubjective expectations and achievements that are performed in them.

This interactionist reading already guides the reconstruction of Hegel’s concept of autonomy, that is, the initial dialectical presentation of “free will” in the Introduction, and is far from being uncontroversial. Honneth interprets the “other” in the phrase: “being oneself-in-the-other” in a purely intersubjectivistic sense:

in order to be able to will itself as free, the will must limit itself to those “needs, desires and drives” whose fulfilment can be experienced as expression, as confirmation of its own freedom; that, however, is only possible if the object of the need or the inclination itself possesses the quality of being free, because only such an “other” can let the will effectively have the experience of freedom.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 28.
The “other” is always read by Honneth as being “another human subject”. He therefore favours a strong “inter-subjectivist” reading, where inter-subjectivity is truly conceptualised as inter-action between individual subjects. This is the crucial point of departure from “institutionalist” readings which take seriously Hegel’s syllogistic construction of the free will. On that alternative interpretation, which is for example the thread in Siep’s readings, the subjects recognise and are recognised only via their integration in larger, “universal” institutions in which their particularity is “sublated”. These diverging interpretations are at the root of all later differences in the appraisal of Hegel’s social philosophy.

Honneth’s reading is normativist in that these intersubjective expectations and achievements are normative. In the end the integration of modern societies is therefore explained through different types of intersubjectively constituted, normative structures, the same structures that The Struggle for Recognition called the “spheres of recognition”. These spheres also indicate the conditions of individual self-realisation in modern contexts. This reading, as noted, corresponds to Honneth’s own theoretical options in social theory. As the few summarising words above make clear, at the most fundamental level, both his reading of Hegel and his own model of social theory are premised on a major theoretical decision regarding the basic “stuff” that social life is “made of”, in other words, on a major decision regarding social ontology.

This basic “inter-actionist” social-ontological premise, following Renault but also Honneth’s own choice of words, needs to be termed “expressivist”. It sees the institutions of society, conceived on the basis of basic types of social inter-actions, as “expressions” of recognition, as the social incarnations of the different types of normative attitudes that social agents can take towards each other. The following passage makes this expressivist perspective particularly explicit: “The capacity of specific types of social action to express intersubjective attitudes

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85 See page 125, with the revealing use of the term: “aufeinander”, “to each other”.
86 On the reading of the Philosophy of Right as “social ontology”, see Leiden an Unbestimmtheit, pp. 55 and 66.
87 See the crucial discussion by Emmanuel Renault in L’Expérience de l’Injustice, pp. 194-200. We return to these questions in chapters 9 and 11.
of recognition is what allows Hegel to speak of the sphere of Sittlichkeit as a whole as a structured order of different forms of recognition’. 88

This fundamental social-ontological option is the reason behind Honneth’s rejection of “institutionalist” arguments, whether in Hegel, in the reading of Hegel, or in social theory more generally. It is the reason behind his criticism of Hegel’s third section of the Philosophy of Right. According to Honneth, Hegel muddles his normative analysis of the social integration of modern societies by complementing it with a critical analysis of modern institutions:

he wants to perform a normative structural analysis of modern societies in order to identify the historically produced conditions of individual freedom, but at the same time he conducts an institutional analysis by legitimating grown, legally anchored organisational configurations.89

For Honneth, this confusion becomes especially apparent and detrimental in the section on the State. Hegel was well on his way towards an “emphatic concept of ‘public freedom’” according to which “each recognises in the activity of the other a contribution to goals pursued in common”.90 But Hegel’s misplaced institutionalism confused the issue: “Exactly at the point where Hegel comes to speak about the corresponding relation of recognition, instead of an horizontal, suddenly a vertical relation emerges”, the vertical relation between individual and political institution which ends up in the infamous verticality linking the individual as an accident to the State as a “substance”.91

Honneth himself uses Siep’s notions of horizontal and vertical forms of social integration, and explicitly embraces an exclusive, “horizontal”, “interactionist” option, which leads to an “expressivist” concept of institutions. Similar critical remarks as those regarding the Jena texts immediately spring to mind in light of current alternative readings and indeed in light of the letter of Hegel’s text. From the point of view of the type of approach developed by Ludwig Siep, it is highly questionable whether an interactionist, expressivist reading of the Philosophy of Right is really convincing. It is only too easy to

88 Honneth, Leiden an Unbestimmtheit, p. 81.
89 Ibid., p. 123.
90 Ibid., p. 125.
91 Ibid.
point to the many passages in Hegel’s book where *Sittlichkeit* is described as an order of institutions, which cannot be understood in a strict interactionist and expressivist sense. Hegel defines not just the State, but *Sittlichkeit* as a whole, as a substance of which the social subjects are the “accidents”. In particular, Hegel highlighted the structural role of institutions of freedom, qua institutions, as the “ethical powers” (§146) when discussing *Sittlichkeit* as a whole. The “vertical” relations are therefore decisive, in Hegel’s mind, not just at the level of the state, but define ethical life as a whole. The family and civil society themselves are spheres in which inter-subjective relations constitute only one dimension, one always tied up with the other, institutional ones. In the case of the family, the vertical interaction is between the subject and the family as one institution, an interaction which makes him or her a family member (as opposed to a partner, a parent or a child). Without this, it is difficult to understand the specifically normative functions, irreducible to the intersubjective interactions, of the “institutions of the family”: the contract or the property, but also its cultural institutions. In the case of civil society, we have a complex, systematically organised diversity of institutions in which, once again, the subject is defined through his or her interactions with them, qua institutions, and not just through interactions with other subjects. Indeed, Hegel’s analysis of civil society is invaluable precisely for its early sensitivity to the systemic nature of the market economy.

But Honneth is more reflective about this in *Suffering from Indeterminacy* than in *Struggle for Recognition*. He acknowledges explicitly that his interactionist reading is only partly faithful to the letter of the text. Indeed, this is the point where his reading differs from a strict exegesis and becomes a “reactualising”, that is to say, an equally critical, “reconstruction”. At the point where Hegel no longer attaches a single mode of intersubjective interaction to a specific order of society, in which individual self-realisation and a specific mode of recognition are tied together, but attempts to integrate the account of several types of institutions within that order, he moves from the normative reconstruction of the conditions of individual freedom that Honneth understands his project to be, to the impossible project of accounting for these conditions through the theoretical consideration of real existing institutions of his time.

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The problem here, for Honneth, is not just that the institutions that Hegel attempts to concretely integrate in his normative account are outdated, but rather the deeper problem of a mixture of normative reconstruction and institutional description.

The more Hegel attempts, in the chapter on *Sittlichkeit*, to furnish the ethical spheres with institutional complexes that are normatively different and indeed contradictory, the less the possibility becomes to be able to equate them as a whole with specific sets of social practices of action.\(^93\)

Here again, the strength and simultaneous weakness of Honneth’s approach to Hegel appear in full light. He has to admit that his reading has to abandon a great part of the text (much of section three, notably the whole section on the State, by far the largest), and disregard the text’s own self-understanding, in order to rescue it. And indeed another approach to the text would be thinkable, one that would see in the concrete account of real-existing institutions one of its strong points, rather than its weakness. A different reading of Hegel, one closer to many current readings of the 1820 book, would insist that Hegel’s book is so important precisely because it is the first account of modern society to have attempted to account, with an adequately complex theory, for its dramatic increase in complexity, indeed its apparent “systematic” aspect, as it appears in the differentiation yet interrelation of the spheres of social action. Such reading implies that one does not sever institutional analysis and normative reconstruction. Some excellent readings of the *Philosophy of Right* have defended, for example, Hegel’s recourse to the institution of the corporation and shown that, far from being understood as an old, outdated model, the corporation for Hegel is the indispensable element of mediation that brings together social and political institutions. A more sympathetic use of the *Logic* helps to understand how this specific mediation operates in Hegel’s mind: as a reciprocal conditioning of the legal-economic sphere by the State and of the State by the legal-economic order. This solution, if taken seriously, leads to a highly productive solution within the field of contemporary political philosophy.\(^94\) It leads notably to a relative underplaying of the State sphere which

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is shown to be factually anchored in non-political forms of social activity. It also helps to give Hegelian politics a much more participatory outlook than in Honneth’s view.95 Because of his lack of interest in the section on the State and his rejection of any reference to the Logic, Honneth is unable to find any redeeming feature in what constitutes the bulk of the book he intends to save. On the social-theoretical level, one can also ask: Is it convincing to reduce social institutions to types of intersubjective normative expectations? Is this not a reduction of the institutional to the moral?

In response to such criticisms, however, Honneth’s initial methodological caveat has some force. If one wants to defend the letter of Hegel’s theory of modern society, one is committed to taking seriously the speculative logical scaffolding holding it together. But if one wants to also continue to read the *Philosophy of Right* for the purpose of “reactualisation”, then one must be able to show that the Logic, and indeed Hegel’s systematic vision of philosophy as science, can still be accorded with our “contemporary post-metaphysical rationality standards”. This is something that Honneth, in contrast both with contemporary American readings and to the more traditional readers who take Hegel at his word when he states that his book cannot be understood separately from its place within the system, does not believe is possible.

Outside narrow questions of Hegel scholarship, other theoretical gains of Honneth’s unorthodox reading must be emphasised. By retrieving the cognitive logic at play in the *Philosophy of Right*, Honneth is able to show that the book represents an important alternative in the field of contemporary political philosophy. Already in *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth had engaged in a “reactualising” reconstruction with contemporary debates in political and moral philosophy in mind. The explicit aim was to use Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* to define a “third way” between neo-Aristotelian and neo-Kantian accounts. The neo-Aristotelian position, shows convincingly that self-determination needs to be conceptualised with the social conditions that make it commensurable with self-realisation, thus providing content to the empty universalism of neo-Kantian accounts, but it is unable to show convincingly how the ethical determinacy of autonomy does not necessarily mean cultural relativism, since

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there can be no universal model of the good life. On the other hand, the universalist claims that the neo-Kantian position allows one to make, constitute precisely its strong point. With the notion of spheres of recognition emerging with modern society, Honneth claims that a revised Hegel can take the best of both positions (social determinacy and universalism) whilst avoiding their pitfalls: that is, relativism and abstraction.

In his renewed engagement with Hegel in *Suffering from Indeterminacy*, Honneth follows the same objective as in *The Struggle for Recognition*: to provide a “reactualisation” of Hegel in order to excavate a valid alternative in contemporary political philosophy. In fact, this time the model that Honneth clearly opposes is just simply the post-Kantian tradition in political philosophy. This is probably because in 2000, neo-Kantian premises inspired most of the dominant positions in moral and political philosophy, and liberalism had attained a quasi-hegemonic position in philosophical debates. It is therefore not inaccurate to understand the new reading of Hegel as a renewed critique of liberalism. Characterised in this way, its persistent underlying “left-Hegelian” features start to appear. There is a “radical” way of understanding the diagnosis of “suffering from indeterminacy”. The latter designates the lack of moral orientation suffered by modern individuals who no longer see the immanent rationality of existing institutions. At first, this type of pathology, which sounds like moral disorientation and psychological unease, seems to be far less dramatic than the type of pathologies Marx had in mind as a negative inspiration for his critique of the modern political economy. Indeed, Honneth’s new Hegelian politics seems to have become highly intellectualist, a move away from materialism and back to idealistic positions, since he now approvingly reads Hegel’s solution to the pathologies of modernity as consisting of the replacement of one-sided images of freedom with a more concrete one, the image of freedom encapsulated in the notion of *Sittlichkeit*.

However, what seems to be a retreat into spiritualist philosophy can also be interpreted in more substantive fashion. There is a more radical interpretation of the pathology of “indeterminacy”. The main methodological point behind a “reactualising reconstruction” is a passage to conceptual abstraction, in order to prevent theory from inappropriately generalising into general normative statements on the basis of the real-historical features of a given society. “Suffering from indeterminacy” is thus only an abstract concept that can receive
a number of concrete instantiations, including the worst pathological forms of social injustice known in real contemporary societies. To see how this is possible, one must remember the positive content of Hegel’s solution as it is reconstructed by Honneth: according to him, Hegel defines justice in modern society as the guarantee given to all subjects in equal measure of their participation in social interactions that will make their individual self-realisation possible. Indeterminacy means at first a type of action that is normatively indeterminate, but since the specific normative determinacy in question includes a commitment to the self-realisation of all, indeterminacy therefore amounts to a breach of a radical egalitarian commitment to the flourishing of all, a commitment that concerns in particular the socially conditioned well-being of subjects. In other words, on Honneth’s reading, Hegel’s idea is that the social pathologies that emerge as a result of limited and abstract definitions of freedom are pathological not just in the sense that they leave the subjects of action in indecision, but more deeply, in the sense that they cause injuries to their well-being which impact on society as a whole.

The anti-liberal implication of such a reading becomes quite clear if we put sufficient emphasis on the specificity of Hegel’s normative vision and ask what exactly is entailed in the opposite of “indeterminacy”, namely the social constitution of individual action that allows the individual to realise him-or herself. The emphasis is on the social constitution of the social agent. If one takes such a social-ontological stance seriously, then the notion of social pathology gains equal gravitas. If subjects depend entirely on the intersubjective interaction with others for their well-being, it is their entire subjective life that is at stake in social life. This, however, in very abstract terms, in the terms for example in which Honneth conducts his reconstructions, is precisely what inspires Marx himself in his critique of capitalism. On that account, Hegel and Marx share the same basic vision: namely, that there is an identity between freedom and reason, and that this unity comes to be incarnated in a society in which the universality of reason means the flourishing of each thanks to the quality of social relations. The anti-liberal point here is that liberal approaches to justice are typically guilty of the “indeterminism”, dualism and abstraction, that are equally denounced by Hegel and by Marx. Self-determination is tied to the social conditions of self-realisation. A discussion that defines the normative principle only as procedure (Habermas), or a principle of justice
that is conceived as the procedure through which “basic goods” ought to be fairly distributed (Rawls), does not pitch the question of justice at the right level. It fails to show the essential link between justice and well-being, or conversely, between injustice and socially induced pathologies.

These reflections highlight the normative force in Honneth’s interactionist stance, the political radicality hidden in the idea of “primary sociality”. This stance might appear naïve or truncated in view of the complexity of modern societies. It seems to ignore the normative and functional autonomy of institutions. It seems to lead to a reductive reading of Hegel. But by insisting as systematically as it does on the intersubjective dependency of socialised individuals, it is able to retrieve in terms acceptable to contemporary theory the most fundamental intuition defining the “Left-Hegelian” tradition, indeed, the basic intuition that constituted the moral element in Marx’s critique of capitalism: that social relations are the ultimate source of individual ill-being or well-being; that the “liberation” of the individual from his or her ailments, therefore, must encompass a “liberation of society”. Indeed, the implication that emerges implicitly from Honneth’s readings of Hegel is the justification of radical social transformation. A social definition of justice leads directly to the idea that it is the social relations themselves that need to be challenged and transformed if justice is to be concretely realised. If moreover one sees the seeds of the new rationality of the free society to be already operating in modernity, as did Hegel and Marx, then the notion of social transformation becomes not only a possibility but a reality and indeed a necessity.

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In their critical reviews of Honneth, most commentators note the trilogy: Hegel-Mead-Winnicott as if there was nothing particularly surprising about this succession of references and about the choice of these authors in particular. Honneth’s reading of the Jena Hegel is generally dealt with in one or two sentences, and his interpretation simply accepted without discussion, or the Hegelian reference is mostly mentioned without its implication being truly considered. Similarly, most commentators mention Mead in one breath as if his social psychology was known to all, and as if Honneth’s use of Mead was obvious and uncontroversial.\footnote{A notable exception is J. Rundell, in “Imaginary Turns in Critical Theory: Imagining Subjects in Tension”, in D. Freundlieb, W. Hudson and J. Rundell eds., \textit{Critical Theory after Habermas. Encounters and Departures}, Leiden, Brill, 2004, pp. 307-344.} And the fact that Honneth bases his social theory on object-relations theory equally remains unquestioned.

We saw in the previous chapter that the return to Hegel, however unexpected it was from the point of view of Honneth’s trajectory until 1992, and however astonishing it should seem given Honneth’s ambitious aim
in the book (an alternative communicative theory of society), was in fact well justified by the reading of the Jena Hegel that Honneth proposed. As it turns out, Mead is the pivotal reference in the book, and in Honneth’s social theory at the time. The place of the Mead chapter in *The Struggle for Recognition*, at the exact centre of the book, is significant. Pointing backwards towards Hegel, Mead is read by Honneth as propounding similar theses on society and socialised subjects, but through a methodology that is more acceptable by “post-metaphysical” scientific and philosophical standards. Because of this, Mead then can be used as the springboard for the “special” studies conducted later on in the book. What Mead’s pivotal position means for the reader is that one should always approach the writings of that period with Mead in mind, as the most important background reference. Often Honneth is taken to task by critics on the basis of misconstructions of his theses that would have been averted had they taken the Meadian reference more seriously. This is especially true with critics who target Honneth’s notion of identity, and his use of this notion of identity to underpin political philosophy.2

Honneth returns to Mead, ten years after the study written with Joas, from a new perspective. As before, Mead’s social psychology constitutes the pivotal reference, as it buttresses Honneth’s approach to the normativity of social life. But the perspective has shifted somewhat. In 1980 Mead provided the intersubjectivistic correction to Gehlen’s theory of action. Thus he helped to formulate a particularly strong version of a theory of the essentially social character of all human praxis. He was the main reference in support of “practical intersubjectivity”, of an intersubjectivity grounded in and realised in praxis and of a praxis to be conceptualised as “social action”. The focus was squarely on the social dependency of individual action, in a move that confirmed Habermas’ intersubjectivistic shift, but which also emphasised a lot more than the latter the non-linguistic aspects of interaction, for example the social constitution of individual perception. Mead was used at the time as one of the most crucial references in an intersubjectivistic philosophical anthropology.

In 1992, Mead is no longer approached as an intersubjectivistic correction to contemporary philosophical anthropology, but rather as the naturalistic

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2 See chapter 11, section 3.
correction to Hegel’s theory of subjectivity and social integration. Honneth rereads Mead to uncover in his work, and especially in his most famous text, the lecture notes gathered under the title “Mind, Self and Society”, the same key theses that Honneth argued could be retrieved from the Jena Hegel. These are the three fundamental premises underpinning Honneth’s social theory: 1. the dependence of the subject on recognition processes for its sense of self in the normative sense, that is, for a basic sense of self-worth that is the necessary condition of individual agency; 2. the three-fold aspect of that recognition, corresponding to a broadening of the normative claims expressed by subjects; 3. the central role of conflict, the “struggle” aspect of recognition, which accounts both for this broadening of subjective claims, but also for the force driving moral progress in society.

Honneth’s second reading of Mead will demonstrate to what extent the American pragmatist himself had already developed a theory of recognition. The opening of the Mead section in The Struggle for Recognition justifies succinctly yet powerfully the return to the American pragmatist:

Nowhere is the idea that human subjects owe their identity to the experience of intersubjective recognition more thoroughly developed on the basis of naturalistic presuppositions than in the social psychology of George Herbert Mead. Even today, his writings contain the most suitable means for reconstructing the intersubjectivist intuitions of the young Hegel within a post-metaphysical framework.3

Whereas in 1980 the reading of Mead concentrated on the “central importance given in his theory to the intersubjective structure of action and reflexivity”, in 1992, it is the famous dialectic of the “Me” and “I” that becomes of central interest, because it is in this dialectic that the three fundamental theses found in Hegel and providing the backbone of Honneth’s own social theory

3 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, 71. This echoes Habermas justification of his own turn to Mead in the Theory of Communicative Action, which presents Mead’s social psychology as a “paradigm shift”, see Theory of Communicative Action II, p. 5. See also the renewed justification in “Individuation through Socialisation”: “G.H. Mead was the first to have thought through this intersubjective model of a socially produced ego”, p. 170.
are presented and developed. The Mead section in *The Struggle for Recognition* is thus clearly organised in three moments: the “Me”; the “I”; and the three spheres of recognition arising from the dialectic of the “Me” and the “I”.

**Mead’s radical intersubjectivism**

In chapter 4, we recalled Mead’s famous notion of the symbolic gesture: the ability to evoke in myself the reaction that my behaviour will arouse in the other. This dialogical nature of symbolic gestures solves the problem of the coordination of action by accounting for the medium in which it can occur. But as we also recalled, human communication has a remarkable specificity: already in prelinguistic communication, but most especially in linguistic exchange, the speaker can perceive simultaneously and with the same meaning the effect of his gestures (vocal or non-vocal) on the addressed. This feature of human communication helps to account not just for action coordination, but also for the emergence and indeed the very structure of human self-consciousness. As Honneth puts it succinctly,

> in perceiving my own vocal gesture and reacting to myself as my counterpart does, I take on a decentered perspective, from which I can form an image of myself and thereby come to a consciousness of my identity.5

In animal conversation, the meaning of the gestures is available only for the external observer, not for the subjects in action. The dog fleeing the other attacking dog does not represent itself to itself as fleeing, in the precise sense of the word. It just runs away. Whatever dog “affects” might be involved, the objective meaning of the behaviour is accessible only to the third, observing party. In human conversation, however, that meaning can be internalised because of the above noted specificity of human communication in which messages impact equally on the speaker and the addressee. With this

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4 In “Individuation through Socialisation”, Habermas once again propounds a “linguistic” reading of Mead. For Mead, however, the tendency to take the attitude of the other is initiated well before the infant human being can start using language, and indeed involves a whole set of communicative gestures, many of which are not linguistic, like smiling, kissing, waving, and so on.

internalisation, the external objectivity of the meanings entailed in the “conversations of gestures” is refracted back into the subject in action, thereby structuring and filling up an internal space, in fact, creating an internal space in the proper sense, where previously there was only unformed psychic and organic “material”. In other words, the use of symbolic grammars (again not necessarily exclusively linguistic), gives me a view of myself from the perspective of the dialogue partner(s), even in his or her absence. And this, according to Mead, is the only way for me to gain a perspective from which I can see myself at all. There is no primary affinity of the self to itself through which it would immediately capture itself, in its ownmost intimacy, to paraphrase Heidegger. “The ‘I’ never can exist as an object in consciousness”. The “I” is “always out of sight of himself”. Only as an objectified self, that is, by internalising the view that the outsiders have of me—a possibility that becomes irrepressible as soon as I start using symbolic communication—can I get to know myself as this self.

This account, as we saw again in Chapter 4, may be understood at the same time in phylogenetic and in ontogenetic terms. In terms of the evolution of the species, the emergence of human language meant that the “conversation of gestures” which coordinates organisms through the logic of stimulus-response feedback mechanisms could now be internalised: the human being learns how to pre-empt within herself the reaction of the other to her own action. This is an obvious evolutionary advantage, but more interestingly for our concerns here, it opens an inner space where the dialogue takes place, the space of inner consciousness. In ontogenetic terms, the child gradually learns to “adjust himself to the attitude of the others” by internalising their responses and invitations, until language enables him to conduct a conversation in the absence of the significant partners, first externally, through imaginary conversations, and then gradually in ever more internalised fashion. The consciousness of the adult then is the end result of this process of internalisation of dialogue.

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between the self and itself, between the self addressing itself between first and third perspective.

The emphasis on ontogenesis in “The Mechanism of Social Consciousness” provides useful formulations that highlight the primacy of the social in Mead’s theory of the subject. Honneth quotes the following passage:

a ‘me’ is not an early formation, which is then projected and ejected into the bodies of other people to give them the breadth of human life. It is rather an importation from the field of social objects into an amorphous, unorganised field of what we call inner experience. Through the organisation of this object, the self, this material is itself organised and brought under the control of the individual in the form of so called self-consciousness.8

This vision of the psychic field upon which socialisation processes operate will prove crucial later on when the relationship of the “Me” and the “I” is considered. However, before that, it is important to make sure that we have emphasised strongly enough the idea that the self, on Mead’s account, is entirely dependent on the social context for its emergence as a self. This means that the self in its innermost intimacy is structured through and through by patterns that have been acquired outside. In a sense, there is no self prior to the internalisation of “social objects” (the self as viewed from the outside), only a mass of “unorganised” affective and instinctual material which is by far not sufficient to form a true self. “Other selves in the environment logically antedate the consciousness of self which introspection analyses”.9

If we turn our attention to the types of “meta-subjective symbolic structures” and “dialogue partners” that are internalised to gradually form the self, we confirm from another angle the radical intersubjectivistic nature of Mead’s social psychology. The general mechanism is the process of internalisation we have already well described:

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the individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group (...). For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience.  

The first interaction partners are obviously the “significant others” with whom the nascent self is in interaction through “gestures” that are to an important extent non-linguistic. The internalisation of external viewpoints, the passage of conversation of self to self from the outside to the inside, which opens the space of inner consciousness, runs parallel with a generalisation of those viewpoints. Gradually, the circle of others from whose perspective the self watches itself by evoking their reaction to his or her actions, widens; these others become less and less concrete, representing instead important social functions and roles, until the self is able to watch her own behaviour from the point of view of the “generalised other”. At the end of this process, “inner consciousness is socially organised by the importation of the social organisation of the outer world”. Mead’s theory of self-consciousness is truly the most radical version of intersubjectivism, where intersubjectivity primes over subjectivity, both genetically and conceptually: “The self as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experiences.”

This is without doubt the most important aspect of Honneth’s theory of recognition as it is presented in *The Struggle for Recognition*. It is this thesis about the utter dependency of the subject on the other “social objects”, down to the very level of the subject’s own self-consciousness, which explains the most characteristic feature of Honneth’s social theory, one that has irritated so many critics: namely, the direct link between the theory of the subject and the critical, normative theory of society, the intimate alliance of social psychology and social theory.

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This link is not surprising from the perspective of Meadian socialisation theory: given the subject’s total dependency on its social context, its vulnerability is structural and extreme. The consequences, as Honneth has drawn them out, must follow: the normativity of social life, the standard by which social life can be judged, is individual self-realisation, since the latter is, as it were, the direct inverse image of the social context; social pathologies can be read in individual ill-being; normative ethical and political philosophy needs to be married to critical sociology. All of the characteristic features of Honneth’s model presented in his most famous book stem from the radical intersubjectivistic premise.

However, if, as is the basic tenet of pragmatism, philosophy is as fallible as the empirical sciences upon which it partly relies, then new insights into the formation of subjectivity and self-consciousness will have to be accepted, at the price of a revision of previous fundamental premises. This is what happened in Honneth’s thinking around 2000, in the shift that took him from this radical Meadian intersubjectivism to the acknowledgement, following recent research in infant development, of a primitive sense of selfhood, and the consequent abandonment of the Meadian reference.13

**The different types of “I”**

Radical intersubjectivism, as we also recalled, has been the target of a sustained attack from authors like Manfred Frank, Dieter Henrich and their disciples who refute Habermas’ narrative of a steady conceptual progress. For Habermas, progress can be traced from the misguided subjectivism of the idealists—despite their ground-breaking discovery (notably Fichte’s) of the circles of transcendental self-consciousness—to the paradigm-shifting revolution of the linguistic turn in the 20th century, which makes redundant the endless conundrums of transcendental idealism by recasting self-consciousness in a communicative structure in which reason is reinterpreted as the exchange of redeemable claims. The regular objection of the critics of intersubjectivism is that of circularity. To say that I know myself when I see myself from a

13 See chapter 12.
decentered perspective through which I can “gather a picture of myself and so can reach to a consciousness of my identity”, these authors argue, presupposes the very self that the “social construction” story is supposed to account for. Must I not have a previously given “familiarity with myself” for me to be able to identify that picture presented by the others as a picture of me?

However, Mead was too sophisticated a philosopher to fall in such basic circle. Indeed, his rejoinder to precisely this objection forms the most important part of the model of subjectivity which Honneth found so decisive for a re-foundation of social theory. This rejoinder is basically Mead’s famous analysis of the distinction between the self as “Me” and the self as “I”.

Mead’s speculative remarks on the emergence of the self through the internalisation of “social objects” is only a theory of the self as “Me”, that is to say, a theory of self-consciousness in the sense of the reflective capacity of the subject to consider and explore itself. The key question in this construction is: how is the subject able to gain a perspective upon itself so that it becomes an object to itself. Consequently, that part of Mead’s social psychology is not, to be precise, a theory about personal identity, about the sense of self as self. Mead perfectly accepts the notion that there is a primary sense of identity, the sense of owning one’s own thoughts and actions from an intimate perspective that can be had by and shared with no one else, the same type of “affinity” with oneself, which the “anti-intersubjectivist” critics, to coin an ugly term, object to Habermas and Honneth. This intimate self-presence is precisely what the “I” refers to for Mead, by contrast with the objectified image of it in the epistemic self-relation of self-consciousness. We will see below why the dialectic of the “Me” and the “I” was crucial to Honneth and how it further explains why he relied so heavily on Mead for the construction of a critical theory of society. But first we need to clarify how the “I” stands to the “Me”. Here, Habermas’ 1988 study, “Individuation through Socialisation”, is crucial as it makes important distinctions about the different types of self-relation.

The first, crucial distinction is that of epistemic versus practical self-relation. The former is the type of self-consciousness that has been discussed so far, that is, the reflective relation of the self of itself. The latter, more than a relation, is a “rapport”, as Tugendhat says, a “Verhältnis” and not a “Beziehung”, that
the subject has to itself in action, for example in controlling its behaviour and summoning itself for action.\textsuperscript{14} Once this distinction is in place, three different meanings of the “I”, in opposition to the “Me”, can then be distinguished.

The first “I” is the “I” that is immanent in the epistemic self-relation, the “I” that is involved in the knowing of the self by itself. Mead describes it as the sense of self that was always already present and presupposed in the self knowing itself, a self however that can be epistemically reached only in the shape of a “Me”:

\begin{quote}
It is in memory that the ‘I’ is constantly in experience. (…) the ‘I’ in memory is there as the spokesman of the self of the second, or minute, or day ago. As given, it is a ‘me’, but it is a ‘me’ that was the ‘I’ at the earlier time. If you ask, then, where directly in your own experience the ‘I’ comes in, the answer is that it comes in as a historical figure. It is what you were a second ago that is the ‘I’ of the ‘me’.
\end{quote}

The “I”, that sense of ownness in one’s own thoughts and actions, is thus only ever the “I of the Me”, present at all points of the subject’s subjective life, of course, but reached only in mediated fashion, via the objectified version of it through the “Me”, that is, as an internal “social object”.

To further explore this first sense of “I”, Mead, in the same page, describes the “I” as the “reaction” of the self to the socially constructed “Me”.\textsuperscript{16} This could make it sound as though the socially constructed “Me” was primary, and the “I” would then only be a derivative phenomenon and thus an illusion of true subjectivity, a false spontaneity. The opposite is the case: it is just that the spontaneity of the “I” can never catch itself. The “I” does think and act spontaneously, but is traceable only retroactively, as a “historical figure”. To put it in terms of a temporal image: the “I” is the true agency, for example the true power of projection and anticipation, the structure of futurity in the self, but it can be known as such only as a historical figure, through a retroactive

\textsuperscript{14} Tugendhat, \textit{Self-consciousness and Self-determination}.

\textsuperscript{15} Mead, \textit{Mind, Self, and Society}, p. 174.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 174.
reconstruction. This explains why Mead writes in the same page that “we surprise ourselves by our actions”: when I reflect on who the person is that did what I did, I catch myself as a “Me”, since my gaze is socially constructed, but as a ‘Me’ that was an “I” and was, at the present time of action, unpredictable for the Me.

The two other meanings of the “I” are only variations on this fundamental relationship between a spontaneous source of action and its reified construction as a social object. To follow Habermas’ reading:

the epistemic self-relation had been made possible by a ‘me’ that fixed in memory the spontaneously acting ‘I’ (…) The practical relation-to-self is made possible by a ‘me’ that places limits from the intersubjective perspective of a social ‘we’, on the impulsiveness and the creativity of a resistant and productive ‘I’. From this perspective, the ‘I’ appears on the one hand as the pressure of pre-social, natural drives, and on the other hand as the impulse of creative fantasy.

To put it once more in the terms of a temporal image, the “I” is a source of instinctual energy presupposing and predating the socially constructed self, and so points to the immemorial past of the subject, but its unpredictable reactions to the internalised demands from society as crystallised in the ‘Me’ make it a source of creativity and true spontaneity, the origin of the subject’s capacity to project itself into the future. This “futural” or projective aspect of the self will be crucial for the critical-social aspect of Honneth’s rereading of Mead. Remembering what we saw above about ontogenesis, the relationship between the “Me” and the “I” therefore turns out to be quite complex, and organised according to a logic of reciprocal conditioning. It is not just a case of the “I” “responding” to the “Me”, and thereby enabling true action, but only on the basis of a “reaction” to the constraining demands of the social. In the adult subject, the “I” comes first, as it were, inasmuch as it constitutes the actual source of spontaneity and thus, of responsibility. It is indeed accessed

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17 Indeed, Joas shows that this structure is generalised by Mead to account for historical knowledge in general, beyond individual subjective history. See his *Mead*, pp. 176-182; and Mead, “The Nature of the Past”, in *Selected Writings*, pp. 345-354.

epistemically only as a historical figure, but precisely as the past original source of what is now a “Me”. Genetically, it is true, the self that comes first, qua self, is the “Me”, since the “amorphous, unorganised field of inner experience” needs to be organised through a coherent perspective which is not given in it but found outside, but this self depends on the “raw material”, so to speak, of this instinctual energy, which, in the adult subject constitutes the untameable element below the “Me” that can achieve true initiative.

The struggle between “I” and “Me”: social-theoretical consequences

Now we need to return to the dialectic of the “I” and the “Me” and focus more carefully on the “widening” mechanism of the circle of internalised others, which opens the space of inner consciousness. It is this mechanism and its implications, which harbour what Honneth found so significant in Mead at the time of Struggle for Recognition, and which explains why he saw in Mead the central reference for an alternative theory of society.

The initiation of the internalisation process occurs through the transformation of the first instinctual, quasi-automatic reactions of the child to its environment. At first,

to the young child the frowns and smiles of those about him, the attitude of the body, the outstretched arms, are at first simply stimulations that call out instinctive responses of his appropriate to these gestures.19

At this primitive level, the reaction of the child to the gestures of others around her is akin to the “conversation of gestures” that one observes in the animal realm. This means first of all that the meanings that are exchanged in that conversation fall outside of the infant’s inner life. The reactions to the environment are quasi-automatic, tightly bound to instinctual preformed mechanisms. At this stage, there is no unity of the self, neither in the sense of self-identity nor in the sense of a unified body schema, because the internalisation of the others’ perspective has not yet had time to occur. The decisive mechanism that transforms the child’s experience and initiates the internalisation process

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is made possible by affective memory. The mnemonic traces in the child of his own reactions to the others’ behaviour (what Mead calls “the imagery from past experience”) and the traces of their outcome (reactions confirmed or disapproved, leading to a pleasurable or displeasing experience) allow the child, the next time a similar behaviour occurs around him, to predict his next course of action, to repeat or not his previous reaction. This mechanism, however, is exactly the same as the mechanism enabling the internalisation of the other’s perspective since it consists in the child arousing in herself the pre-empted reaction of the other to her own behaviour. As in Hegel, memory, as “Erinnerung”, is thus both a power of remembering, a re-collection, and a power of internalisation. “When (the) gestures in others bring back the images of his own responses and their results, the child has the material out of which he builds up the social objects that form the most important part of his environment”, that is to say, internal images of those concrete others with whom she is in regular contact.

These internal images play the essential function of shaping and directing the, at first, amorphous field of affective and instinctual “material”. The emergence of the self thus occurs through a loop of recurrent, confirmed and confirming affective experiences, between a nascent “inside” and the external confirmations and disapprovals stemming from the outside. The child could be said to test his own responses to external invitations by drawing on the fund of previous external responses to his previous demands and responses. In this loop, this constant criss-crossing between internal demand/response and external demand/response leads, in the best case, that is, when the external environment is consistent and sufficiently sympathetic in its responses and demands, to a fortification and extension of the “fund” of past experience. Crucially, this fund is “internal”, as it corresponds to an internalisation of past interactions. Crucially, also, this internalisation is more specifically an internalisation of others’ responses, of their “perspectives” on the nascent self’s own actions.

Explaining the integration of external perspectives as a self-feeding loop drawing on interactions between the nascent self and its social environment is what allows Mead to account also for the “widening” and abstracting of

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the partners of interaction. This is where Mead’s famous conceptual distinction between play and game takes place. In play, the child relates to concrete others and integrates a structure of behaviour that is idiosyncratically theirs. But once this integration has been established, it becomes a “pattern of behaviour”, and is then disconnected from the “power of concrete reference persons”.21 It can be generalised as a norm of behaviour that the child can utilise in contexts outside the direct, intimate relation. This, according to Mead, is what happens in the development of imaginary companions: the children “organise in this way the responses which they call out in other persons and call out also in themselves”.22 The child playfully alternates her perspective between enacting the other person’s reaction to her own action, and enacting her own reaction to the imaginary person’s reaction to her (re-)actions, and so on. The systematic aspect of this swapping mechanism demonstrates that the child is in fact engaged in the practice of a skill: exercising one’s capacity to take the perspective of the other. And since the self is nothing but the subject’s idiosyncratic response to the internalised patterns of behaviour of the external others, the exercising of this skill is nothing but the strengthening of the self. When roles and not just concrete attitudes are tested out, the exercise in role-swapping concerns not just the simple fact of taking on a different perspective, but of trying different and specific types or patterns of behaviour. In this case, the testing and training exercise the child’s ability to put herself in specific social positions and view herself from that position: one moment the child enacts the expected reaction from the external group to her actions; the next moment, she enacts her own reactions to those external reactions. She “calls out in herself the sort of responses the (stimuli) call out in others”. She is alternatively the stimuli and the responses to the stimuli, all at once in herself, thus building and strengthening her self.

When the skill to immediately “call out in oneself the sort of response that stimuli call out in others” has been developed to a high level of proficiency, several perspectives at once or in very short succession, can be taken by the subject, and those perspectives are no longer attached to concrete others but

21 See the masterful reconstruction by Habermas in *Theory of Communicative Action* II, pp. 34-35.

simply to patterns of behaviour. When this happens, the child is able to move from play to game. In that latter case,

the child must have the attitude of all the others involved in that game. The attitudes of the other players which the participant assumes organise into a sort of unit, and it is that organisation which controls the response of the individual.23

To illustrate this point, Mead uses the American philosophers’ favourite example: the player in a base-ball team. The individual player’s response relies on her adapting her behaviour to the positions of all the other players in the field, not just factually (where to throw at this precise moment in the game), but normatively (where is one allowed to throw in general). The individual response is possible only on the basis of having integrated the positions of all the others, not just as a collection of discrete, individual others, but as a “sort of unit”, as a coherent, organic whole, with its own purpose and organisation, such that it is important to consider not just the factual and normative positions of all the other players, but also the team’s strategic and tactical requirements.

As Honneth shows in his own reconstruction of Mead, this constant process of widening of the perspectives internalised by the self as well as their increasing abstraction, well illustrated in the passage from play to game, provides the general model for thinking the relationship between the individual self and social life as a whole. The crucial term enabling this final slide to “the generalised other” lies in expressions like “all the others”, or “a sort of unit”, as in the previous quote. Such expressions justify the analogy between the role-playing involved in social activity in general and playing in a team. The only difference between the two now, in contrast with the stronger qualitative difference between play and game, is only quantitative, a difference in the degree of abstraction:

The organised community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called ‘the generalised other’. The attitude of the generalised other is the attitude of the whole community. Thus, for example, in the case of such a social group as a baseball team, the team is the generalised

23 Ibid., p. 154. Quoted by Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 77.
other in so far as it enters—as an organised process or social activity—into the experience of any one of the individual members of it.24

It is essential to pay particular attention to Mead’s emphasis on the generality of the “generalised other”, which obviously directed his choice of words. Mead stresses this point very explicitly:

If the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not sufficient for him merely to take the attitudes of other human individuals toward himself and toward one another within the human social process, and to bring that social process as a whole into his individual experience merely in these terms: he must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organised society or social group, they are all engaged.25

In other words, the external viewpoint which, by being internalised, leads to the creation of a full self (as “Me”), is not just that of other individuals qua individuals, but that of society as a whole. To use a terminology already introduced in the previous chapters, Mead is here clearly saying that the self becomes a social object, not just as a product of interpersonal interactions, in the “horizontal” sense, but also in the “vertical” sense of an interaction between the individual and the social as a whole. And that social reality is to be taken not as a massive “fact” dominating the subject as its “substance”, but rather as an organised, complex whole, organised according to separate, “organised” “activities” and “undertakings”, notably through the division of labour. Mead therefore propounds a theory of the subject that sounds very close to Hegel’s, most probably in full awareness of this: the singular, in Hegel, is the dialectical unity of the particular and the universal.26 “Ethical life”, Sittlichkeit, is precisely that social, meta-subjective element, the social as a whole. Agents can develop their own identity and autonomy by integrat-

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26 On Mead’s early Hegelianism, see Joas, *G.H. Mead*, pp. 58-61. Joas describes Mead’s early position as “secularised Hegelianism”.

ing the different mediating mechanisms located in it, that is, by relating in relevant ways to the different types of institutions, fulfilling different societal tasks. Those institutions of social life, as the *Philosophy of Right* already showed,²⁷ are precisely the places where individual particularity is educated into universal singularity. The inter-personal is not sufficient (but of course it is necessary), and the vertical interaction is also indispensable, because only through the adaptation to the generalised other can the individual be said to be fully socialised and socially integrated, basically, to take place in the general division of social labour. Mead’s idea is very close to Durkheim’s vision, both in terms of his early emphasis on the socialising/individuating role of the division of labour in society, and because of the emphasis on the collective dimension of beliefs: for both authors, the individual reaches the full level of socialisation when he or she acts in accordance with the collective norms and values, the social life of the community as properly social, a life organised in specific types of “activities” and “undertakings”.

The central role played by the division of labour in this model makes it impossible to argue that it assumes an unrealistic homogeneity and unicity of social life. In the quote above, the expression “organised society” shows precisely why such an objection would be inaccurate. The Hegelian image of society, in particular Hegel’s description of the complex, dialectical relationships between the system of corporations and the universality of the State render such objection pointless. Mead does not deny that social life is constituted of different realms, which develop their own normative frameworks. The “homogeneity” of society “as a whole” therefore designates the functional integration of these different sub-sectors within the unity of society. In that case, the individual’s internalisation of “the generalised other”, which achieves his or her social integration, is always mediated, as in Hegel, by more particular values, norms, and forms of habitus, that are specific to the social sphere in which the individual is positioned:

only in so far as he takes the attitudes of the organised social group to which he belongs towards the organised, co-operative social activity (...) in which that group as such is engaged, does he develop a complete self.²⁸

²⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §§ 251-256.
And so the self is indeed an internalisation of the perspective of society “as a whole”, but that perspective is itself differentiated and articulated within itself, “organised”. The “homogeneity” of social life is not synonymous with total lack of distinction, on the contrary. Therefore the internalisation of this “organisation” within the self is mediated by the position of the self in it. This construct is to be compared with the idea found in the early Horkheimer of a class-specific experience of social life, of a social and cultural diffraction of the general division of labour (“cooperative activity” says Mead) through the specific social location of individuals within specific social groups.²⁹

However, it remains true that conceptualising social life as one is also logically necessary.³⁰ Without it, functional integration makes no sense: in is a whole that is internally differentiated and organised, otherwise differentiation and organisation make no sense. Indeed, there are times when the individual relates to society as such a unified whole. This is the case when fundamental ethical values are at stake, or simply when the individual makes use of the “universe of discourse”, that is to say, makes use of the symbolic resources that are shared by an entire community. And the latter relation, Mead never tires to remind us, is nothing but the condition for thinking in general: to evoke in oneself the meaning that is shared between all the speakers of one language. Again, similar distinctions at the social-ontological level are also at play in Hegel’s vision of social life. The fact that the individual relates to the whole of social life from the particularistic angle of his or her participation in a specific social-economic sphere, that the individual therefore looks at the life of the community through the diffraction introduced by his position in one of its sub-groups, is not incompatible with the fact that he can also, as citizens, as “bürger” and no longer as “bourgeois”,³¹ relate to the universal as universal.³²

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²⁹ See chapter 2, “Social action as cultural action”.
³⁰ Hegel, Philosophy of Right, § 299, Remark, p. 338.
³¹ Philosophy of Right, § 190, Remark, pp. 228-229.
³² On Hegel’s key distinction between the individual as social-economic “bourgeois” (Hegel uses the French term) versus a more “universal” dimension of the same individual as “citizen” (Bürger), see Philosophy of Right, § 190, Remark, p. 228.
And in Hegel already, the latter moment turns out to be the condition of possibility of the former.\textsuperscript{33}

**Mead’s theory of institutions**

And so we encounter the question of institutions again. Again, the question needs to be asked: Is it sufficient to equate communicative freedom, intersubjectivity and “the social conditions of individual autonomy”, as Honneth does? Just as Habermas offers a reconstruction of Mead that stresses the link between role-taking and linguistic communication, Honneth’s reconstruction stresses the intersubjective moment, the moment, as Mead said, when the subject “takes the attitudes of other human individuals toward himself and toward one another within the human social process”. As in Hegel’s case, this, then, allows for a strong intervention in social theory, as the structure of society can then be shown to impact directly on subjects’ welfare. This basically recaptures in new terms and in a new theoretical framework, the basic “Left-Hegelian” intuition: that the freedom and fulfilment of the human being, since it is a social being, depends squarely on the quality of social relations.

Just as in Hegel’s case, however, it is important to note that Mead’s literal definition of the institution contains more than is retained in Honneth’s reconstruction of it. Mead defines an institution as a specific behaviour pattern, as a specific generality, as it were, a generality that all individuals involved in that society internalise and react to when they are in a situation in which this institution is at stake:

> An institution is nothing other but an organisation of attitudes which we all carry in us, the organised attitudes of the others that control and determine conduct.\textsuperscript{34}

There is at first nothing normative in the strong, moral sense of the term, in this definition of the institution. It simply is the name of those “generalised” patterns of behaviour that make the coordination of individual actions, and

\textsuperscript{33} On this point, see in particular Jean-François Kervégan, *Hegel, Carl Schmitt. La Politique entre Spécultion et Positivité*, Part II.

\textsuperscript{34} Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, p. 211.
the emergence of selves, possible. Without institutions, no society, and without society, no selves. In reading those same pages, Honneth characterises the social rules which the individual internalises as “normative” because they relate to established “norms of action”, but this is normative only in the sense of a convention that has been instituted, not in the stronger, moral sense. For example, when Mead directly addresses the question of institutions, he makes the point that

Oppressive, stereotyped and ultra-conservative social institutions (...) are undesirable but not necessary outcomes of the general social process of experience and behaviour.35

This clearly shows that the normative question, in the strong sense of the term, is only secondary to the functional ones, that is, the integration of society and the constitution of socialised selves.

Honneth’s theory of the institution, by contrast, is normative in the stronger sense, in that it seeks to discriminate between freedom-enhancing institutions and mere “social conditions” (as he puts it in Suffering from Indeterminacy). Honneth rejects, as we saw, the last (and by far largest) part of Hegel’s social and political philosophy on the ground that it confuses the issue of the institutional conditions of autonomy with the critique of institutions. We understand why this is a concern from Honneth’s perspective: the revolutionary insight into the intersubjective nature of the social bond and thus into the underlying normativity of social orders is weakened and becomes of restricted value when it is too swiftly concretised into existing institutions. The social-theoretical insight is forced to remain abstract to retain its value: society is now conceived as an organisation of specific and related forms of intersubjective interaction, but it is not for the social theorist to pass judgement on which concrete institutions at a given time are most adequate for realising these forms of interaction. All the theorist can do is differentiate between different types of recognition, which will be attached to different types of social interactions and so attached to institutions in this sense. This is what Honneth sees Hegel as doing in his separate analyses of the family, the market and the State. But one must keep the normative analysis at an abstract level and not conflate

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35 Ibid., p. 262.
it with the concrete critique of existing institutions.\textsuperscript{36} According to the very premises of the theory, these institutions are always open to be challenged and transformed anyway, but this is no longer the realm of the social theorist but of real social movements, not of the social theorist, as theorist.

This position has great theoretical and critical strength, particularly in regards to the critique of political liberalism and the implicit social-theoretical premises that it makes possible. However, one might well wonder if that position gives sufficient and adequate theoretical acknowledgement of the institutions, at both the ontological and the normative levels. In particular, one of Emmanuel Renault’s decisive contributions to the theory of recognition has been to point to a crucial distinction that is highly significant here: it is two different things to propound a normative theory of institutions and to study the normative impact of institutions. To acknowledge the specific impact of specific types of institutions on subjectivities, along the very lines of the Meadian argument, that is to say, by giving full weight to the notion of an internalisation of behavioural patterns, does not amount to a weakening or muddling of the intersubjectivistic premise. Indeed it might be construed as a more realistic view, since it takes into consideration the specific effects of specific institutions. And so by contrast the question arises whether Honneth does not overlook some important normative aspects of institutions because he refuses to engage in a non-normative analysis of institutions. On that reading, Mead was more sensitive to this question than Honneth, precisely because of his functionalist interest in the institutional dimension of social life.

Be that as it may, Honneth then shows how close Mead’s theory of socialisation is to Hegel’s theory of \textit{Sittlichkeit}. In Honneth’s mind, this means of course, a vision of society as an organised order of recognition. Unlike Habermas or Tugendhat, Honneth points to the fact that the internalisation of norms of behaviour is in fact synonymous with mutual recognition. He can refer easily to the passages where Mead himself employs the concept, with Hegel clearly in the background:

\begin{quotation}
What appears in the immediate experience of one’s self in taking that attitude (of the other—JPD) is what we term the ‘me’. It is that self which is able
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{36} For all this, see Honneth, \textit{Leiden an Unbestimmtheit}, pp. 102-127.
to maintain itself in the community, that is recognised in the community in so far as it recognises the others.\textsuperscript{37}

Honneth interprets this passage in the following way:

with the appropriation of the social norms regulating the cooperative nexus of the community, maturing individuals not only realise what obligations they have vis-à-vis members of society; they also become aware of the rights that are accorded to them in such a way that they can legitimately count on certain demands of theirs being respected.\textsuperscript{38}

Here again, Honneth’s reading seems to be slightly tangential to Mead’s text, emphasising perhaps more so than does Mead, one aspect or implication of the key thesis. It is true that Mead sees in the great scope and abstraction that characterise the circle of internalised social figures in the modern individual, a definitive normative progress. He writes for example that

one of the greatest advances in the development arises when the reaction of the community on the individual takes on what we call an institutional form. What we mean by that is that the whole community acts towards the individual under certain circumstances in an identical way.\textsuperscript{39}

But what Mead seems to want to highlight most centrally in the idea that the internalisation of the generalised other can be expressed in forms of recognition, is that the individual comes to be fully socialised only when he or she has internalised the perspective of all others. Again, the perspective here seems to be primarily functional rather than normative in the strong sense. The question here, unlike in Hegel, is not the recognition of the other’s freedom, or his normative value, but simply the internalisation of the social values, an adaptation to behavioural patterns. One could say that Mead lets the concept of recognition undergo a behaviouristic transformation. Honneth is certainly right in pointing out that one implication of the idea of an internalisation of

\textsuperscript{37} Mead, \textit{Mind, Self and Society}, p. 196. See this other quote, a few pages earlier: “we cannot realise ourselves except in so far as we can recognise the other in his relationship to us. It is as he takes the attitude of the other that the individual is able to realise himself as a self”, p. 194.

\textsuperscript{38} Honneth, \textit{The Struggle for Recognition}, p. 79.

\textsuperscript{39} Mead, \textit{Mind, Self and Society}, p. 167.
the “universal” generalised other entails the fundamental idea of equality. But we might ask if this is really what Mead has centrally in view, and indeed if this is precisely what he understands by “recognition”. In other words, is it really the idea of a “mutuality” of recognition that is at the centre of his interest in passages as the one just quoted? Is he not rather discussing the recognition of the “We” by the “I” and the “I” by the “We”, where recognition is closer to acknowledgement in the epistemic sense than mutual recognition of the other’s moral value? In that case, is the “social” bond thereby established truly “intersubjective”? One could argue that it is intersubjective only indirectly, by the fact that all individuals have the same type of relation to the “We”. Indeed, if all individuals have internalised the same norms of action (as behaviour patterns), then they all end up relating to each other, qua individuals, in similar ways. But that dimension of social life, subject-to-subject interaction, is here only a by-product of a more primordial one, the interaction of the subject to the whole. The crucial image here is that of the Leibnizian monads only indirectly interrelated, through their common reflection of the same overall reality.40 One would then have to distinguish between the social, the communicative and the intersubjective. They point to different dimensions of social life in Mead, and do not seem to be immediately interchangeable.

Mead’s theory of emancipation

As we saw at the outset, however, Mead’s theory of society is not limited to the conservative moment of the internalisation of conventions (this term is perhaps more appropriate than that of norms). It also points to the dynamic moment of moral progress that is harboured in the relation of the “Me” and the “I”. Honneth focuses on this dialectic in order to find again the two central ideas that he extracted from the Jena Hegel, and which serve as the basis of his own model of normative social theory: the idea of a struggle for recognition, that is to say, of the irreducibility of conflict over moral contents within social

40 This dimension is explicitly highlighted by Mead himself. See the approving reference to Leibniz’s monadology in G.H. Mead, “The Objective Reality of Perspectives”, in Selected Writings, p. 344, and Mind, Self and Society, p. 201.
life, and of conflict as the driver of moral progress; and the three-fold dimension of the recognition order underpinning society.

The struggle at the heart of both individual and social life is that between the “Me” and the “I”. As we saw, the “I” is that fund of affective, pre-social drives, which continuously reacts, “comments” on the social life as the latter is integrated into the self. As with the “I” of epistemic self-relation, the “I” of practical life is both antecedent to the social self, yet can be retraced only afterwards, as the affective, impulsive reaction to the conventional behaviour demanded of the self by social norms. This conflictual relationship within the self, between its normalised and its impulsive sides, is the core mechanism of both individual and social progress. This is because the “I” can fulfil its own impulsive demands only by attempting to widen beyond what exists factually, the circle of external social positions, which in return, make up its own self. In other words, the “I” attempts to create, or anticipate, the “Me” that it would have to be in order for its “I”-demands to be fulfilled.

Mead has in mind situations in which a subject senses inner impulses to act in a way that is hampered by the rigid norms of society. What Mead views as specific to these cases is that they allow the individual involved actively to resolve his or her moral conflict only by carrying out a particular form of idealisation: if one is to realise the demands of one’s ‘I’, one must be able to anticipate a community in which one is entitled to have those desires satisfied. This becomes unavoidable because by questioning intersubjectively accepted norms one eliminates the internal conversation partner to whom one had previously been able to justify one’s action. Thus, what comes to take the place of the ‘generalised other’ of the existing community is that of a future society, in which one’s individual claims would, prospectively, be accepted.41

Unsurprisingly, Honneth interprets this dialectic in terms of recognition. But he cannot use the notion of “struggle for recognition” in this case, since the forces in presence here are not “two consciousnesses”, but either the same self divided in itself between social and internal pressures, or the self and its social environment. Only indirectly, by pointing out that every self is also rep-

resentative of a certain position within the functional organisation of society, could the notion of a dialectic between self and society lead to the idea of a struggle for recognition between social groups, yet Honneth does not take up that possibility.

This conflictual mechanism is a source of individual development as a constant pressure to move beyond fixed social roles and adapt them to one’s personality. In the motto “individuation through socialisation”, the emphasis is first of all on individuation. The ‘I’ learns more and more about itself as it learns to deal in its own ways with the social pressures and constraints, which at first had provided the guidelines allowing for its self to emerge at all. A dialectic of conformity and uniqueness is at play here, or to put it in Hegelian terms, a dialectic of universality and particularity as leading to a strong individuality. And in both Mead and Hegel, the dialectic has a temporal dimension encapsulated in the idea that the interplay between the adaptation to external norms and conventions and the emergence of an autonomous, idiosyncratic self, is a process of education, of Bildung.\(^4\) Habermas very usefully helps us to see that this process of education of the self has two distinctive dimensions: one where the self learns to control its own behaviour from the perspective of societal expectations (self-determination); the other where it learns to develop its own existential, biographical uniqueness, its true individuality (self-realisation). The progress that the dialectic of the ‘Me’ and the ‘I’ carries with it is therefore simultaneously moral and ethical, to maintain the Hegelian trope.

As Habermas and Honneth remark, Mead here is located in the great tradition of thought that saw the emergence of sociology: the attempt to come to terms with the two concurrent phenomena of increase in individualisation and the complexification and differentiation of society. This leads to the obverse side of the dialectic: moral and ethical progress is also that of the social itself. Mead never tires of emphasising the fact that democratic and economic development lead inevitably to an ever-increasing widening of the borders of societies, with the possibility of a “membership in human society” becoming an ever more “real” goal.\(^3\)

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The spheres of recognition in Mead

Finally, Honneth looks for the three spheres of recognition in Mead himself. The first sphere, that of intimacy, which Hegel located in the family, is not really to be found in Mead. As we saw, his ontogenetic interest lets him focus on the process of socialisation as internalisation and gradual abstraction of the concrete behaviour patterns of attachment figures, not on the sense of being cared for and having one’s needs fulfilled, as Hegel had described it. Once again, the emphasis is functional rather than normative.

By contrast, on Honneth’s reading, Mead brings essential new elements to the conceptualisation of the second sphere, the sphere of rights and of the recognition of the individual’s moral autonomy and responsibility. The previous analysis has cast some doubts on Honneth’s interpretation of Mead’s theory of socialisation as a theory of “mutual recognition”. Be that as it may, it is undeniable though that Mead saw the relationship of the self to the “generalised other” as leading to a universal recognition of individual rights. This is undeniable from the very logic at play in this dialectic: if to become a true subject is to internalise the general norms of a social body, to be integrated in it, the outcome of such socialisation processes is not just that one will be adapted, functionally, to the behaviours and expectations of others, that one will know what to do in given social situations. Another crucial outcome is that one will also know what to expect from the others, what one will be entitled to as a result of one’s socialisation. In other words, one will not only know one’s duties, but also one’s rights. Honneth describes this point as “not just a theoretical amendment, but a substantive deepening”, because it brings to light what is from now on the crux of his normative social philosophy, the idea of positive relationship to oneself:

At the individual level, the experience of being recognised as a legal person by the members of one’s community ensures that one can develop a positive attitude towards oneself. For in realising that they are obliged to respect one’s rights, they ascribe to one the quality of morally responsible agency.44

This identity between belonging to a community, being a self in that community, and having rights, had another very important consequence for Honneth:

44 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 80.
it drew the attention to the absolute centrality of rights and the institution of the law for a normative understanding of both subjectivity and social life. A given social order can be characterised through the type of rights that it recognises for individuals and the extent to which these rights are actually applied to groups and classes. And the law constitutes a crucial mediating factor for the positive relationship to oneself, which is constitutive of a subject’s personal identity.

Similarly, the conflict between the “Me” and the “I”, the idealising and anticipating process whereby a subject rejects an existing state of social life and projects herself into a new stage where identity can be fully recognised, that process was also formulated in terms of an anticipation of new rights, as the reverse image of the unjust existing legal order. The ideal, anticipated community in which the “I” can find its identity fulfilled is an “enlarged community of rights”.

Furthermore, Honneth recognises a third feature that becomes a central thought in his own social philosophy: the idea that the enlargement of legal recognition has two different aspects,

In the first sense, the concept captures the process by which all members of a community experience a gain in personal autonomy in virtue of having their rights expanded. The community is ‘enlarged’ in the internal sense that the measure of individual liberty in that society increases. In the second sense, the same concept also stands for the process by which the rights existing within a given community are extended to an even-larger circle of persons.45

Honneth thus finds already in Mead essential features of his own political philosophy: the “universalisation of social norms” on the one hand, and the “expansion of individual freedom” on the other.

Finally, Mead’s social psychology did not clearly separate aspects of the self that would correspond exactly to the second and third sphere of recognition. However, the end of the section entitled “The Realisation of the Self in the Social Situation” does distinguish between two different types of

“self-respect”. The first is the one that an individual is granted by doing
his or her duties as a member of society. “We do belong to the community
and our self-respect depends on our recognition of ourselves as such self-
respecting individuals.” But this is not enough, says Mead. We also “want
to recognise ourselves in our differences from other persons”. This repeats
the difference between the universal recognition of the individual as a moral
subject, a bearer of rights equal to all other individuals in the community, and
the recognition of the individual in his or her uniqueness, as having special
capacities and qualities. The problem that Honneth finds in Mead’s delinea-
tion of a different type of recognition, beyond the legal one, is that it remains
too tied to the functional division of labour. Mead defines this third type of
recognition simply as doing one’s duty better than others, and wanting to
have one’s specific skill recognised as such. Mead thus attempts to distinguish
the third from the second sphere from within the social division of labour. The
recognition of one’s identity is the recognition of how well one performs one’s
social duty. In criticism of Mead, Honneth highlights the fact that above and
beyond the division of labour, the more general “ethical goals” (Zielsetzungen)
are the determining normative force. These goals, as Honneth argues, are ulti-
mately the principles which define the recognition of individual achievement.
They determine what counts as achievement and what remains invisible, and
the exact social value of each achievement on the social scale. The fundamen-
tal premise of Honneth’s vision of society comes across quite clearly here: that
society is integrated around core values that over-determine societal subsys-
tems, including the division of labour. Mead’s reliance on the social division
of labour for the third sphere of recognition is problematic because it fails to
locate the place where the normative crux of the recognition of identity lies:
in the “common value convictions”. Mead thus fails to see the most difficult
and decisive problem of modern, “post-traditional” societies, that is to say
of societies in which the individual is sufficiently liberated from traditional
forms of life to be able to define its own path, its own biographical unique-
ness. This problem is:

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47 Ibid., p. 205.
the issue of how to define the ethical convictions found in a ‘generalised other’ in such a way that, on the one hand, they are substantive enough to allow any and every individual to become conscious of his or her particular contribution to the societal life-process, and yet, on the other hand, they are formal enough not to end up restricting the historically developed latitude for personal self-realisation.48

By reducing the problem to that of the social division of labour, Mead, according to Honneth, failed to grasp the full extent of the problem, and proposed a reductive solution to it. This is another way of pointing to the functionalism of Mead’s solution.

However, despite the truncated aspect of Mead’s characterisation of the third sphere of recognition, it retains a great advantage over Hegel’s early concept of *Sittlichkeit*. The latter had propounded a theory of ethical life as synonymous with “solidarity”, which seemed to solve the conundrum of modern societies: how the individual could be both fully individuated whilst still participating in a strong ethical life. But the problem is that, under the condition of post-traditional society, the notion of a substantive ethical life runs up against the necessity to preserve value pluralism. And with this, it becomes difficult to show how there could be any shared belief about the good life which would unite the individuated subjects. Mead’s reliance on the social division of labour allows one to see this problem and also the direction in which the solution can be found:

> Without the addition of an orientation to shared goals and values—the sort of thing Mead was pursuing in an objectivistic manner with his idea of a functional division of labour—the concept of solidarity lacks the underpinning of a motivating experiential nexus.49

The direction of Honneth’s own solution to the descriptive, normative and critical issues facing social theory emerges quite clearly as a result of this rereading of Mead. His solution is based on the idea that the ultimate integration mechanism of society occurs around “common goals and values”, but it


acknowledges the fact that these goals and values, and the model of a “good life” that they imply, can only be a highly formal type since they must also give the individual freedom in his or her existential choice. The concept of a “formal Sittlichkeit” is the answer to that conundrum. But the other aspect of Honneth’s own theory to also emerge clearly from the rereading of Hegel and Mead is that social integration around core values and goals is a constantly fluctuating process where conflict plays a major transformative role.

The deficiencies noted by Honneth in both Hegel and Mead dictated the latter stages of his elaboration of a new model in social theory. Hegel had helped to distinguish between three spheres of recognition. Mead had helped to “naturalise” this model and make it viable for contemporary methodological concerns, but in Mead’s social psychology the three spheres are diluted, so to speak. The next stage in Honneth’s research therefore consisted in a detailed development of each of the three spheres, maintaining the key premises that had conducted the return to Hegel and Mead: intersubjectivism, pragmatism and the determining role of conflict.
Part Three

The Theory of Recognition as New Critical Social Theory
This chapter brings together the different elements introduced in the previous sections, to present the full image of Honneth’s mature model of critical social theory. In particular, the chapter concentrates on the three “spheres of recognition”. As the previous chapters dedicated to Hegel and Mead have already shown, the “spheres of recognition” designate the three fundamental types of normative interactions which, according to Honneth, are necessary for modern subjects to develop their full autonomy. The two key premises underlying such a claim are of course: first, a substantial account of autonomy that equates it with self-realisation; and secondly, the intersubjectivistic premise according to which subjects are structurally dependent on their fellow social beings for their self-realisation. Honneth finds in Hegel and Mead exactly three such types of normative conditions of subjective autonomy: one through which the subject’s affective life is secured (recognition through the intimate sphere); one through which the subject is able to see himself as equal to all, as full subject of rights (legal, universalistic recognition); and one through which the subject is able to see
her contribution to societal life validated (recognition of the individual’s “performance”). Since the spheres of recognition designate the conditions of subjective autonomy, they also provide, once they’re applied in the negative, the criteria of social critique: different forms of social injustice correspond to the different types of attacks made on the different possible claims of recognition. Social theory, the theory of justice and social critique thus come together in the concept of recognition.

The chapter seeks to show that a great part of the criticisms directed at the ethics of recognition are misdirected, when the exact methodological status of Honneth’s claims is considered. This chapter’s aim is thus simply to present the mature model of recognition. More critical distance is taken in the following chapters, as they attempt to characterise the strengths and weaknesses of the model.

**The notion of practical self-relation**

The first concept to focus on, because it is the most important one and also the one that has been the source of most misunderstandings, is that of “practical self-relation”. This is the concept that in a sense carries the whole structure of Honneth’s model of social theory. Practical self-relation designates the basic conditions of selfhood, which, by allowing for the emergence of a sufficiently robust identity, enable the subject to engage in interaction with its environments. In Honneth, practical self-relation is thus tightly connected to, indeed almost overlaps with, the notion of “practical identity”.

The core idea is that for a human agent to be an agent in the full sense of the term, notably in the normative sense, that is to say, an agent who can act freely and in full responsibility, a necessary condition is that the agent must have been able to develop a sufficiently strong identity. In other words the originality of Honneth’s concept of freedom, the dimension that contrasts it from other theories of freedom, is that it relies squarely on a social-psychological stance. This basic idea is intuitively fathomable as soon as it is given a critical

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1 See the very first sentence of Chapter 5 of *The Struggle for Recognition*, which refers to “the practical identity formation of human beings”.
twist: one gives only an abstract, or truncated, notion of subjective freedom, with serious negative implications down the track (for example in terms of moral and political philosophy) if one abstracts from the conditions that make identity possible, the identity that is required for action to be possible at all. As a result of this focus on the conditions of praxis via the question of the identity of the agent, practical self-relation and practical identity are therefore also intimately connected with the notion of “personal integrity”. This approach to the questions of practical agency and freedom constitutes Honneth’s own appropriation of the argument, well explored and articulated by the German philosophers who defined the philosophical context in which the theory of recognition grew in the 1990s (Tugendhat, Habermas and Wildt), that it is abstract to define self-determination in separation from self-realisation. As the recourse to Mead also showed, the question of freedom cannot be solved without considering the dimension of inner freedom in tandem with that of outer freedom: the merely negative definition of freedom as absence of external obstacles to individual action is incomplete because a subject without a sufficiently robust identity, even if granted formal rights and protections, will not be considered a truly autonomous agent, simply because they won’t be able to act in full freedom.3

Naturally, this primary notion of self-relation is complemented by the intersubjectivistic premise: basic features of selfhood can be achieved only through and thanks to “the experience of intersubjective recognition”. The conditions of freedom, especially of inner freedom, are to a large extent social conditions. It is this argument, which explains the structural link in Honneth between subject theory and social theory. This is without a doubt the most characteristic feature of his thinking, and for his critics the weakest point in his model.

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3 See Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 174 for the explicit distinction between conditions of “external and internal freedom”. The key reference here is clearly Charles Taylor’s famous critique of “negative freedom”.

Honneth summarises the entire argument succinctly as he introduces the phenomenological and empirical confirmations of the three spheres of recognition:

the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one’s partners in interaction, as their social addressee.\(^5\)

This summary is a good illustration of the way in which Honneth brings together functional and normative dimensions. The idea of recognition, following on from Mead, has first of all a functional import: it explains the first problem that social theory is concerned with, the problem of the coordination of individual actions. Mead’s solution is precisely that it is the psychological mechanism by which human agents are able to see themselves from the perspective of the other, which explains also how “the reproduction of social life” is possible. It is this fundamental intuition that the basic ontological stuff of social life is in fact made up of recognitive interactions that explains why Honneth could defend such unfashionable propositions in contemporary social theory, as, for example, the analysis of redistributive struggles in terms of recognition. All social phenomena in Honneth need to be approached from a socio-psychological perspective because ultimately it is that perspective, as Mead demonstrated, which provides the proper explanation of social actions as coordination of individual actions.

The crux and central difficulty in Honneth’s approach is that the functional is intimately linked to the normative. There is no problem in deriving the “ought” from the “is” for Honneth, because the mechanism explaining the possibility of social coordination is the same mechanism that accounts for the conditions of autonomy. The normative conclusion that Honneth draws from Mead’s theory of social integration is that, since the subject can achieve an identity only through relations of reciprocal recognition, those relations in turn have not only a functional import, but also a decisive normative one: they determine directly the capacity for a subject to achieve an identity, so that there can be a subject of action in the first place. Because of the extremely

\(^5\) Ibid.
deep level at which social relations condition and determine subjective identity, the argument makes it impossible to distinguish more than analytically between the functional adaptation of the subject to social life, and the normative conditions of autonomous action. This explains why in the passage just quoted Honneth can conclude directly from the functionalist argument about the reproduction of social life to an “imperative”: it is because the very identity and integrity of socialised subjects depends on the structures that also explain their integration in social life.

The functionalist thesis of a radical social dependency of the subject leads to the normative thesis of an imperative built into social integration: namely, that the latter should not make the very formation of subjective identity truncated, unbalanced or indeed, in view of the historical cases of severe social pathologies diagnosed by earlier critical theorists, impossible. This in fact is what is entailed in “self-realisation” for Honneth. Therefore, one forms an inaccurate image of his thought, if one understands “self-realisation”, in its common, more superficial, usage, as the full flourishing of an otherwise already established self. Because Honneth follows Mead in thinking that the self is totally dependent on society for its formation, “self-realisation” means first of all the formation of identity, the formation of a self. Of course, the common denotation of the term self-realisation is also implied: the fulfilment of subjective capacities and desires. But it is crucial to see that Honneth means more by that than just ethical potentiality: there can be no flourishing if there is no self to flourish. Self-realisation in Honneth refers first of all to the ontological possibility of subjective identity before the ethical notion of the good life. In fact, the idea is not just that in order to be a full self, one needs to already be a self, something that requires minimally conducive social conditions of possibility; even more radically, it is the idea that, to a certain extent, one is not a real self if one is not a full self. In concrete terms, this means for example that even if rights are granted, it is abstract to speak of freedom in a world that makes the full development of subjectivity structurally impossible.6

6 This shows that criticisms that target Honneth’s “ethical turn” miss the radicality of his argument. The most violent attack on recognition theory from that perspective was conducted by Nikolas Kompridis in his “From Reason to Self-Realisation? Axel Honneth and the ‘Ethical Turn’ in Critical Theory”.


To grasp the exact meaning and scope of Honneth’s approach, it is useful to refer to Emmanuel Renault’s reformulation of it. In order to fully capture the originality of Honneth’s theory of recognition in its grounding of normativity, Renault develops the following, negative argument: if an individual no longer considers hers- or himself to have any value in their actions, in other words, if they lack all “positive self-relations”, then there will be no point in acting for them. A norm of action therefore requires, as a quasi-transcendental condition of possibility, a more originary condition: that the subject of action itself already exists as being normatively significant, and more precisely, as being normatively significant to itself. This is precisely what the spheres of recognition discuss: those minimal conditions that enable a subject to develop a minimal sense of his or her own value; a “self-value” that is the most basic requirement for any action with a minimal amount of autonomy. Before “self-realisation” in the common sense, recognition first makes possible that minimal “ontological” realisation of a self that is required for any action to make any sense to the self itself. At the deepest level, the normative demands for recognition are therefore not secondary demands stemming from pre-constituted selves, but demands for the realisation of conditions without which there can be absolutely no autonomy because there would be no self to exercise autonomy. As Renault points out, in the theory of recognition demands for recognition are not to be taken at first in a psychological sense. More primordially, they point to the conditions of possibility of normative practical life in general. This is a crucial point to make notably because so many critical readings of Honneth take recognition demands as mere expressions of psychological needs, and fail to see the depth at which those demands are pitched.

All the remaining components of Honneth’s core model stem from this core intuition whereby self-determination and self-realisation are co-original, and the functional is tied directly to the normative.

First, the immediate consequence of the internalisation model of subjective self-relation, is that different types of recognition, entailing different types of internalised normative outlooks, produce different types of self-relation.

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7 See the powerful pages of L’Expérience de l’Injustice, pp. 121-124.
Before being grounded in the historical process of societal differentiation, the three spheres of recognition have a kind of taxonomic, or abstract, conceptual justification: they exhaust the ways in which a subject might be viewed normatively from the outside, in terms of “worth”, and thereupon relate to herself: as a being with particular needs; as a being comparable to all the others; and as a being unique in her capacities and contributions.

Second, the normative dimension of “reciprocal recognition”, the fact that it is an “imperative”, entails a crucial dynamic moment. It points to the fact that there can always be “more of” reciprocal recognition. Since subjective formation and social integration are intimately interlinked, this means both an expansion of subjective identity features, and an expansion of recognition at the social level. The latter, as we know already from the readings of Hegel and Mead, means both an extension of rights for the individual, and an extension in the granting of rights to groups, classes and communities. Built into the notion of an “imperative” of reciprocal recognition, with its attendant dynamic of subjective and social expansion, is therefore also that of an immanent moral progress.

Finally, both Hegel and Mead point to the fact that this normative expansion results from “struggles for recognition” that aim to enforce the institutional recognition of as yet unrecognised identity features of individuals and groups.

**The problem of empirical verification**

The heart of Honneth’s proposal consists in an “actualisation” of the models of social integration and subjective formation inspired by Hegel and Mead through the recourse to contemporary “empirical sciences”. Honneth attempts to give some flesh to the basic social-theoretical schemes identified in Hegel and Mead by relating them to contemporary studies which seem to vindicate them and provide them with more detailed content. This is another area of his model that could be seen to present a particularly weak point. There might well be a suspicion of arbitrariness or circularity in Honneth’s methodology. A conceptual scheme, say the idea of primary, affective recognition, is said to be confirmed by psychological object-relations theory, but the question arises in the first place whether that particular psychological theory was not selected
amongst all the other possible precisely because it confirms Hegel’s concept of love. A sceptical reader could argue that what needs to be proven guides the choice of evidence which then, unsurprisingly, reconfirms the first premise. With this possible suspicion of circularity, the accusation of arbitrariness becomes a real possibility: why those psychological, legal-historical, sociological models, and not others? Before delving onto the specificity of each of the three spheres, it seems important to examine briefly the precise methodological link between historical-conceptual reconstruction (Hegel and Mead), the systematic construction (practical self-relation; the three spheres; the struggle for recognition), and empirical confirmation (object-relation psychology; history of rights; historical emergence of the achievement principle, and so on).

What exactly does empirical research confirm in chapter 5 of The Struggle for Recognition? What is the exact nature of such “confirmation”?

Honneth’s justification reads as follows:

> The three-part division that both authors appear to make among forms of recognition requires a justification that goes beyond what has been said thus far. The extent to which such a distinction actually fits anything in the structure of social relations is something that must be demonstrated by showing that this way of distinguishing phenomena can be brought into approximate agreement with the results of empirical research.\(^8\)

This means in particular, focusing on the experiences of love, right and solidarity, “to make fruitful connections to the results of research in individual sciences”, in order to more specifically test two specific points: the differentiated types of self-relations and the potential for moral development (in which, to recall, the origin of struggle is to be found):

> whether the three patterns of relationships can in fact be distinguished in such a way that they form independent types with regard to the medium of recognition, the form of the relation-to-self made possible, and the potential for moral development.\(^9\)

\(^8\) Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 94.

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 95.
What Honneth seeks in “empirical research” is thus centrally focused on the different types of practical self-relation, and their assumed intersubjective dependency. What needs to be empirically confirmed and justified, above all, is the claim that modern individuals are able to develop a practical identity, the condition of their practical autonomy, by being allowed to “relate to themselves” in three separate, fundamental ways, and that these fundamental modes of self-relation, being intersubjectively constituted, are both the source of vulnerability and irreducible tension, and thus the origin of both conflict and progress.

In a later presentation of his model, in the discussion with Nancy Fraser, Honneth approaches this question of the empirical validation of the three-sphere model through a negative methodology: what are, he asks, “the normative perspectives” from which “the subjects themselves evaluate the social order”; what are the “identity claims” that subjects “expect from society”, and which, when they fail to be fulfilled, are responsible for the experiences of “social injustice”? This negative way of relating to each other the conceptual reconstruction and the empirical verification was in fact already implicitly at play in The Struggle for Recognition. In that book, the order of discovery is not reflected in the order of presentation. From the beginning, as the previous chapters have shown in detail, Honneth’s enterprise is guided by a negativistic methodology, grounded in a negative phenomenology: the central phenomenon is that of the experience of injustice, because it is the experience that a critical theory of society defined by its link to practice must necessarily place at the foreground; and this then leads to the attempt to develop the appropriate conceptual grammar to describe this experience. The later delineation of the different types of damage and destruction of self-relations in chapter 6 of the book, in fact represent the actual starting point of Honneth’s inquiries.

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10 Fraser & Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition?, pp. 130-134.

It is useful to approach Honneth sceptically from the perspective of the methodological suspicions of arbitrariness and circularity (why precisely those fields of “empirical research” and not others?), or question-begging (the empirical research proves the very premise that had led to the focus on precisely that specific research in the first place), as they help to highlight important features of his methodology: namely, its specific forms of sociological positivism and historicism. I must stress immediately that these two terms are meant here in a positive sense, not in a critical one.

The basic empirical background is constituted by a certain narrative of modernity: according to Honneth, there is a consensus amongst historians, sociologists and social theorists, about the nature of the shift to modern society. This shift is synonymous with an unlocking of the individual from traditional life-worlds, which enables the individual to relate to herself or himself normatively from separate perspectives that were previously not differentiated as clearly. The ethics of recognition therefore relies on a diagnosis of modernity as structural differentiation, which it interprets normatively as the differentiation of forms of practical self-relation, in other words, as the emergence of different concepts of the person. Although Honneth does not particularly emphasise it and despite his initial uneasiness with the *Philosophy of Right*, this is in fact a strong echo of Hegel’s delineation of the different normative meanings of “being a person” as a result of the differentiation of the spheres of modern society.\(^\text{12}\)

Against the background of this reading of modernity, we can focus first of all on what is for Honneth simply a result of the social-scientific inquiries regarding the normative nature and origin of experiences of injustice. This indicates an undeniable (very Hegelian) faith in sociological inquiry, a form of sociological positivism in Honneth. Under “empirical research”, Honneth famously understands more specifically: contemporary revisions of psychoanalysis, in relation to the first sphere; and for the two other spheres, the

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\(^\text{12}\) As is well known, in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel distinguishes between the person (the bearer of rights), the subject (the moral subject), the bourgeois, the citizen and the historical individual.
empirical data furnished by historical research: that is, research in historical sociology, the sociology of social movements and the classical tradition of social theory. From his very first encounter with Barrington Moore’s and E.P. Thompson’s famous studies on the German and English working classes, Honneth will never renounce the idea that the moral core of social struggles has been empirically demonstrated. Historical, moral progress and the social-scientific study of it have demonstrated, as an indisputable fact, that modern subjects expect specific forms of recognition as conditions of their own well-being. In very simple terms, it is in fact historical studies themselves that have emphasised the normative core of all modern progressive social movements:

What gives rise to—indeed compels—such a categorical revision are the findings that have been compiled concerning the moral sources of the experience of social discontent.13

The “categorical revision” refers to the shift towards a recognition paradigm in social theory. What historical studies have “all” proven as fact, according to Honneth, is that individuals caught up in the modern rupture have expressed new forms of social suffering, and made new types of demands, which all point to the moral feelings of misrecognition, or of denials of recognition, as their origin. Additionally, of course, on the basis of this interpretation of modernity as a process of normative differentiation, the “compiled results of research” also confirm the content and structure of each of the three separately delineated spheres. But their first lesson, so to speak, is the independent confirmation of the conceptual model. They all converge towards the establishment of methodologically fallible but empirically confirmed facts: the moral fabric of feelings of injustice and the moral core of social movements.

The image of the overall methodological approach used by Honneth that emerges from this interaction between conceptual analysis and empirical studies is therefore not so much that of principle and verification, but rather

13 Fraser & Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition?, p. 133. More literally, the German says: ‘zusammengetragene Forschungsergebnisse’, literally, the ‘compiled results of research’. The German expression puts the emphasis on the social philosopher’s active role in “compiling”, or “bringing together”, results from different disciplines concerning the same phenomena.
of *isonomy*. The reliance on different “empirical” disciplines leads to the discovery of a convergence of the “results of research”, a convergence which confirms in turn the conceptual reconstruction operated within Hegel and Mead. Rather than a relation of conceptual hypothesis to empirical verification, or of conceptual adduction from the empirical, the conceptual and the empirical mutually reinforce each other from their different perspectives.

In the end, the demonstration by isonomy in fact encompasses a lot more than just the conceptual reconstruction of the two “intersubjectivist” philosophers and historical and sociological disciplines. It becomes a general feature of Honneth’s overall project. The theory of modernity, contemporary psychology, the history of subjective rights and the sociology of individual and group status all point to the same fundamental fact: namely, that modern subjects depend on different types of social recognition for the establishment of their identity and the possibility of autonomous agency. This general convergence corresponds with an even more abstract one, the philosophical paradigm-shift towards intersubjectivity, which inspired the return to Hegel and Mead as the two great founders of that paradigm. Honneth’s model is thus underpinned by a general, consistent isonomy, or, as in the case of classical sociology, by a general “convergence”: the general philosophical thesis of the intersubjectivistic shift (that the subject is intersubjectively constituted) is confirmed by the development of contemporary psychology, which itself undergoes an intersubjectivistic shift. This social dependency of the subject leads to the notion of a substantial link between social integration and subject formation. This in turn expresses the need to adopt a normative outlook in social theory, an outlook that is confirmed by historical sociology and the sociology of social movements. In terms of the immanent history of the Frankfurt School, such a development towards the intersubjective and the normative reproduces the shift from the first to the second generation, and demands a different, critical reappropriation of Marx, and ultimately, of Hegel, and so on.\(^\text{14}\)

Such “positivistic” interpretation of conceptual and empirical studies which alleges a convergence of results, however, is also underpinned by a strong historicist tendency. It is essential to stress that it is the narrative of societal

\(^{14}\) See my “Reflective Critical Theory: a Systematic Reconstruction of Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy”. 
differentiation itself that, for Honneth, already contains, as a story of a normative differentiation, a subsequent delineation of separate spheres of normative demands, of which one can count precisely three. This aspect of Honneth’s thinking is linked to the central notion of “post-traditional society”. This designates therefore a second kind of extra-philosophical confirmation of the “practical self-relation” philosophical approach, one that is different from the link with the special historical and psychological sciences. It is the fact of systemic differentiation itself, interpreted normatively, which according to Honneth leads to the three spheres of recognition and the thesis of a constitutive struggle for recognition.

It can be noted, for example that an important argument justifying Honneth’s substantive reliance on Mead is the premise that he shares with each of the founding fathers of social theory, Weber, Simmel and Durkheim: namely, that the separation of social spheres and the great social complexification that ensues, provoke simultaneously an as yet unknown process of individualization.15 And like many other social theorists, Honneth interprets this increase in individuality as a normative progress, to wit, as a progress in subjective autonomy. Honneth’s basic idea is in fact just the same as Hegel’s: that modern society makes possible a progress in “subjective freedom” which is linked substantially to the fact that different spheres of social life come to be differentiated.

The key concept, as said, is that of “post-traditional society”. It is based on the idea that the differentiation of separate social spheres was triggered by the dismantling of metaphysical and religious narratives which provided transcendent foundations for the rigid societal frameworks of “traditional society”.16 Traditional and “post-traditional” societies can be contrasted by comparing the ways in which they define the values and the personality types

15 This reminder is significant especially in the light of criticisms that question Honneth’s historicism. Once again, Kompridis’ violent critique in “From Reason to Self-realisation?” is the sharpest attack to date in this direction.

16 In Recognition or Redistribution?, Honneth names in particular the two forces of modern political ideas, the recognition of radical equality, in the ideological, and the context-bursting power of capitalism, in the material, as the two major forces behind the demise of traditional frameworks, see p. 140.
corresponding to their societal aims. Traditional societies are said to have been “integrated” around rigid norms and values that corresponded to societal aims anchored in and justified by religious and metaphysical belief systems.\textsuperscript{17} These rigid cultural frameworks were expressed and translated in highly constraining normative behavioural models that specified group-specific qualities and capacities contributing towards these substantial social aims; typical behavioural models that were of course hierarchically ordered. In such traditional orders, recognition was already present to a limited extent, granted internally as a result of an individual belonging to a specific social group and fulfilling his or her social roles. But recognition was certainly not a social force operating on the general social level, because much more powerful counter-forces of social integration were effective. With the demise of religious and metaphysical references, the objectivity of hierarchical value systems was radically undermined. Since those ideological references underpinned and justified social segregation and in particular the rigid scales of ethical frames of individual existence, their demise resulted in an epoch-changing, radically expanded, egalitarian meaning of recognition.

As a result of this historical shift, a fundamental structural transformation occurs: the social standing of individuals is no longer defined by their group-belonging. On the one hand, social integration no longer occurs along the hierarchical scale of values and norms, but through value representations vying for their recognition as valid ways of achieving the general ethical aims. Since, however, these group-specific values are now fragmented and pluralised and the general ethical aims themselves are open for challenge—the result of open-ended compromises between social forces—social integration is now structurally destabilised, and unremittingly open to conflict. The destruction of vertical hierarchies underpinned by rigid value systems opens an era of indefinite social questioning. Conflict is structurally inscribed in the very heart of modern society because of its open mechanism of integration.

\textsuperscript{17} Honneth, \textit{The Struggle for Recognition}, pp. 123-127, and also “Posttraditionale Gemeinschaften. Ein konzeptueller Vorschlag”, in \textit{Das Andere Der Gerechtigkeit}, pp. 328-338; and also \textit{Redistribution or Recognition?}, pp. 139-140. The same line of arguments runs right through to Honneth’s latest sociological writings on neo-capitalism, see chapter 12.
This is a point that cannot be stressed enough: there is an *historical grounding* of the struggle for recognition. As a result, the critics who question the idea of struggle in *The Struggle for Recognition* need to explain how they themselves account for the core problem of social theory, namely the problematic character of social integration once value-pluralism has emerged.

At the same time, since social status is no longer tied to group belonging, and with the pluralisation of ethical values, the process of full individuation receives a tremendous acceleration, notably through the competition between individuals and groups for the achievement of social esteem.\textsuperscript{18} As Honneth writes:

> It is only from this point on that the subject entered the contested field of social esteem as an entity individuated in terms of a particular life-history.\textsuperscript{19}

Such social competition opens up two distinct dimensions of subjectivity vying for recognition. Firstly, since the modernity thesis Honneth adopts argues that normative hierarchies are no longer effective, any individual has (ideally) the right to assert its own normative status: this is the basis for the modern axiom of universal equality. But that basic equality according to which everyone is entitled to the recognition of their equal moral status is expected also for the recognition of a normative specificity. In a twist impossible to disentangle, subjects therefore, for the first time, appear as universal subjects of rights and at the same time as particular subjects that can be recognised for their unique qualities and performances. The spheres of recognition thus result directly from the conceptual reconstruction of the shift to “post-traditional society”\textsuperscript{18}. In other words, even if some empirical studies came to be discarded as a result of the progress in their specific scientific discipline, this would not affect directly the delineation of the spheres of recognition as they emerge initially from the interpretation of modernity. This interpretation can well be questioned, but

\textsuperscript{18} See also Honneth’s critical review of Ulrich Beck in “Aspekte der Individualisierung” in *Desintegration*, pp. 20-28, in which he articulates a similar view of modernity, from a social-theoretical perspective. The normative framework established in Honneth’s most famous book is directly indebted to his studies in social theory.

\textsuperscript{19} Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 125.
it relies on premises that have been those of a great majority of historical and contemporary studies in social theory.

To catch a glimpse of the strong historicist justification of the spheres of recognition, and to begin to direct our attention to each of these spheres specifically, it might be worth quoting the following summary that introduces the three spheres in the book written with Nancy Fraser:

The distinctively human dependence on intersubjective recognition is always shaped by the particular manner in which the mutual granting of recognition is institutionalised within a society. From a methodological point of view, this consideration has the consequence that subjective expectations of recognition cannot simply be derived from an anthropological theory of the person. To the contrary, it is the most highly differentiated recognition spheres that provide the key for retrospective speculation on the peculiarity of the intersubjective ‘nature’ of human beings. Accordingly, the practical self-relation of human beings—the capacity, made possible by recognition, to reflexively assure themselves of their own competences and rights—is not something given once and for all; like subjective recognition expectations, this ability expands with the number of spheres that are differentiated in the course of social development for socially recognising specific components of the personality.20

In this second presentation of the historical underpinning of the three spheres of recognition, pressed by the difficult objections raised in Zurn’s review,21 Honneth clearly wants to dispel the impression given by some passages of *The Struggle for Recognition*, that his normative theory of ethics and politics emerges directly as a consequence of an anthropological theory, from a theory of “human nature”. Instead, he states here very clearly how any anthropological conclusion must be made as a retrospective conclusion drawn from historical developments.

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20 Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 138.
21 Zurn, “Anthropology and Normativity”.
The first sphere of recognition

The first sphere of recognition is first not only in a genetic, but also in a logical sense, since it relates to the establishment of the most basic conditions of subjective agency. This sphere accounts for the minimal affirmative and practical acknowledgement of a subject’s needs that is structurally necessary to help the latter build a sufficient degree of physical and psychic self-confidence required to engage in social life. Basically, without experiencing a minimal degree of care, especially in one’s formative years, one will not be able to develop the capacities required to exercise outer and inner freedom.

The first aspect to stress about the first sphere is the number of uncertainties surrounding it, notably between its characterisations in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1992) and *Redistribution or Recognition* (2003). *The Struggle for Recognition* gave the impression that only the other two spheres are the historical products of social and normative differentiation, that is, emerge with “post-conventional” and “post-traditional” ethics. However, the reference to Luhmann’s book on love shows that Honneth did not have a trans-historical, anthropological feature in mind, when discussing the normative structure of “love” relationships, but rather the specific type of affectivity that emerges with modern society, one that consists in “strong emotive relations between a limited number of persons”.

In *Redistribution or Recognition*, the historical relativity of modern love is emphasised more strongly:

> With the processes of institutionalisation—the marking off of childhood and the emergence of “bourgeois” love-marriage—a general awareness gradually arose of a separate kind of social relation, which, in contrast with other forms of interaction, is distinguished by the principles of affection and care.

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24 Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 139.
Later research has starkly questioned the conclusions of Philippe Ariès’ ground-breaking historical studies on the “emergence of childhood”. Honneth’s point, however, is relatively independent of those issues in social history since it concerns the institutionalisation of the intimate sphere rather than issues about its precise historical genealogy.

The same point can be made about the conception of Romantic love. One could well argue that, despite the fact that affective interpersonal relations came to be fully disentangled, “differentiated” from other social considerations (economic for example) only with the rise of bourgeois society, the specificity of the love-interaction, indeed the specificity of its normative weight, was already established well before the “modern” shift. The history of literature, for example, would testify to that. But once again, the main point is the institutional one: when does the specificity of the subject’s needs emerge as an “institution”, that is to say, as a separate reality within social life warranting specific claims from subjects?

The crucial aspect to discuss in this sphere is one that concerns the specific kind of “practical self-relation” that love and affective interactions make possible. With this second point, though, the historicised and institutionalist approach to affectivity is less clear. Indeed, it appears that, despite Zurn’s criticism and Honneth’s acknowledgement of the necessity to ground the normativity of recognition in a historical, rather than an anthropological argument, a substantial transhistorical element is preserved, even in the later texts:

In order to allow for the socialisation of progeny, the estate-based order of pre-modern society must already have rudimentarily developed the attitudes of care and love—without which children’s personalities cannot develop at all—as a separate form of recognition.

The small remark that without care and love “children’s personalities cannot develop at all” does seem here to be presented as being independent of the historical differentiation of institutional spheres that is characteristic of modernity. It seems to point to an anthropological feature of socialisation that is largely trans-historical and trans-cultural. Clearly, the claim of a substantial

26 Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 138.
link between affective recognition and subjective identity relates directly to Mead’s model of identity formation according to which the child develops structures of selfhood from interaction with, at first, concrete others.

Just as obviously, the link relates to Honneth’s reliance on object-relations theory. The general isonomy underpinning Honneth’s methodology concerns psychoanalysis more particularly, as object-relations theory achieves for him the same intersubjectivistic shift that he also sees at play in social theory, social philosophy and the philosophy of action. This is the first way in which Honneth justifies his recourse to the psychological models of Daniel Winnicott and Jessica Benjamin. As a result, Freud is said to rely on a subject-object model of consciousness, for whom, therefore, “the interaction partners of the child matter only to the extent that they appear as objects of libidinal projections”, whereas the progress in psychological research, according to Honneth, has been to highlight the “independent significance of emotional attachments”, in other words to shift from a subject-object to an intersubjectivistic model.27 Once again, a strong positivistic element is at work here, as Honneth does not hesitate to argue that the development of contemporary psychology has produced an incontrovertible new paradigm, one whose truth is best captured by interactionist psychoanalysis. To anticipate the criticism that the concluding chapter will develop, one could note that there also exist “interactionist” readings of Freud’s theory of the drive, which show the structural interrelation between bodily determination (the drive as biological) and the role of primary interactions.28 Indeed, even if the Oedipian logic is fuelled by somatic energy, it unfolds through strong attachments, projections and internalisations that resemble very much the internalisation process described by Mead.29 In this exegetical chapter though the focus should rest with the specific type of


practical self-relation and intersubjective struggle that object-relations theory allows Honneth to develop. As we will now see, it is here in fact that Honneth sees the strongest justification for a direct reliance of social theory on contemporary, interactionist psychoanalysis: the latter, he argues, provides an invaluable concept of recognition whose fruitfulness for social theory is immense.\textsuperscript{30}

Famously, Winnicott begins with a primary “symbiotic” unity between mother and child, where neither of the two interaction partners has yet managed to separate themselves from the other and thus become individuated. This first phase is crucial for the initial development of a unitary “body schema”, in other words, for the tentative first features of a “practical identity”: as the child is as yet unable to differentiate between him/herself and the environment, it is the care provided by the mother, especially her protecting and nurturing “holding”, through which “infants can learn to coordinate their sensory and motor experiences around a single centre”.\textsuperscript{31} Mother and child exit this primary symbiosis by gradually asserting and realising their independence from the other. This process, however, is a painful one since it means equally the realisation of the other’s independence, when previously a dreamlike, pleasurable fusion with her was experienced. Everything hangs on this “dialectic” of dependence and independence.

First, it gives a new, “intersubjectivistic” angle on the aggressive gestures of the infant once the unbroken continuity with the mother, which helped sustain the sense of omnipotence, has been ruptured by her repeated absences and the feeling of a growing distance from her. These gestures are no longer interpreted as the negative expressions of frustrated drives, or indeed as manifestations of the death drive, but rather as practical attempts to test that distance as well as the mother’s capacity and willingness to bridge it; in clear terms, her continued loving despite her absences, but also the cruel separation from her. At the same time, these aggressive outbursts bring the infant to a new stage of development as for the first time they attest to independent reality, and thus its own:

\textsuperscript{30} Honneth, \textit{The Struggle for Recognition}, p. 157.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 99.
in this sense, the child’s destructive, injurious acts do not represent the expression of an attempt to cope negatively with frustration, but rather comprise the constructive means by which the child can come to recognise the mother, unambivalently, as an ‘entity in its own right’.32

In other words, the struggle for recognition turns out to be a structural, quasi-anthropological moment of subjective formation. The work of Jessica Benjamin describes precisely the amazing overlaps between Hegel’s logic of struggle for recognition and the account of aggressive behaviour in object-relations theory. As we shall see again in the last chapter, the implications of this “subject-theoretical” theory of struggle are immense in Honneth’s thinking, especially in the latest writings.

Honneth gives an idea of the absolute centrality of this moment for his thinking when he notes that

This new stage of interaction, which Winnicott labels ‘relative independence’ encompasses all the decisive steps in the development of the child’s capacity to form attachments. (…) These analyses depict the emergence, in the relation between mother and child, of the ‘being oneself in another’ that represents the model for all more mature forms of love.33

It is not exaggerated to argue that, for Honneth, the primary relation of recognition, those affective bonds, which Hegel had so well characterised, especially in his Jena writings (to which the ‘being oneself in another’ expression refers), are constitutive features of subjectivity as a whole, beyond the “forms of love”.

A specific structure is entailed in the relationship between symbiosis and independence. In Winnicott’s model, whilst early symbiosis is indeed a necessary first step, it must be overcome for the subject to develop a strong enough sense of self. But the overcoming of symbiosis is not simply the realisation of independence, rather it is the realisation of independence within dependence, and so equally the continuation of dependence even after independence has

32 Ibid., p. 101.
33 Ibid., p. 100.
been established. This is what the famous concept of the “good enough” mother entails:

If the mother’s love is lasting and reliable, the child can simultaneously develop, under the umbrella of her intersubjective reliability, a sense of confidence in the social provision of the needs he or she has, and via the psychological path this opens up, a basic ‘capacity to be alone’ gradually develops in the child.34

Under this “capacity to be alone”, Honneth argues, we should understand precisely the development of subjective life and practical identity, the moment, that is, where the subject: “begins to discover, without anxiety, his or her ‘own personal life’”. We recognise the essential feature of autonomy described by Habermas in his rereading of Mead, namely the process whereby the subject gradually develops a full capacity for action as it gains access to and control over its own inner life by relying on internalised behavioural patterns. In other words, the internalisation of an image of the mother as a reliable existential pole of reference, combined with the simultaneous realisation of her actual independence leads to a specific form of self-relation, which is in fact the primordial condition for any subjective identity since it is the condition for the subject’s inner life in the first place.

Honneth stresses without ambiguity, already in The Struggle for Recognition, the extraordinary importance of this moment for the development of subjectivity. The last pages dedicated to the first sphere already generalise the structural importance of affective recognition, shifting suddenly from its role in the first sphere of intimate recognition to a much broader argument about subjectivity in social life in general.35 In Honneth’s recent writings, after 2000, affective recognition becomes the heart of the theory of recognition. In 1992, he simply notes that a general concept of affective recognition can be extracted from the specific relationship with the mother:

All love relationships are driven by the unconscious recollection of the original experience of merging that characterised the first months of life (...). The inner state of symbiotic oneness so radically shapes the experiential scheme

34 Ibid., p. 104.
of complete satisfaction that it keeps alive, behind the back of the subject, and throughout the subject’s life, the desire to be merged with another person.

The fundamental point at stake is not just that subjects continually seek to repeat the experience of the lost oneness with another person. Rather, the more precise structure at play is the “tension” between dependence (desire for symbiosis) and independence (not just the independence of the other, but also the independence of the subject, that is, his or her autonomously developed inner life). The primordial structure of subjective autonomy, in Honneth’s view, is therefore a tension between ego-boundaries and ego-dissolution: there can be a new experience of ego-dissolution only because the boundaries of the self and the boundaries of the other were recognised in the first place; but for those boundaries to be in place, the total care of another from whom one was not separated at first was necessary. Both poles (dependence and independence) are necessary, and both are in fact the condition of the other, and the tension and reciprocal dependence between the two poles constitute the fundamental structural preconditions of subjective life.

the process of merging obtains its very condition of possibility solely from the opposite experience of encountering the other as someone who is continuously re-establishing his or her boundary. It is only because the assurance of care gives the person who is loved the strength to open up to himself or herself in a relaxed relation-to-self that he or she can become an independent subject with whom oneness can be experienced as a mutual dissolution of boundaries.36

Already in 1992 therefore a human subject for Honneth is a subject who is constantly seeking to “merge” with others, but on the basis of both the acknowledgement of their independence and his or her own pre-established independence. The concept encapsulating this vision of subjectivity is that of “broken symbiosis”: zerbrochene Symbiosis.

36 Ibid., p. 105.
The second sphere of recognition

The second and third spheres of recognition, as was pointed out, emerge directly out of a conceptual-normative reconstruction of the “shift to modernity” informed by the bulk of historiographical and sociological knowledge.

The second sphere contains the principle of the universal equality of all individuals. In view of the multiple possible applications of his three-fold model to ethical and political issues, this principle of universal equality is in Honneth’s eyes the most important achievement of modernity, the one that truly justifies the equation of modernity with moral progress. Indeed, Honneth interprets the majority of struggles for recognition in modern society as revolving around claims made in the name of that principle. As a result, the immediate meaning of recognition for Honneth is not so much recognition of one’s identity, as is too often assumed, but recognition of one’s equal status. In this emphasis on the centrality of equality, once again, Honneth follows in Hegel’s footsteps, but also of course sides with the majority of social and political philosophers. As we saw in chapter 3, this is a major point of overlap with Habermas’ discourse ethics and its extension into political theory.37

Indeed, Honneth agrees with Habermas not just on the centrality of individual rights for the normative foundation of modern societies, he also agrees substantially with the methodological approach to justify this. This could be called the Kantian moment in Honneth’s thinking. In characterising the content and methodological justification of the principle of moral equality, Honneth basically follows Habermas’ Kantian-like interpretation of the modern rule of law, as an order ideally conceived by a community of equal co-legislators. Indeed, this is already Honneth’s approach, as early as 1992, even before the publication of Between Facts and Norms:

The legal system can be understood as the expression of the universalisable interests of all members of society, so that, according to the demand internal to it, exceptions and privileges are no longer admissible. Since, in this connection, a willingness to adhere to legal norms can only be expected of partner of interaction if they have, in principle, been able to agree to the

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37 See the references to Between Facts and Norms in Redistribution or Recognition?, p. 145.
norms as free and equal beings, a new and highly demanding form of reciprocality enters the relationship of recognition based on rights. In obeying the law, legal subjects recognise each other as persons capable of autonomously making reasonable decisions about moral norms.\textsuperscript{38}

Like Habermas, Honneth approaches the problem of the normativity underlying the social order through the question of justification. In fact, this is a dimension of his model that has so far not been sufficiently emphasised. The question of the normativity underlying social life is to a large extent equivalent to the question of justification. For example, the struggle for recognition is basically a struggle about competing interpretations concerning an order of justification: struggles break out when the dominated and the excluded no longer agree that an order of justification is valid. This is the question at the heart of critical-theoretical concern: what are the fundamental principles by which a social order is justified? Or more accurately, since Honneth prefers to approach normative questions negatively: what are the normative expectations that socialised individuals feel they are justified in directing at society because they have not been fulfilled? These questions are not quite Habermas’, but the premise behind the answer and the answer itself are very similar: the premise is universal equality as a conquest of modernity, and the answer is the articulation of a legal-social order that respects this equality.

At this point in his argument, Honneth underlines an important difference between Mead and Hegel, and implicitly highlights a problem in Mead, which he has not sufficiently taken into account in his second reading of him. In Mead, as the previous chapter demonstrated, the core problem is the functional question of social integration. The social self is the direct product of the integration of social norms. In other words, in Mead there is at first, before the rebellious “I” intervenes, an absolute “authority” granted to “ethical traditions”, and because the problem is purely functional at first, this authority requires no specific normative justification. What holds socially holds simply on the basis of tradition. We could say in this respect that there is something like a Pascalian moment in Mead, which Honneth does not sufficiently

acknowledge. Of course, the American pragmatist, like all the other authors in this tradition, also has the ideal community of autonomous subjects in view. The dialectic of the “I” and the “Me” quickly distends the exclusive boundaries of the traditional community. But it is in Hegel, rather than Mead, that the law is a medium of social integration and at the same time, and precisely for that reason, a normatively justified, because rational, social medium. To put it differently, in Mead equality is an indirect consequence of social integration, because it turns out that every subject undergoes the same socialisation process, follows similar patterns of internalisation of the same generalised other. The logic is, as was argued earlier, a monadological one: socialised individuals reflect the same order and as a consequence of this, but as a consequence only, can therefore be said to be in reciprocal relations, as equals. In Hegel by comparison, because of his reliance on Kant, it is a full embrace of the “universalistic foundational principle” which ties together recognition, law and rationality.

Now that the Kantian core in Honneth’s analysis of the legal status of the modern subject has been highlighted, the content of the second sphere can be more precisely detailed. As just said, the core argument is the idea of a community of co-legislators united through their joint application of the normative medium of practical reason. The whole content and structure of this sphere derives from this universalistic approach.

First, the universalistic angle influences directly the characterisation of the capacity that is specifically recognised in this sphere:

If a legal order can be considered to be valid and, moreover, can count on the willingness of the individuals to follow laws only to the extent to which it can appeal, in principle, to the free approval of all the individuals it includes, then one must be able to suppose that these legal subjects have at least the capacity to make reasonable, autonomous decisions regarding moral questions. (...) In this sense, because its legitimacy is dependent on a rational agreement between individuals with equal rights, every community based

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on modern law is founded on the assumption of the moral accountability of all its members.\footnote{Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 114.}

To recognise someone as a bearer of rights, according to Honneth, is thus to recognise her as being “able to make decisions in individual autonomy about moral questions”. This, as we have emphasised, is an interpretation of the moral capacity that operates in similar fashion as the recognition of legal capacity in Habermas, and which relies on fundamental Kantian and Hegelian considerations. In turn, it determines the type of “practical self-relation” that is established through this type of recognition. Given the internalisation model that Honneth favours, the subject to whom the faculty to make individual moral decisions is granted can see herself in that light, as a person capable of making her own decisions, and can therefore consider herself a full subject in the sense that she is entrusted with the capacity to act autonomously and in a responsible way. To speak metaphorically, the subject thus integrated can see herself not just as a full member of the community but as a full adult. Famously, Honneth calls this form of self-relation, “self-respect”. One important feature in this way of interpreting modern law, however, this time in contrast to Habermas, is that legal recognition, just like the love relation, is not just owed to the individual as a matter of justice in the traditional sense of the term, but more deeply, as a condition of practical identity, in the sense of subjective integrity. The most fundamental normative dimension of legal recognition is not that it would be unjust to withdraw it because the subject is owed it, but that it would endanger the subject’s capacity to act and, indeed, would harm a fundamental condition allowing her or him to be, in the full sense of the term. The injustice in the case of legal injustice is fundamentally not “quantitative” (to receive what one is due), but “qualitative” (to receive what one needs in order to be a full subject):\footnote{As we saw, Honneth in Suffering from Indeterminacy mentions this as one of the main points of contention between his and a Rawlsian approach. See also, Renault’s thorough critique of Rawls along similar lines, L’Expérience de l’Injustice, pp. 173-174.}

Just as in the case of children acquire, via the continuous experience of ‘maternal’ care, the basic self-confidence to assert their needs in an unforced manner, adult subjects acquire, via the experience of legal recognition, the
possibility of seeing their actions as the universally respected expression of their own autonomy. (...) Whereas love generates, in every human being, the psychological foundation for trusting one’s own sense of one’s needs and urges, law gives rise to the form of consciousness in which one is able to respect oneself because one deserves the respect of everyone else.43

The following passage brings together very well the different strands delineated so far:

In the experience of legal recognition, one is able to view oneself as a person who shares with all other members of one’s community the qualities that make participation in discursive will-formation possible.44

Right, the inscription in law of the subject’s recognition, is therefore not just a political institution or a moral achievement, but a mediation that operates at the very heart of subjective identity. No better example could be given of an actualisation of Hegel’s idea that true singularity is always a mediation of particularity and universality, and that, as the incarnation of such a unity, right is the “existence (Dasein) of freedom”.45 But the crux of the normative, social-theoretical argument lies clearly within the theory of subjectivity. It is because equality in law is one of the essential moments, under the conditions of modernity, in the formation of a functioning personal identity, that it becomes one of the key normative principles. The argument is intuitively much more convincing when it is put in the negative. The examples of numerous social movements and the experiences of social inequality they grew from demonstrate that the lack of legal recognition, as recognition of fundamental, universal equality, deeply affect those who suffer from the lack of such recognition. Joel Feinberg’s argument in “The Nature and Value of Rights” provides a precise formulation of this link between the normative value of modern rights and practical identity and integrity: “respect for persons may simply be respect for their rights”, and “what is called ‘human dignity’ may simply be the recognisable capacity to assert claims”.46

43 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, pp. 118-119.
44 Ibid., p. 120.
45 Hegel, Philosophy of Right, § 30.
Finally, this link between legal and moral theory and the theory of the subject has a decisive historical twist: the moral progress that is built into the logic of recognition takes a specific shape with the history of legal development and the constant expansion of the spheres of legal recognition. The key study used by Honneth to flesh out this idea are the famous lectures by the British sociologist, Thomas Humphrey Marshall, “Citizenship and Social Class”. Marshall’s historical delineation of the widening of the sphere of rights offers Honneth a synthetic presentation of the development of modern law as the gradual expansion of subjective rights that is linked directly to the demise of rigid class organisation. The core idea in Marshall’s article is precisely the one that Honneth identified with the help of Habermas: namely, that fundamental subjective rights are necessary conditions enabling subjects to belong fully to the political community as co-legislators. Marshall fleshes out this point through an historical perspective by showing how the interpretation of the notion of full membership gradually thickened under the spur of struggles for legal recognition. The more the equality principle was applied widely and strengthened its normative hold on societies, the more the abstract nature of established types of rights appeared, thus calling new kinds of rights to be institutionally recognised. Once negative rights about freedom of thought and expression were granted, it became apparent that they were not sufficient to ensure equal participation. The struggle for universal political rights then ensued. But they themselves were not sufficient as it was shown time and again that the same rights could coexist with a social dejection that made political membership an illusion. A third wave of new rights was then appealed to, this time social rights needed to ensure the basic levels of social security and cultural education enabling the citizens to be full participants in collective life:

Each enrichment of the legal claims of individuals can be understood as a further step in fleshing out the moral idea that all members of society must have been able to agree to the established legal order on the basis of rational insight, if they are to be expected to obey the law.48

48 Ibid., p. 117.
On this reading, social rights thus turned out to be as important as basic human and citizenship rights:

In being legally recognised, one is now respected with regard not only to the abstract capacity to orient oneself vis-à-vis moral norms, but also to the concrete human feature that one deserves the social standard of living necessary for this.\footnote{Ibid.}

The significance of such a strong defence of social rights is tremendous when it comes to the political-philosophical import of the theory of recognition. It is in the legal moment that the alternative that recognition theory offers to political liberalism is the most explicit and the most powerful.

**The third sphere of recognition**

To highlight the main elements relating to the “third sphere”, the same questions that were prominent for the first two spheres can continue to provide the main guideline, namely: what kind of practical self-relation is at stake with the recognition of the social contribution, and how is it different from the other two; how is this new form of practical self-relation a direct product of the shift to post-traditional society; in what sense is “struggle” a constitutive part of this form of recognition?

The narrative of normative differentiation means amongst other things that two types of normative vantage points on the individual, which were previously welded together, can now be dissociated. In traditional society, the social status of individuals was to a large extent identifiable with their legal status, and the two were related to the social groups to which they belonged. Basically, an individual had as many rights as the group to which he or she belonged. The emergence of the principle of universal equality entails, as a counterpart, the separation of the principle of legal recognition from that of social valuation. The latter, having been dissociated from the rigid attachment to group status, undergoes a radical, structural transformation. The social standing of individuals is no longer tied to their group belonging, but to their individual achievements. This is why, as was already mentioned before,
Honneth claims that “it is only from this point that the subject entered the contested field of social esteem as an entity individuated in terms of a particular life-history”⁵⁰

For the first time, the subject is individuated in terms of the role he or she plays within the general scheme of social life. In principle the individual’s life-history is no longer rigidly determined by his or her social origin.⁵¹ This individuation, once again, is not just functional in character, but carries significant normative force: the individual can now relate to her- or himself in a radically individualised way. Such individualised life-history, however, as can be seen immediately in the above narrative, owes this new dimension to its social magnitude: the normative worth of the chosen life-course depends on its realisation of societal goals. What is individualised, therefore, is not so much the individual’s life-history, but rather the way in which the individual fulfils social functions.

Another useful way of capturing the structural transformations underlying the normative order of modern societies is to focus, as Honneth does, on the vast literature dedicated to the transformations of the concept of social esteem, or the notion of honour. In traditional society, honour was bestowed upon individuals fulfilling their duties and behaving in the ways that were associated with the group they belonged to. Legal and social recognition were united in the status that the group was granted. With the destruction of the society of orders, the legal standing of the subject becomes universalised, or “democratised”, in the form of universal legal recognition. This universalisation of legal recognition can henceforth take charge of a large part of the individual’s social standing. “Human dignity” becomes the modern translation of an important aspect of what was previously included in social honour: precisely that part of the subject which was normatively significant, and shared by a large number of other subjects. This time, the hierarchical ladder is flattened and the community encompasses—ideally—all human beings.

However, the universalisation of the respect owed by society to the subject is not sufficient to capture the full gamut of the notion’s normative significance.

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⁵⁰ Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 125.
⁵¹ Ibid.
Beside equal dignity, modern individuals also demand to have their specific, individual, contribution recognised. As said, this is a direct consequence of the demise of the old rigid, collectively applied value-systems. Social respect is radically individualised; it is now tied to the individual biography. But there are two ways to interpret this. This is because the notion of honour has not fully disappeared in modern society. Whilst honour was previously defined in relation to status-groups, it continues to operate, but this time in a strictly subjective and private sense. Honour now designates the normative worth of the singular subject inasmuch as it is tied to that individual’s idiosyncratic self-understanding; it becomes largely synonymous with subjective “integrity”. This “privatised” notion of honour, however, is not what is understood by social valuation of the individual in his or her difference from the others (as opposed to universalistic valuation). The social valuation (Wertschätzung) that modern subjects demand as part of the respect that is due to them is what is left of individual value, between universal dignity and the privatised sense of personal honour. The exact sense of the individualisation of social respect is thus the notion that the individual is herself responsible, through her achievements and the realisation of her abilities, for her social standing. From this second perspective, the initial democratisation process is complemented by a parallel “meritocratisation” process. That second, meritocratic moment in the modern shift is what is captured in the notion of the “achievement principle”, the Leistungsprinzip:

‘prestige’ or ‘standing’ signifies the degree of social recognition the individual earns for his or her form of self-realisation by contributing, to a certain extent, to the practical realisation of society’s abstractly defined goals.

The first important implication of this vision of modern society concerns the mode of social reproduction. Post-traditional society is defined as a society that has lost all substantial normative underpinning through which ultimate goals could be linked with a substantial hierarchy of values to which social stratas, with their corresponding dispositional models, would be attached. The ultimate social goals, and the value system that arises from them, are now “up for grabs”. They are fleshed out through historically changing interpretati-
tions, in which ultimate societal goals are given content by the specification of a system of values, which in turn leads to the specific valuation of different forms of individual self-realisation. Put more simply, “qualities and abilities” (Eigenschaften und Fähigkeiten) are now defined and valued on the basis of a normative order that is established through the transactions between the social groups. But precisely, this transaction is now itself constantly open for renegotiation. With the demise of metaphysical underpinnings, it is a structurally necessary “cultural conflict” that decides which normative “world view” triumphs:

the worth accorded to various forms of self-realisation and even the manner in which the relevant qualities and abilities are defined fundamentally depend on the dominant interpretations of societal goals in each historical case. But since the content of such interpretations depends in turn on which social groups succeed in publicly interpreting their own accomplishments and forms of life in a way that shows them to be especially valuable, this secondary interpretive practice cannot be understood to be anything other than an ongoing cultural conflict. In modern societies, relations of social esteem are subject to a permanent struggle, in which different groups attempt, by means of symbolic force and with reference to general goals, to raise the value of the abilities associated with their way of life.54

It is therefore true that, in a certain sense, The Struggle for Recognition defends a “culturalist” model of social integration. This “culturalism” however is quite different from what is usually understood by that term in contemporary debates on multiculturalism. In those debates, culture refers to highly distinctive normative and symbolic conceptions that characterise specific, mainly ethnic, groups and thus separate them from others. Culture, then, is the primordial feature of subjectivity and social belonging, and the key question is: “how can society function given the heterogeneity of cultures?” We could say that in this perspective, culture and society are defined separately from each other and the problem is that of their reconciliation. Indeed, in that model, culture comes before society in that it is assumed that individuals are defined firstly by their cultural identity and engage in social transactions on the basis

54 Ibid., pp. 126-127.
of that pre-established identity, even if social interactions subsequently cause them to question and possibly transform that identity. Honneth’s approach to culture is exactly the opposite since he sees the link between society and culture as an internal one. Culture here also designates normative and symbolic resources that substantially inform subjective identities, but none of the mechanisms all of this points to can be defined in separation from the social. Not only does culture become an essentially antagonistic notion as it is now defined as the expression of the struggle through which groups contest or justify positions of domination or privilege. More deeply, as a result of Honneth’s transactional vision of culture, the latter can no longer be defined, in terms of its substantive features, as though it pre-existed its inscription in the social order. Culture becomes the way in which specific groups interpret basic societal goals that are shared by all groups, if only in antagonistic terms. In the multiculturalist understanding of culture, the basis of antagonism is cultural heterogeneity; antagonism is therefore contingent. In Honneth by contrast, conflict between “cultures” is inescapable because it is rooted in the social domination of some groups over others. Basically, in the previous model, the groups are primarily defined in ethnic terms, whereas Honneth’s model most directly applies to groups that are divided along class- and gender lines. The long quote above refers most obviously to social classes, or indeed to the relationship between male and female symbolic worlds. Indeed, it is probably fair to say that the implicit paradigmatic example of a “cultural conflict” for Honneth has shifted throughout his work, from classical class struggle in the first writings, to the conflicts around the gender-based representations of activities and associated values. Today, he sees examples of conflicts of the “third sphere” first and foremost in the feminist struggles around the social representation and valuation of female-dominated spaces, activities, professions, and so on.\[^{55}\]

Honneth’s “culturalism” is therefore better defined as a theory of “cultural antagonism”, since it revolves around the idea of a “cultural conflict” that is inherently built into the very existence of post-traditional society. It can thus reasonably be argued that Honneth’s mature model of recognition retains a basic Bourdieuan inspiration. Like the great critical sociologist, Honneth thinks that social theory can maintain the idea of the centrality of class struggle by giving it a culturalist turn. This turn, as can now be clearly seen, was also well prepared by the rereading of first generation Critical Theory with the latter’s emphasis on the class-specific cultural interpretation of the division of labour. Horkheimer’s concept of “cultural action” is now reinterpreted as struggle for social recognition. With the idea of an “ongoing cultural conflict” and “permanent struggle” over the interpretation of society’s symbolic order, Honneth seems to fulfil the programme that he had set out in his earlier writings.

The precise nature of the self-relation that this new emerging principle makes possible is easy to characterise. Within a given world of values attached in specific ways to the distinctive definition of basic societal goals, a subject can now look at herself not just as an equal bearer of rights, but also as a singular being whose contribution to society is valued, precisely as a singular contribution. The subject can therefore not only build a sense of self-worth in terms of a respect that is due to her as it is to all other human beings. The subject can also build a sense of “self-esteem”, of being recognised for her specific qualities and capacities, for her specific contributions to social life. This, of course, is only an ideal scenario, since there exists no consensus on the normative and symbolic interpretation of what counts as a good achievement, and members of non-privileged social groups are forced at first to attempt to reconcile their own value system with that of the hegemonic groups.

The concept of Leistung, of socially valid achievement, has a highly abstract meaning, and of course purposely so. What counts as “achievement”, as contribution to social life, which types of activities are regarded as worthy contributions, and therefore also which qualities and capacities necessary for achieving such activities are deemed socially significant, all of this is a matter of historical change, subject to the structural conflict of interpretations highlighted by Honneth. In The Struggle for Recognition, the “qualities and abilities” that subjects aim to have recognised, even if they pertain to the realisation of
societal goals, are less clearly tied to the work sphere than in the discussion with Fraser. In 1992, social achievements are only vaguely defined as the realisation of “ethical goals”. By contrast, in 2003, Honneth more explicitly ties Leistung to the division of labour.\(^{56}\)

If one were to harden this difference, one could have the impression that a major shift is at play here, between the two versions of the third sphere. In particular, this shift would offer alternative interpretations of identity politics. According to such a bipolar reading, the 1992 book would allow us to construe demands for the recognition of social identity, for example, the struggles around the recognition of particular life styles (as in the gay and queer movements), in the “grammar” of the third sphere, namely as demands for the recognition of cultural identities as being valuable to society at large. Such a construal could cite “Integrity and Disrespect”, an article published by Honneth in 1990, whilst he was on his way towards the full model of “struggle for recognition”. In it, Honneth mentions explicitly the recognition of “lifestyles” and “forms of life” as the content of the third sphere.\(^{57}\) Later on by contrast, especially in the 2003 book with Fraser, the third sphere seems to be largely interpreted as contribution to the division of labour. Identity politics understood in a strong culturalist sense seem to be excluded from that sphere. Identity demands are now approached through the dialectic of the universal and the particular that structures the second sphere of recognition. The recognition of identities is now interpreted as a demand for an extension or a deepening of existing rights.\(^{58}\)

However the social nature of cultural conflicts in Honneth makes such reading of a shift between 1992 and 2003 implausible. As was just highlighted, the recognition aspect of cultural conflicts, inasmuch as it pertains to the third sphere, is intimately tied for Honneth to the reproduction and integration of society. The defining question in that sphere is: how do different social groups

\(^{56}\) Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 166.


\(^{58}\) See the section entitled “Cultural Identity and Struggles for Recognition”, pp. 160-171.
represent, to themselves and to others, their place within the overall social order, in other words, their specific “contribution” to society. This leads to a highly specific concept of culture, one that does not accord at all with the usual notion that is implied in debates on identity politics and multiculturalism, in the Anglo-American understanding of the “politics of recognition”. Within Honneth’s model, this more usual understanding of culture as the basis of identity, and thus as the basis for claims of recognition is not accounted for by the third sphere, but by the second, which deals with the recognition of universal as well as special rights. Honneth’s intervention in the “politics of recognition” debates should not be sought so much in his analysis of the third sphere as in the analysis of the second. And his critical point is precisely that all too often the crucial role played by rights and the law are underestimated in those debates. On this interpretation, there is actually no real change between 1992 and 2003, only a lack of precision in The Struggle for Recognition. From that perspective, the formulations of the 1990 article seem unfortunately confusing, and can perhaps be put down to the fact that they only reflect an inchoate and as yet inaccurate development of the mature model in its political-philosophical implications. We return to these implications of the recognition model in chapter 11.
Honneth’s ethics of recognition can be regarded as the culmination of a research programme that was first enunciated more than ten years earlier. Perhaps “programme” is not quite the right term to use, but at the very least the mature ethics of recognition appear to be the final expression and articulation of a number of strong intuitions that all of his earlier writings had already flagged. This remark sounds innocuous at first, yet it underlines a feature of Honneth’s work that is significant for an adequate assessment of it. Read in isolation from the texts that preceded it, Honneth’s most famous book might seem to be plagued by a certain theoretical vagueness. The propositions contained in the book can be compared to specific inquiries into the different areas it touches upon (from social psychology to historical sociology, to social ontology, and so on), and would probably appear quite abstract or superficial by contrast. This impression could arise for example by comparison with the classical or contemporary sociological literature dedicated to the institutional framework of individual action, or the analysis of social movements. This impression vanishes, however, when the
theses put forward by *The Struggle for Recognition* are viewed against the background of Honneth’s previous work. Indeed, this has been the main exegetical principle behind this study. One truly captures the depth and strength of Honneth’s intervention in contemporary social philosophy only if one sees *The Struggle for Recognition* as the solution to problems in social and political philosophy that define an entire tradition of European philosophy, basically the critical heritage of Hegel. Viewed in this way, that is, as an alternative proposal in critical social theory, the book appears as a real theoretical *tour de force*. The “mature” theory of recognition manages to bring together, in one extremely diverse and ramified, yet consistent synthesis, all the conceptual and critical concerns, all the key thoughts and categories, which ten years of research had previously developed. And because this previous research was itself characterised by an astonishing consistency, as the first articles already exposed deep intuitions and bold theoretical decisions that were later fleshed out by the more systematic texts, Honneth’s overall *oeuvre* in critical social theory in the end displays an uncanny continuity. Taken as a whole, this body of work represents a genuine contender for the introduction of a new paradigm in critical theory, to challenge and possibly replace previous ones.

The presentation of Honneth’s “mature” model of critical social theory begun in the previous chapter therefore needs to conclude by reconstructing the way in which, from an “ethics”, it evolves into a full model of critical theory. Such a transformation is performed in the last chapters of *The Struggle for Recognition*, with important details added in articles published immediately afterwards, in “Pathologies of the Social”; “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect”; and “Integrity and Disrespect”. These articles, following on from chapters six and eight in *The Struggle for Recognition*, shift the focus from the normative analysis to its use in critical arguments.

**Recognition and social movements**

Up until chapter 7, *The Struggle for Recognition* is a book of social psychology, moral psychology and social theory. It offers the normative core of a theory of socialisation, and sketches a new “concept of the social”, but it is not a critical theory of society in the strict sense of the term. It is the aim of the last three chapters of the book to transform the theory of society and the theory of
socialisation into a critical social theory. In order to do that, Honneth makes explicit the link between his social-psychological and social-theoretical arguments and the theory of social movements. This is the crucial missing link since the defining character of Critical Theory is its reflexive connection to progressive social movements.

The link between social theory and practice is captured in the idea that social movements are grounded in “feelings of injustice”:

the motives for social resistance and rebellion are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from the violation of deeply rooted expectations of recognition.1

As we know, by “deep seated expectations of recognition”, Honneth understands the irreducible conditions of subjective identity and autonomy, which are structurally tied to basic forms of social interaction that enable subjects to construct a strong enough, and sufficiently self-affirmative, sense of self. Those expectations are “deep-seated” (even though they are historically produced), because they have a structural and irreducible nature. This means in particular that when they fail to eventuate, that is to say, when subjects are not recognised or not recognised in a proper way, it is the very foundation of the subjects’ capacity to act and fully own their actions that is undermined. The feelings arising from these experiences of “misrecognition” and “social contempt” are therefore anything but psychological epiphenomena. The effects of social structures of misrecognition on subjects are necessarily dire, since they attack the very conditions of practical identity. Many critics fail to properly acknowledge this aspect of Honneth’s model: the notion of pathology needs to be taken seriously, with all its pathos one is tempted to say, if one wants to take the full measure of Honneth’s proposal. The term “pathology” is one of the most recurrent concepts in his vocabulary. It designates the type and scope of social problems that the model of recognition is designed to tackle descriptively and critically. And as a diagnosis and a critique of social pathologies, the ethics of recognition obviously and most explicitly establishes a substantive genealogical line to the Critical Theory tradition, since

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1 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 163.
that tradition is defined from the beginning as a critical diagnosis of the modern pathologies of reason, society and culture.

The deep impact of social structures of domination, now reinterpreted as structures of misrecognition and social contempt, can already be properly conceptualised with the help of Hegel and Mead, since the latter propounded theories of socialisation that underlined the radical intersubjective dependency of the subject. Honneth now complements this argument at the intersection of social psychology and social theory with a new claim: the idea that feelings of misrecognition and social contempt are also at the origin of social movements.

The basis of this claim is twofold. First, on the side of the collective aspect of movements, the claim relies on what for Honneth represents an indisputable “fact” of recent social-theoretical inquiry, namely that the fundamental motivation of real social movements is not utilitarian but moral. The works of E.P. Thompson and Barrington Moore in particular, which have established this point through their historical and sociological inquiries into the labour movement in England and Germany, have had a huge influence on the theory of recognition in that respect.2 These works offered Honneth invaluable empirical confirmations of the critical claims he was making against structural interpretations of Marx, and of the need to interpret social struggle as a “moral struggle” against domination.3

From the hermeneutic vantage point of social experience, the link between recognition as a psychological and as a sociological concept is established with reference to a pragmatist view of emotions borrowed in particular from Dewey, notably when the latter defines emotions as “affective reactions arising as a result of the success or failure of our intentions of action”.4 Such a view of emotions as affective responses to the success or failure of actions is now applied to negative social experiences. Put in this light, experiences of

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3 See chapter 1, and Honneth’s 1985 article “Domination and Moral Struggle”.

social contempt present the same characteristic of taken for granted expectations linked to action that fail to eventuate and thus take the subject aback. In the case of social experiences, however, the expectations are at core normative and concern the expected nature of our relations to others. Consequently, typical affective responses to negative social experiences are negative emotions like shame or rage, through which subjects who have been rebuked by others express their hurt internally or externally. Such feelings point to a “moral crisis in communication”, which is “triggered by the agent being disappointed with regards to the normative expectations that he or she believed would be placed on another’s willingness to respect him or her”.5 Here, another source of empirical verification is provided in particular by the ground-breaking work of Richard Sennett into the moral injuries of class domination.6

The pragmatist approach to feelings of misrecognition leads directly to a theory of social movement because, beyond its expressivist dimension, it also highlights the cognitive and counter-practical potential contained in them.

First, the negativity of reactive emotions points to the content of subjective expectations, which might have been only implicit at first. In other words, negative emotions have the potential to trigger a reflexive, epistemic acknowledgement of the normative expectations by the subject itself.

As Renault remarks, such an argument could easily have been interpreted in the terms of Hegel’s notion of an “experience of consciousness” as it is developed in the Phenomenology of Spirit.7 But Honneth does not want to go down that obvious path, because he does not have sufficient confidence in the recognition model of the mature Hegel. If we think of the way in which Robert Brandom reinterprets the Hegelian concept of experience, as a momentary crisis, and its resolution, between conflicting normative commitments,8 this points again to the important conceptual difference between Honneth and

5 Ibid., p. 138.
the American pragmatist readings. The overlap between Honneth’s and the pragmatist readings, concerns their shared focus on normativity in social practices. In both accounts, mutual recognition is the basic scheme, the quasi-transcendental condition underlying all forms of normativity. For the Americans of course, this concerns not just the norms of practice, but even the norms at play in knowledge and semantics. Whatever the scope of normativity, the formal argument remains: since normativity is elaborated in the interactions through which commitments, justifications and demands for justification are exchanged, it is necessary that the participants have mutually recognised each other. But, as Pippin notes, the commonality ends there, because of Honneth’s social-psychological interpretation of the normativity of recognition.\(^9\) Pippin’s criticism of social-psychological, or genetic approaches to Hegelian recognition zeroes in on the main bone of contention between the two traditions. On the American reading, recognition is a purely normative concept that is required because of the social nature of normativity and normative progress. In terms of Hegel interpretation, this means holding firm to the idea that recognition for Hegel is recognition of the individual’s freedom, whereby freedom is not so much self-realisation, subjective fulfilment, but rather the achievement of the universal, rational point of view. Honneth’s different pragmatist take on recognition highlights the special “critical-theoretical” import of his interpretation of recognition in social-psychological, genetic terms, by contrast with the American interpretation. The insistence on negative feelings as symptoms of attacks on the conditions of practical identity shows all the difference with the American readings. Whatever one thinks of the respective value of the readings of Hegel and their systematic use, one thing is certain for critical purposes: it is only if one attaches a strong genetic and social-psychological content to recognition, as does Honneth, that the concept becomes a valid diagnostic tool, able to address social pathologies as such. By contrast, when the model of autonomy underpinning the critical diagnosis of pathologies

\(^9\) Pippin, “What is the Question for which Hegel’s Theory of Recognition is the Answer?”, European Journal of Philosophy, 8(2), 2000, pp. 155-172, and again in the more recent ““Recognition and Reconciliation: Actualised Agency in Hegel’s Jena Phenomenology”, in eds. B. van den Brink, Bert and D. Owen, David, Recognition and Power, pp. 57-78.
of recognition is conceived too strictly in terms of procedures of rational justification, it seems very likely that the diagnoses it generates remain highly abstract. They will be lacking precisely what Honneth’s approach to recognition offers: a direct insight into the damage to practical identity, and the subjective reactions to such damage.

The “negativity” of feelings of disrespect that can be taken as symptoms of pathologies of recognition, the suffering they entail, is the mark of an unmet demand which can be made explicit retrospectively. The negative affective reactions thus point to the transcendence of full recognition within the immanence of a social order based on misrecognition or denials of recognition. At this point, Honneth makes use of the pragmatist approach to emotions in another way, this time as a possible origin of a specific kind of social action. In this case, the negative experience of contempt inspires a transformative praxis aiming to relieve the suffering caused by disrespect, and to transform the negative experience into a positive one. Having come to an epistemic realisation of the expectations that they always already addressed to society, and equally, of the fact that those justified expectations were turned down, the subjects who have suffered the injury of misrecognition or denial of recognition are from then on in a position to potentially reclaim the place in which this expectation can be fulfilled:

each of the negative emotional reactions that accompany the experience of having one’s claims to recognition disregarded holds out the possibility that the injustice done to one will cognitively disclose itself and become a motive for political resistance.\(^{10}\)

As chapter eight analyses in more detail, the relation between cognitive enlightenment of one’s own normative expectations and political resistance in fact also goes in the other direction. That is to say, political resistance provides the opportunity for subjects to flesh out the content of the positive recognition that was withdrawn and is now actively demanded. A second cognitive process is thereby triggered:

\(^{10}\) Ibid.
social shame is a moral emotion that expresses the diminished self-respect typically accompanying the passive endurance of humiliation and degradation. If such inhibitions on action are overcome through involvement in collective resistance, individuals uncover a form of expression with which they can indirectly convince themselves of their moral or social worth. For, given the anticipation that a future communication-community will recognise them for their present abilities, they find themselves socially respected as the persons that they cannot, under present circumstances, be recognised for being.¹¹

It is important, however, to note that the progress from suffering to reflexive self-understanding, to an articulated insight into the concrete structures of social injustice and thereupon the practical and reflexive insights into the potentialities for political resistance, this process is not described by Honneth as a straightforward, direct and easy one. In particular, Honneth does not claim anywhere that the process is a necessary one. He only ever describes the possibility that negative experiences are reflected upon and transformed into positive practical energy. Indeed, given the conditions that need to be met for that possibility to be realised, it is always going to be a rare possibility.

Two conditions at least are necessary, according to Honneth, to transform individual experiences of social contempt and the affective experiences of shame, into the moral source of social movements. First, the subjects undergoing these experiences must come to the realisation that their individual, subjective plight is representative of a group experience.

Hurt feelings of this sort can, however, become the motivational basis for collective resistance only if subjects are able to articulate them within an intersubjective framework of interpretation that they can show to be typical for an entire group. In this sense, the emergence of social movements hinges on the existence of a shared semantics that enables personal experiences of disappointment to be interpreted as something affecting not just the individual himself or herself but also a circle of many other subjects.¹²


The expression “intersubjective framework of interpretation” can be read as Honneth’s new formulation for his earlier notion of “cultural action”.\footnote{See chapter 2.} In the context of this passage, however, the notion receives a new, very interesting, connotation. The passage shows that cultural action designates not just a group-specific symbolic expression of social life in general, social life diffracted through the lens of the distinctive life-world of a social class; it designates also, more precisely, the symbolic, cognitive and normative resources that can be mobilised, in some cases, by dominated subjects to transform their individualised negative social experience into a collective representation.\footnote{See Roger Foster’s critique of what he sees as Honneth’s overly optimistic account of the possibility of social struggles through “cultural action”, in “Recognition and Resistance”. Foster’s criticism based on a Foucauldian, indeed a post-Althusserian vision of the subject as “subject of power” is interesting as an excellent, representative formulation of a poststructuralist skepticism towards Honneth. But equally, Foster’s criticisms adopt precisely the type of theoretical standpoints Honneth rejected from the very beginning, in the polemics in Marxist exegesis (see chapter 1), precisely because from his point of view such standpoints amount to a dissolution of the possibility of social action, and so therefore of politics.}

The “collective semantics” inherent in cultural action obviously fulfil not just a cognitive function, but also a practical one: as symbolic resources, they also form the basis of a social action aiming at overcoming existing social injustice.

However, in order for those two conditions to be met (the semantic and the practical), the broader social context must be minimally favourable. Social domination is only expressed in overt physical or political oppression in the most extreme cases. More regularly it is manifested in the domination of a symbolic and normative universe over another, with the effect that the values, experiences, and implicit norms of a social group, are structurally prevented from becoming explicit. In that case, neither the first nor the second condition will ever be met. As a result, to the initial suffering caused by domination, which will be manifested in very material terms through, for example, poverty, the narrowing of social chances, the segregation in difficult and badly
paid labour, will be added the extra suffering of not being able to articulate suffering, let alone do something about it.

The concept of a “feeling of injustice” thus becomes the new normative guideline to which the critique needs to be referred in order to diagnose social situations, their specific pathologies, and to explain and justify the social movements that address them. Once again, it is essential to emphasise the pathos entailed in the term.\textsuperscript{15} Everything hangs on the depth at which the notion of “positive relation to self” is pitched, upon the realisation that it is a condition of practical identity itself. Against such background, the feeling of injustice does not point to a vague malaise, or a superficial psychological discomfort or irritation. It points to experiences of major disruption in subjective constructs, possibly to extreme subjective suffering. A crude objection that is helpful to consider at this point could be that such a theory appears to psychologise suffering and becomes indifferent to physical suffering, such as is experienced in situations of difficult labour for example. But the whole point about Honneth’s reformulation of domination and exploitation in terms of misrecognition is that physical suffering caused by social circumstances appears to a subject as an injustice, that is, has normative content, when it is seen as an affront to the dignity of that subject. A mere accident, or an injury are not necessarily injustices, even if they have a “social” origin; they might be unfortunate, indeed tragic, but they cannot be called unjust unless some normative dimension is also injured in the process. It is only when physical suffering denies the moral value of the person that it becomes an injustice. But as soon as one puts it in these terms, one is forced to use the language of recognition. One then would have to say: the suffering is not acknowledged, or not to its full extent, or the suffering that a social occupation or a social institution causes is not taken into account, or is even purposefully inflicted. In all such cases, the pathology is one of misrecognition or a denial of recognition, even if it manifests itself in physical injury. It denies the moral value of the person, her integrity, rights or social value. It is the feeling of injustice that makes the physical pain normatively unbearable, so to speak, on top of

its physical dimension. It is this dimension that makes it a scandal and not just
an accident: it has been caused by our peers, it is seen by them as something
we deserve, or that we are not entitled to complain about, or that is not even
worth noticing.\textsuperscript{16}

Another objection is inevitably raised with the claim that the feeling of injus-
tice becomes the main normative guideline of critical theory: namely, that a
feeling of injustice does not contain its own normative justification; that, for
example, some real social movements, based on real feelings of injustice, are
also difficult to justify. But against objections like these, recognition theory
simply needs to point out that it entails a clear-cut normative criterion within
its own structure: only those social struggles that enhance recognition can be
considered to be valid struggles for recognition.\textsuperscript{17} “Enhancing recognition”
can be taken in a qualitative or in a quantitative sense: as the deepening of
the meaning of recognition, notably by specifying legal recognition into more
areas; or as the extension of some form of recognition to broader groups of
individuals.

The critique of social pathologies

The other key notion of social pathology does not yet appear as a central cat-
egory in 1992. As the succinct reconstruction has just shown, the notion log-
ically completes the model of a critical theory grounded in the “feeling of
injustice”. When “injuries of deep-seated recognition expectations” take a sys-
tematic form as a result of a specific organisation of the social-cultural order,
that social context, because of the injuries it inflicts on subjects, is tantamount
to a “social pathology”. This concept emerges for the first time at the end of
chapter 7, after the study of Sartre’s concept of “objective neurosis”, which

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] For a more systematic exploration of the ways in which psychological and socio-
logical arguments need to be canvassed in order to fully substantiate this theory of
socially induced suffering, and to defend it as a valid basis for social and political criti-
cism, see Renault’s latest study, \textit{Souffrances Sociales. Sociologie, Psychologie et Politique},
\item[17] See a very clear formulation of this in \textit{Redistribution or Recognition?}, pp. 171-172.
\end{footnotes}
Honneth characterises as “pathology of recognition relations”.18 However, it is only in the major chapter that introduces the volume Honneth edited in 2002, *Pathologien des Sozialen. Die Aufgabe der Sozialphilosophie*, that the theory of recognition is explicitly completed with the notion of social pathology.

In this chapter, Honneth set out to retrace the conceptual genealogy of a tradition he calls “social philosophy”. As Honneth himself notes, this is quite an idiosyncratic definition of social philosophy, one that does not correspond, for example, to the current Anglo-American usage. Also, as is so often the case with Honneth, it is clear that the conceptual-historical reconstruction is a way for him to define the parameters of his own intervention within Critical Theory. The point of the historical reconstruction, however, is not so much historical as it is systematic. By describing the major shifts between the main authors within a unified philosophical field, where the basic aims and methods remain constant, one is able to gain a precise understanding of the conceptual and methodological stakes, of past errors and deadlocks to be avoided, and also of premises and arguments that continue to be productive (for example and most notably, Hegel’s notion of *Sittlichkeit*), indeed of untapped resources (as in the case of Feuerbach and Mead in the first book with Joas).

It is interesting to note that the chapter starts once again by demarcating “social philosophy” from Hobbes. This time, however, the focus is no longer on differing “concepts of the social” and the role of struggle, but on the difference between the political concern that drives Hobbes’ investigations compared with the social and ethical concerns that inspire Rousseau, the author which Honneth, following Taylor, sees as the founder of his discipline. This core difference between Hobbes and Rousseau points to one of the most important dimensions in Honneth’s thought; it indirectly signals one of the key interventions he intends to make in practical philosophy generally: namely, to defend the general position that questions of justice cannot be dealt with properly if the normative discussion is pitched solely at the level of moral or legal principles. Instead, the question of justice must be expanded to encompass the consideration of the social conditions that make it possible. And the best way to capture this fundamental intuition is to formulate it in

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the negative. Accordingly, the question of justice is best approached by studying the social conditions that have emerged as necessary given the real social conditions that have so far prevented it from being realised. This shift from the moral and the legal to the social is of course the most important inspiration Honneth draws from Hegel. It is also the basis of the theoretical continuity, beyond all divergence, between Hegel and Marx. Honneth captures this founding argument of the “social philosophy” tradition, as he defines it, in the following way:

Unlike political philosophy, social philosophy no longer tried to determine the conditions of a correct or just social order, but set forth the conditions imposed by the new life-form on human self-realisation.19

Social philosophy in this sense therefore entails a critique of the social-cultural order based on the idea that fateful directions in the development of modern society lead to distortions of human potentials and capacities, and produce socially induced suffering. As a result of this focus on social life rather than the normative correctness of a moral or legal framework, the solutions envisaged will be phrased in terms of reforms or transformations of social life. The series of authors that Honneth sees as pursuing such a programme of “social philosophy”, thus encompasses Hegel and Marx, takes a dramatic, methodological turn with Nietzsche, is given an empirical foundation at the turn of the 20th century with the founders of sociology, Weber, Durkheim and Tönnies, and is continued in the 20th century in the Frankfurt School, as well as in authors like Foucault and Taylor. In all these authors, Honneth claims, the determination of the conditions of human self-realisation is connected with the critical diagnosis of “pathologies of the social”, of pathological tendencies of modern society that make individual self-realisation impossible. In this critical dimension once again the contrast with political philosophy is decisive. The point is to not leave the critique of injustice at the levels of moral or legal condemnation, but to underscore a fateful distortion of human features, or the destruction of the conditions necessary for human flourishing. The genealogy is therefore well summarised in the list of diagnostic concepts

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that these authors have coined: alienation, “division” or “bifurcation” (*Entzweiung*), reification, nihilism, rationalisation, *anomie*, discipline, colonisation of life-worlds, and so on.

In this narrative, Nietzsche represents a decisive moment because his perspectivism highlights in the clearest and most challenging way the difficulty for all critical projects to shore up an evaluative framework that would take cultural relativism and value pluralism seriously. This is the most difficult challenge posed to social philosophy as it casts serious doubts on the possibility of securing normative criteria to ground critical diagnoses. In all cases, the suspicion always arises that the norms of critique only reflect the thinker’s own idiosyncratic take, or the values and norms of a particular time. As a result of Nietzsche’s challenge, Honneth sees social philosophy as facing a fundamental alternative: either to ground the norms of critique in an anthropological model, or in a philosophy of history. In the first case, the pathologies produced by social life can be critically described as distortions of structures of human life, those necessary features of human nature without which a human being cannot survive and flourish. Rousseau’s writings represent a prime example of such a critique of society grounded in an anthropological model:

> In this respect also Rousseau became in very quick time a founder of a tradition. (...) For with his proposal to consider the original form of existence of the human being as a criterion for comparison, he had created one of the few possibilities which would be open to social philosophy from then on. However much the social context would change from then on, one of the alternatives for its theoretical justifications would always remain in the future, to refer to an ideal form of human action, which would be located in the anthropological constitution of the species.\(^{20}\)

Hegel on the other hand, and more specifically the Marxist reappropriation of Hegel in Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, are exemplars of a critique of society grounded in a philosophy of history. In this case, the norms of cri-

tique are to be found in a telos of reconciliation which the current state can be shown to fail to achieve. As we know, however, Honneth regards this second option as do all contemporary critical theorists following Habermas’ definitive critique, as being precisely the source of the errors of Critical Theory’s first generation. In particular, as soon as the proletariat, the supposed bearer of historical progress, and thus the social force in which history would consume itself and from which the present could be judged, can no longer be seen in this historical role, critical theory is plunged into a historical and conceptual negativism, which becomes blind to the actuality and indeed emancipatory potential of social forces.21 Significantly, however, we can note that in 1994 Honneth continues to rank Marx in the first, “anthropological” mode, including the mature writings on political economy.

As was emphasised in previous chapters, Honneth believes that it is only in anthropological arguments that one can successfully ground the norms of critique. He is aware of the difficulties of the solution, and his proposal for a “formal” conception of Sittlichkeit is developed to answer such objections. However, even after conceding much to the critics, notably to Zurn, Honneth continues to maintain his fundamental intuition, which was already operating in his very first work, that the reference to fundamental conditions of human self-realisation, once their historical character is acknowledged, is the only way to ground social critique. Indeed, despite all subsequent concessions, it can be argued that this remains a constant feature of his thinking, until today, beyond all the later shifts.

Apart from helping to meet the challenge of grounding a normative framework, the reconstruction of a tradition of social philosophy also helps Honneth clarify once more the relationship between philosophical analysis and empirical work. The issue is brought to its clearest expression in the discussion of Helmut Plessner.

However debatable the actual result of (Plessner’s) reflections for today’s concerns, with them he had kept open the possibility for his social-philosophical enterprise to be contradicted by objections of an empirical orientation. If his proposal is compared with the methodological path that Lukács

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chose in his own social philosophy, then the full difference between the
two is unmistakable: whilst with Plessner the analysis of social patholo-
gies remains controllable by scientific means, with the former, it is totally
removed from a general examination.22

This positive trait identified in Plessner obviously applies to Honneth’s own
work. It defines the specific kind of “positivism” and fallibilism that is charac-
teristic of Honneth’s methodology and also of his indebtedness to Habermas
in this respect as well.

**The theory of recognition as new critical theory**

With all these features, the full model of Honneth’s mature ethics of recog-
nition is complete. The three spheres of recognition designate the necessary
“presuppositions of a successful self-realisation”, as they contain the condi-
tions of possibility of three different types of positive self-relation. These are
in turn the necessary preconditions of full, autonomous individuation, the
basis of self-realisation. Since they are the “general”, or “universal structures”,
enabling a fulfilled individual life, their absence leads to pathologies and dis-
tortions of practical identity. Negative feelings that emerge within pathogenic
social contexts, that is, in contexts, in which mutual recognition is not granted
in one of the three forms, harbour a reflexive potential, the potential to draw
the attention of subjects to the source of their frustration, alienation and ill-
being. When subjects realise that their ill-being has a social character, that
is, that it is produced by society and targets them as members of a specific
group, a dynamic of resistance can be set in motion. When favourable stra-
tegic circumstances are present, that is, a well organised social movement
providing the language and the structure for the politicisation of demands
of recognition, and when the broader social environment itself is at least mini-
mally receptive, the subjects struggling for their recognition can achieve the
acknowledgement of their normative demand. When this happens, when new
rights are conferred, or old rights extended to new groups, or a social value

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22 Honneth, “Pathologien des Sozialen”, p. 43 (my translation; the passage does not
feature in the English translation).
order is rebalanced towards more equality, it is not just the subjects of the oppressed group who benefit, but the whole community since the ultimate structure of recognition is its mutuality. The virtuous dialectics of struggles for recognition characterise the rise of modern society and undergird it as an ideal journey of moral progress. Accordingly, the telos of full reconciliation is the idealised, counterfactual, presupposition underpinning all emancipatory political struggles. Conversely, the dependency of human subjects on intersubjective, recognitive relations, and the telos of full, mutual recognition provide the normative criteria to engage in the critique of specific social contexts marked by their distinctive forms of “pathologies of recognition”.

Such a model is impressive at least as much for its internal consistency as for the synthesis it achieves of all the theoretical elements gathered by Honneth throughout his earlier work. A critical theory centred on the notion of struggles for recognition is able to retrieve Marx’s fundamental insight that social integration is achieved through struggles between groups. It reinterprets class struggle as a struggle for symbolic power, rather than as a utilitarian conflict over the distribution of material interests. The model develops a feature that remains implicit or underdeveloped in Marx: the fundamental anthropological insight into the intersubjective dependency of the human subject, an insight that was learnt from Feuerbach but was repressed in the expressivist metaphysics of labour. However, the decisive idea underpinning the critical-theoretical endeavour remains faithful to Marx since it continues to defend the idea that, given the social essence of subjective formation, individual pathologies can to a great extent be referred to the existence of social pathologies so that the struggle against injustice has to be pitched at the level of social diagnosis and social transformation. With the shift from a paradigm of production to one of recognition, however, the theory that makes social struggle its core notion, viewing it in particular as the motor of social progress towards more equality and less injustice, can become sensitive to all forms of struggle against domination and oppression; it is not reduced to proletarian movements.

The early critiques of Adorno and Horkheimer continue to inform the model in crucial ways. Negatively at first, with the rejection of an idealistic philosophy of history as the foundation of the normative framework. First generation Critical Theory is berated in 1992 just as in the *The Critique of Power,*
notably because its authors engaged critical theory into a hopeless negativistic impasse as soon as the subject of history could no longer be found. Additionally, Honneth maintains the accusation that this radical negativism severs the link between social philosophy and empirical research, and makes the critical theorist blind to the reality of contemporary social movements.

Beyond these serious reservations, the notion of “cultural action” continues to play a decisive role in the mature model. As in The Critique of Power, the notion refers to the “subcultural”, or “collective semantics” through which underprivileged groups filter the hierarchical value system of an unequal social order, an ambiguous cultural achievement that makes injustice bearable but can also allow the dominated individuals to organise and transform their private feelings of injustice into proper movements of resistance aiming at political redress. The theory of recognition is thus a “culturalist” theory in a peculiar sense. Its guiding notion for example, the feeling of injustice, in fact denotes a moral experience. Once again, Honneth’s reading of Moore and Thompson’s historical-sociological research function as indispensable reference points for him.

**Beyond Habermasian critical theory**

The mature model also includes the critical reception already developed in earlier texts of the Habermasian model of critical theory. This is especially visible in the first lecture held by Honneth in 1994 in his new position in Berlin, later published under the title “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect”. In this text, Honneth reiterates the criticism of Habermas he had already developed in the important 1981 article “Moral Consciousness and Social Domination”. Such thematic continuity is highly significant because it confirms that the model of critical theory developed in The Struggle for Recognition has not abated in its radical theoretical and practical aims.

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24 Ibid.
25 Now reprinted in *Disrespect*. 
The 1994 lecture once again focuses on the link between “critique and pre-scientific praxis”, that is, between the conceptual formulation of normativity and social experience as a normative experience. This is of course the crux of critical theory and it formed precisely the guiding thread of the critical reading of Habermas as early as in Social Action and Human Nature (1980). The question, as is now well-established, is actually twofold: it asks first of all how the conceptual model relates to the sociological from which it originates; and secondly, how theory relates back to social movements. On both accounts, Habermas’ communicative approach to society is deemed unsatisfactory. Because he interprets progressive social trends through the lens of the expansion of domination-free communication and in turn interprets the latter purely in terms of linguistic deliberation, the extent of what could be called the sociological sensitivity of critical theory is actually lessened. From now on, only those movements which actually aim to expand the realm of communication can be detected in the critical diagnosis. The communicative turn thus threatens to make critical theory sensitive only to those movements and those forms of social experience that have already been able to make themselves heard in the public arena. A critical theory that takes its normative cue from the realisation of communication runs the risk of overlooking the structural difficulties facing oppressed and underprivileged groups, the obstacles they must overcome to make their views, experiences, demands and complaints heard. In fact, the difficulty arises not just from the kind of symbolic and cognitive filtering that the hierarchical social order puts in place, but also from the fact that an unequal social order distributes the symbolic tools and modes of expression in such a way that the cultural expressions of underprivileged classes appear non-receivable. They fail the different tests that define the conditions of justification. Indeed this inability to articulate social experience is not just a political problem, the problem of the representation of claims on the public sphere. It is in fact and most pressingly a problem for the subjects themselves. Social domination seeps into the symbolic order and organises the very frames of experience and discourse. As a result, the inability to present receivable claims starts within subjective life itself. In the most serious cases, dominated subjects are robbed of the symbolic, discursive tools that

26 See chapter 3 above.
would allow them to reflect on the injustice they suffer. This line of thought justifies the focus on the experience of injustice, rather than on the normative adequacy of claims of injustice, even though the issue of normative adequacy becomes indispensable once social experience starts to be articulated in political arguments.

A critical theory focusing exclusively on the normative validity of communicative claims remains blind to the structuring effects of class domination. Beyond the problem of the validity of demands of justice, a critical theory committed to a linguistic definition of communication ignores the fact that, as Honneth puts it, the experience of injustice is not felt by subjects as “limitation of linguistic rules, but as injury done to identity demands which are acquired through socialisation”.27 This point in turn indicates at least two separate dimensions of possible redress. First, at the juncture between theory and practice, critical theory needs to make sure that it does not restrict the problem of social suffering to the issue of participation in the public sphere. A critical theory of society intent on remaining faithful to the methodological imperative of an organic link to pre-scientific experience needs to avoid such reduction. This, then, implies secondly the major theoretical correction that recognition theory aims to perform. In the terms of the lecture, an “expansion” of the communication paradigm “beyond the linguistic-theoretical framework”, towards a theory of “individuation through socialisation”, which focuses on the types of formative interaction through which subjects gain their autonomy and individuate themselves. This correction shifts the centre of the critical analysis, from the diagnosis of encroachments of systemic forces into the communicatively structured lifeworlds, to the diagnosis of “the social causes that are responsible for the systematic injury done to cognitive conditions”.28 The hope behind such a theoretical correction is also to make the “practical intent” of critical theory more substantive, by providing a “grammar of social conflicts” that would be more true to the phenomenology underpinning these conflicts.

28 Ibid., p. 72.
Despite his often repeated scepticism regarding the feasibility of a rejuvenated project of critical theory in the original sense, Honneth’s reconstruction of the tradition of “social philosophy” and his proposal for a completion of that tradition in *The Struggle for Recognition*, in fact looks much like the very completion of such a programme.  

29 The reformulation of the critical theory tradition in terms of “social philosophy” is indeed a major argument in favour of the paradigm shift towards recognition that Honneth advocates, beyond the theories of instrumental and communicative action. It offers an alternative reading of the Left-Hegelian heritage that does not repeat the mistake of grounding the normative order in a fateful philosophy of history, or of interpreting the discovery of communicative integration in a restricted sense. The correction, however, is not a rupture, since so many coordinates of the theoretical project, down to the main philosophical reference points, remain the same. Despite these continuities, though, the overall image of society which arises from this new critical-theoretical model is a new one. Opposed to the radical pessimism of the founder of Critical Theory, it reads modernity as a story of moral progress where the sphere of autonomy has been continuously extended, both in terms of the areas of subjects’ lives that become protected by rights, and in terms of the ever greater numbers of individuals benefiting from the advances of egalitarian principles.

But Honneth’s general vision of modern society is also at odds with Habermas’ basic view of modern society. From the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to *Between Facts and Norms*, the key features of that vision have remained remarkably stable, despite all the many theoretical twists and turns. Despite the many passages underlining the possibilities of friction and distortion, social life as it occurs in the lifeworlds and the public spheres is largely analysed in idealised terms, without much focus on power struggles and without much interest in the lines of rupture or the tensions persisting between groups and classes. The economic and legal subsystems seem to a large extent out of reach for political contest. Advances in the area of social justice are

29 See, amongst many other formulations of the same concern, the first page of “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect”.
entrusted to the force of rational debates within enlightened public spheres.\(^{30}\) By contrast, Honneth stresses the perpetuity of tension and struggle, as constitutive elements of social life. No institutional realm is a priori exempt from political demands and from demands for transformation, including the economic one. Most importantly, the transformative power of social movements is fully acknowledged, indeed it becomes the crux of the theoretical model, and is therefore, performatively, brought to the foreground of the historical landscape, by contrast with the alleged “systemic” forces of the economy and the state apparatus.

As we recall, the beginning of *The Struggle for Recognition*, in returning to the first texts of the Jena Hegel, seemed to set out as a one of its central tasks to develop “a new concept of the social”. Before we outline Honneth’s intervention in this field, we can already note that it is inspired and nourished by classical and contemporary writings in social theory. For example, in “Pathologies of the Social”, Weber, Durkheim and Tönnies are discussed alongside Rousseau, Hegel and Marx, as belonging to the same line of inquiry, a line that is pursued by Habermas and in which Honneth himself clearly intends to locate his own interventions. Contemporary research in sociology and social theory plays a decisive role in Honneth’s writings throughout his career. Few contemporary philosophers are more attuned to the social sciences as Honneth. This is one of the features through which he clearly intends to pursue the programme of a critical theory of society, despite all the reservations he has expressed in that regard. Yet, despite this great proximity to social theory, he characterises his own endeavour as “social philosophy”, not as social theory. What are the differences? The answer
to this question will allow us to define a useful perspective through which to tackle the question of the social-theoretical import of Honneth’s theory.

Honneth does indeed set out to develop a new “concept of the social”, but his intention seems from the beginning almost strictly normative. That is, he does not aim to come up with his own account of social integration, attending to the many questions linked to that task. He does not develop fully articulated accounts on such problems as: the definition of institutions and their role in the socialisation and social integration of individuals; the nature and direction of functional differentiation; the precise dynamics of social movements and the structural link of those dynamics to societal differentiation; the changing nature and the directions of class structures, or of intergenerational integration; the shift in the content and meaning of individualisation processes, and so on and so forth. However, the theory of recognition is connected to, and indeed, says substantial things about, all these issues. Honneth’s specific interest in relation to all these issues of social theory is the definition of the fundamental norms through which those social phenomena studied and described by social scientists can be diagnosed and critiqued.

However, this initial qualification does not do full justice to Honneth’s vision of the scope of social philosophy. There is also definitely an explanatory ambition in Honneth’s project. Recognition is also a concept with ontological depth. This explanatory ambition, however, is squarely restricted to the conceptual. Social theory, as opposed to social philosophy, if we follow that distinction for a moment, could be defined as a descriptive and analytical endeavour attempting to give an account of the actual reality of social phenomena. The theoretical in social theory would be a set of second order reflections grafted on, that is to say, either arising from or reflecting upon, concrete descriptions of social reality. For example, the apparent autonomous development of economic institutions could be “theorised” as the outcome of the gradual differentiation of social systems obeying functional imperatives. Social philosophy by contrast would place itself directly at the theoretical level and would work on the concepts involved in that realm. On that model, social philosophy has the task of clarifying the core concepts used in social theory, that is to say, of defining precisely what these core concepts are and what they entail, and of establishing how the different concepts used in social theory are interrelated. Of course, the two types of theoretical exercise often overlap to the
point of indistinction. The great social theorists are philosophers in their own rights. Indeed, the paradigmatic work of social theory, Parsons’ *Structure of Social Action*, performs precisely the type of conceptual analysis and immanent critique that has just been said to define social philosophy. However, the two disciplines can be said to retain different aims, at least if we compare Honneth’s own methodology with some of his contemporaries, like Joas, Alexander, Giddens, Beck or Bauman. Social theory remains descriptive in its aim. Its justifications, for example, will often rely on an articulation of the conceptual and the empirical, whereas justification in social philosophy is mostly logical and conceptual-analytical. Honneth of course has consistently referred to empirical sociological research, but in this case, this was more often than not with the aim of specifying the concepts and norms to be used in social theory, rather than for the direct purpose of sociological description.

A good illustration of the difference proposed here between “social theory” and Honneth’s version of “social philosophy” is provided by his critical analyses in *The Critique of Power*. The arguments he discusses in that book, those of the great critical theorists, are of social-theoretical nature: they are arguments aiming to explain social integration, socialisation processes, and so on, in contemporary Western society. But Honneth’s own intervention in the book is social-philosophical: with each author, he attempts to define the core conceptual scheme underlying each of the social theory models, and the critical insights arise through the identification of conceptual contradictions, impasses or other conceptual problems, for example the contradictions and ambiguities in Foucault’s notion of power; or Adorno’s reductionist and self-contradictory theory of socialisation. The relation of the conceptual to the empirical remains decisive, but the significance of that relation remains a conceptual not a descriptive one. The question is not whether the theoretical tools, as a matter of fact, allow for accurate descriptions of specific social phenomena, but more broadly if the concepts are broad and precise enough to do justice to social reality. Understood in this way, social philosophy is therefore normative in a second sense, namely at the explanatory level, and does offer social-ontological insights. This time, norms are the core notions sought by the social philosopher to explain the phenomena described by social theorists, most especially social integration and the puzzle of the integration and reproduction of social orders. Again, to be very clear, those “norms” are not
tailored to specific phenomena; they remain general and can in principle be applied to a number of different social situations. However abstract these “norms” remain, though, they definitely bring a “social-ontological” side to Honneth’s endeavour. The struggle for recognition therefore plays two roles: it is not just a critical tool accounting for the experience of injustice and the transformations of social orders; it is also a conceptual tool explaining social integration. It identifies the ultimate fabric of modern social orders as fractious fields constantly open for renegotiation.

Another way of distinguishing between social theory and social philosophy is in reference to historical trends. Social theory, because it has a descriptive aim, needs to combine a long view of historical trends, most notably by providing a characterisation of modern as opposed to pre-modern society, with a sensitivity to more local phenomena, especially in relation to its own time, and often in specific national contexts. Typically, the commentary on recent social developments is embedded in a larger narrative of modernity. Social philosophy, on the other hand, is fully historical, but need not take a stance on smaller-scale developments, and indeed, is wary of theory becoming overly influenced in its conceptual core by local, empirical phenomena.

None of these introductory considerations will dispel the sense that Honneth’s notion of social philosophy is quite idiosyncratic. This has to do with the fact that his reconstructions of a whole tradition and, consequently, of an entire discipline are premised on fundamental conceptual and methodological axioms that are specifically his own. To put it differently, the reconstruction of a tradition of social philosophy which culminates implicitly in his own reflections constitutes in itself an important methodological justification for his overall project.

An “action-theoretic”, normativist approach

The main premises in Honneth’s theoretical approach to the social have already been discussed in the previous chapters. Here, we can attempt to bring them together and characterise his specific proposal in social theory.

The most fundamental premise is that the social order maintains itself through the sharing of normative orientations amongst socialised individuals. Social theory cannot avoid being normativist. This is for two separate but strongly
interconnected reasons: an anti-normativist theory of society is forced to do violence to an irreducible element of social life, one that is essential to explain the maintenance and functioning of a social order, namely the behaviour of socialised agents that are constantly referring to each other in ways that are not purely instrumental; and at a practical level, an anti-normativist theory of society robs itself of the means to construct coherent tools for the critique of social phenomena. Honneth’s main target in social theory is functionalism, or to put it negatively, any theory of society that explains the maintenance of social orders without reference to the meaning that individuals attach to their actions and experiences. In other words, there is a definite Weberian strand in Honneth’s social theory, even if he has never explicitly elaborated it.

By contrast with functionalist theories of society, Honneth refers to his approach as an “action-theoretic” one. This is an approach and a characterisation he shares with his long-time intellectual partner Hans Joas. The decision to analyse social phenomena from the perspective of both intersubjectivity and practice, through the lens of “practical intersubjectivity”, is probably the primary theoretical decision in Honneth’s thinking, both in genealogical and systematic terms. It is this stance, to recall, which inspired the criticism of structuralist interpretations of Marx, or guided the re-reading of the tradition of philosophical anthropology.

In terms of contemporary social theory, given their consistent agreement on this point, Hans Joas’ characterisation of an action-theoretic stance can be taken as an accurate characterisation of Honneth’s own assumptions:

I propose the label ‘constitution theories’ as a generic term for describing the increasingly frequent current attempts to pose an alternative to functionalism. This term denotes all those sociological theories which set out to make social processes intelligible in terms of the actions of the members of a society without assuming there to be some underlying transhistorical developmental trend.¹

An interesting heuristic way of characterising Honneth’s theory is to try to locate it within the list of theories proposed by Joas in *The Creativity of Action*. Honneth’s model would probably be situated between what Joas lists as the

fourth and fifth groups within his taxonomy of “constitution theories”. The similarity with the fourth group is that Honneth, like the authors Joas counts in it, also develops “a theory of conflict and power in which social orders are presented as unstable and usually asymmetrical balances of power”. Here the work of Bourdieu is the paradigmatic example. Bringing him in the vicinity of the “fifth current”, is Honneth’s interest in the sociology of social movements and especially the political philosophy of Castoriadis. He could be well identified with this group since Joas adds that “this group also includes all those approaches which, although based on that of Parsons, try to free his work from the ballast of functionalism”. This could be a good characterisation of Honneth’s own social theory.

We can briefly highlight aspects of his model that confirm this broad characterisation, before attempting to stress the originality of his social-theoretical position.

Most of the fundamental axioms underpinning Honneth’s social philosophy are similar to those that inspired Parsons’ own normative theory of society. To begin negatively, it is based on a rejection of individualistic, utilitarian, instrumental-rationalistic and positivistic models of action. The paradigmatic figure in which those traits were gathered for the first time is that of Hobbes, and his “utilitarian” theory of action. It was noted already that Hobbes features as a key negative backdrop in the writings of the 1990s. A similar, “action-theoretic”, Parsonian line of critique against “utilitarian” theories of action is adopted by Honneth in his later critique of Marx developed in The Struggle for Recognition, or in his critique of Bourdieu. It is important to dwell a little on the latter. On the one hand, Honneth’s social-theoretical model, centred on the notion of conflict for moral and symbolic power, bears strong Bourdieuian traits. Bourdieu’s inspiration is evident and decisive in the crucial 1981 article “Moral Consciousness and Class Domination”, as well as in The Critique of Power, in which domination plays a central role, notably in the critique of Habermas. Later, in the exchange with Fraser, Bourdieu’s later project published in The Weight of the World provides an important argument

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 233.}\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{3} Here, I am following Joas’ characterisation of the Parsonian project in The Creativity of Action, pp. 7-17.}\]
against the sociological construct of “new” identity movements versus “old” redistributive struggles.

On the other hand, in “The Fragmented World of Symbolic Forms” (1984), Honneth also critiqued the “utilitarian” framework used by Bourdieu to conceptualise his theory of symbolic action. The date of this important article is interesting. The positive engagement of the young scholar who was on his way to the work resulting in *The Struggle for Recognition* possibly indicates the decisive and inspirational role played by Bourdieu in Honneth’s formation. Indeed, given the great care with which Honneth always chooses the titles of his texts, in particular of his books, the proximity of the Bourdieu article and Honneth’s first major collection of essays, *The Fragmented World of the Social* cannot just be a coincidence. But, as the first chapters have amply shown, the young scholar already had a clear vision of the fact that there was to be no compromising on the normativist premise in issues of social theory. As a consequence, whilst he clearly approved of Bourdieu’s attempt to actualise the importance of struggle as a central moment in the explanation of the social order, he also bemoaned the fact that Bourdieu’s continued reliance on the concept of capital led him to conceptualise social experience on the model of the possession of economic goods, and in turn forced him to analyse social struggles along the lines of the utilitarian struggle over distribution. As a result, the young Honneth claimed, Bourdieu did not have the conceptual means to characterise adequately the specific normativity operating in the life-styles and everyday cultural “habitus” of social groups, nor was he able to give a sufficiently differentiated account of the impact of this normativity on the identity of the subjects belonging to those groups. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, he was not able to give a sense of that “cultural action” which Honneth was attempting to delineate in *The Critique of Power*, that is, “the cultural forms of life in which the social groups first endeavour to maintain their collective identity”. And he was unable to establish the specificity of “the struggle for the social recognition of moral models”. Already in 1984, the young Honneth had a clear view of that dimension of social life upon which he was to base his own model and research programme:

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While the economic struggle over distribution is (...) a dispute amongst combatants solely mindful of their own utilities, in the moral-practical struggle each of the opposing groups fights for the other’s normative approach.\(^5\)

Such a determined focus on the normative and conceptual specificity of “moral-practical” struggles allowed Honneth very early on to identify his theoretical opponents in the debate over the nature of social action, and the precise points of disagreement.

The first line is represented by Bourdieu. That line is correct in stressing the collective, meta-subjective character of the determinants of action; it is also an important ally in defending a view of the social order as structured through group antagonism; however this line fails in not distinguishing sufficiently between material and normative integration.

A second line of thought in the theory of social action would be one most fully opposed by Honneth, one which would argue in “utilitarian” terms in the fullest Parsonian sense of the word: not only through a concept of rationality exclusively geared to instrumentalities and utilities, but also in strict individualistic terms. This would be represented, for example, by rational-action theory or social-contract theories. Honneth has never directly confronted such models of social action. They are so much at odds with his own vision of the social that there seems to be no middle ground to engage with them. This is perhaps a weakness in Honneth’s work. Methodological individualism is an extremely powerful position in traditional and contemporary theoretical sociology.

However, there is a third theoretical line with which Honneth has engaged much more substantially. This line can be broadly characterised as “functionalist”, if by that we simply mean any explanation of social action which refers not to the experiences, intentions and actions of social individuals and groups, but rather to institutions and historical trends that carry on fundamental functions in the reproduction of societies. To qualify this immediately, another surprising omission in Honneth’s overall career has been the lack of engagement with Luhmann’s systems theory. This lack of engagement with the great German social theorist is surprising at many levels, not least because he has

been an important interlocutor for Habermas in his mature theory of society. Apart from Luhmann, however, Honneth has consistently propounded a sustained critique of functionalist arguments, most notably in relation to French social theory. Indeed, this is probably one of Honneth’s greatest originalities in respect to Habermas, namely his keenness to continue to draw critical and positive arguments from a dialogue with French social theory, beyond the reference to Durkheim.

Critical engagement with Lévi-Strauss and Foucault

Three early critical discussions in particular have played a decisive role in Honneth’s development: the critique of Althusser, which chapter 1 has outlined; the critique of Foucault, the more famous of the three; but also the critique of Lévi-Strauss. Honneth’s critiques of Lévi-Strauss and Foucault are worth mentioning briefly, because they contain not just Honneth’s usual reservations against functionalist arguments, but also important positive leanings on these two thinkers.

The critical review of Lévi-Strauss, “A Structuralist Rousseau”, was first published in 1987, in between The Critique of Power and The Struggle for Recognition when Honneth was developing his key intuition of a specific struggle over moral norms at the core of social integration in modern societies. The expanded version of the article published in Die Zerrissene Welt des Sozialen came out in 1990, coinciding with Honneth’s Bourdieuan turn in Critical Theory, towards a class-theory of moral consciousness. This reconstruction of Lévi-Strauss’ intellectual career takes on a very specific colour if we read it retrospectively as a step towards the completion of Honneth’s social-philosophical model. We find in it some of the key intuitions that are later developed in The Struggle for Recognition and in the complementary 1994 articles, “Pathologies of the Social” and “The Social Dynamic of Disrespect”.

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6 In an encyclopaedia entry dedicated to structuralism, Honneth demonstrated his deep knowledge of the French social theory of the 1970s, see Honneth, “Strukturalismus”, in eds H. Kerber and A. Schmieder, Handbuch Soziologie, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 1984, pp. 582-586.
Honneth’s central interpretive claim, namely his emphasis on the influence of Rousseau on Lévi-Strauss’ thinking is quite striking. It echoes directly the prominence granted to the Swiss philosopher in “Pathologies of the Social”. In both Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss, Honneth reads the project of a critique of “pathologies” of modern society. Lévi-Strauss’ categories, which take place alongside those studied in the 1994 study, like alienation, bifurcation, anomie, are “disharmony”, “imbalance”, “inauthenticity”. Like Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss conducts his critique of the social pathologies of modernity with reference to normative criteria that are ultimately grounded in anthropological arguments. This is clearly a very important dimension for Honneth, who is engaged, as we know, in the difficult, unfashionable research programme of a refoundation of Critical Theory in (formal) anthropology. In Lévi-Strauss, Honneth also finds a “social-theorist”, someone interested in finding “the principles of social life”, for whom the core social mechanism explaining the emergence and maintenance of social orders is not to be explained individualistically and rationalistically, but through the establishment of fundamental social bonds, through “reciprocity”, “mutuality” and “solidarity”. Indeed, Honneth goes on to show that it is one of Bourdieu’s great insights, one that takes him from an orthodox Lévi-Straussian structuralist, to his own mature position, to have shown that the explanation of social integration through core intersubjective relations should also be conceived as a relation of reciprocal antagonism, as a struggle for symbolic domination.

However, in this reading of Lévi-Strauss, one aspect is strikingly at odds with Honneth’s later model. Honneth argues that the Rousseauian influence on Lévi-Strauss can be traced most clearly in the adoption of Rousseau’s “romanticism”, “the true motive”, as Honneth puts it, behind the anthropologist’s vocation and work. According to Honneth’s interpretation, in the study of earlier cultures and societies, Lévi-Strauss was pursuing more than a methodological interest. Rather, this study

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8 Ibid., p. 143.

is motivated by a profound respect for the beginnings of human socialisation that itself is born of the deep romantic conviction that in archaic cultures one finds not so much a piece of unmediated nature as one finds a specific capacity for an intimate integration within the wider life-network of nature.¹⁰

In the next page, Honneth talks about Lévi-Strauss’ “constant, sympathetic concern with the comprehensive network of natural life” as the guiding thread of his entire intellectual life. This culminates in the “ecological ethic” that is to be found in Lévi-Strauss’ late writings. At first glance, this romantic Rousseau is at odds with the Rousseau that Honneth appeals to in “Pathologies of the Social”. This is the sign of a larger, more substantial disagreement between him and the great anthropologist on some key premises. The Hegelian background, the Habermasian assumptions underpinning Honneth’s mature model cannot be reconciled with Lévi-Strauss’ “romanticism”, with the notion that “pre-modern” cultures are not antecedent, but alternate forms of, human development. But we also recall one of the key initial inspirations behind Honneth’s critical moves beyond Habermas, as they were expressed in Social Action and Human Nature. It was precisely the underlying ecological concern and the dissatisfaction with a theory of society that had taken a reductive view on nature, one, for example, that had severed the naturalistic roots of onto- and phylogenesis, which led the young critical theorists to look in Feuerbach and Mead for an alternative, more naturalistic, ground of social action. Those ecological, naturalistic elements disappear in the course of Honneth’s development, as a result of his interactionist interpretation of intersubjectivity.¹¹

More important than Lévi-Strauss, however, is the engagement with Foucault, who for the young Honneth is the most characteristic representative of a “functionalist” approach to society. Foucault’s challenge has been felt by Honneth without interruption throughout his career, from the second last chapter in Social Action and Human Nature, to the well-known, dense chapters in The Critique of Power, to the editorial work performed by Honneth on

¹⁰ Honneth, “A Structuralist Rousseau”, p. 139.
the occasion of the important 2001 Foucault conference in Germany,\textsuperscript{12} with a number of smaller articles dedicated to him in between.\textsuperscript{13}

The first criticism addressed to Foucault relates to his “archaeological” period and the adoption of a structuralist framework. This criticism in fact reiterates Honneth’s general rejection of structuralism in social theory. Already with Lévi-Strauss, Honneth explained that his “most fruitful discovery (…), the insight namely into the extra-economic role of exchange, was actually obstructed more than expanded by the structuralist jargon”.\textsuperscript{14} The contradiction that Honneth sees between the romantic motive inspiring Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist framework is that the latter excludes in principle any reference to an hermeneutic dimension which would allow us to see the myths and cultural achievements of societies studied as affective expressions of their social identities. At the risk of reading too much of Honneth’s own thinking into his reading of Lévi-Strauss, we could say that the model of a social theory centred on the concept of recognition is what Lévi-Straussian anthropology would look like after it has rid itself of structuralism.

All this is confirmed then in Honneth’s critiques of Foucault. As with Lévi-Strauss, Honneth objects to Foucault’s adoption of a structuralist methodology in his early, “archaeological” period. The series of contradictions that Honneth diagnoses in Foucault’s theory of the statement and the archive boil down to the impossible task of trying to establish a theory of society based on the model of a neutral, subjectless, non-intentional system of discourse obeying only formal, differential rules. Such a programme necessarily leads into an impasse, Honneth argues, because this framework does not provide the means to account for the alleged unity and homogeneity of the social system. Where could that unity come from if the discursive order is without centre

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Honneth, “A Structuralist Rousseau”, p. 150.
\end{itemize}
and without subject? Foucault’s answer in terms of a “function of control” is no solution, since the same question arises, regarding the who and the why of social domination. When Foucault introduces the notion of a “function of control” to explain the hegemony of discursive orders, the question arises as to how he can “combine institutional techniques and cognitive procedures without relying upon the cognitive initiative of subjects”. As with the critique of Lévi-Strauss, what this criticism shows is the impossibility of conducting social theory without the category of meaning and the presence of an hermeneutic moment.

This is a point that arose also in the criticism of Adorno. This hermeneutic moment is itself twofold. First, statements need to be referred to group-specific forms of social and cultural life, to group- or class-specific forms of social experience, as the culturally and socially specific filters of the division of labour. Secondly and intimately related to this, the hierarchical order of societies must therefore be conceived, not in a homogenising way as a uniform production dominated from the top down by an all-powerful order of domination (the totalitarian domination of modern economic-administrative apparatuses, or the “order of discourse”), but rather as the unstable compromise solution of a fundamental antagonism between groups, that is refracted in their distinctive discourses and practices. Social theory requires a hermeneutic sensitivity to the cultural actions of dominated groups, in their adaptation to the inegalitarian social order and in their resistance to it, as well as an hermeneutic sensitivity to the justificatory and enforcing discursive and cultural practices of dominating groups. Such an hermeneutic dimension is explicitly thematised in the mature model, in the two 1994 articles, but is already seen in The Struggle for Recognition when Honneth considers the cultural and political conditions enabling an experience of injustice to be transformed into the active energy of a social movement. In Foucault as in Adorno, the adoption of totalising and homogenising categories leads to a reductive vision of the social, a lack of sensitivity for the real experiences of domination and injustice, and for the more or less visible acts of resistance that arise from them.

16 Ibid., p. 143.
17 See The Struggle for Recognition, chapter 8.
In Foucault’s genealogical phase, Honneth detects an initial theory of power that has the merit of highlighting the tension between competing social agents. Even though the concept of action used early on by Foucault in his shift to genealogy is purely strategic, and therefore far removed from the normative concept that Honneth himself is seeking to develop, it remains an important “action-theoretic” proposal. Indeed, in it Honneth finds the kind of “practical intersubjectivity” which, we recall, was also the catchphrase of his early project undertaken with Joas. Very quickly, however, with the emergence of the discipline thesis, the action-theoretic model is repressed again, and a vision of modern society functionally controlled by a system of domination takes its place once again.

while the concept of power is supposed to have been developed out of the practical intersubjectivity of social struggle, without having been able to explain sufficiently the process of the social stabilisation of power, the analysis of techniques of power unexpectedly uses the idea of power-wielding institutions without having to refer to the process of their social establishment. In between, the phenomenon of actual theoretical interest—the stabilisation of practically secured positions of power in the form of their social institutionalisation—disappears.18

Obviously for Honneth the answer to Foucault’s conundrum would be found in the concept of cultural action which he developed at the time, and later in the concept of struggle for recognition. Accordingly, the social order owes its relative stability to the fact that the social groups share a minimal consensus over the justification underpinning that order, until the dominated groups are able to transform their adaptation to such inegalitarian order into demands for change, based on their experiences of injustice.19 In other words, the conundrum which Foucault faces, and which expresses itself in the form of a contradiction between his early, Nietzschean, concept of power and the institutionalist application of it in the historical writings, boils down to the

18 Honneth, Critique of Power, p. 173.

fact that he largely overlooks the normative dimension of social integration and institutionalisation processes.

This error arises for Honneth, because Foucault approaches modern society from a functionalist perspective, which leads him to a methodology akin to a system-theoretical approach. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example,

Foucault evidently conducts his historical research within the framework of a systems theory that conceives the form of social organisation as a temporary complex of power strategies by which the invariant problems of demographic growth and economic reproduction are overcome.20

There is therefore, according to Honneth, a substantial link in Foucault, between his non-normative theory of power and his adoption of a functionalist perspective. Both come together in the vision of society as a trans-subjective, anonymous system of power seeking to entrench itself in the hearts, minds and bodies of socialised individuals.

As a consequence of such a functionalist turn, beyond all other differences, the same reductions identified in Adorno’s late theory of society appear once more:21 the “crude” behaviouristic conception of socialisation which sees modern bodies as moulded, and subjectivities even “created” by, the new nexus of knowledge/power; the reduction of the social field to a passive, amorphous reality delivered over to the functionally determined institutions of power; the blindness to the hermeneutic significance and practical potential of social struggles, which are either ignored, or even construed as being strategically triggered by power for its own reinforcement.

This early critique of Foucault, combined with the rejection, *in fine*, of the founder of French structuralism, highlights the connections that Honneth drew very early on between different positions within social theory that do not necessarily imply each other, but that all lead as a consequence of their respective approaches to a downgrading of the practical, integrative role of social struggles, and to a lack of consideration for the experience of socialised subjects. For Honneth, therefore, from the beginning and consistently throughout

21 See also Honneth, “Foucault and Adorno”.
his writings, structuralism, functionalism, systems-theory, and generally any perspective starting from the premise of the institutional dimension of social life, all these approaches are guilty of some form or other of reductionism, and have to face contradictions and conceptual impasses at some point in their development. And the rejection of such approaches is also inspired by another concern, namely the problem of the practical relevance of theory.

It is without a doubt this close link established by Honneth between the conceptual tools put to work in social theory and their impact on the feasibility of a critical theory of society defined in terms of its double anchoring in the experience of social injustice, which accounts best for the originality of his position within “constitution theories”, as Joas usefully described those types of social theory that focus primarily on the practical and hermeneutic dimensions of social action. Honneth’s originality is not that, unlike other authors in this field, he would fail to take notice of the systemic aspects of modernisation processes. Rather, as the previous chapter has argued, he gives a distinctly normative interpretation of them. The differentiation of institutional spheres for him does not equate with the impossibility of social action conceived as praxis, as it does for example in Habermas. Such differentiation, on the contrary, results in a normative differentiation, to wit, the ability for socialised individuals to relate to themselves in differentiated, normative ways, and thus to make differentiated claims to society. The possibilities for individuals to become ever more autonomous and individuated, in other words, to increase their potentials for self-determination through increased self-realisation, are therefore enhanced rather than constrained by systemic differentiation.

The same applies for the possibility of social action since ever more aspects of an individual become normatively redeemable. This implication of the theory of normative differentiation is encapsulated in the idea of an “ascending” dialectic of the universal and the particular in the normative claims of groups and individuals suffering from injustice. Modern society, on Honneth’s model, has unlocked potentials for ever greater individuation and autonomisation, which have been tapped into by the various social movements that have advanced the normative integrative processes of modern societies. Few other social theories put so much emphasis on social movements and the social experience of individuals and groups. Again, it is important to emphasise the decisive role played by the historical sociology of social movements
(especially E.P. Thompson and Barrington Moore) in the development of Honneth’s thinking.

The institutions of social life

The question that this stance immediately raises, however, is whether Honneth does not create a forced alternative that becomes counter-productive and leads him to take a reductionist stance himself in social theory and in social philosophy. It is one thing to want to save the hermeneutic and practical dimensions of social life, and another to explain all functional realities of modern societies normatively. To put it differently, one should not confuse two theoretical tasks: on the one hand, the need to make room, within a theory of modern society, for the experiences of socialised subjects as they pertain to the validation or violation of justified normative claims; and on the other hand the grounding of all processes of social integration on this dimension of social life. Honneth would most probably reject this dichotomy as a caricature of his position. The point of a normative interpretation of functional differentiation is not to reduce it to an hermeneutics of social life, but to secure a normative anchoring point from which critique remains possible. From this perspective, Honneth’s social theory has much more modest ambitions than for example the other theories considered above. It does not aim to be a social theory in the strong sense, but merely to retrieve the “normative constraints” placed on processes of social integration. In this sense, Honneth’s intervention in social theory is indirect and external at first. In its explicit self-understanding, it only draws the attention of social theorists to a dimension of social life that it is crucial to keep in view if one wants to be able to ground satisfactorily a critique of the pathological traits of that social life.

The problem, however, is that there are many passages where the rejection of functionalist arguments, and the desire to save the possibility of praxis, are so great that the line Honneth seems to want to defend becomes dangerously close to the reductionist perspective just mentioned. This danger of shifting from a modest retrieval of the normative constraints placed on functional processes, to a reductionist “ontological” stance on these same processes, is especially evident in the case of Honneth’s approach to institutions. It has been noted already on a number of occasions that his intersubjectivistic
starting point has the tendency to reduce the institutional depth in some of the key authors inspiring his project, notably in Hegel and Mead. This is just one aspect of a more fundamental tendency to construe intersubjective relations in mere “inter-personalist” terms. There is a deep tendency in Honneth to reduce interaction to the horizontal relationship between singular individuals, to inter-personal interaction.\textsuperscript{22} As chapter 5 has shown, intersubjectivity is used in a variety of ways in the tradition Honneth locates himself, and was not necessarily synonymous only with interpersonal interaction.

In the case of institutions, the problematic nature of Honneth’s social-theoretical assumptions has been well demonstrated by Emmanuel Renault in *L’Expérience de l’Injustice*. Renault’s distinction between an expressivist and a constitutive concept of recognition in relation to institutions marks an important step in the development of the theory of recognition.

Honneth’s theoretical strategy relies entirely on what can be called an expressive conception of recognition (a conception of recognition whereby the latter is expressed in institutions). The relation of recognition is considered by Honneth as though it depends on relations between I and Thou that are not social in themselves, but which enable nonetheless to evaluate the social relations which factually determine the relations between I and Thou, depending on the extent to which they favour or impede recognition. In this sense, social relations and institutions express to a greater or lesser extent the relations of recognition. This expressive conception of recognition is in concordance with the normative conception of institution (…). Interpreted as the result of a struggle for recognition, the social world can express either a happy resolution of that struggle, or its perpetuation. We could say in pointed fashion that ‘to express’ here means that the institutions should not be considered as apparatuses that by themselves produce recognition or its denial, but rather as the institutionalisation of relations of recognition which therefore point to a pre-institutional level.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} This tendency is also underlined in the otherwise sympathetic review of *The Struggle for Recognition* by J. Alexander and M.P. Lara, “Honneth’s New Critical Theory of Recognition”, *New Left Review*, 220, 1996.

\textsuperscript{23} Renault, *L’Expérience de l’Injustice*, p. 198 (all translations mine).
By contrast, Renault’s “constitutive” theory of recognition holds that

Institutions not only express the relations of recognition, but also produce or constitute them. The mistake in the expressive conception of social recognition is to consider only the problem of the normative expectations directed towards institutions, and to fail to emphasise sufficiently that it is always within the framework of an institutional predetermination that subjectivities address demands of recognition to institutions.²⁴

Renault is careful to note that this second sense of recognition in relation to institutions is itself not reducible to an institutionalist conception of recognition:

there is indeed something that is not instituted in recognition since the need for recognition can remain unfulfilled within institutions and thus strive for their transformation.²⁵

Renault’s distinction captures the crux of the critique of Honneth’s readings of Hegel and Mead conducted in previous chapters. Both these authors propound substantive theories of the institutional determination of individual existence, and indeed of interpersonal relations. Hegel in particular, through the notion of the “ethical powers of Sittlichkeit”,²⁶ that is, the socio-economic spheres which determine not only specific personality structures, but also modes of social interaction, and specific types of normativity. The worlds of the peasants, the bourgeois and the state bureaucrats have their own forms of ethicality, in which relations of recognition are shaped differently, provide different forms of “self-relation”, and in which, therefore, claims for recognition also differ. It seems difficult to argue against Renault’s “constitutive” conception of the relation between recognition and institution. This conception seems to be a more valid one, especially in view of the tradition of social theory and indeed in view of some of Honneth’s very own premises. This constitutive use of recognition to conceptualise institutions simply gives more weight to the social determination of subjects and does not reduce the social to intersubjectivity.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 200.
²⁵ Ibid.
²⁶ Hegel, Philosophy of Right, §145, p. 190.
Such a claim might appear disconcerting given the level of sophistication and erudition demonstrated by Honneth. Could he really have committed such a mistake as to propound a pre-institutional theory of recognition, in particular if one considers that his model is predicated on the classics of theoretical sociology, most especially Durkheim and Parsons? This puzzle becomes more fathomable if it is remembered that the mature theory of recognition arises as the attempt to marry Marx and Habermas through immanent critiques of both, and by playing each against the other. Habermas emphasised the normative logic of social integration, beyond functionalist and utilitarian arguments in the mature Marx. But Marx had maintained the perspective of class struggle and the critique of institutions, whereas Habermas’ analytical distinction between system and lifeworld, on Honneth’s reading, always threatens to reify into norm-free contexts of action entire areas of social life that would become impervious to a normative outlook. With the theory of recognition, a new normative outlook becomes available, one, however, that is pitched at such a radical level, even before the linguistic formation of lifeworlds, that all institutional realities, including those where the “steering media” are extra-linguistic, become answerable to critical diagnosis. The whole of the social world becomes the field of critical social theory since the whole field, in all its components, could become the locus of an experience of social suffering. The danger hidden in this logical progression towards recognition is that the solution to the problem of the normatively motivated critique of society can quickly lapse into an unhelpful, hard dichotomy between functionalist and normative arguments. Against Marx, the question becomes that of finding a process of social integration that is moral; against Habermas, of finding one that is not dualistic. The “moral monism” which Honneth claims as his specific position leads to an ambiguous result. On the one hand, it seems to constitute a powerful position for critical purposes. All social phenomena can be said to entail a moral dimension, to potentially generate feelings of injustice and experiences of suffering, so that no area of social life should be excluded in principle from critique and the practical attempts at transformation. The problem is that this beneficial result can easily be bought at the price of a reductionist position in the theory of society. There seems to be an unnoticed slide between the critical demands of critical theory (that it should be both normative and monistic) and the conceptual demands of social theory, that the institutional depth of social reality be given full acknowledgement.
Throughout his career Honneth has hesitated on the crucial question of the relation of recognition to institutions. In the implicit embrace of Horkheimer’s model of “cultural action”, for example, the acknowledgement of the separate, functional autonomy of the division of labour is well taken into account. On that model, recognition relations constitute a normative social lens on a world that is institutionalised according to a logic that is largely independent of the social conflicts and morally charged relations between groups and agents. Towards the end of The Critique of Power, however, something like an expressivist conception of recognition seems to appear. Already in the critique of Foucault, as we saw a few moments ago, the action-theoretical model of power is implicitly praised by Honneth. What seems to be implied at this stage is that Foucault is only missing the normative moment of social integration through antagonism to arrive at a satisfactory solution. But institutions on that model seem to be reducible to expressions of power struggles. And as the end of chapter 4 argued, the shift from the cultural action model to the struggle for recognition model already anticipates a monistic normative model that has not just critical, but also social-theoretical ambitions. With the move towards a “concept of the social” inspired by the notion found in Hegel and Mead of a “primary sociality”, the expressivist vision of recognition and institutions seems already entrenched. On the other hand, in later writings the autonomous logic of development of the economic sphere is acknowledged as a matter of course.

Beyond the fundamental distinction between expressive and constitutive conceptions of recognition, another significant contribution made by Renault is to have shown that taking into account the social dimension of existence, in a strong sense that emphasises the power of institutions, does not lead to a dissolution of the normative programme, as Honneth had feared. It leads, however, to a different vision of social emancipation, since a different understanding of the link between recognition and institution must have a bearing on the link between social theory and social critique. If institutions are viewed as “expressions” of relations of recognition, the experiences of misrecognition and the immanent transcendence they negatively entail point to a state of social life beyond current institutional reality. Ultimately, they point to that telos of full reconciliation between subjects, where mutual recognition is totally achieved, in quantity and in quality, so to speak, when all social
individuals are recognised in their full identity. Strangely enough, recognition seems to provide both an internal and an external perspective on the reality of institutions. The perspective is internal in as much as recognition is supposed to account for the normative conditions of the institutional consensus, the minimal layer of consensus legitimating and justifying the given institutional order. In other words, in explanatory, or “social-theoretical” terms, the expressive conception of recognition leads to an internalist picture. But the critical perspective is externalist since the experiences of injustice point beyond existing social reality. On Renault’s model, on the other hand, the explanatory and the critical perspectives both remain internalist. This is obvious for the social-theoretical, that is to say if the institutional reality is seen as itself producing, or constituting types of recognition relations. On the critical level, the perspective is also an internalist one:

the confrontation of demands of recognition aimed at the institutions is internal to the life of the institutions themselves: it takes on the path of a process of internal evolution, or in crisis situations, in which collective conflicts appear to the individuals subjected to the denial of recognition as the only possible outcome.27

Renault’s injection of an institutionalist dimension into the theory of recognition thus seems to provide a useful synthesis, which retains the critical potential of Honneth’s innovations, whilst making room for a more realistic vision of the meta-subjective weight of institutions and ‘ethical powers’. We will return to these problems in chapter 11 when we study Honneth’s uneasy relation to the critique of political economy.

This section is dedicated to what Honneth has termed “the moral of recognition”, in other words, the implications of the ethics of recognition for moral theory. This entails the following problems: the precise characterisation of the nature of the norms involved in moral action; the question of moral judgement, that is to say, the type of deliberation, through which these norms are formulated and put into play by a plurality of subjects in real action; the moral psychology that needs to be coherently attached to moral theory; and the critical relation to competing theories of morality.

**Beyond discourse ethics**

As in most other areas of his work, the easiest access into Honneth’s moral philosophy is to take it as a correction of Habermas. The “moral of recognition” is best characterised as a critical development of discourse ethics. The central idea behind Habermas’ discourse ethics, that an action is moral only if it can be justified as an action that would have been agreed to by all the agents concerned, that idea also captures the central intuition at the
heart of the ethics of recognition. In the latter, the Habermasian intuition is fleshed out in terms of the normative value of every individual, the value that is precisely at stake in, and triggers, struggles for recognition. Indeed the second sphere of recognition articulates a moment in the theory of recognition that can be called its irreducible Kantian moment: the fact that each person is equally deserving of respect as a free being able to be held responsible for his or her own actions.

But the ethics of recognition also grew from of a series of dissatisfactions with Habermas’ proposal. Some of these dissatisfactions were of a direct moral-philosophical nature. In particular, two features that were presented already in previous chapters have special significance for the “moral of recognition”. The first is the Marxian-Bourdieuian suspicion relating to the difficulty faced by discourse ethics as soon as the principle of discursive universalisability is confronted with the reality of class-specific moral experiences and the difficulties encountered by dominated groups in accessing the proper realm of justification.¹ As was seen in chapter 3, there is a constant Bourdieuian moment in Honneth. Accordingly the discrimination and cultural disadvantage suffered by dominated groups mean that they are denied access to the forms of cultural and symbolic capital that would allow them to express “properly” their own moral experience, in a language, that is, that would be recognised as valid in the public discourse over norms. Habermas’ overly rationalistic and formalistic reformulation of the moral imperative runs the risk of not counting as valid expressions of moral experience that cannot rise to the formality of universalisable validity claims. Dominating classes on the other hand, not only enjoy unproblematic access to symbolic vocabulary and resources, they are even encouraged, through their position in society, to use a language of justification appropriately. Indeed, this last point in fact leads to an even stronger thesis: the very logic of occupying a position of social domination entails the constraint of formulating the justification for one’s power and privilege. Such an insight, which was central in Habermas’ earlier model of social theory, and is captured notably by the concept of “systematically distorted communication”, becomes very difficult to articulate with the sole means of linguistic pragmatics.

The second major critical claim made against discourse ethics was linked to the first, but was no longer restricted to the sociological narrowness of Habermas’ moral theory. The argument this time targets the collapsing of the Kantian insight (universal dignity) onto the normativity inherent in linguistic agreement. This collapse, according to Honneth, leads to the confusion between validity and experience, the confusion between moral experience as “thick” experience, and the necessity to couch it in normative terms, by using the resources inherent in the pragmatics of language, for questions of justification. The fact that moral justification relies on all the normative rules and constraints that discourse ethics brings to light does not mean that moral experience is itself solely made up of this normative material.\(^2\) The correction of this confusion was from the beginning one of the major inspirations behind Honneth’s project of an ethics of recognition: to provide a theory of moral experience that does justice to all its dimensions, however they might be presented in formal normative language.

The attempt to avoid the shortcomings of discourse ethics is probably one of the main reasons behind Honneth’s methodological negativism in normative questions, a negativism which applies most particularly to moral questions. The upshot of the critique of Habermas’ overly formalistic characterisation of the moral point of view is that a logically and normatively adequate presentation, to oneself and others, of the norms guiding action cannot pass for the primordial feature of moral norms. If that is the case, however, no other access to the reality of moral experience can be granted, at first, but a negative one: what constitutes the moral order is revealed when, through their affective and indeed practical reactions to injustice, subjects point negatively to the normative feature that have been injured through an unjust or immoral action. “Moral injuries” and the “feeling of injustice” are the primary guidelines for the theory of morality.\(^3\)


\(^3\) See in particular “Recognition and Moral Obligation”, Social Research, 64(1), 1997, pp. 16-35.
Honneth refers to such methodological negativism in a number of texts, and often in reference to contemporary German moral theory.\textsuperscript{4} As the initial quotation of the important article “The Other of Justice” reminds us, such negativism was already the method that Adorno had defined for ethical thinking.\textsuperscript{5} This negativistic approach to moral theory could also be counted as further proof of the impact of Theunissen’s work on Honneth’s thinking.\textsuperscript{6} The previous chapter also showed that this negative methodology was crucial in establishing the three spheres of recognition. The leading question, to recall, was a negative one: “what are the conceptual means with which a social theory might find out what is felt by the subjects as social injustice in the social reality?”\textsuperscript{7} In both \textit{The Struggle for Recognition} and in the polemic with Fraser, Honneth uses this question as a guideline to articulate the three spheres. Each sphere is supposed to represent the normative construct arising at first negatively from the phenomenology of the different historical types of injustice, as they are documented in particular by the historical sociology of social movements.

More substantially, negativity is not just a methodological concept, but constitutes in fact the very heart of the moral status of human beings. In this, Honneth unequivocally follows Habermas. A passage from \textit{Justification and Application} made the point very clearly:

> communicative socialisation through which persons are simultaneously individuated generates a deep-seated vulnerability, because the identity of socialised individuals develops only through integration into ever more extensive relations of social dependency. The person develops an inner life and achieves a stable identity only to the extent that he also externalises


\textsuperscript{7} Fraser & Honneth, \textit{Redistribution or Recognition?}, p. 149.
himself in communicatively generated interpersonal relations and implicates himself in an ever denser and more differentiated network of reciprocal vulnerabilities, thereby rendering himself in need of protection. From this anthropological point of view, morality can be conceived as the protective institution that compensates for constitutional precariousness implicit in the sociocultural form of life itself. Moral institutions tell us how we should behave toward one another to counteract the extreme vulnerability of the individual through protection and considerateness. Nobody can preserve his integrity by himself alone. The integrity of the individual persons requires the stabilisation of a network of symmetrical relations of recognition in which non-replaceable individuals can secure their fragile identities in a reciprocal fashion only as members of a community. Morality is aimed at the chronic susceptibility of personal integrity implicit in the structure of linguistically mediated interactions, which is more deep-seated than the tangible vulnerability of bodily integrity, though connected with it.8

This argument is also at the heart of Honneth’s moral thinking.9 Like Habermas, Honneth propounds a radical intersubjectivistic theory of subjective formation: the subject can learn to relate to herself only by integrating the normative expectations and attitudes that others direct at her. As a result, the subject, for both Habermas and Honneth, is formed in conditions of extreme vulnerability. On that view, the positive self-relations, those fundamental, minimal conditions that enable a subject to function at all, to conceive of herself as being, to a minimum extent, the author of her own choices and actions, depend on the context in which she is socialised, both for the constitution of the capacities required in autonomous action, and for the maintenance of a minimal sense of agency and identity. Primary and secondary socialisation provide, or not, those conditions of subject formation. Because he shares

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9 And recently, in an article with Joel Anderson, Honneth has made explicit the political implications of this departure point, see Anderson/Honneth, “Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition and Justice” in eds. J. Christman and J. Anderson, *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*, New Essays, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 77-100. See chapter 11 for an overview of the political implications of such a focus on vulnerability.
this radical intersubjectivistic view of the subject with Habermas, Honneth’s “moral of recognition” therefore simply reformulates the fundamental intuition at the heart of discourse ethics:

Morality represents the quintessential core of those attitudes we are required to take towards each other in order to ensure in common the conditions of our personal identities.\(^{10}\)

At the heart of both moral theories, the most fundamental concept is that of vulnerability.

the ‘moral point of view’ refers to the network of attitudes that we have to adopt in order to protect human beings from injuries arising from the communicative presuppositions of their self-relations.\(^{11}\)

Moral action thus has negative and positive formulations. Negatively, an action is moral when it avoids or prevents an injury that could befall a human being on the basis of his or her intersubjective dependence on others. We can note that this formulation mixes the two German concepts of recognition: the normative and the epistemic. To avoid inflicting suffering on the other requires, as its condition of possibility, perceiving the other as vulnerable. But that perception is also already directly normative. Perceiving the other as a being to whom suffering ought not to be done is synonymous with recognising her or him in a normative sense. This mixing of the normative and the perceptual will be decisive for the critical remark at the end of the chapter.

To turn to the positive formulation of the moral imperative from the perspective of the intersubjectivistic premise, an action is moral when it ensures that the subjects affected by the action will be able to realise their personal identity. The difference between Habermas’ discourse ethics and the “moral of recognition” arises from the broader differences in their approaches to normative questions, and ultimately from their different anthropological presuppositions. As the quote above shows quite clearly, for Habermas the radical vulnerability of human subjects stems from their communicative interdepen-


\(^{11}\) Ibid.
dency, that is, from the fact that they are involved in “communicative socialisation”, or “social interactions mediated by the use of language oriented to mutual understanding”. In moral philosophy as in other areas, Habermas draws a major overlap between the normative experience itself, the justification of its normative adequacy, and the logic inherent in linguistic understanding. The logic underpinning this overlap seems to be the following: since the human subject is “communicatively” vulnerable, so to speak, its identity and autonomy can be defended only in practices that operate on the very logic of language-use: that is, through practices that allow for free discussion and under the constraint of the counter-factual universal acceptability of validity claims.

Honneth, on the other hand, is critical of this identification of normativity and the immanent normativity of language use, and finds it an excessive narrowing of the normative experience. His whole project consists, one might say, in retrieving the full phenomenological depth of normative experiences. This is quite precisely one of the main aims behind the delineation of the three spheres of recognition. They seek to capture the different normative perspectives from which all types of normative judgements (moral, social and political) can be made. As a result of this general programme, the “moral of recognition” is therefore articulated, like the theory of justice, around three principles, and each sphere of recognition formulates a specific type of duty, or moral imperative:

Because (moral) attitudes aid in securing the intersubjective conditions under which human subjects can preserve their integrity, they have to consist in as many forms of recognition as there are types of morally injurious disrespect. (…) The moral point of view has to encompass not just one, but three independent modes of recognition.12

An unavoidable consequence of this position is that:

The moral point of view comprises three moral attitudes that cannot be ranked from some superordinate vantage point. Thus the entire domain of the moral is pervaded by a tension that can be resolved only in individual responsibility. We are obligated in concrete situations to accord others

12 Ibid., p. 138.
recognition in a mode that corresponds to the respective kind of social relationship at issue; but in the case of a conflict, we have to decide which of our bonds is to be granted priority according to a different set of guidelines.\(^{13}\)

However, the principle of recognition described in the second sphere—the recognition of each individual as an equal moral subject capable of taking free decisions and capable therefore of participating fully in the public debate over the norms of individual and social action—to a certain extent has primacy over the other two:

Strictly speaking, even a morality of recognition follows the intuitions that have already prevailed in the Kantian tradition of moral philosophy: in the case of a moral conflict, the claims of all subjects to equal respect for their individual autonomy enjoy absolute priority.\(^{14}\)

The crucial difference with Kant is that the conflict now is between equally valid normative claims. The priority of the Kantian moment does not rule out other types of moral claims, but only functions as basic premise, in the great majority of cases. Once that moment is respected, the other claims have full validity and only a concrete deliberation tied to the specific circumstances of the moral situation can help adjudicate and decide in favour of one or the other.

### The other of justice

However, there is a different side to the Kantian moment and its priority. Most of Honneth’s articles specifically dedicated to moral theory address a set of moral problems that arise when a moral principle antithetic to the universalist imperative of equal treatment emerges, a principle Honneth refers to, following Habermas, as “the other of justice”.\(^{15}\) By “justice”, Habermas

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 141.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid.  
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and Honneth both have the Kantian imperative in view, the imperative at the heart of the modern conception of moral action. This is the imperative which requires equal treatment for every human being as a being equally deserving of respect, that is to say, as a being equally deserving to see his or her fundamental freedom recognised. This recognition in turn means both that the human being is acknowledged in his or her full normative standing and, in more practical terms, is not prevented from engaging in the ways he or she has chosen for his or her self-realisation. This normative principle represents for Habermas and Honneth the fundamental normative ground of modern rights.

One fundamental feature of this principle, deriving directly from its radical egalitarianism, is its symmetrical structure. This symmetry entails a number of dimensions that can be analysed separately.

Firstly and most simply, the symmetry built into the principle of equal respect means that I need to treat others as I demand to be treated myself. But it can also be formulated in the following ways: that my freedom and the freedom of others reciprocally condition each other, that is to say, that I can be free only by being recognised as such by others, whom I therefore must also recognise as free; that I am myself bound by the pragmatic requirement according to which actions that affect others must be justifiable from their perspective; and so on.

One implication of this symmetrical structure of the Kantian, egalitarian-universalist moment of morality is a negative one: since the condition for its moral adequacy is that the moral action must be able to be justified from the perspective of any of the parties affected by it, the moral action effectively prohibits any partial, favourable treatment of one individual over the others. Preferential and asymmetrical treatments seem to be excluded from the realm of morality by the egalitarian principle. This feature forms the core of the definition of the moral not only in ethical theories inspired by Kant, but in competing models also, notably in utilitarian ethics. This feature, however, clearly represents a huge difficulty. As soon as this necessary implication of

a universalist approach to morality has been made explicit, the limitations of that approach become instantly clear because some forms of human interaction, like love or friendship, are characterised by a radical asymmetry. In those relations, one is ready to sacrifice one’s own interests, and indeed the interests of others, in favour of the more significant other, if we can put it like that. Some others count more than others. And yet it seems counter-intuitive to discount these special relations from the realm of moral experience on the basis of their structural asymmetry. Indeed, as Honneth makes the point convincingly

our conception of what makes a person morally good, and indeed of what morality might signify in the first place, is something we have gained not least from those innumerable, multifaceted examples of selfless devotion, sacrifice and loving care, whose source is the unwavering affection for another human being.16

In such cases, the well-being of the particular other is the primary concern; it informs the content of the moral experience and of the actions in favour of this special other. By definition the care for the other’s well-being, the sensitivity to her idiosyncratic interests and being are limited to that other’s radical uniqueness, her irreplaceability and “concreteness”. Care by definition is highly particularised and in many cases cannot be required to be symmetrically reciprocated. It fails both the universalism and the symmetry demanded of moral action from the Kantian and other strong normativistic perspectives. From within the tradition of Critical Theory, we could call this the Adornian moment in morality, the moment of preservation of difference, a moment, as we have seen, Honneth fully intends to preserve.

One of the main conundrums of contemporary moral theory, therefore, is to accommodate the experiences of love and friendship with the universalistic constraints that seem almost constitutive of morality in modernity, to integrate

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16 A. Honneth, “Love and Morality. On the Moral Content of Emotional Ties”, in Disrespect. The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007, p. 171. These type of quotes (many others could be given) show that the claim that the ethics of recognition fails to fully take into consideration the otherness of the other is based on a misunderstanding.
two forms of experience and what seem to be two contradictory principles within the realm of morality, without injustice to their respective normative and phenomenological consistency. Honneth’s highly ambitious claim is that only the moral of recognition is truly capable of resolving this conundrum.

One powerful strand of contemporary philosophy that can be defined as the deliberate attempt to do full justice to “the other of justice” is the field of ethical theories inspired by “postmodernist” thought. Without him putting it quite in this way, Honneth applies to that literature the test of performative contradiction. In the article entitled precisely “The Other of Justice”, Honneth take the proposals put forward by Jean-François Lyotard and Stephen White as paradigmatic representatives of this field. Both, beyond the differences in their aims, references and methods, share a similar project: to overcome the deficiencies of universalistic ethics by focusing on the theoretical and practical implications that derive from the imperative of doing justice to the other’s specific difference. Honneth shows that in both cases, the authors are in fact forced to implicitly rely on the very arguments that Habermas’ discourse ethics articulates and shows to be analytically linked, namely universality and the discussion principles, that all those affected be considered and given the opportunity to actually and actively participate in deliberation. The imperative of giving each their due, that each individual’s difference be given the chance to be respected, in fact is tantamount to the very type of universalistic procedure formulated by Habermas. It would be a logical contradiction to define the ethical imperative in terms of a recognition of difference and not ground it in a universalistic procedure. This critical argument would also apply to all the criticisms of Honneth himself that are formulated from the perspectives of an “ethics of difference”. Despite rhetorical circumvolutions, the ethics of difference cannot avoid the universalistic and proceduralist moments without running the risk of internal inconsistency.

Additionally, the rejection of the formalism of Kant’s ethics, which seems to leave no room for the consideration of individual interests, is shared by discourse ethics and postmodernist ethics alike. The emphasis in postmodernist ethics on the affective dimension of concern for the unique demands by the concrete other is to some extent shared by Habermas himself, as Honneth reminds us. Habermas, it is true, favours a cognitivist approach to moral norms: the intersubjective reciprocity that is the logical condition for
moral deliberation and thus seems to imply something like the possibility to empathise with the other tends to be interpreted by him more in terms of the rational comprehension of her or his point of view, rather than as a truly affective empathy.\textsuperscript{17} However, in response to the objections from the ethics of care, Habermas attempted to show that the egalitarian principle of justice could only be applicable if a second principle was assumed, that of “solidarity”, through which the well-being and the concrete demands of the real other engaged in communicative deliberation were taken into consideration. Honneth sees a major problem in this response. Habermas wants to combine this notion of solidarity with the universalistic requirement: solidarity is for him the empathic reverse side of the principle of equal treatment. This, however, is too idealistic, Honneth argues, from the perspective of his own concept of solidarity. As we saw, within the framework of the third sphere of recognition, the recognition of the individual’s social value can be made sense of only from within a restricted community of values and shared ethical ends. The affective empathy with another subject in social interaction is therefore truly possible, on Honneth’s model, only within the confines of a given ethical community, whereas the moral community is not reduced to the ethical community.\textsuperscript{18}

For Honneth, none of these models can truly deliver the solution to the conundrum presented above: namely, how to combine adequately the two principles of universal symmetry, and of asymmetrical duty towards the concrete other. Another theoretical alternative, one broadly inspired by Aristotelian ethical arguments is just as limited. Honneth agrees with this latter line of argument to the extent that he shares its scepticism towards Kant’s model. Honneth’s philosophical enterprise can be characterised as continuing in the footsteps of Hegel’s “Sittlichkeit critique” of Kantian morality, as a correction of morality by ethicality. In his writings in moral philosophy, Honneth constantly emphasises the inability of contemporary moral theories overly impressed by the Kantian emphasis on symmetry and disinterestedness to come to terms with

\textsuperscript{17} Honneth, “The Other of Justice”, pp. 112-113.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., p. 123.
the full range of moral experiences.\textsuperscript{19} This is a strand in Honneth’s thinking that we have encountered many times already: the critique of moral, social and political philosophical models from the vantage point of the full hermeneutic depth and breadth of normative experiences. Against Kant, however, the neo-Aristotelian solution is no more able to solve the conundrum. This is because it seems to take for granted the capacity to define the values that will allow one to define the good life, without explaining how these relate to the well-being of others.\textsuperscript{20}

Honneth sees in his ethics of recognition an alternative path in between these dichotomies, a path that allows him to combine the symmetrical and asymmetrical components of justice, “between Aristotle and Kant”, between difference and discourse ethics. The solution is actually quite straightforward, and its terms have in fact already been presented in their basic outline. The simple mistake that all these proposals commit is not to give equal weight to the two principles. They argue as though either the universalistic or the particularistic moment had to be favoured. But one-principle solutions quickly encounter their limits simply because they cannot do justice to the complexity of moral experience. They then attempt to reintegrate the missing moment through the back door, so to speak. Difference ethics are forced to implicitly rely on universalistic arguments, whilst rationalistic, or cognitivist, theories are forced to make room somehow for the affective, the concrete and the particular. The best way to avoid these hesitations is simply to acknowledge that the two moments are equally constitutive of morality, and to bite the bullet in accepting the theoretical conclusion that an irreducible feature of moral life is the tension between them. Such admission, rather than being a weakness, in fact seems to correspond to the experience of moral life itself.

\textsuperscript{19} The article “Love and Morality” is a critical review of contemporary moral philosophy, as it pertains specifically to the theme of love and friendship. The article is the synthesis of two critical reviews that appeared in Merkur, in 1998.

\textsuperscript{20} “Zwischen Aristoteles und Kant. Skizze einer Moral der Anerkennung”, in Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit (the original, German edition of Disrespect. The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory), p. 172. I quote the German because this particular passage does not feature in the English version.
In terms of philosophical references, the solution consists therefore in a certain “marriage” of Habermas and Derrida, to repeat Critchley’s famous suggestion. Habermas is the one who best articulates, in full awareness of the methodological constraints of post-metaphysical philosophy, the irreducible moment of universalism and egalitarianism at the heart of modern moral life. His attempt at integrating the affective dimension post festum, however, is not very convincing. Derrida, on the other hand, who at times seems to fail to acknowledge the normative force of the universality principle, is the one who articulates fully the second principle by drawing the full implications of Levinasian ethics. In particular, Derrida does not shy away from the paradox that results from the full adoption of the Levinasian inspiration: on some occasions, true justice consists in doing injustice to the universalist-egalitarian principle, in circumstances namely, when only an attitude that relinquishes the demand of symmetrical response, an attitude, in other words, that sacrifices the autonomy of the self in favour of the infinite demand of the other, can be the true ethical response.

Despite appearances to the contrary, this solution, namely the marriage of universalism and difference, is not in contradiction with the other distinctive feature of recognition ethics: its three-fold model and the claim of moral monism. The dialectic (unity in tension) between the principle of asymmetrical affective empathy and symmetrical universal egalitarian treatment leads directly to a three-fold model, because the first of the two principles can be specified in two different ways, depending on the sphere in which it applies. In the intimate sphere, the affective response to the concrete other is absolutely asymmetrical, especially in the case of the parent-child relationship. In the broader social sphere on the other hand, the affective empathy towards the other is more an interestedness in the other’s existence and needs. In that case, the affective interrelation is closer to being symmetrical, notably because it is based on a shared lifeworld or at least on a minimal community of moral assumptions. At the end of “The Other of Justice”, Honneth is thus able to

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reframe the content of his three spheres through the lens of the two antagonistic moral principles:

in the same way that solidarity constitutes a necessary counterpoint to the principle of justice, as it complements it in a particularistic way with the affective impulses of reciprocal compassion, similarly and just as equally care represents a counterpoint to it that is just as necessary, because it complements it with the principle of unilateral, fully disinterested assistance.²³

Honneth’s claim for his ethics of recognition is thus highly ambitious. The conclusion of his article clearly argues that his ethics achieves a grand synthesis: of Kant (second sphere, “principle of justice”), with Aristotle (third sphere, “solidarity”) with the ethics of care (first sphere, “care”).

Equally significant in that respect, is the way in which the monistic dimension is retained beyond the two-way or three-way descriptions that result from Honneth’s critical engagement with contemporary moral theory. What unites the three principles is the ability of the human subject to acknowledge the normative status of the partner in interaction. This ability is that of the subject of action. It is the capacity of the moral agent to treat another human being not just instrumentally, but also as a being that deserves particular attention, because of her status as a being of needs and freedom. There is therefore a unique cognitive dimension in recognition even as it is taken in its normative sense: to recognise someone in a normative way is to see²⁴ in him or her, the needs and the interests that demand to be fulfilled. To be a moral creature, for Honneth and Habermas, is essentially synonymous with being vulnerable, since one becomes a free subject in the radical dependence on other subjects. This can now be rephrased in the terminology of “seeing”: to be a moral creature is to demand to be seen as a creature of needs, whose needs are the condition of real autonomy (bodily and psychological security; capacity to engage in responsible action; opportunity to make valued contributions). A denial of recognition is the failure on the part of the others to acknowledge, to see, the needy nature of a human subject. A case of misrecognition is a case

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²³ Honneth, “The Other of Justice”, p. 125.

²⁴ As Lévinas had put it, thus capturing the centrality of the metaphor for the accurate conceptualisation of ethics.
of inaccurate “perception” of a subject’s normative needs. Indeed the struggle for recognition in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* was already described in those terms: “two consciousnesses” face each other, each certain of its own truth (its autonomy as self-consciousness). The question for them becomes: how can I make the other see me as I am? This question is also the fundamental question that Sartre puts at the heart of the intersubjective encounter: what alienates me in the being-for-the-other, is the other’s *look*. In all these analyses, the distinctive and single root of the moral attitude comes to light: it is the fundamental attitude towards an other being as a being whose needs demand a practical and affective response from me.

**The problem of love as a normative sphere**

This focus on vulnerability as the most fundamental concept in moral theory provides an alternative entry into the debate in contemporary moral philosophy on whether love can be counted as a right. One only needs to formulate the problem through a concrete question, for example with reference to children, to see how acute the problem is: does it make sense to say that someone, a child in particular, has a “right to be loved”.

The reason this problem is worth discussing briefly in this chapter is that it represents one of the strongest possible objections against the first sphere, and by extension, against the whole framework of Honneth’s ethics, since the latter is premised on the idea of internally articulated “spheres of recognition”. Yes, the objector would argue, genetically and descriptively, children do rely on care and love for the establishment of their sense of self and subjective agency. But how could emotions be made the subject of a rights claim, the object of a duty that could be demanded?

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25 I use the article by Matthew Liao, “The Right of Children to be Loved”, *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14(4), 2006, pp. 420-440, as a useful guideline for this brief discussion of a complex problem. The article provides a good synthesis of the literature on the topic and refers helpfully to a number of important distinctions.

26 Liao “The Right of Children to be Loved”, p. 424.
First, one must distinguish between the reality of the duty and the duty-bearer. Honneth argues from a strong anthropological position. He does not claim that love, because it is a necessary condition for the constitution of positive self-relations, is therefore necessarily a duty on the parents. If that were the case, then love would therefore have to be enforceable by law and public force, which is of course preposterous. All that Honneth says in fact is that, because it is a condition of positive self-relation, love constitutes a first type of right for the subject. But the question of who needs to fulfill the right is not analytically contained in the right itself. The second problem is an empirical question, the problem of finding who will best provide asymmetrical care demanded by the subject. Of course, in most cases, at least in modern Western societies, one would expect the biological parents to fulfill that role. But if for some contingent reason the parents cannot provide the affective recognition required by the growing child, the point is not to punish the parents and force them to love, but to find substitutes for them, in acknowledgement of the child’s needs. The onus is not on the actual claiming of the right onto the duty-bearer, but rather on the essential vulnerability of the human person.

This first point leads to a second aspect, namely the indirect or secondary responsibility of society when primary care is not provided. By focusing on the vulnerability of the child rather than the duty of the parents, one expresses the right of the child in the absolute. This becomes a duty that befalls everyone else, in case the parents, who would be expected to provide primary care, fail to do so. In such cases, a specific social institution ought to respond to the unmet need of the child, and this is obviously what happens in most societies, whether formally or informally. Indeed, one might add that this institution of caring for the child without parents or without “good enough” parents has been in place in many societies well before functional differentiation took effect.

**Ethics of needs and anthropocentrism**

Another critical point comes to the fore once the fundamental basis of Honneth’s moral theory, namely the notion of essential vulnerability, has been made clear. If the ground of moral action is the perception of the other’s essential vulnerability, in other words the capacity to see another creature
as a creature endowed with structural needs, then one obvious question is: is such a creature of needs only a human being? If, as Honneth seems to argue, moral theory needs to be grounded in the full phenomenological depth of moral experience in order to avoid unilateral, truncated approaches as well as abstractions, then it would seem counter-intuitive to exclude other organic beings, especially animals, from moral consideration. Indeed, encompassing non-human beings in moral experience is an option that is open to utilitarianism, especially the utilitarianism that uses only a “thin” notion of interest, starting with the interest that a live organism has in surviving and in not being subjected to suffering that can be avoided.27 We can go even further. If the core capacity for moral action can only be defined negatively, as the acknowledgement of vulnerability, then any entity that can be endangered or made to suffer should be a legitimate object of moral consideration. Here, “ontological” rather than organically based understandings of vulnerability, survival and suffering, would far extend the realm of moral objects. If vulnerability simply meant an entity’s “interest in continuing in its own being” despite that entity’s reliance on other entities, then a morality grounded in attention to vulnerability would define as moral duty the consideration of the “interests” of any system that would be complex enough to be “harmed” (that is, have its interests in self-permanence curtailed) in its interactions with others. On that account, there would be a moral duty not to destroy or damage the following entities: an ecological system; a specific human culture; an animal species; a work of art; a complex machine or an everyday object; a specific human language; a cultural environment, a historical building, and so on.

Honneth most emphatically refuses to consider that there is a moral duty towards non-human entities. At best, there is an indirect duty, that is, a duty inasmuch as that entity is itself a necessary part in a human being’s self-realisation. Honneth is most sanguine about this. In the recent 2006 Tanner lectures, for example, he most categorically rejects the idea of rights for natural beings.28 In his reconstruction of Adorno’s implicit ethical theory, Honneth argues that natural entities, animals especially, have normative significance

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28 He does this also in trenchant terms in his 2001 address to the Greens Congress, “Identitätsfindung durch einen Erweiterten Gerechtsbegriff. Sozialphilosophi-
only indirectly, to the extent that they have mattered for other human beings to which we are relationally attached.

But this anthropocentric stance, notwithstanding the fact that it is today questioned by many in different traditions, might represent a problem for Honneth at an immanent level already. Again, the best way to show this is by contrast with the model from which Honneth attempted to demarcate his own. The problem is quite different for Habermas since he defines vulnerability from the outset in a “communicative” way, that is, as the specific vulnerability that humans are subject to, as a result of their specific identity formation through “communicative socialisation”. In order to criticise Habermas for his anthropocentrism, one needs to engage him on the much more difficult terrain of the relationship between symbolic capacities and moral status. This can very well be done, but the criticism is no longer immanent. Honneth, however, rejects the reduction of communication to linguistic exchange, and what he sees as Habermas’ confusion between validity and experience. The emphasis put on the affective and the pre-linguistic inspires the differentiation of the normative into three principles, while the first sphere provides more than just one of the normative principles, as it functions also as the paradigmatic moment.

With this shift from communication to recognition, however, the meaning of suffering and vulnerability also changes. The key questions become: what exactly is injured in misrecognition; or, what is the exact nature of a “moral injury”; what is it that is unacceptable in moral injury, what is the exact normative element that makes moral suffering unacceptable and therefore makes it the negative origin of morality? Is the unacceptable the simple fact that a human being is made to suffer because of the actions of others, or more specifically the fact that a human being suffers inasmuch as she could be autonomous, which would mean that a moral injury is an injury that prevents a human being from achieving that autonomy? The fundamental issue thus concerns the precise normative value of autonomy: Why exactly do positive self-relations matter? We saw that positive self-relations matter because they are the conditions of possibility for personal identity, which is itself the condition of autonomy and agency. But why does autonomy matter? Does

autonomy matter in and of itself, or does it matter because it is the condition for human beings to flourish? In other words: Is autonomy itself the end? Or is human fulfilment the end, with the proviso that, since human beings, because of their specific constitution, can only be truly fulfilled if they are autonomous, then autonomy is an essential component of that realisation, indeed becomes synonymous with human self-realisation? If human freedom is an end in and of itself, then yes, non-human beings matter only inasmuch as they are means to human freedom. That does not necessarily translate into a full instrumentalist relationship to nature as Honneth is at pains to demonstrate in the Tanner Lectures. If a natural object is essential to a human being’s ethical life, then that object must be preserved. But “ontologically” so to speak, in terms of the “ontology” underpinning morality, that object has no rights or normative value independently of the human world. If, on the other hand, autonomy matters only as a condition of human flourishing, then flourishing becomes the ultimate criterion of morality, and autonomy is a necessary component of it only in the human world. For beings that are not endowed with the same capacity for autonomy as humans, the attempt to survive and flourish still exists, they continue to have a “right to flourish”, and can be seen to have an intrinsic interest in it.

What we are getting at with these questions and distinctions is the sense that is hard to suppress, that beings other than human beings have their own right in continuing to exist in non-disturbed ways, as far as is possible. Here, a crucial distinction might make the intuition more palatable. One way of characterising the intuition is to define vulnerability in the thinnest or vaguest ontological sense possible: an entity that exists has an ontological need inasmuch as it demands to continue to be, and to continue to be in the state that it is. On that model, a use object, to take an extreme example, has an intrinsic normative value. This ethical model exists and is propounded by the school of “the ethics of needs”.29 Another way of defining vulnerability and thus of restricting the scope of moral perception is to restrict the field of entities with “an interest to continue to be” to organic entities, to the realm of life. On that model, the work of art, for example, ceases to have intrinsic moral value. This

second position is most powerfully defended by Stéphane Haber. Against the anthropocentrism of second generation Critical Theory, Haber advocates a consideration of natural beings as living beings endowed with “a tendency, a natural power of affirmation that is proper to these beings that have not been or not overly been fabricated”, and which gives them their own normative dimension. On the basis of this power of spontaneous self-manifestation and self-organisation, natural beings can appear as “quasi-subjects”, as “partial alterities”, as having a right to appeal, therefore, to a normative sense of interaction. This is the deep justification, Haber argues, of the strong intuition that natural beings need to be included in our public deliberations as more than just instrumentally useful and morally indifferent beings. Against Honneth’s anthropocentric stance, however, their normative value is intrinsic, even if only humans are able to see it. The fact that only human beings can behave towards other beings morally does not mean that only human beings have moral value.

The great strength of Haber’s analysis is that he manages to defuse the most serious philosophical worries that seem to immediately emerge when a position like his is defended, and especially the type of objections that Honneth seems to have. Haber shows very well, for example, that a naturalistic position in normative questions does not necessarily have to end up in a metaphysics of life, as is still the case, for example and paradigmatically, with Jonas’ famous grounding of an ethics of responsibility in an ontology of life. Naturalism does not necessarily entail a renunciation of the specific normativity of the human world. Precisely, the distinctions suggested above pointed precisely in that direction. If one defines the capacity for symbolic

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and autonomous action in anthropological terms, that is to say, as a natural endowment of human beings, then it is their flourishing, the fulfilment of this their capacity, that defines them normatively. But then it is the fulfilment of organically grounded capacities that becomes the normative criterion, not just human autonomy. Indeed, too strong an insistence on human autonomy becomes difficult to justify from that perspective; it starts to look very much like the type of anthropocentric prejudice whose limits Peter Singer has clearly demonstrated.

On the other hand, defining freedom as a natural capacity does not have to lead to a non-normative vision of the human being, far from it. All one needs to say is that there are different forms of natural endowment, that humans are privileged in being able to access and build symbolic worlds, have a capacity for autonomy not granted to other beings. This probably entails the conclusion that human vulnerability is greater than that of animals, because it is more complex, more dependent on interaction. This would then justify a certain normative hierarchy in the realm of ends. But one does not need to always argue in exclusivist, dichotomous terms: why should the acknowledgement of animals and other natural entities’ “right” to continue to exist in their own way be an affront to the right of human beings to do the same, if one grants that the latter entails a lot more for it to be fulfilled (for example, the rights associated with the three spheres)?

It is true that this naturalist grounding of normativity has Spinozist resonances, but it does not have to be taken into a fully-blown metaphysics of life, if one simply keeps this Spinozist echo at its thinnest, most acceptable level, as the simple reference to the tendency of living things to self-develop and self-organise, to have a minimal, organic, autonomy. In that very weak sense, the reference to Spinoza is no longer immediately prohibitive. Here, there is a sense that the phrase “post-metaphysical thinking” sometimes acts as an unhelpful deterrent in Habermas and Honneth. The puristic attempt to avoid any trace of “metaphysics” leads to exaggerated prudence in theoretical and normative terrains. These great readers of Hegel should know that when one pretends to have done away with metaphysics, one in fact continues to be caught up in it. There is a form of “metaphysics of human freedom” in Habermas and Honneth, in the sense that they enounce its absoluteness without questioning its status and content. And to mention Hegel again, who can
be taken as the most famous and most decided defender of a “metaphysics of freedom”, of the unicity and sacredness of human freedom in the whole universe, one should not ignore that he himself, as powerfully as any Romantic philosopher, had emphasised the quasi-subjectivity that can already be found in the animal, indeed in the plant, so that in Hegel one could find an alternative theory of normativity, one focusing no longer on autonomy, but rather on the vulnerability of living beings caught up in all manner of interactions.33 Paradoxically, Honneth’s anthropocentric position on the question of the scope of normativity coincides with Hegel’s official doctrine on the gap between first and second nature. But this coincides also with Hegel’s later metaphysics of spirit, the very metaphysics that Honneth had rejected in his initial reading of him.

Haber’s analysis also draws our attention to another crucial argument regarding the normativity inherent in the interaction between human and non-human living beings, namely the fact that we are, like them, embodied living beings. It is difficult to object to the idea that the capacity for moral perception, the perception of the other’s essential vulnerability, is grounded in our co-existence with it. This is:

the co-naturality of the human living being and its milieu, a consequence of the fact that the human being’s presence to the world is first and foremost that of a body that senses and acts as a creator under certain conditions.34

The decisive philosophical reference to articulate these thoughts is obviously Merleau-Ponty. Such an emphasis on the embodied origin of our capacity for moral perception resonates powerfully in the context of a genealogical reading of Honneth’s work because it is, as we recall, the very type of argument that had been used by him earlier in his career to steer away from Habermas’ linguification of anthropology. Honneth’s retrieval of German philosophical


anthropology and Feuerbach was to a great extent inspired by the need to correct the excesses of the “linguistic turn”. In such a context, the restriction of normativity to the *anthropos* is hardly justified. The decisive references for the young Honneth, Feuerbach and Mead, to which he might have added Merleau-Ponty, of course emphasise the specificity of human action, but they also insist on the shared features that unite animal and human behaviour, notably the common root of their capacity to interact with their environments, namely organic embodiment. To clarify, while Habermas was to some extent justified in restricting normative interaction to human interaction because of his restricted vision of dependency as communicative dependency, Honneth cannot refer to the same definition of interaction since he grounds normative interaction deeper than linguistic exchange and extends vulnerability outside of communicative socialisation. His initial entry into critical theory could have led him to propound a much more expansive theory of morality, one that would have made his ethics of recognition into a serious model for political ecology, clearly one of the most urgent theoretical tasks of our time.
This chapter will of necessity offer only a truncated treatment of the question as only a whole book could do justice to the problems it addresses. This is because of the complexity and breadth of questions of political philosophy today and also because most of the criticisms that have been raised against Honneth’s ethics of recognition have targeted the implications of his model for political philosophy.

This chapter will therefore have to be selective. It is organised in three sections, each dedicated to a specific issue. The first section deals with Honneth’s account of the liberalism/communitarianism debate. Because the writings that Honneth specifically dedicated to political philosophy first centred on that debate, this initial problem allows me to schematically present his official response. This section, however, must also briefly show in what sense the theory of recognition is neither a liberal, nor a communitarian position.

The second section addresses one of the most serious objections raised against Honneth’s theory of recognition: its alleged weakness in dealing with problems arising from economic
injustice. Focusing on this problem enables us to present another one of Honneth’s explicit proposals in political philosophy, with a focus, this time, on the critique of political economy.

The third section deals with the question of identity. This is probably the area that is most often targeted by critiques of recognition, and mostly in direct connection with problems of political philosophy.

**Section 1. The critique of liberalism**

*Recognition and the liberalism/communitarianism debate*

The *Struggle for Recognition* was finished by Honneth at a time when he was actively involved in introducing the debate between liberalism and communitarianism in Germany. This historical overlap had a strong influence on the final shape of *Struggle for Recognition*. As with moral philosophy, Honneth explicitly presented his theory of recognition as an alternative, “between Aristotle and Kant”, to the two famous positions that were dividing the major English-speaking scene at the time. A passage at the end of the book made the point clearly and succinctly:

> The line of argument that we have been following in the reconstruction of the model of recognition points to a position that does not seem to fit clearly into either of these two alternatives. Our approach departs from the Kantian position in that it is concerned not solely with the moral autonomy of human beings but also with the conditions for their self-realisation in general. Hence, morality understood as the point of view of universal respect, becomes one of several protective measures that serve the general purpose of enabling a good life. But in contrast to those movements that distance themselves from Kant, this concept of the good should not be conceived as the expression of substantive values that constitute the ethos of a concrete tradition-based community. Rather, it has to do with the structural elements of ethical life, which, from the general point of view of the communicative enabling of self-realisation, can be normatively extracted from the plurality of all particular forms of life. (...) Our recognition-theoretic approach stands in the middle between a moral theory going back to Kant, on the one hand, and communitarian ethics, on the other. It shares with the former the
interest in the most general norms possible, norms which are understood as conditions for specific possibilities; it shares with the latter, however, the orientation towards human self-realisation as the end.¹

At a superficial level, Honneth’s position in political philosophy seems in fact to have greatly shifted. The early Marxist position seems to gradually make way for a more mainstream liberal one, culminating in a passage of the book written with Fraser, where Honneth explicitly aligns the ethics of recognition with the “teleological liberalism” of Rawls and Raz.² In that same passage, however, the third “classical” reference is Hegel again. Given the role that Hegel plays for many alternatives to liberalism, as the most decisive first reference point, notably because of his critique of rights-based approaches to justice and social-contract types of arguments, it is clear that Honneth means something quite vague by “liberalism” in this passage. Liberalism in this particular page is only the name for any position premised on the notion of equal treatment of all and the acknowledgment of every individual’s right to autonomy.

By contrast, the basic idea underpinning Honneth’s alternative position in political philosophy is the idea of the “social conditions of individual autonomy”.³ Honneth has held on to this most fundamental intuition throughout his work. Most significantly, he has never abandoned it, even in his most recent writings, those which, for a superficial view of his development, could signal a shift towards liberalism. For example, it is an idea that he keeps returning to in the book with Fraser. We encountered it in Honneth’s second major reading of Hegel (Suffering from Indeterminacy), presented in 2000.

The long quote at the beginning of this chapter already gives a good summary of what is entailed in this idea. We also encountered a particularly vivid expression of it in the chapter on social theory (chapter 9), when we noted Honneth’s particular way of interpreting the difference between Hobbes and Rousseau:

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¹ Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, pp. 172-173.
² Fraser & Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition?, p. 178.
³ Ibid., p. 179.
 unlike political philosophy, social philosophy no longer seeks out the con-
ditions of a correct or just social order, but instead attempts to ascertain the
limitations that this new form of life imposes on human self-realisation.4

The emphasis on the social conditions of justice remains a distant yet power-
ful echo of a typically “Left-Hegelian” critique of politics. In this tradition, the
critique of politics in fact involves two separate problems. Both problems turn
around the problematic relation between society and politics: the first prob-
lem relates to the social origin of normative principles; the second is the prob-
lem of the adequacy of normative principles to social reality. One of the most
significant examples of such a line of critique is Marx’s twofold critique of
idealist philosophy and of normative political theory. Already in his earliest
writings, for example in his critique of Hegel’s political philosophy the young
Marx had connected the idealism of mainstream philosophy and politics to
the inverted state of real society:5 the alienation of humanity in contemporary
society brings about a false realisation of it in the political and the juridical.
The reality of the social therefore directly contradicts that illusory realisation.
This is Marx’s famous opposition between the citizen and the bourgeois.6 The
ideal, philosophical expression, which is also the justi-
fication, of this inversion
in reality occurs through a theoretical inversion that constitutes the essence of
all idealisms: taking the norms for the real. Honneth’s intervention in political
philosophy can be seen as a distant, mediated, repetition of a similar critical
stance towards normative political philosophy. Marx saw in normative politi-
cal philosophy an idealistic repetition, and thus an ideological justification, of
a real political inversion: the satisfaction in the realm of the norms of needs

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4 Honneth, “Pathologies of the Social”, p. 5.
5 Of course Marx never changed his mind on this. The labour-theory of value,
amongst many other critical implications, allows one to see through abstract, liberal
rights as a falsely equal bargain between the worker and the capitalist. For a particularly
vivid expression of this, see for example the chapter on “The Working Day”, and
notably the final passage, Capital 1, X, p. 416.
6 K. Marx, On the Jewish Question, in Early Writings, trans. R. Livingstone and
“social” critique of idealist philosophy and normative political theory, see E. Renault,
that are unfulfilled in social reality. Similarly, Honneth presses contemporary political philosophy on the articulation of its normative claims with social reality, in terms both of the origin of the political norms and principles in a social reality where suffering and injustice are omnipresent, as well as on the realisability of normative principles within social reality.

These two critical insights—the social origin of political claims and the social applicability of political principles—centred around the problematic link between politics and social life, are also at the core of Honneth’s reception of the liberalism/communitarianism debate in the early 1990s, in “The Limits of Liberalism” (1991) and in the introduction to the edited collection Honneth published to present the key texts of the debate (Kommunitarismus, 1993). In retracing the conceptual stages of the debate, Honneth is careful not to reduce it to the ontological and methodological problems of atomism versus holism. As he notes, Rawls’ reply to Sandel allowed him to maintain his proceduralism even after he accepted the ontological point that subjective identity can be formed only within a community of values and a strong conception of the good. Indeed, Rawls was able to turn the objection back to the communitarians by emphasising the argument at the heart of his model, the idea that

The legal guarantee of personal autonomy is not something which stands in the way of the intersubjective process of personal identity formation, but rather, conversely, first makes it feasible in society.⁷

In other words, granting the ontological premise about the intersubjective character of subjective formation not only does not refute, but even strengthens the case for the methodological and normative priority of rights and liberties. We can note that this leap, from the ontological to the normative, could be seen to be a problem for Honneth himself, since he is typically an author who derives normative consequences from a substantive model of the subject. This could mean that he would have identified in others a problem that in fact

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also plagues his own model. Zurn’s critique of the anthropological basis of Honneth’s own theory of justice articulates precisely that criticism. Honneth, however, is well aware of the difficulty for himself, and answers it by historicising the anthropological argument: the social conditions of subjective identity have arisen as a result of normative differentiation and henceforth create a framework, which plays simultaneously a constitutive and a normative role.

Honneth identifies more serious objections to the theory of justice in Taylor’s and MacIntyre’s critiques. The point here is no longer to argue directly from the ontological to the normative, to reject the proceduralist method on the basis of a “communitarian” view of the subject, since the two standpoints (the ontology of the subject and the norms of politics) must be strictly separated and liberals can show that their normative position can remain largely unaffected by ontological questions. Indeed, liberals can take an “intersubjective” view of the subject on board without major changes to the overall construct. Rather, the core question concerns the problem of the relation between the conception of subjective self-realisation and its realisation in a community. If the subject can truly achieve full autonomy only through sharing common value references because subjective self-realisation relies on meta-subjective, social frameworks of meaning, then liberal theories of justice have a huge problem to confront because they refuse, methodologically, to discuss such ethical frames of reference. They agree about the intersubjective dependency of the subject, but fail to translate this into the type of normative consequence that communitarians emphasise: namely, that the subject can therefore realise herself or himself only within communities for which this goal of self-realisation and what it entails already exist as shared values, which implies that these values therefore exist prior to the individual’s perception of them. For example, the communitarians note that legally guaranteed liberties cannot be exercised by the subject if the subject is not the member of a community that makes this exercise meaningful and socially possible. In other words, there are irreducible social preconditions to the individual quest for self-realisation, whatever the actual content of self-realisation might be, depending on the social and historical context. But liberal theories cannot account for this moment of the social precondition of individual self-realisation, because of their neutrality towards ethical values.

Given that the liberalist tradition insists that normative status may not be granted to any specific ethical value, it is not possible within the framework
of such theories to develop the idea of a community that is integrated in terms of a notion of ethical life, even though, it is precisely this which we evidently have to presuppose when trying to explain the process of individual realisation of freedom.⁸

In his introduction to the Kommunitarismus volume, as he introduces Sandel and McIntyre’s positions, Honneth puts the same argument in negative form: more is needed for a society to function than just the collection of legally entrenched individual evaluative preferences; for society to be morally integrated, its underlying normative principles require the sharing of a basic normative horizon. Without this horizon, subjects will not be motivated to fulfil and respect the principles. A collection of legally protected individuals does not yet make a society. The sharing of a fundamental normative horizon is also required as a precondition of social life; and because individuals develop their autonomy within the framework of social life, it is also a condition of a free individual life.⁹

**Is Honneth a communitarian?**

But this communitarian argument sounds very close to the general orientation of Honneth’s thinking in social and political philosophy. Honneth’s own insistence on the intersubjective preconditions of individual freedom would seem to make him a close ally of the communitarians. In the passage from The Struggle for Recognition cited earlier, he was criticising the narrowness of the liberal paradigm precisely by holding up against it the principle of: “making possible the good life” (die Ermöglichung des guten Lebens). As we saw in chapter 7, Aristotle’s key premise that the whole precedes the part in a sense encapsulates Honneth’s own basic ontological position in social theory.

Even more significant is the overlap between Honneth’s philosophical anthropology and that of Charles Taylor. It is quite telling that Taylor was invited to write the preface to the English translation of Social Action and Human Nature, the study in philosophical anthropology, which was decisive in determining the course of Honneth’s later thought. Taylor gave the young Honneth

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⁹ Honneth, Kommunitarismus, p. 13.
and Joas an illustrious example to follow, and a decisive theoretical support, in their attempt to anchor the critique of modern society in philosophical-anthropological arguments. Honneth later paid his intellectual debt to Taylor in the postface to the German translation of Negative Freedom. The basic idea underpinning both theories is the same, namely the idea of “the communicative presuppositions of all processes of self-realisation”. As we saw in chapter 4, it is this fundamental insight which explains why Honneth finds Taylor’s model the right one to follow in order to ground critique philosophically, even ahead of Habermas. Indeed, if one recalls the initial sections of Taylor’s famous essay on recognition, in which he laid out the basic premises of his political theory, one would find a number of major overlaps: the idea that “a crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally dialogical character”; that, as a result, “misrecognition (…) can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred”; or the idea that the pre-modern notion of “honour” has been replaced by a new notion of normative importance for the individual, the notion of dignity, which sunders itself between a universal moment, the “politics of equal dignity”, and a particularistic moment, the politics of difference.

However, despite Honneth’s thematic closeness to Taylor, I would argue that his position in actual fact differs quite substantively from him and from the communitarians more broadly. The crucial difference between a Honnethian and a communitarian position in political philosophy concerns the interpretation of the notion of “social preconditions of subjective identity”, that is

11 Ibid., p. 246.
12 See the final page of “Pathologies of the Social”.
14 See the interesting attempt by M. Yar to use Honneth’s struggle for recognition as an appropriate corrective to communitarian positions. This attempt implies the type of similarity in difference defended here, M. Yar, “Honneth and the Communitarians: Towards a Recognitive Critical Theory of Community”, Res Publica, 9, 2003, pp. 101-125.
to say, the way in which the reference to a common value horizon necessary for conceptualising both individual autonomy and social life is construed. There are two fundamental ways of understanding this “shared value horizon”. That divergence leads to major differences in the political outlook, both on the theoretical and practical levels.

Both the communitarians and Honneth ground their normative outlooks in an ontology of the human subject, in a view of the human subject’s radical social, or intersubjective, dependency. Communitarians interpret this ontological fact by saying that any subjective attempt at self-realisation occurs through the mobilisation of the meta-subjective norms of the community in which the subject was socialised. Taylor’s “strong evaluations”, for example, through which the subject interprets, evaluates and organises his or her intentions and desires, arise within a communal, social and cultural pre-given world, the horizon of values of the community in which the subject has been socialised. This remains the case even when the “strong evaluations” are creative, or transformative, and overstep the boundaries of the original value horizon. Even then, the new values remain bound up with the community’s horizon inasmuch as they overstep, or rather overstretch, precisely that horizon and could be articulated only in that precise normative vocabulary. This is the ground, as Honneth recalls, of Taylor’s rejection of the Habermasian proceduralist approach in normative questions:

Since, as human beings, we cannot avoid understanding ourselves in the light of strong evaluations, an external position from which we could normatively define a specific procedure that would transcend cultures, can in principle not be reached by us; on the contrary, any such definition is itself always already tied to an overarching understanding of the good life that stems from the normative traditional horizon (normativen Traditionszusammenhang) of the particular culture to which we belong.15

Honneth of course agrees that selves develop through procedures of socialisation that are thoroughly determined by the relationship to others and their embeddedness in a particular culture. But Honneth prefers to emphasise a different implication of this intersubjective view of subjective formation. Rather

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15 Honneth, “Das Subjekt in Horizont Konfligierender Werte”, p. 244 (my translation).
than the embeddedness in a specific cultural tradition, Honneth emphasises the essential vulnerability of the subject as a result of intersubjective dependency. To say it in summary form: whilst the communitarians stress the community side in the individual-community dialectic, Honneth stresses the individual one. The normative consequence of such difference in emphasis relates to the aims of social philosophy: if intersubjective vulnerability rather than communality is the core concern, the decisive dimensions to study are the structures through which individuals can achieve self-realisation through intersubjective dependency, not so much the subject’s ties to the community.¹⁶ In other words, the core concept is that of individual self-realisation, not whether community is itself a primary good.

Most of the other differences between Honneth and communitarian positions derive from this initial difference in emphasis and from the implications that flow from it for the critical project.

The first major difference is theoretical, and concerns the problem that plagues contemporary political philosophy: how to establish normative guidelines for an ethic, that is to say, for collective representations of the good, given the irreducibility of value pluralism in modern societies. In Habermas, the initial “ontological” argument about the intersubjective dependency of the subject leads to a formal-universalistic, proceduralist solution: justice is synonymous with equal participation in normative discourse. Honneth shares Habermas’ ontological presupposition, even if he aims to expand communication beyond linguistic understanding. He also shares Habermas basic direction in the application of that insight to political theory. The spheres of recognition characterise precisely the formal principles that result from a more fleshed out anthropological approach to communication. On that basis, even if the content of their philosophical anthropologies differ, Honneth and Habermas share the same methodological approach to the question of value pluralism and the problem of relativism that is entailed in it. Both insist on the metasubjective normative horizons framing subjective self-realisation, but the problem of relativism is avoided because the principles that now arise from

¹⁶ This position has been reaffirmed very clearly in Anderson/Honneth, “Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice”.
that insight have a formal universal import. They can be shown to apply universally, in formal or structural terms, beyond variations in content (the content of rights, of types of social recognition).

By contrast, from Honneth’s perspective, liberals and communitarians are mired in a “theoretical cul-de-sac” on that issue. Both camps end up agreeing, despite their differences that “well integrated communities play a constitutive part in the realisation of individual freedoms”.17 However, because they draw a contextualist conclusion from that idea, namely that there is therefore no possibility of adjudicating on conceptions of the good life from outside these communities, they can no longer discriminate between models of community, between freedom enhancing and freedom-curtailing cultural practices. For Honneth, the exemplary case of such methodological self-contradiction in contemporary political philosophy, is Michael Walzer’s hermeneutic theory of justice, as his critical review published in 1991 argues:

> in the writings of Walzer, a discrepancy is opened up that is typical of the contemporary intellectual situation: a rhetoric of particularism prevents the articulation of the remaining universalistic motives which one would precisely have to use in order to buttress the defence of a cultural pluralism that one aims to defend so decisively.18

The conundrum is the same for the liberals since their ethical neutrality also prevents them from making normative decisions regarding conceptions of the good life. Typical here is Rawls’ own development, which led him from a universalistic to a historically situated account of justice, a shift that runs the risk of falling into the contextualist trap:

> As a result, both sides find themselves in the same dilemma. They no longer have any supra-contextual criterion with which to distinguish justifiably between morally acceptable and morally objectionable concepts of the collective good. (...) Yet, both sides are at the same time all the more dependent on such a criterion because in the mean time they widely agree that without

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17 Honneth, “The Limits of Liberalism”, p. 244.
18 Published in English as “Michael Walzer, Interpretation and Social Criticism” in *Thesis Eleven*, no. 36, 1993, pp. 188-194. See also *Desintegration*, pp. 71-79.
any link to value convictions, there is an inability to clarify the conditions under which individual freedom is realised.\(^{19}\)

For Honneth, Habermas’ approach is the only one that enables us to avoid falling into the contextualist trap. Despite all other differences with Habermas, Honneth’s approach is deeply inspired by him (and this can surely be related to their underlying “Left-Hegelianism”): the moral principles of modern societies are sought in formal structures arising from the basic anthropological-philosophical premise of the intersubjective dependency of subjective identity.

These theoretical questions are directly linked to more practical questions, in particular to the question of the model of social critique. What Habermas’ solution demonstrates is both the need and the possibility of maintaining a valid reference to a principle of “transcendence within immanence” in normative political theory. Such a prerequisite is of course vital for critical theory. And of course, it constitutes a theoretical imperative that has featured prominently, from the very beginning, in all of Honneth’s writings, from his initial critique of Foucault, for example, to the critiques, fifteen years later, of Gadamer and McDowell. Throughout, the fundamental concern has remained the same: any consistent normative-critical moment in social philosophy requires the passage to some context-transcending viewpoint, and the main theoretical difficulty for contemporary social philosophy is in how to found and articulate this moment.\(^{20}\)

The preservation of a moment of “transcendence within immanence”, however, also preserves a certain radicality in the political implications of social theory. This will not sound very convincing against the background of the strong continuity between Habermas’ and Honneth’s models of political

\(^{19}\) Honneth, “The Limits of Liberalism”, p. 245.

theory. However, it can also be argued that, already in Habermas, but even more so for Honneth, the distance from liberal and communitarian methodologies can be related not first and foremost to conceptual or methodological issues, such as those just highlighted, but primarily to the implications of these approaches for social critique.21

Regarding communitarian positions, the implication of a political theory based on the notion of a struggle for recognition is a deep suspicion towards the notion of community. The theory of recognition intends to maintain the irreducibility of conflict and the central role played by struggle in the theory of society. For Honneth as much as for communitarians the idea that social integration requires the reference to supra-individual value horizons is central, especially in reference to the third sphere of recognition. But a crucial feature of such value horizons in his model is that they are contested, and secondly, that they are contested not primarily on cultural, but on social grounds. Or rather, more precisely, social conflicts around norms or values that are cultural in content, in fact have a moral basis inasmuch as they trigger claims of injustice and demands of redress. As was shown earlier, Honneth’s specific approach to cultural conflicts is to highlight that they are just as equally social conflicts, conflicts along and about structures of domination.

This insistence on the conflictual structure of the social in general, and by repercussion on the “fragmented” (or rather: split, torn, as the German term “zerrissen” denotes) character of value horizons, thus gives a different meaning to the notion of “the good life”. For communitarians, the shared value horizon must be largely uncontested because for them it is a genetic and logical precondition of any subjective capacity of ethical self-articulation. In Honneth on the other hand, the dialectic between subjective identity and communal value horizon is fraught with tension. More often than not, the relation is an unhappy one, leading notably to what he describes as social pathologies, until a successful struggle for recognition is able to modify the

21 E. Renault, “Entre Libéralisme et Communautarisme: une Troisième Voie?”, in Où en est la Théorie Critique?, Paris, La Découverte, 2003, pp. 251-268, for a presentation of the reception of the American debate by Frankfurt theorists in general, emphasising in particular this key difference regarding the possibilities of social critique.
framework and make it possible for specific claims of recognition to be taken into account. From Honneth’s perspective, communitarianism therefore runs the risk of advocating conservative positions, or at least of being unable to address transformative practices adequately. The explicit political opinions of the communitarian theorists are not the issue here. Honneth’s critical position targets equally traditionalist and more progressive accounts. In all cases, the difference in the interpretation of the motto of “the social preconditions of the good life” is grounded in the view that a critical theory of society must take its cue from the unsatisfied social demands, rather than from the socialised agents’ reliance upon communal values and norms. In other words, the hermeneutic moment that is constitutive of all types of communitarian accounts of politics, whatever their explicit political allegiance might otherwise be, always threatens to end up in a form of theoretical conservatism.²² On the contrary, Honneth’s ethics of recognition is concerned with the possibility of giving a normative justification of social movements aimed at social transformation. The reference to communal value horizons in this case can only be a “dissensual” one, that is to say, one that acknowledges the necessity of ethical integration but adds immediately that the latter is only ever achieved through the misrecognition or denial of recognition of large sets of social interests.

What’s at issue here is not just the deduction of an image of politics from the concept of society. One of the major dimensions of social injustice stems from the fact that social claims are not simply unrepresented in the public sphere, but that they are not even representable, that is to say, that they are repressed from the political field, mainly because of the ideological foreclosure of that field. This is already one of Honneth’s main arguments against Habermas’ discourse ethics. A general point arising from such criticism is that normative theories of justice that overlook the structural aspect of social domination add to the injury of empirical injustice the insult of its meta-theoretical repression. Such theories reinforce, or entrench, empirical mechanisms of injustice, even if their explicit intentions are progressive. This means very simply that conceptual and methodological issues, in particular the concept of society or

²² This is a danger highlighted very early on by Honneth as he discusses Habermas’ critical dealing with hermeneutic philosophy and the risk of conservatism that a theoretical emphasis on tradition harbours, see The Critique of Power, p. 225.
the diagnosis of modern democracy with which one operates, beyond their theoretical import, have direct practical, political significance. From that perspective, Habermas who himself highlights the problematic nature of the link between theory and practice in political liberalism, would himself be accountable to such critical argument. Indeed, this is the crucial point at which Honneth’s and Habermas’ political theories part ways. Honneth’s insistence on retaining a notion of conflict, even in a transformed, neo-Hegelian rather than neo-Marxist mode, within his theory of society, grants him a critical vantage point on the political theory that derives from discourse ethics. Despite the latter insisting on the necessity of linking the normative account of justice to a substantive theory of modern society, it seems liable to the reproach of reproducing within itself, at the theoretical level, the repression of unmet social demands in the political processes that is one of the central mechanisms of contemporary injustice.23

23 See Emmanuel Renault, “Radical Democracy and An Abolitionist Concept of Justice” in A Critique of Habermas’s Theory of Justice”, in eds. Sinnerbrink, R., Deranty, J.-P. et al., Critique Today, Leiden, Brill, 2006, pp. 137-151. Habermas’ critical review of Taylor’s model of a “politics of recognition”, in “Struggles for Recognition in the Democratic State”, can be taken as a response to Honneth on that score. In response to the charge that he ignores the agonistic aspect of politics, Habermas replies that his theory of the co-originarity of private and public autonomy means precisely that there can be an “actualisation of the system of rights” only through the actual exercise of public autonomy, and that “there would be little likelihood of this without social movements and political struggles”. With this, Habermas seems to want to cut the grass from underneath Honneth’s feet and imply that there is no need for a separate theory of the struggles for recognition. But Habermas’ rejoinder misses one of the key problems highlighted by Honneth in the articulation of the social and the political: the irreducible, structural difficulty of some interests, of some voices, to be at all represented on the political scene, and hence, the necessity to distinguish strongly between the actual institutions of political process, which always tend to reproduce social oppression, from a different notion of politics, which is defined centrally as the struggle against this oppression and its doubling up in political institutions. Habermas seems to reduce the question of non-representation, or rather of the impossibility of representability, to an empirical question, when it is in fact the core of the definition of politics. On this precise point, see Deranty and Renault, “Democratic Agon: Striving for Distinction or Struggle against Injustice and Domination?”
From that point of view, the implications of Honneth’s model of the struggle for recognition for political theory seem to come close to Jacques Rancière’s own definition of politics as a rupture of the social consensus that is performed by agents demanding the practical acknowledgement of their equality. Rancière does not explicitly refer to ‘recognition’, although the notion sometimes slips through. But his radical egalitarian principle and his emphasis on “dissensus” as the core mechanism of politics are formally close to Honneth’s emphasis on the experience of injustice as the negative locus of political action.24 His own criticism of Habermas’ is similar to the one developed by Honneth in 1990.

Despite all the common features that seem to bring Honneth close to communitarian positions, and especially Taylor, the emphasis on dissensus makes their normative theories of justice largely incompatible. This is mainly because Honneth bases his own account on a negativistic methodology, whereby the norm of justice is defined primarily as the abolition of injustice. On that model, the principles of a just society are those normative guidelines, that is, extensions, corrections, complements, transformations of existing principles of justice, for which those who suffer from injustice would, and sometimes do, struggle if they are in social and cultural contexts that enable them to do so. The three spheres of recognition provide the grammar to analyse the different types of claims around which social movements are articulated. But they have a methodological status that is radically different from the normative principles of other political theories. They are not tied reflectively to specific

historical political traditions, nor are they reconstructions of the necessary social principles to which all reasonable modern social agents would have to agree. They point to the normative dimensions that subjects suffering from social injustice implicitly rely on when they engage in social struggle against injustice. As such, these principles make no sense separated from the negative experience of injustice and the attempt at addressing the causes of injustice.

These principles thus achieve the link between the normative and the empirical in a very specific way. In communitarianism, the normative principles are deduced from a philosophical anthropology emphasising the intersubjective preconditions of subjective realisation, and they are hermeneutically tied to distinctive communities, by reference to each community’s specific notion of the good life. This always threatens to rob normative political philosophy of the possibility of critique because the hermeneutic methodology does not provide valid access to the context-transcending norms on which to ground critique. Honneth’s principles, by contrast, are indeed drawn from philosophical anthropology, but this initial theoretical foundation is also complemented by the normative reconstruction of real historical struggles against injustice and leads to an image of the normative conditions of subjective identity that remains formal. Such a methodology amounts to an anthropology of modern subjectivity that provides norms for the critique of existing social contexts. Crucially, however, the social incarnation of these norms is not relativistically contextualised in reference to specific social contexts, but sought in the real social movements and in the social pathologies as documented by critical sociology. In that way, the danger of a de-contextualised social critique is avoided since the formal norms receive their substantial content, for example, the specific content of rights claim, only in reference to the specific social, historical situation. At the same time, however, the danger of a dilution of normativity and thus of critique, as a result of contextualism, is avoided. Instead, the social theorist can always translate the formal model into the search for the “normative surplus” which, from within the immanence of social life, points towards its transformation on the basis of what in it, is unacceptable.
Is Honneth a liberal?

Again, it is this emphasis on the way in which the normative principles relate to social reality that is at the heart of the difference between Honneth’s and liberal theories of justice.

In terms of content, as noted at the outset, Honneth’s position is very close to that of Rawls and other liberal political theorists. In their great majority, all contemporary political philosophers share a similar political aim: to offer normative justifications of a social-democratic model of contemporary society. They all agree that the principle of universal equality is the fundamental foundation of modern societies. In particular, all agree that this principle is tied essentially to the possibility of individual self-respect, one of the essential primary goods whose fair distribution defines a just social order. It is interesting to highlight a particularly telling moment in the liberal literature: the fact that the defining reference in that field, Rawls’ theory of justice, famously emphasises the normative primacy of self-respect, making it one of the essential primary goods. In a famous passage of the Theory of Justice, Rawls seemed to anticipate the German discussions on the conceptual roots of practical identity: “Without self-respect, nothing may seem worth doing”.

Once again, however, beyond the great overlaps in terms of content, the differences in the methodological approaches have crucial political-theoretical, and indeed, practical significance. And once again, the key question is how the different theories negotiate the difficult connection between normative discussions about the principles of the just social order and the reality of historical societies.

Rawls, and with him most other liberal political philosophers, consider the normative construction of principles of justice as a reflective reconstruction of the actual normative foundations of real Western democratic societies, or indeed, of one society in particular, American society. This methodology implies that one considers contemporary Western democracies (or rather

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See Honneth’s critical argument on this particular point, in “Limits of Liberalism”, p. 238.
the USA) as providing an incarnation of the principles of justice that can be arrived at through "reflective equilibrium". Indeed, this is what "reflective equilibrium" entails: that the political conception of justice only articulates in a purified manner "firmly held convictions" that are already operative.\(^{27}\) Consequently, one might well say that Rawls’ principles, notably the second, egalitarian one, have a utopian dimension that can lead to a radical critique of existing societies. But the radical transformation that seems to be implied in the image of a full realisation of the two principles is in fact only the transformation of a reality that is implicitly taken as already just, as containing the norms of its own transformation. However "radical" one might take Rawlsian liberalism to be, it is premised on the idea that social reality deep-down is already just.\(^{28}\)

By contrast, the three “principles” corresponding to the three spheres of recognition are not assumed to be substantive principles already realised in Western democracies. This is a point where the emphasis on the formality of Honneth’s concept of \textit{Sittlichkeit} is crucial. The spheres of recognition represent a typology of normative structures through which subjects can make sense of their social experience. And this, mainly when they experience injustice because according to the pragmatist principle, it is in the failure of action that reflection is possible on the normative expectations that were always already presupposed in it. The three spheres of recognition therefore can be called normative principles, and Honneth does characterise them in this way, in “The Limits of Liberalism” for example.\(^{29}\) But the key methodological difference between substantive principles seen to be embodied in real existing societies and formal principles that structure justice claims changes their critical and political status significantly.

In the first case, since the principles are seen to be already at play in existing societies, the political output of political theory is to measure reality to its own standard, to approximate reality to itself. A substantive historical narrative underpins this view of modern politics, namely that contemporary societies are realising for good a process of social rationalisation that is


\(^{28}\) Renault, \textit{L’Expérience de l’Injustice}, p. 84.

\(^{29}\) Honneth, “The Limits of Liberalism”, p. 230.
synonymous with modernisation. In particular, the principle of toleration, which arose as a problem with the Reformation and whose solution was presented already by Locke in the 18th century, is on the way to being fully realised. Western societies, on that model, are therefore on their way towards solving the conundrum of the rational society. This is so since, according to the normative model developed in Political Liberalism, they on the one hand manage to enshrine the individual rights of “rational” subjects, whilst successfully overcoming the paradox necessarily created by this very principle. A paradox necessarily emerges from the enshrining of individual rights, since their “comprehensive doctrines” are by definition incompatible (since they are essentially individual) and thus risk making the society of such “liberated” individuals impossible. Rawls’ solution is specific to him, but the way of presenting the problem, as the conundrum of reconciling individual rights with the value pluralism it implies as well as with social integration, is common to all liberal writers. Implied in this way of putting the problem, however, is the view that Western democracies, at least normatively, are on their way to realising the truth of modern politics, which is itself nothing but the political and social image of rationality itself. Rawls, for example, explicitly endorses the idea of a reciprocal influence between the rationalisation of individuals and the rationalisation of society.

More or less implicitly, political liberalism sees itself as the normative reflection that accompanies a real social and historical trend that is synonymous with the realisation of reason and freedom. As a result, there is a tendency in political liberalism to underplay empirical injustices because the real, normative achievement of these societies acts as a counter-objection to the critique of injustice. The liberal philosopher can always say: yes, these injustices exist, but look how far we’ve progressed; the norms for an abolition of these injustices are already at play and only the irrationality of individuals and communities prevents their full actualisation. This justificatory view of Western societies is all the more problematic when the model is compared to other forms of society. In that case, the toleration that reigns within is no longer maintained, and liberalism that was neutral about “comprehensive views”

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30 See in particular the Introduction to Political Liberalism.
31 See the chapter “Goodness as Rationality” in A Theory of Justice.
within becomes a comprehensive view in its own rights, sure of its good right to impose itself on others. Many suspect that it is not just a coincidence that the same word, liberalism, is used both in the esoteric, academic discourse of egalitarian, well-intentioned political theory, and in the much more sinister discourses of contemporary neo-imperialist Realpolitik. Beyond the many differences that make any identification between the two impossible, what unites them is the belief in the moral superiority of Western democracies, and the structural blindness to the injustices that proliferate in them and that they impose, as real societies, on others.

By contrast, the ethics of recognition, even though it also extracts its normative principles from a progressive view of modernity, and is premised on a “legitimating” vision of modernity, is not forced to adopt such justificatory attitude towards historically existing social situations. Claims of recognition along the three formal axes described by Honneth can be formulated and redeemed in any number of ways.

The decisive difference lies with the negativistic methodology. Honneth never fails to emphasise this aspect of his theory. This is not just a methodological point. The critical and political status of his theory depends on it. Methodological negativism touches first of all the normative reconstruction of modernity. Rawls’ constructivist approach quickly showed its real metal by acknowledging it was a “device of representation” in fact relying on the normative reconstruction of already existing principles. Such a method is built on the assumption that the principles it “constructs” are already implicitly embodied in the reality it normatively describes, and that it is therefore intrinsically unable to transcend its social context. A negativistic methodology, by contrast, argues in this way: in order to know what normative principles structure social life, one looks at the claims that have historically been raised in real claims of injustice, and in real attempts to change the social

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32 Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?* p. 188. In that sense, he may be seen to be closer to Adorno than Bernstein makes it sound in his otherwise remarkable study “Suffering Injustice”. See also van den Brink’s remarks in “Damaged Life”, about unexpected yet important similarities (beyond other substantial differences) between Adorno and Honneth on the centrality of negative ethical experiences to characterise the good life.
order on that basis. These claims and the struggles they inspire negatively, point to the normative presuppositions that are injured by social structures. In this case, the inscription of the principles in the real existing societies has a very different status. Yes, individuals can, under favourable circumstances, rely on these principles to make their claims. In this sense, one can say that the principles already exist. But they exist as grounds for the rejection of injustice, not as realisations of a potential for full rationality. They are possibilities of struggle and dissent in the name of an experience of injustice, not the already achieved figure of justice. On that model, one can even talk of moral progress, of a certain accumulation of normative advances, without falling under the criticism just formulated. It is not (just) that these advances are empirically always under threat. Rather, the negativistic method ensures that such advances are not taken to be principles that are already fully substantiated. The theory remains agnostic about the final image of justice. It can paint an ideal, conceptual end point of full recognition (when each and everyone is both fully individuated and full integrated), but it does not anchor it in a particular context. In that sense, the Kantian strand in Honneth’s theory of recognition is not to be associated with the normativism of the second Kritik, but rather with the writings on history, where Kant attempted to devise a non-metaphysical teleological account of the realisation of equality.33

The fundamental methodological difference between the ethics of recognition and liberalism as a result of Honneth’s use of a negativistic approach is well captured by a late passage in Honneth’s second rejoinder to Fraser in 2001. The recent date of that passage confirms that Honneth has in fact not budged so much on his basic critical attitude towards liberalism, and remains committed to a classical, “Left-Hegelian” position:

We do not simply seek to apply what we take to be well-grounded normative principles to a given social order in order to arrive at judgements about morally justified corrections or improvements. Rather, social reality must be

33 This Kantian moment in Honneth’s approach to modernity can perhaps be read between the lines in his reconstruction of Kant’s philosophy of history in “The Irreducibility of Progress. Kant’s Account of the Relationship between Morality and History”, Critical Horizons, 8(1), 2007 (2004 for German first publication), pp. 1-17.
described in a way that shows how norms and principles considered justified could already have become socially valid.34

The task of the critical theorist is not to adjudicate from above on an external social reality, on the grounds that such empirical reality is at odds with itself since the principles of justice are already in operation. Rather, the political critique of a given social reality consists in uncovering potentialities for normative improvement within its immanence. Social reality then is indeed at odds with itself but the tensions that plague that reality are not between its own norms and its reality, but rather between different forces within itself.

As a result, another crucial element to contrast the ethics of recognition and political liberalism is the place the critique of social pathologies takes in the overall model. For a negativistic methodology these experiences take centre stage: it is in the experiences of social suffering that the normative principles undergirding modern societies negatively appear, either in a historical sense, in the reconstruction of the normative core of modern society, or in a critical sense, when it comes to uncovering new applications of those principles. The “political theory” that grows out of an approach so strongly reliant upon sociological insights looks at politics as the institutionalisation of normative demands by social groups. The political, then, is defined as the clash between normative claims and counter-claims, between justifications of domination and denunciations of domination. Such theory does not have much to say on other questions of political philosophy, for example about the structure of the state, or the paradoxes of democratic sovereignty. Its strength consists in focusing normative political philosophy back on the substantial link between politics and social life. The old critique of political philosophy from the point of view of real social suffering is thus reawakened in a valid way.

Of course, Rawls’ second principle seems to be well capable of answering factually-based objections by pointing precisely to the fact that it offers a highly restrictive justification of inequalities that is clearly not met in real situations. But the point of the contrast and the objection it entails is not a crude factual one. The objection consists rather in saying that the pathologies that are produced by the social-economic order prove that the very language with

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34 Fraser & Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition?, p. 257.
which social inequality is discussed in political liberalism is inadequate, as a theoretical vocabulary. Social pathologies show that there is not much sense in talking of basic rights and liberties when the subjective identities are so deeply threatened by the social structure that they can no longer function. The gap that opens up between the academic language and the reality it purports to reconstruct is too wide. In a society where socially induced pathologies are immense, the vocabulary of a distribution of inequalities makes no sense; it is the wrong grammar. It might well be formally consistent, but its formal consistency is an empty victory. The crucial issue is the sociological relevance of the normative principles.

Things are in fact even worse if one entertains the idea that the crude factual objection, which proposes that reality is not as the principles of justice say, might not be that crude after all. Is it so certain, after all, that even in the “happiest” periods of the Fordist consensus, in the most flourishing times of the most integrated welfare-states, the language of the distribution of social and economic inequalities was not already seriously underestimating the amount of injustice? This becomes even more acute if, as do Renault or Bernstein, we replace the critique of liberalism in its Marxist background and remember that the battle against liberalism was a battle to impose the recognition of the equal normative importance of socially caused suffering. This, however, is precisely the background of Honneth’s own position. In other words, the ethics of recognition carry out in the changed theoretical and empirical context of the late 20th century the critique of liberal rights and the defence of social rights. It does so by highlighting, against the letter of Marx, the normative significance of modern law. But the emphasis on the social element makes it the direct heir of the socialist critiques of liberalism.

In the end, what makes the ethics of recognition incompatible with a liberal position, despite the essential agreement on the content of the principles highlighted, is the divergence on how to rate the impact of social inequality on subjectivity. The point here is not to oppose an alleged naïve anthropological view of socialised individuals, the “atomistic” liberal one, with a more “comprehensive”, “intersubjectivist” one. Honneth does not believe that this is the correct way to highlight the weaknesses in political liberalism. The point, rather, concerns the method used to articulate the normative principles. Rawls’ and other egalitarian solutions explicitly attempt to respond to the charge that
liberal liberties are only “formal”, by integrating a strong reference to social and economic equality. But the main premise of liberalism is maintained even in these egalitarian versions of liberalism, to wit, the primacy of liberty over equality, of rights of liberty over social rights. The ethics of recognition, by contrast, puts a very different emphasis on inequality, because it takes a very different view of the impact of inequality on social individuals. The primacy of rights, of negative freedoms in liberalism is coherent from a normative perspective only if one agrees with the assumption that an unequal distribution of “social values” remains external to the subject’s identity. The inequality counts as an injustice only when the distribution is not fair (when, for example, in Rawls’ model, it is not “to the advantage of all”). The fact that inequality is treated in quantitative terms, as something to be distributed, means that it cannot be seen as the possible source of a moral injury. The “social bases of self-respect” accordingly are themselves “distributed” together with the other primary goods, like money. On that model, it is unacceptable to be deprived of those bases, not because it actually harms the individual, but because one lacks a resource that is otherwise given to others.

The argument that inequalities must be arranged in such a way that they are “to the advantage of all” seems to be a very strong restriction to inequalities, certainly one that would apply a strong critical norm to real societies. But social and economic inequalities can be deemed to be acceptable at all only in an image of society where they don’t really impact on subjectivities. This is possible only for a liberal vision of the modern subject according to which the guaranteeing of basic rights and liberties provides the sufficient conditions for self-realisation. Social and economic status then gives some further content to a definition of self made possible by the liberties, but in a sense remains external to the subject who is first of all a free subject. On that model, social and economic inequalities are purely quantitative, and have no qualitative dimension to them. They do divide society into separate groups and classes, but not in a way that is detrimental to individuals’ self-respect. For example, as long as the subject is able to take part in some “social unions”, a participation

35 See the general principle of a “distribution of social values” in A Theory of Justice, p. 54.
that the rights and liberties enshrined in the first principle ensure, the “union of social unions” remains possible, indeed it is even said that it can be a just social order, despite existing inequalities.\(^{36}\) In other words, the recognition of formal equality is sufficient to ensure self-respect or self-esteem to everyone, despite the existence of social and economic inequalities. The key critical argument is not just that Rawls fails to notice the difference between self-respect and self-esteem, a distinction that appears clearly through Honneth’s spheres of recognition. The real problem in this confusion is not a theoretical failure, but its practical, political implication: by failing to distinguish clearly between self-respect and self-esteem, Rawls implicitly argues that self-respect always ensures the possibility of self-esteem. As long as one is ensured of one’s basic rights and liberties allowing one to engage in one’s socially determined activities, self-esteem naturally follows. By making self-respect the first of the “primary goods” and giving it at one point a negative characterisation, Rawls seemed very close to Honneth. But this impression dissipates quickly if one reads the remainder of the paragraph of *The Theory of Justice* dedicated to self-respect: “It normally suffices that for each person there is some association (one or more) to which (the individual) belongs and within which the activities that are rational for him are publicly affirmed by others”.\(^{37}\) This is all that is needed for inequality to not lead to a destruction of self-esteem and thus to become acceptable. In other words, a society can be fully just even with a great amount of social contempt. All that is required is that those unfortunate enough to have missed out in the natural distribution of abilities and capacities can find solace in unions of peers where their lesser achievements find their due recognition. If that is the case, the contempt shown by other “social unions” will matter little to them.

From the point of view of the ethics of recognition, such a version of the social division of labour is simply too optimistic and indeed naïve. It fails to take into account the reality of social domination that comes with the division of the social field in groups with diverging value models. It ignores the results of critical sociology and the history of social movements, about the impact of the hierarchical division of society on the members of the dominated groups.


It does not see that social domination can lead to moral injury, and that this is a major characteristic of injustice. Injustice is not just the unfair distribution of goods to which all are entitled. More deeply, injustice has to do with the destruction of the moral basis of self-realisation. Unfair distribution, on that model, is unjust primarily because it undermines the sense of equality that is achieved in true recognition. And so, the very language of unfair distribution is inadequate since the point of injustice is qualitative (moral), not quantitative.

Finally, this critical focus on the implicit image of society underpinning liberalism points to another critical perspective from the vantage point of the theory of recognition. The lack of consideration for the reality of social domination leads to a pacified view of society and of the division of social labour, where the cooperation between individuals and groups is postulated and seen as unproblematic. Accordingly, Rawls argues that the underlying normative principle “implicit in the public culture of a democratic society”\(^38\) is that of a “fair system of cooperation amongst free and equal persons”. Such a conception of society explicitly rejects the structuring effects of class struggle and group domination. Once again, the normative-empirical distinction could be brought forward to reject this criticism as simplistic and ill-informed. But this rejoinder would fail to heed the full force of the argument about social domination: namely, that the structural role played by social domination in all forms of society, including and especially in modern societies, renders the very distinction between the empirical and the normative suspicious, since one of the most pernicious impacts of domination consists precisely in affecting the normative order. In other words, the reality of social domination needs to make its impact in theory and the normative itself, lest theory reproduces, willingly or not, the structures of domination. This was, for example, one of the main criticisms of the early Honneth against Habermas’ discourse ethics: the failure to see the problematic anchoring of his democratic theory in social reality reverberated into the theory itself, and requested a major correction. Honneth’s ethics of recognition contest any political theory that would argue in isolation from the results of social theory. This is clearly a distant yet

\(^{38}\) Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 15.
unmistakable faithfulness to Marx’s own critique of the liberal philosophy of his time.

Section 2. The critique of political economy

The objections to recognition theory from the point of view of economic injustice, the problem of “redistribution”, have been articulated most strongly by Nancy Fraser in a series of important articles published throughout the 1990s, and finally in her long confrontation with Honneth, in their joint publication, *Redistribution or Recognition* (2003). Simon Thompson’s book on “The Political Theory of Recognition” already presents a comprehensive treatment of the debate between Fraser and Honneth. Instead of attempting to offer an alternative coverage of the exchange, I will instead focus on a number of points that seem crucial for a full understanding of the scope of Honneth’s political theory, including on the question of economic injustice. I use another reference as guideline, namely the long article dedicated by Christopher Zurn to Honneth’s accounts of economic injustice, despite the fact that Fraser’s arguments provide the background reference for Zurn’s criticisms. The reason for this is twofold: Zurn provides a wonderful synthesis of all the arguments

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in this debate; and secondly, his emphasis on a key article by Honneth, the 1993 “Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation”, allows us to present some of the most striking, and insufficiently acknowledged, features of Honneth’s political theory.

**Democracy as social cooperation**

Zurn launches his Fraserian critique of what he sees as recognition-theory’s reductionistic stance on the economy with a reading of a crucial article published by Honneth in German in 1993, immediately after the publication *The Struggle for Recognition*, which was first translated and published in English in 1998: “Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation”. At first glance, it could seem surprising to direct a critique of Honneth’s stance on economic injustice through this text since it is concerned primarily with questions of political philosophy. In it, Honneth argues that Dewey’s writings on democracy provide a fruitful alternative approach to the question of the normative foundations of democracy compared with the main contemporary contenders: liberalism, proceduralism and republicanism. The reason why Zurn chooses this text in particular to cast new light on the “redistribution versus recognition” debate stems from the specificity of Dewey’s solution to the political problem. Dewey, wilfully pursuing the old Hegelian-Marxist intuition via new, pragmatist, philosophical means, argues that a vibrant democracy relies on a “fair and just division of labour”. Honneth’s explicit reappropriation of Dewey’s model, therefore, gives invaluable clues as to his own approach to the problem of the division of labour, and thus the first insights into his approach to the relation between recognitive and economic relations.

In the introduction to the article, in order to justify the retrieval of Dewey’s democratic theory, Honneth recapitulates the problem that had guided his earlier forays into political philosophy: the key question, he argues once

the superiority of Fraser’s approach: C. Zurn, “Identity or Status? Struggles over ‘Recognition’ in Fraser, Honneth, and Taylor”, *Constellations*, 10(4), 2003, pp. 519-537.

more, is the issue of the social foundation of political participation, the social foundations of democracy. Democracy relies on the requirement of individual participation in the process of will-formation, yet many contemporary models of democracy offer insufficient or indeed inexistent conceptual analyses that explain and normatively clarify how individuals are motivated, and from which point of view, to participate in the debates over the issues concerning their community. As we saw in the previous section, this is especially the case for liberalism.

Dewey’s solution, as Honneth reconstructs it, is clearly indebted to Marx: democracy for Dewey is not so much grounded in, but is rather identified with, social cooperation. Inasmuch as individuals through their interactions in the activities of social life always already collaborate and are thus forced to deliberate amongst each other, they are already engaged implicitly in a process, which the political movement makes explicit and reflexive. Democracy, therefore, as the normative ideal of modern politics, in the end designates a certain state of society, in which social cooperation is fully developed, rather than just a set of institutions or a kind of deliberative procedure. This solution, therefore, solves the problem of individual participation, since according to it, the participation in social life is already in nuce a participation in that society’s reflexive moment of political will-formation. But it is clear that the specific problem solved with Dewey’s emphasis on social cooperation in fact points well beyond the specialised debates of political theory, and aims instead at an expansive vision of society as a whole, in other words, at the possibility of individual flourishing on the basis of healthy social relations, in which participation in democratic life is only one of the dimensions of social cooperation. In other words, Honneth finds in Dewey a perfect illustration of the kind of concerns defining his vision of “social philosophy”, a type of philosophy, to quote once again the key passage from the “Pathologies of the Social” article, that does not “seek out the conditions of a correct or just social order, but instead attempts to ascertain the possibilities that a form of life entails for human self-realisation”.

The key argument justifying this identification of social cooperation and democratic politics, the argument that plays a central role in the evaluation of Honneth’s approach to economic problems, is encapsulated in the specifically pragmatist sense of the notion of “reflexivity”. In his early writings,
however, as Honneth shows, Dewey does not clearly identify the specific reflexivity that is inherent in politics. Instead, he directly identifies democratic politics and cooperative society, thus repeating the reduction of politics that is also at play in Marx. What is missing, in both the early Dewey and Marx, is a separate analysis of the political moment in its specific role and its specific structure. Inspired directly by Hegel’s notion of Sittlichkeit, but failing to heed Hegel’s careful description of the State in its multiple relations to society, Dewey brings together without sufficient mediation, in a kind of Rousseauian reprise, individual autonomy and political sovereignty. The element that brings them together is the individual’s participation in the division of labour:

Because each member of society contributes, on the basis of a division of labour, through her own activities to the maintenance of society, she represents a ‘vital embodiment’ of the end of society. For that reason, she is entitled not just to a part of the freedom made socially possible; rather, as an individual she always possesses the entire sovereignty through which all jointly as a people become the sovereign bearer of power.

Despite the serious shortcoming that the lack of mediation between society and politics represents, the decisive role played by the “division of labour” in these early writings is already highly significant. As in Hegel, the functionalist aspect of the economic organisation and the corresponding instrumentality of economic activity from the individual point of view, are only superficially disconnected from ethical life. In fact, in both Hegel and Dewey, the division of labour is itself an essential moment of ethicality: not only indirectly, because it allows the community to reproduce itself materially, but much more directly and importantly, because the inscription of individual activity within the overall organisation of social life is the properly ethical condition for the individual’s participation in political life.

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44 Ibid., p. 237.
In later writings, Dewey acknowledges the separate moment of deliberation marking the specificity of politics by contrast with social cooperation. But this acknowledgement in no way weakens the fundamental intuition that democracy in the end designates a “social ideal” just as much as a specifically political one. Now, however, it is the pragmatist understanding of reflexivity that allows Dewey to maintain his key, Hegelian-Marxian, intuition.

The intersubjective and reflexive definition of truth in the pragmatist tradition is well-known. Truth-seeking procedures, notably in the sciences, are seen as extensions of those everyday procedures that we put into play when some of our basic implicit assumptions are held in check by disruptions of experience and their failure to eventuate. Truth-seeking procedures are thus reflexive processes inquiring into, and correcting, the implicit assumptions that have been proven wrong. And this process, for the pragmatists, is best engaged in via a community of inquiry. In other words, it is in the essence of scientific inquiry to be “reflexive cooperation”. In his later writings, Dewey simply finishes the circle that had led from society to science, back to social life. As Honneth reconstructs his argument:

in social cooperation, the intelligence of the solution to emerging problems increases to the degree to which all those involved could, without constraint and with equal rights, exchange information and introduce reflections.46

This then, leads to an idea of democratic deliberation which, as reflexive, is now relatively separate from the immanence of social life: democratic deliberation, like scientific debate, is that reflexive moment where the community of “inquirers” attempts to solve as one community a problem that has emerged in an area that concerns everyone.

Such an argument, however, is not yet sufficient to justify the link that is supposed to be maintained between democratic deliberation, in its relative autonomy from social life, and the strong social ideal inspired by Hegel and Marx. The problem of linking politics and social life from the pragmatist perspective

amounts to the following question: whilst the community of the “involved” is not problematic in scientific inquiry, it becomes the core problem in social philosophy. It is not difficult to see why democratic procedures can be described as reflexive deliberations over problems arising in social life. The whole question is: who is involved in those problems and in what capacity? Why should these problems arising in social life involve all members of social life, and even more pointedly, why those members in their involvement in the division of labour? The response to this question is crucial if the division of labour and the strong social ideal depicted in Dewey’s early writings are to retain their significance. It would be perfectly conceivable, for example, to hold a similar, reflexive, version of democracy, for example a Habermasian one, without making the political moment rest strongly on the division of labour. In brief, it is clear how democracy can be described as reflexivity; the whole difficulty, and originality, of Dewey, is to make it a reflexive cooperation, where cooperation is not just cooperation at the political level, but political deliberation based on social cooperation.

Once again, the missing link is provided by a pragmatist conceptual scheme:

Social action unfolds in forms of interaction whose consequences in the simple case affect only those immediately involved; but as soon as those not involved see themselves affected by the consequences of such interaction, there emerges from their perspective a need for joint control of the corresponding actions either by their cessation or by their promotion.47

On that model, political procedures are called for to coordinate and regulate the consequences of actions that originate at first from particular parts of society, but which can be seen in fact to affect all members of society. Politics then is truly a reflexive moment where society attempts to solve its own internal problems. The division of labour comes into play in this scheme as soon as the argument is given a normative twist and a specifically democratic version of politics is sought: for all individuals to be involved in the reflexive process of political deliberation, they must already see how they are indirectly affected by the actions in which they are not directly involved. This, the Hegelian-Marxian idea of division of labour ensures, since it shows how individual

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activity is essentially related to, indeed defined by, its place within the overall social organism. Put negatively: a society is not truly democratic, even if its political procedures formally are, if social agents cannot see how the actions of others relate to them, and how their actions are related to others. Once again, democratic politics is rooted in a democratic society. As a result:

only a fair and just form of a division of labour can give each individual member of society a consciousness of cooperatively contributing with all others to the realisation of common goals. It is only the experience of participating, by means of an individual contribution, in the particular tasks of a group, which in its turn cooperates with all the other groups of a community through the division of labour, that can convince the single individual of the necessity of a democratic public.48

We verify here that the direct problem tackled by Honneth in the 1993 article is indeed that of “the moral foundations of democracy”, but that it in fact points to a much broader conception of society at large, to an expansive “social ideal”. Basically, for Dewey, and clearly for Honneth also, there is no sense in talking of democratic politics separate from the problem of democratic society. In other words, democracy can only be achieved via social transformation. This is exactly the same conclusion that The Struggle for Recognition reached one year earlier. In the meantime, a highly charged concept of the division of labour has been shown to be necessary: political freedom requires justice in the division of labour; through the division of labour, each individual activity is defined in its social and indeed in its potential political significance.

Critique of Honneth’s account of economic injustice

Zurn’s critique of Honneth’s reductionist stance on the question of economic injustice refers to Honneth’s double argument according to which a fair and just division of labour is the condition for a true democracy, and a condition also of individual flourishing. On the one hand, Zurn acknowledges the great insights that the return to Dewey enables Honneth to develop within contem-
porary political philosophy: by grounding politics in the ideal of richly articulated and diversified social life, he avoids the monolithic solutions of other rights-, value-, or identity-orientated political models; he emphasises the link between plurality in social life and the vibrancy of democracy; and finally he can indeed “emphasise the importance of greater economic equality for a healthy democracy in a way that competing theories do not”.49 At the same time, though, Honneth’s Deweyan solution leads to a truncated view of economic activity, precisely because of the strong link that is from now on established between economic distribution and recognition. The “consciousness of cooperatively contributing to the realisation of common goals” not only provides the platform that enables individuals to take part in democratic deliberation. It also provides recognition of the individual’s contribution to society, it gives the individual his or her social value. Honneth thus finds in Dewey, after Mead, a direct confirmation of his third sphere of recognition.50 The problem, however, is that from now on Honneth seems to approach the economy the wrong way around. Because the ideal of a fair and just division of labour has provided such a powerful model for an alternative, more expansive, and basically more radical, image of politics, from now on the economy seems to be analysed by Honneth from that angle alone. Before the famous exchange with Fraser, Zurn finds in a 2001 article the explicit shift to this position:

the rules organising the distribution of material goods derive from the degree of social esteem enjoyed by social groups, in accordance with institutionalised hierarchies of value, or a normative order. (…) Conflicts over distribution…are always symbolic struggles over the legitimacy of the sociocultural dispositive that determines the value of activities, attributes and contributions. (…) In short, it is a struggle over the cultural definition of what it is that renders an activity socially necessary and valuable.51

49 Zurn, “Recognition, Redistribution, and Democracy”, pp. 96-99.

50 See Dewey’s reflection, which is very close to Mead’s similar reflections on the topic: State institutions, by “enabling all members of society to count with reasonable certainty upon what others will do”, create “respect for others and for one’s self”, “The Public and Its Problems”, p. 29.

In this text, the culturalist reduction of the economy seems to be complete. Zurn’s other critical points all rely on the identification of this shift, and the resulting conclusion that, basically, it seems that for Honneth the economy is explained through culture. Honneth is thus accused of reducing “distributive injustices to injustices in underlying evaluative patterns”, and so to propound a naïve view of the causes of economic injustice. The latter is often not to be explained through reference to the social-cultural value system, but rather to the economic imperatives, which function to a large extent independently of status questions. Honneth seems to ignore the basic fact that the explanation of phenomena specific to the economic order ought to be in categories of instrumental, not communicative or normative, rationality, in causal, not moral terms.

Furthermore, if the theoretical analysis conflates phenomena belonging to different orders, its practical relevance is seriously in doubt as it risks advocating practical solutions that fail to address the real causes of injustice, or even worse, advocates solutions that in fact compound the injustice, because, for example, of negative feedback effects it is not able to take into consideration.

Finally, Zurn seems to put the finger on what seems to be the undecided nature of the third sphere in Honneth’s construct. Honneth can continue to hold on to the 1993 model of reflexive cooperation only if he gives a very abstract notion of “work”, as designating any socially significant individual activity. This, however, makes him incapable of distinguishing between different types of cooperative association (from bowling clubs to factory floors, as Zurn says) and their significance for allowing individuals to take part in “reflexive cooperation”. But then the theory becomes so abstract as to be empirically and practically useless when it comes to analysing real forms of injustice, notably in terms of the transformations that would be necessary in different forms of social association, to challenge the distributive patterns (bowling clubs and factory floors, for example, would be significant in very different ways for that matter). In terms of the analysis of social injustice, Honneth can explain

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52 Zurn, “Recognition, Redistribution, and Democracy”, p. 101.
53 Ibid., pp. 102-103.
54 See the discussion of this in chapter 7.
economic injustice in terms that are adequate to its actual economic aspect (for example, the political-economic factors explaining the reality of low wages) only if his definition of work, as that which the recognize structure is supposed to reward, is so abstract as to be useless empirically and strategically. For example, to explain capital mobility, Honneth would have to accept the main political-economic reason explaining the low level of wages, as being the result of an order of recognition. In order to defend this thesis, he would then have to describe the “political-economic” factors as a relation of “recognition” between, say, labour and capital. But this would lead to such an abstract and simplistic description of the complex reality of contemporary capitalistic processes, as to be without any real value analytically, and leading once again to useless or even counter-productive conclusions when it comes to addressing the question of the redress of injustice.

**Economic injustice as pathology of recognition**

Against this devastating attack, the first line of defence consists in granting to Fraser and Zurn at first that recognition theory, qua social theory, is not sufficient to account for the specificity of economic action as opposed to other types of social action, but that it is extremely useful, perhaps irreplaceable, to account for the experience of economic injustice, qua social experience. This is the line taken by Emmanuel Renault in the chapter dedicated to the economic institutions of injustice in *L’Expérience de l’Injustice* and in other recent writings.\(^{55}\) As Renault writes,

> It is clear that, on its own, a theory of recognition is incapable of producing a theory of capitalism, but it never intended to do that anyway. However, by relying on theories elaborated by the sociology of work and the economic sciences, it can nevertheless engage in the analysis of the effects of recognition produced by the institutions of salaried work and the capitalist market.\(^{56}\)

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Instead of reasoning through the causes, as Fraser and Zurn propose to do, making the critique of injustice methodologically dependent on the analysis of the causes of injustice, Renault shows quite emphatically how fruitful recognition theory can be for a critique of economic injustice, inasmuch as it provides a powerful analytical tool to analyse the effects of contemporary economic processes on individuals and communities. On that reading, recognition is the most appropriate concept to use in order to describe the experience of injustice as social experience.

Such a claim is easy to accept at least for what is the explicit content of the third sphere in the latest version of the model. As Honneth writes in the 2001 issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* on recognition:

> The rules organising the distribution of material goods (notably wages—JPD) derive from the degree of social esteem enjoyed by social groups, in accordance with institutionalised hierarchies of value.57

The labour market produces specific injustices, whereby some forms of work, some statuses attached to specific professions, are not sufficiently recognised, or not recognised for their proper social value, and this injustice is reflected in the wages. An unjust scale of wages, or the absence of wage compensation (in the case of care work and house work) are directly analysable in terms of recognitive injustice. In any case, this is quite precisely how it is experienced by those who feel their wage, or the absence of a wage, represents a form of social injustice.

Following Renault, a similar argument can be also readily accepted in relation to commodities and services markets. These markets also have direct recognitive effects. The price that the market puts on products is a reflection of the value that society attaches to them. As Renault remarks, in Marx, for example, one of the structural conditions of exchange value is the “social validation” of use-value.58 If a product is not seen as being socially useful, it will not be exchanged. This, however, is directly linked to work: for the work of an individual to be part of social labour and take place within the division of labour,

57 Honneth, “Recognition or Redistribution?”, p. 54.

it has to be recognised as being socially valid, as producing socially validated products. In the capitalistic system, this occurs through the exchange of the products of labour. The price of a product is therefore a more direct than indirect recognition of the value of that individual’s activity.

Finally, and still following Renault, the other great economic institution: the capitalist firm, can also be shown to produce injustices that need to be analysed as injustices of recognition. This type of critical diagnosis of the sphere of production from the perspective of pathologies of recognition is also conducted by Honneth in great detail in two recent texts: in “Organised Self-Realisation” (2004), and in an article written with Martin Hartmann: “Paradoxes of Capitalism” (2006).

Drawing on a wealth of recent sociological and psychological literature on the impact of new methods of production and management, Honneth shows how the paradoxical developments of individualisation and recognition in the neo-liberal, or post-fordist, models of economic organisation introduces new tensions and contradictions into the spheres of recognition. This is because the new mode of production, accompanied by new modes of consumption and presentation of self, exploit the subjective potentials liberated by the welfare period in order to increase productivity and profit. Working subjects are thereby more efficiently mobilised for the good of the company in particular and the overall system in general. Their entire idiosyncratic selves, with their specific qualities, creativity and desires are thus put in the service of production. Recognition becomes paradoxical because the instrumental exploitation of it renders it impossible, or even reverses it into a pathological force.59

Recognition, and the greater individuality that comes with it, thus becomes a “factor of production” itself.60 In a period where mass consumption has to a large extent been saturated, the new frontier for increases in productivity, and thus for profits, was to be found in the intensification of work, which the

flexibilisation of work processes and the destructuration of the firm aimed to achieve. Productivity was sought in reorganisation and new forms of management. Recognition plays a decisive part in ensuring this intensification. The greater autonomy granted to workers in the post-fordist company can be analysed in terms of recognition: at all levels of the hierarchy, many more workers are asked to involve themselves totally in the quality of the production (the quality of the product, but also the efficiency of productive processes), and are promised greater autonomy and recognition of their contribution in return. However, the recognition thus granted to the post-fordist workers is flawed. This leads to the emergence of new forms of suffering, of a truly alarming level.

Whether one considers the situation of individuals in the labour market in general, or in the contemporary firm, recognition theory thus appears particularly well adapted for providing an analytical grid to address contemporary experiences of injustice linked to the economic system. In other words, despite the harsh criticisms expressed against it on the economic question, it does seem to be well placed as a critical theory, that is, as a theory substantively connecting its conceptual and normative claims to social reality. In particular, by focusing on the importance of the experience of work for contemporary individuals, as one of the main axes in their lives through which they can develop their subjectivity, or, in pathological cases, find their lives deeply affected, the theory of recognition proves particularly well placed to deal with one of the most important areas of socially induced suffering in contemporary societies. It proves this by showing first of all, in its conceptual apparatus, how important work is normatively for modern subjectivity. And it proves this secondly, by providing an adequate theoretical grammar to describe contemporary pathologies of work.

This critical nexus: pathologies of work as specifically social pathologies, and the centrality of these pathologies in modern society—this nexus has always been at the heart of Honneth’s thinking, right from the beginning. 61 With the development of the recognition paradigm, notably through the various shifts in the interpretation of the “third sphere”, it could appear as though work as

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61 See in particular Honneth, “Work and Instrumental Action”.
a concrete activity gradually receded into the background. The third sphere of recognition seems to give only a partial entry point into contemporary pathologies of work, by focusing solely on the social-psychological, the recognition of one’s contribution to the division of labour at large. However, with his latest studies on the paradoxes of capitalism, Honneth has reconnected with his initial project of a “critical conception of work”. His diagnosis of the pathologies of the post-fordist economy in a neo-liberal regime has regained some of the diagnostic wealth of his earlier writings on work.

Zurn acknowledges at several points in his article that “Honneth is surely right about how most distributive harms are experienced by individuals” 62 but he contrasts such phenomenological accuracy with another type of social-theoretical relevance, namely the relevance of arguments that link experiences of injustice to their systemic, “political-economic” causes. As previous chapters have shown profusely, Honneth’s original position in social theory arises precisely from the rejection of such severing of social theory from social experience. This was already one of the main points of contention with Habermas, for example. This fundamental methodological constant has several dimensions. It translates first of all into a series of critical arguments against functionalist models, targeting both the theoretical and the practical implications of those models. More positively, it leads to a series of “thick”, substantive theses of social-theoretical nature. How do these two lines unfold in the case of the analysis of economic systems? After all, those systems seem to be precisely the type of social fields that demand the introduction of functionalist elements. What would an “action-theoretic” account of markets look like?

**Theory of recognition and economic theory**

From the perspective of Honneth’s insistence on retaining the link between experience and theory, Fraser and Zurn’s dualistic models of society seem to repeat the sociological abstraction already uncovered in Habermas. Despite their assurances to the contrary, Fraser and Zurn’s insistence on analytic dualism, on the allegedly strictly analytical distinction between social-cultural versus systemic social reproduction, threatens to end up in an

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ontological dualism in which economic processes would be reified. As Honneth remarks in response to Fraser, in her eagerness to disprove him on the issue of redistribution, she puts forward theses and implicitly accepts presuppositions that prove in the end to be counter-productive for her own purposes. If one insists too much on the autonomy and complexity of markets and capitalistic processes more generally, one robs oneself of the means to conduct an immanent critique of them. This is true first of all in terms of the norms of critique. If as Zurn argues following Fraser, “market imperatives simply dictate the choices”, that is, if it is assumed that the logic of economic processes is purely instrumental, the search for the maximisation of profits, then the critique of economic injustice can only be external. But then, where do the norms of critique come from; how are they justified; how can they be shown to relate to “pre-scientific praxis”, and so on? One seems to be reduced to the type of externalist critical standpoint that Critical Theory by definition rejects.

In terms of social theory, if, as Fraser insists, her dualism is only perspectival, how can she reject Honneth’s recognitive approach on the basis that it ignores the alleged systemic operational logic of markets? As Honneth remarks, this seems to reify the “perspectivalism” into an ontological thesis. In brief, critical theorists who want to follow Habermas too closely on these issues seem to be caught between the rock of their system-theoretical assumptions regarding the economy, and the hard place of their normative inclinations, which remain indispensable for analysing social phenomena in terms of injustice.

These critical remarks, however, do not by themselves recommend recognitive theory as a better social theory for describing modern economic reality. Again, the question is raised: what would be an “action-theoretic”, “recognitive-theoretic” account of markets?

Already the argument that recognition has become a “productive factor” is not just a normative claim but also a claim that has explanatory power. If we generalise on the basis of this example, we see where the proposal is heading: a “recognitive-theoretic” account of the economy would be one that would show that recognition is not sufficient to fully explain economic processes, but is itself a constitutive element in them. Again, the distinction between expression and constitution is crucial here. An extreme version of recognition theory
would be fully “expressivist”.\(^\text{63}\) It would see all social institutions, including the economic ones, as more or less perfect “expressions” of recognition relations. There is no doubt that some of Honneth’s texts flirt with this position.\(^\text{64}\) According to this model, all social institutions, including the economic ones, are constrained by a normative order which precedes and transcends them. In that sense, institutions can be said to “express” relations of recognition. Against this, Renault for example shows what a “constitutive” theory of recognition in relation to institutions would look like: institutions are not (just) expressions of pre-social relations of recognition; institutions also produce their own types of recognition relations. For Renault, this emphasis on the institutional moment was limited to the problem of the critique of injustice: specific institutions produce specific forms of injustice. However, it seems difficult to hold that economic institutions produce specific forms of recognition, but to limit the ontological status of these forms of recognition to that of effects. It is much more likely that the recognition effects that institutions produce contribute, in their own way, to a certain extent, to the functioning of those institutions. This, in fact, seems to be Honneth’s position in his final rejoinder to Fraser:

> I continue to assume that even structural transformations in the economic sphere are not independent of the normative expectations of those affected, but depend at least on their tacit consent.\(^\text{65}\)

This was quite exactly Honneth’s alternative position to Habermas’ dualistic analysis of society and the economy in *The Critique of Power*. Already in his dissertation, Honneth had diagnosed the theoretical and practical difficulties that a vision of the economy as a norm-free sub-system of society harbours:

> in the case of both symbolic and material reproduction the integration of the accomplishments of action takes place on the way toward the formation


\(^{64}\) See S. Thompson, “Is Redistribution a Form of Recognition?, p. 93.

\(^{65}\) Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 250. See Zurn, “Recognition, Redistribution, and Democracy”, p. 114.
of normatively constructed institutions. This formation is the result of a
process of communication realised in the form of understanding of struggle
between social groups.\(^{66}\)

However “systematic” the integration of individual actions might appear to
be, this integration, whether in the areas of symbolic or material reproduction,
always involves the intervention of institutions, which are themselves concre-
tions (constitutive or expressive) of recognitive relations.

The most fundamental argument at stake here, which Honneth is forced to
deal with, the one notably that makes an expressivist-recognitive theory of
the economy inadequate (the analysis of the economy in pure recognitive
terms), is the notion of the complexity of action integration as a result of
the unpredictability and impenetrability of the nexus of unintended conse-
quences. Basically, markets cannot be reasonably presumed to be organised
through any wilful notion of social action. This acknowledgement of the inde-
pendent, system-like behaviour of economic processes is precisely at the heart
of Habermas’ hypothesis of a decoupling of subsystems from the lifeworld:

Survival imperatives require a junctional integration of the lifeworld,
which reaches right through the symbolic structures of the lifeworld and
therefore cannot be grasped without further ado from the perspective of
participants.\(^{67}\)

The “invisible hand” of market mechanisms is too “hidden” to be made sense
of by the participants, and yet it does allow an integration of individual actions
that would otherwise be impossible. As a result, two types of action integra-

\(^{66}\) Honneth, *Critique of Power*, p. 293.

\(^{67}\) Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action II*, p. 232. Quoted by Honneth, *Critique of
Power*, p. 292. See another late summary statement from Habermas: “Modern societies
are integrated not only socially through values, norms, and mutual understanding,
but also systematically through markets and the administrative use of power. Money
and administrative power are systemic mechanisms of societal integration that do
not necessarily coordinate actions via the intentions of participants, but objectively,
‘behind the backs’ of participants. Since Adam Smith, the classic example for this type
of regulation is the market’s ‘invisible hand’”, *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. W. Rehg,
tion, one symbolic, the other material, one through communication, the other via non-linguistic steering media, must be postulated for modern societies.

As we know, Honneth’s fundamental intuition in social theory is one he shares with Hans Joas, and the one that has been, from his very first texts, the main inspiration behind his critical and constructive work: a thorough, unashamed, action-theoretic stance, rejecting all functionalist and systemic arguments. How can such a stance deal with the problem of the complexity of modern society, which makes a communicative approach to the complexity and apparent functional independence of economic systems untenable? Is an action-theoretical stance in social theory irremediably condemned to committing a basic social-theoretic fallacy, and to propounding embarrassing “empirical distortions”? Joas has shown that this serious objection is based on a misunderstanding about the scope and meaning of an action-theoretical stance in social theory: the latter does not deny the existence of unintended, unplanned consequences of individual action. Rather, it only refuses to generalise the consequence drawn from them to the analysis of society as a whole, and maintains that social action, qua action, remains both theoretically relevant, and indeed necessary for an adequate approach to social movements and democratic theory. An action-theoretic stance in social theory does not deny unintended consequences of action; it denies that social action remains foreign to, and powerless in front of, them. Quoting Charles Taylor, Joas insists that:

Making intelligible ‘in terms of action’ means the attempt to relate in a transparent way all the unplanned ‘systems’ of consequences of actions to the real actions of real actors. ‘It is certainly not the case that all patterns stem from conscious action, but all patterns have to be made intelligible in relation to conscious action’.

And in support of his claim, Joas quotes precisely Dewey’s theory of the division of labour as a typical sophisticated version of social theory integrating the notion of unintended consequences without denying the

possibility of social action, without recourse to functionalism or methodological individualism.\textsuperscript{70}

Honneth argues along similar lines in his final discussion of Habermas in \textit{Critique of Power}, but already interprets the action-theoretic approach in a “struggle for recognition” sense, even before that model has been developed. His argument starts in the negative. What Habermas says of material reproduction is in fact already true of communicative action:

> the cultural integration of social groups takes place through an entire complex of communicative actions which are not able to be surveyed as such by members of groups.\textsuperscript{71}

If the impossibility of actively coordinating individual action was the reason behind a system-theoretical approach to the economy, the same would have to abide for culture and social integration, as they too are unintended outcomes of communicative processes. But with the distinctions made explicit by Joas, one does not have to bite the system-theoretical bullet: it is one thing to acknowledge the impossibility of a fully intended functional coordination of action, another to exclude all normative dimensions from the mechanisms of action coordination. Rather, with Honneth, an alternative image of society can be presented, one that acknowledges its system-like appearance, on account of its complexity, but refuses to radically separate domains of action, and therefore finds a normative component in all of them. This alternative image, then, is one where indeed there are functional types of action coordination, but where, also, relations of recognition, and notably relations of power, play a decisive, “constitutive” role. We can see why the Dewey article provided such an excellent entry point for assessing Honneth’s theory of economics. With Dewey’s social-democratic solution to the problem of “unintended consequences” (through the ideal of a division of labour where each can see his or her actions affecting and being affected by those of others), Honneth had in fact given a preliminary, action-theoretic, intersubjectivistic response to functionalist reservations, and not just an answer to a question of strict political theory.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p. 290, note 73.

\textsuperscript{71} Honneth, \textit{Critique of Power}, p. 292.
As early as 1988, Honneth saw very clearly what this solution through a "thick" interpretation of the division of labour entails. Already then he had given significant indications about the relationship between the system-like dimension of action coordination, and the communicative-normative (later: recognition) dimension:

both spheres of reproduction require mechanisms that so unite the particular processes of communication or cooperation in a complex that (...) they are able to fulfil the corresponding functions of symbolic reproduction or material reproduction. In both cases, mechanisms of this kind represent institutions in which the respective accomplishments of action are normatively institutionalised, that is, under the constraint of the action orientations of subjects that are stored up in the lifeworld, while their execution is sanctioned by the degree of autonomy of a society found in democratic agreements or under authoritatively bound orders.72

The institutional moment that Honneth refers to in this passage is the one through which recognition intervenes constitutively in economic action. Recognition here means normatively regulated social interactions. For him, these interactions are always also asymmetrical because they are based on a specific balance of power between the groups.

Honneth here distinguishes two such moments of normative regulation. First, there can be a coordination of economic actions (of the "accomplishments of action") only under the constraint of institutionalised "mechanisms" that reflect the state of group interactions (in fact, of their conflict, since power is unequally shared) at a given time. Accordingly, pure, strategic, atomistic individual action, the aggregate of which, according to the neo-classical model, constitutes the economic system, is pure abstraction. Instead the social-philosophical insight nourished by the intersubjectivistic premise and a communicative approach to society insists on the fact that economic actions have an irreducibly "cultural" dimension, if by that is meant, as the Critique of Power argues, the symbolic group-specific filtering of social action, and more precisely, the socially specific filtering of a given state of the division of labour. In clear terms, economic processes, as social realities, are always partly

72 Ibid., p. 293.
“constituted” by the interactions of the groups in presence, because the latter act on the basis of their respective cultural worlds as well as within the framework constituted by the power relations existing between those worlds. The institutional dimension that unavoidably frames economic action qua action, as it concretises the asymmetrical relations of the different social groups at a given time, always introduces a normative dimension into it.

Secondly, the “execution” of the “accomplishments of action”, in other words, the end-result of action coordination, the overall economic action as it actually takes place at the level of society, is subject to a second normative “control”: the reflexive level of politics, in which group struggle, in the case of democratic politics, finds a second, more reflexive, institutionalised expression. In clear terms: there is always a political element in political economy.

On account of these two dimensions, it is an abstraction descriptively (social-theoretically) and a mistake practically, to evacuate from the analysis of economic action the asymmetrical relations of power between groups, which the theory of recognition reframes as struggle for recognition.

This solution, where recognition is co-constitutive of economic action, is basically the solution that Honneth brings again into the debate with Fraser, when he asserts that “even structural transformations in the economic sphere are not independent of the normative expectations of those affected, but depend at least on their tacit consent”. This is a fascinating aspect of the final page of his second rejoinder to Fraser on the issue of redistribution.

There is little sense in merely appealing to the importance of capitalist imperatives without considering how changes in normative expectations and action routines have paved the way for social negotiations about the scopes of these imperatives.73

Even in the case of economic processes, Honneth reflects, some basic relations of recognition are necessary for the system to function at all, even as system. Even economic systems function on the basis of fundamental normative agreements between the different social agents; and these agreements, like all other, are only fragile positions of equilibrium that can always be reopened

73 Fraser & Honneth, Redistribution or Recognition?, p. 256.
for challenge through politics. To give just one small example, it is in fact not written in the book of nature how much a business should return on investment for the market to acknowledge it as “profitable” and for the financial institutions to rate it accordingly, with all the direct implications attached to such ratings. The current accepted rate (at 15 or even 20%), which time and again has proven to be unsustainable for normal business operations, has become the norm in the current financial world only because of the gradual might acquired by shareholders and capital over managers and workers.\textsuperscript{74}

Honneth’s approach to economics is highly original in social theory today, especially given the almost unquestioned acceptance of the purely systemic nature of markets in post-Habermasian critical theory.\textsuperscript{75} In fact, his intuition can find strong support in contemporary economic theory, not in the hegemonic neo-classical models, but in some of its most developed alternatives. These “heterodox” schools take precisely as one of their main presuppositions the intuition tentatively put forward by Honneth. The main school of economic thought that comes to mind is American institutionalism, the approach to economics that represented the mainstream at the time when economic theory was institutionalised in the United States.\textsuperscript{76} Another major “heterodox” economic school that emphasised the role of institutional mediations in economic processes, and thus attempted to highlight the potentials for social


negotiation in the economic processes themselves, is regulation theory. Whilst there are ways of reading regulation theory as being very close to Honneth, despite its declared functionalism, the overlap becomes incontrovertible with one of its most significant spin-offs: the school of conventions developed in France by writers like Michel Aglietta, one of the main theorists in regulation theory in the 1970s, who heavily influenced Boltanski’s and Chiapello’s key work of new sociology, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Currently, a major constellation is emerging between economic theorists, social theorists and other social scientists. What unites all these different strands is precisely the idea so clearly articulated by Honneth that the most influential institution of contemporary societies, the market, can only work because it is embedded in the other networks of society, and relies on the socially constituted norms, beliefs and values of the individuals it throws in its mix.

**Section 3. The politics of recognition as identity politics?**

The last major concern regarding Honneth’s theory of recognition is his proposal to ground a normative theory, indeed a theory of normativity, that is to say, a theory specifying the content, logic and efficacy of norms, on a thick theory of subjective identity, informed by a set of theses stemming from disciplines outside of philosophy. At its most basic, this concern simply relates to the image of the subject that arises from Honneth’s take on Hegelian recognition. For post-structuralists especially, it is too antagonistic (Oliver),

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77 See ed. F. Eymard-Duvernay, *L’Economie des Conventions. Méthodes et Résultats*. Paris, La Découverte, 2006. Aglietta’s work is at the heart of promising developments at the intersection of post-regulation, economic theory (school of conventions), sociology (Boltanski, Thévenot), and social anthropology. The active French school of social anthropology which today develops a post-Maussian paradigm around the notion of the gift (mainly around the work of Alain Caillé) is very influenced by Aglietta’s recent work on the constitutive functional and symbolic role of the currency, as an instantiation of fundamental social and political interactions. See Michel Aglietta and André Orléan, *La Monnaie Souveraine*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998 as well as Lazzeri Christian and Caillé, Alain, “Recognition Today”, in eds Deranty, J.-P. et al., *Recognition, Work, Politics*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp. 89–125. I have attempted to read Hegel’s theory of value from the perspective of these new debates, see my “Hegel’s Social Theory of Value”, *The Philosophical Forum*, 36(3), 2005, pp. 307-331.
or too rigid (Alexander Düttman). A similar concern is shared by authors like Patchen Markell who operate within an Arendtian paradigm. For all these writers, the images of the subject and of intersubjective relations drawn by Honneth deny the structural contingency and frailty that are constitutive of them.

For readers located in Honneth’s own camp, that of contemporary Critical Theory, the concerns relate more to the epistemology and methodology of a critical theory project. Writers like Nancy Fraser, Maeve Cooke, Nikolas Kompridis, Andreas Kalyvas, or Christopher Zurn criticise the very attempt of grounding critical claims on the reconstruction of the conditions of subjective identity. This repeats, all other things being equal, Habermas’ own problematic stance. Honneth’s method is thus said to remain “foundationalist”, badly universalist, awkwardly fallibilist, teleological and perfectionist, and so on.

One specific aspect of this general unease regarding Honneth’s reliance on a thick theory of subjective identity relates to the political dimension of the problem. For all the critics of Honneth listed above, the conceptual, methodological and epistemological difficulties inherent in his theory of the subject come to a head in the negative political implications of that proposal. For most of them, there is something deeply disturbing, truly pernicious about it. The suspicion is that a foundationalist grounding of critique in a thick theory of the subject that overly dramatises the structural dependency of the subject on acknowledgement by others, leads to a reductive, or indeed authoritarian and reifying conception of politics, one that fails the methodological, normative and conceptual requirements of a genuinely emancipatory politics. Of course, Honneth’s intentions are not in question. Rather, as always in these debates, the theory is evaluated against a series of criteria that are deemed necessary for a contemporary theory of politics focused on emancipation. When

78 See the respective references in the bibliography.
that theory is shown to fail to fulfil one or several of these taken for granted criteria, the conclusion follows that, despite all good intentions, the theorist in fact fails the anti-authoritarian test.

Let us mention only two examples of this type of critique. In both cases, the strategy is similar: first a conceptual critique of Honneth’s notions of recognition and identity; followed by the analysis of the disastrous consequences that follow from that ill-conceived notion.

The first typical example is Patchen Markell’s Arendtian criticism. Markell formulates it in the terms of agency and non-sovereignty. The theory of recognition, by “misrecognising” the essential open-endedness, “frailty” and contingency of human interactions, plays into the hands of the very structures it purports to combat, that is, structures of injustice which originate precisely in that refusal to acknowledge the frailty and contingency of human action, that is to say, the impossibility of full control, of sovereignty. This general argument is specified in terms of the relationship between identity and recognition. Here, Markell articulates in the most potent form a concern that is shared by most authors sceptical of Honneth’s take on recognition, whether or not they operate within an Arendtian paradigm: by making subjective agency dependent on the conferral of recognition by outside powers, Honneth does not see that he is in fact reproducing the very logic of authoritarian schemes which operate precisely by claiming and exercising a monopoly of recognition power, of normative authority, over the dominated. Recognition then, despite all good intentions, must be said to be “complicit with injustice”

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82 Markell, *Bound by Recognition*, p. 17. Even before he was attacked from that side of the intellectual field, Honneth raised doubts over the post-structuralist approach to subjectivity, either from a social-theory perspective (see “Pluralization and Recognition: On the Self-Mis-understanding of Postmodern Social Theorists”, in eds., P. Beilharz, G. Robinson, J. Rundell, Between Totalitarianism and Postmodernity. A Thesis Eleven Reader, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1992, pp. 163-173), or from a philosophical
inasmuch as it aims for the same type of sovereign domination that structures unequal social orders.

A formally similar criticism can be found in Düttmann, a good representative of a critique of Honneth from a deconstructive angle. Again, the critique starts with the rejection of the concept of recognition. The latter is said once again to “misrecognise” the truth of recognition, as it “unifies, normalises and disciplines” what is indeterminate, eventful and of the order of the “in-between”. As a result of this, Honneth, like the other great theorists of recognition, is accused of implicitly relying on institutions that secure this normalising of identity: the state, the institutions and the police.83

By contrast with post-structuralist and Arendtian critics, other critical theorists who are closer to Honneth in terms of the references they share tend to put more weight on the restrictions that the focus on recognition imposes to the critical project itself. However, even they are concerned with the political implications of his version of critical theory. The classical objection is of course that demands for recognition and many movements that use the vocabulary of recognition are, as a matter of fact, less than progressive. But there are other concerns. Zurn, for example, articulates most eloquently the Fraserian concern with the counter-productive effects of a critique in terms of recognition: according to him, its weak explanatory footing may well lead to advocating measures that would in the end be detrimental for those the theorist attempts to help. For Kompridis, Fraser and Cooke, the unconvincing grounding of critique on recognition, with its inherent remnants of foundationalism, teleologism and perfectionism, is a methodological mistake that can lead to “sectarianism”, that is, the risk that the theorist unjustifiably favours a form of life over others and restricts the range of possible future options.


Of course each of the authors mentioned here deserves particular attention and each of the criticisms they develop could be the object of a specific response. There is not sufficient room for this here. Moreover, it is possible to make a number of general remarks in defence of Honneth’s proposal to ground critique on “the conditions of positive self-relation”, and also to defend the political implications of this proposal.

Even if each of the authors mentioned above expresses specific concerns about Honneth’s model, it is not inaccurate to claim that, in general terms, most of his critics share a similar disquiet with his attempt to ground political claims in a thick theory of identity, basically, with his way of grounding politics on anthropological claims.

The first problem with some of these criticisms is that they are not self-consistent. Whilst some of them berate Honneth for grounding normative critique on a thick model of subjectivity, that same criticism does not seem to apply to them. Sometimes, the critique of Honneth’s reliance on a thick conception of identity is followed in the next page by an alternative conception, which is often just as thick, but often also far less well grounded in extra-philosophical sciences.

A more serious problem is that in many cases, the meaning of identity and the exact status of the Honneth’s anthropological line of argument are not approached with complete accuracy or in full fairness. The criticisms often do not do justice to his specific project.

The image of recognition and of a politics of recognition most of the critics listed above rely on is the following: an individual or a group already has a formed identity (gay, African-American, woman), finds it is unrecognised or ill-recognised in the existing social-cultural order, and therefore makes demands on the broader social world to enforce the recognition of the valuable aspect of that identity.84 On that reading, the “politics of recognition” relates to the collective actions that arise when specific social groups want to argue for the validity of claims relating to their particular identity. This

84 See Andrew Schaap for a similar understanding of recognition as recognition of preformed identities, in the specific context of political reconciliation, Political Reconciliation, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, chapter 3.
is problematic because it reifies identity in a number of different ways: by assuming that identity is fixed and monolithic; by failing to perceive the perniciousness of identity conferred by dominating groups; and by projecting an ideal of full identity-recognition that smothers creativity and contingency.

The trouble is that such a vision of recognition as recognition of identity is quite far from Honneth’s own model. In Honneth, recognition is not recognition of an already formed identity, of identity as “fait accompli”, as Markell puts it, or as “presupposition” and “result”, as Düttman puts it, but rather a dynamic, indeed an open-ended process that is the condition of identity. The emphasis is not on the damage to a subject or a group when their pre-existing identity is not acknowledged, nor on an alleged end state of fixed identities all recognising and thus stultifying each other. Rather the emphasis in Honneth’s model is on the utter dependency of subjects and groups on recognitive relations for their very identity to be at all possible. The difference is quite significant: on the first model recognition is conceived as a good that causes an injustice when absent; an identity has not received its due. On the second model, recognition is not primarily a good, but a quasi-transcendental condition of subjectivity itself.

Indeed, Honneth only rarely uses the word “identity”. Instead he says “positive self-relation”, “self-realisation” or “integrity”. The central concepts in his model do not focus solely or primarily on self-ascription and the ascription of difference by others and by comparison with others, as the concept of identity implies. The moments of ascription and self-ascription are of course present and are undeniably important. But they do not exhaust the depth of Honneth’s normative approach to identity through recognition. The emphasis is different; the exact normative meaning and import of the key concepts he employs apart from identity are different from those of identity.

The main factor explaining the widespread misreading of Honneth, probably relates to the different contexts of his reception. In the English-speaking

85 See in particular Heikki Ikaheimo’s and Arto Laitinen’s ground-breaking contributions on this topic “Analysing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement, and Recognitive Attitudes towards Persons”, in eds. van den Brink, Bert and Owen, David, Recognition and Power, pp. 33-56.
world, especially in North America, the reference to the concept of recognition is always predetermined by the debates in political theory around multiculturalism and Charles Taylor’s decisive intervention in them. As a result of this, most of the time Honneth is criticised in the same breath as Taylor, without acknowledgment of the key differences between their two projects. This confusion between the two positions is especially striking when the concept of recognition is criticised for its reliance on a misguided conception of identity, and its relation to politics. Undeniably, as was noted in chapter 10, the two positions have a lot in common, at least at a superficial level. The idea that recognition answers a vital human need, and that demands for recognition in the modern world can be of three different kinds, those ideas are shared by Taylor and Honneth. But the key inspirations at the heart of their respective models, in particular, their diverging readings of Hegel, make their models also very different.

Taylor reads Hegel as one of the great philosophers to have seen the central, constitutive place of the phenomenon of expression in human affairs. There can be symbolic meaning for human beings, that is, a truly human world beyond the strictures of first nature, only because human beings are able to develop means of expression beyond mere functional processes and utilitarian concerns. Through expression, communities but also individual subjects are able to articulate who they truly are, develop a true, authentic identity. Identity in Taylor is strongly connected with authenticity, to the point of being almost synonymous with it. Recognition is required in that model because without it, a subject (individual or collective) cannot be who it truly is. There seems to be some justification in arguing that in this model, despite his references to intersubjective dependency, Taylor does conceptualise iden-

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87 On related questions although from a different perspective, see the debate between Honneth and Ferrara, regarding the latter’s emphasis on authenticity as a parallel normative source for modernity, in particular Ferrara, “The Relation of Authenticity to Normativity. A Response to Larmore and Honneth”, Philosophy and Social Criticism, 30(1), 2004, pp. 17-24.
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tity as pre-existing and recognition as re-cognition, as confirmation *ex post* of an already existing instance.

Honneth on the other hand, uses Hegel as the first thinker (in time and in importance) to have developed the systematic consequences arising from the intersubjective dependency of the subject. We find ourselves here at one of the points where a minimal acknowledgement of the specific genealogy of Honneth’s model plays a directly theoretical role. Honneth’s theory of recognition emerges not from the expressivist and hermeneutic traditions, in which the question of dialogue between existing symbolic worlds is the decisive one. It emerges from the post-Kantian and post-Hegelian traditions, in which the core problem is that of the transformation of transcendental questions in a “detranscendentalised”, that is historicised and “socialised”, context. In that second model, the intersubjective, indeed the social and historical dependency of the subject is much more radical, as it were. As a result, the normative import of recognition is very different: recognition is no longer a good that is due to an already existing instance with normatively justified claims; it is the condition of normative life itself, the condition for the subject to exist at all, if by subject we understand a human being who can lead a minimally human life, a life, that is, where she or he can be minimally subject of his or her actions. Recognition is not just a good that is due, it becomes the condition of moral life itself.

The argument is decidedly transcendental in spirit, if not in form. The core conceptual arguments are backed by psychological and “philosophical-anthropological” arguments (not just for Honneth, but also for all the major German authors who inspired his shift to recognition, foremost among them, Habermas and Tugendhat), but such a methodological move is a necessary one in a “detranscendentalised” context. It is a mistake therefore to blame Honneth for ignoring one of the alleged golden rules of contemporary practical philosophy, namely the avoidance of ethical preferences, of perfectionist arguments, as Fraser most spectacularly does, echoing many other North-American critics.88 “Self-realisation”, “integrity”, “positive self-relations” do

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88 See in particular Tully’s influential criticism of the “universalism” of Honneth and other critical theorists, notably in his “Struggle over Recognition and Distribution”, *Constellations*, 7(4), 2000, pp. 469-482.
not have the same theoretical status, are not placed at the same level, as other “primary goods”. To put it as starkly as possible, we could almost say that they are not goods at all, but conditions of a life in which something like primary goods might be possible. They are formal conditions of any good life. It is therefore misplaced to accuse Honneth of naively defining the just through the good, or of putting the latter above the former, with much heavy weather then being easily made about him not having the means to justify his own chosen good. Integrity through recognition is not a good at all, but the condition for any conception of the good life. Yes, the argument is psychological or “philosophical-anthropological”, in other words, “post-transcendental”. But strictly speaking, it is not an “ethical” argument, rather it is an argument about the condition of possibility of anything ethical.

The ironic outcome of such misunderstandings is that often the critics of Honneth propound theses that are in fact very close to his own. This is especially the case with all the writers who oppose the frailty and contingency of human action to his concept of identity, or emphasise the unstable, open aspects of struggles for recognition against what they perceive as Honneth’s overly rigid model of it. For example, when Oliver characterises oppression as “denying the oppressed access to internal life”,89 she is pointing quite exactly to what lies at the heart of Honneth’s concern: precisely, the conditions of possibility for such an internal life, and thus, negatively, the damage done to individuals when these conditions are not met. When this is then turned into a positive prescription—“the oppressed must learn to be actional and create their own meaning”90—we have a good formulation of the programme behind Honneth’s politics of recognition.

The important difference between Honneth and his critics on this point is that often the latter do not seem to find that the social obstacles that prevent the oppressed from “creating their own meaning” are worthy of study by theory. Systems of domination and injustice are pointed to and represent an important reference point in the general political-theoretical discussions, but they are not seriously included in the theoretical effort. As a result, the language

90 Ibid., p. 29.
of these critics, whether they are of liberal, poststructuralist or other conviction, is often couched in terms of “ought” and “must”. In these accounts, it seems that theory can content itself with the description of the ideal of a democratic state or a democratic society without having to worry about the social conditions in which the normative prescriptions will take place. Honneth’s approach to politics, by contrast, in good “Left-Hegelian” fashion, hones precisely on the issue of the social conditions that make political participation possible or impossible. In other words, from the perspective of Honneth’s approach to politics, most of the models presented as better alternatives lack a serious engagement with the problem of social domination. From that perspective, it is simply too easy to conduct political theory separate from a serious engagement with critical sociology.

In fact, the real problem with Honneth’s very distinctive “political theory of recognition” might be not so much that there is, as it were, “too much identity” in it, but perhaps not enough.91 To say this is not meant to suggest that we should return to a Taylorian type of politics of recognition. The ambiguity in Honneth’s use of notions such as “integrity”, “positive self-relation”, or even “self-realisation”, is that nowhere does he give a systematic account of the way in which the different features of subjective identity come together to form what is called “identity”. This concept, however, would seem quite important in his overall approach, as a diagnostic, or clinical, concept that would be essential for the political aspect of his theory.

Honneth’s original approach to contemporary political philosophy consists in questioning models, notably political liberalism, that operate without reference to the social.92 If indeed the special perspective granted by a “social philosophy” approach to political issues consists in defining the normative stance from the perspective of “pathologies”, that is, individual and collective forms of ill-being, then the concept of identity seems irreplaceable because

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91 See Deranty/Renault, “Politicising Honneth’s Ethics of Recognition”.
92 See a clear formulation of this programme in a review published in the Frankfurter Rundschau, “Die Stimme der Gerechtigkeit. Jenseits von Individuum und Gemeinschaft: die politische Philosophie muß sozialwissenschaftlich erweitert werden”, Frankfurter Rundschau, 182, 8.8.1995, p. 7: “political philosophy must be enlarged to include the insights from the social sciences”.
many “social pathologies” are simply to be described as pathologies affecting the identity of individuals and/or groups. This is what is meant by saying that identity can also be a clinical or diagnostic concept: when social forms are pathogenic, they make people suffer in their identity. When they are extremely pathological, social forms simply damage individuals and communities by destroying their identity. Some highly dysfunctional workplaces can bring people to the brink of madness; the alienation suffered by discriminated groups can lead to serious damage to their “selves”, and so on.

Identity in this sense is thus a descriptive, “ontological”, and, if it is used for critical purposes, a clinical concept. It designates the psychological reality underneath the cultural connotation of identity, whereas the cultural take on identity is usually the primary one in contemporary political theory. Such a concept of identity is therefore different from the concept of identity that is discussed when Honneth is critiqued in the same breath as Taylor (even though Taylor also grounds his politics of recognition in this psychological meaning of identity). As can be seen, the normativity inherent in identity taken in this psychological, one is tempted to say, deep-psychological, sense, is different from the one of assumed in most discussions on identity, especially in debates on multiculturalism. Taken in this sense, identity is not just an ontological but also a normative notion because it designates the necessary conditions of individual well-being, not just a rightful claim, a “good” amongst others.\textsuperscript{93} Once again, it is the condition for anything like a good life, and so for anything like a “good” to make sense. Or even, given that for Honneth identity is very close to integrity, the psychological concept of identity is in fact synonymous with the good life itself.

What then is political about identity taken as a psychological concept? And what is the problem with Honneth’s approach to this? As said earlier, nowhere does Honneth systematically describe in what way “integrity”, “self-realisation” differ from “identity”. In particular, he does not show in sufficient detail how the three spheres of recognition, which designate the three conditions of self-realisation, are brought together to form a subjective identity (a specific,

\textsuperscript{93} Honneth repeats the point very clearly in “Recognition and Justice: Outline of a Plural Theory of Justice”, \textit{Acta Sociologica}, 47, 2004, pp. 351-364.
individual type of self-realisation), and what is specifically political about this. The only theoretical aspect Honneth discusses in this regard concerns the possibility that different normative claims, based on different types of recognition, might clash; for example, claims raised from within the intimacy of the family versus “legal” claims based on the demand for self-respect. But he is not interested in what seems to be a central problem for any politics of recognition namely, what is political about identity, even when it is mainly understood as a psychological, or rather, as a social-psychological, rather than as a cultural, concept?

The grounding of the theory of recognition in Hegel and Mead suggests an obvious answer to this question. In both cases, it is the reference to the broadest horizon of what we could call a “generalised” community that completes the process of subjective formation. For both philosophers, it is only through this reference that the different features of the self can be brought together. In Hegel, the dialectic of the self brings together the different ontological and normative features of “being a subject” (a family member, a moral subject, a “bourgeois”, that is, a participant in the division of labour, and so on), when the socialised self is made to realise that her activities, even when they occur in local spheres, always already entail a “universal” element. True singularity for Hegel is the unity of particularity and universality: fully developed identity is the identity of a subject who has enlarged her perspective beyond the narrow circle of the co-participants directly concerned by his or her actions, and indeed beyond self-interest. Indeed, as we saw in the second section of this chapter, this is quite precisely the Hegelian model of democracy that Dewey reformulated from his pragmatist perspective. In Mead, the dialectic of the “I” and the “Me” forces the self to consider itself not just from the existing established social perspective, that is, from the perspective of an existing “generalised other”, but also from the perspective of the generalised other of a “better community” (Habermas), that is, the community of all those truly affected by social action.

In all these (Hegelian) models, what completes the formation of identity is in fact the political moment, that is, the moment where the “universal”, the community takes a reflexive stance upon itself. For all the thinkers mentioned, the self becomes a concrete self when it oversteps its egocentric boundaries and somehow takes the universal perspective upon itself and its social
world. It seems that the logic of Honneth’s argument and the core references that underpin his thinking should have taken him to that conclusion. In that understanding, the politics of recognition does not refer so much to the grounding of politics in normative claims based on identity, but rather to the fact that subjective identity is completed in politics. It is not so much that politics depends on identity, but rather identity on politics.94

From the perspective of a critical theory programme, it is important to develop the argument that subjective identity is “completed”, as it were, in the political moment, first of all because it grants the notion of identity a clinical, critical dimension that is different from the notion of identity implied in mainstream debates on multiculturalism.95 Basically, this insight into the political moment of subjective formation makes it possible to develop a conceptual frame in which individual pathologies, as documented by clinical psychology, can be used for the purpose of social critique inasmuch as the latter also addresses pathologies of the political.96 In particular this approach puts the emphasis on the fact that the problem of the obstacle to political participation is not just a psychological, but indeed a substantially political problem. If one takes seriously the approach to politics via the social conditions of justice, then one must also take seriously the problem of social arrangements that impact on subjectivities in such a way as to make politics impossible for entire groups of individuals. And indeed, the overcoming of such social conditions becomes a fundamental condition of democracy, in other words, one of, if not the, cen-

94 See Deranty/Renault, “Politicising Honneth’s Ethics of Recognition”.

95 Honneth has recently developed a concrete application of this thought in his analysis of racism as perceptual deficiency caused by problematic socialisation. With this analysis, he returns to his initial interest in socialisation as the key to a critical understanding of social and political pathologies, and thus, as a key to the articulation of progressive politics. See Honneth, “Rassismus als Wahrnehmungsdeformation. Über Unsinnigkeiten der Toleranzforderung”, Neue Rundschau, 2001, 112(3), pp. 159-165, and “Rassismus als Sozialisationsdefekt” (2003), Acta Sociologica, 47, 2004, pp. 351-364.

96 See Renault, Souffrances Sociales.
tral political problem. This is a serious issue for contemporary political philosophy which seems to restrict its tasks mostly to the analysis of the norms of democratic politics, and rarely deigns to lower its theoretical gaze to take into account the actual exclusion from politics of large masses of individuals in real-existing “liberal” democracies.

Moreover, the idea that subjective identity “completes” itself in politics provides a useful analytical tool to observe power struggles between social groups. As we have seen, the idea of society as a complex order of recognition entails in particular a dynamic vision of society as the fragile, always contestable result of a normative consensus amongst the different groups making up the social. The consensus can always be renegotiated because it is never a symmetrical, perfectly equitable one. Some groups exercise more power than others and consequently, the normative agreement only reflects a particular stage in the power relations. As we saw, this gives the normative agreement at the core of the social order an ambiguous status for the dominated groups. The normative nature of the “moral contract” underpinning the social order means that this contract can be reopened at any time, but it also makes their domination and situation of injustice more liveable for them because it provides a basic line of justification for that order. From the perspective of the groups exercising social domination, the fact that the fundamental structure of social interactions can be described in normative terms grants them the opportunity to justify their domination.

This is where the political moment comes in, if by that we understand, following Hegel, Mead and Dewey, specific conceptions of communal life as universal reflexive moments immanent within social life organised in its different spheres. To say that the process of identity formation is completed in politics then points to the process of idealisation and normative justification through which individuals from specific social groups, and those social groups themselves as collectives, attempt to complete and perfect the image they have of themselves in coherent, morally acceptable ways, by recourse to a certain image of the social order, in the form of an ideal communal project. Dominating groups and the individuals belonging to them tell stories that explain and

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97 See Deranty/Renault, “Democratic Agon: Striving for Distinction or Struggle against Domination and Injustice?”. 
justify their domination as natural and just. Indeed, the attempt to present social domination as naturally grounded has a paradoxical implication for subjective and social narratives: often, it leads to the denial of the necessity to give a narrative, the rejection of the need to make explicit the ideal, societal project underpinning the existing order. Nothing is more political than an attitude that pretends to be detached from politics, if the individual and the group with such an attitude benefit from the existing social organisation. This might be one of the dimensions of the massive depoliticisation witnessed in Western democracies. Depoliticisation can be analysed as an implicit political project on the part of those with privileges who refuse to change anything to the existing order. In Hegelian terms, a perfectly particularistic identity might often be one that is not just simply not-universal, but one that has actively refused the passage to the universal, and so made the universal choice to refuse to universalise (that is, justify and explain). Things are very different for dominated groups. When they are not able to challenge their domination, dominated individuals need to tell their own stories in order to explain their disadvantage and make the experience of injustice liveable. This is basically what Honneth has in mind with the notion of cultural action. But when a struggle for recognition flares up, it is because dominated groups have been able to project a different image of the community, one in which domination is reduced, equality better realised. In this case, collective and subjective identities have been able to expand through psychological and cultural processes that are political through and through since they revolve around an image of the community.
The controversy with Nancy Fraser in 2003 enabled Honneth to tie together the many strands making up his complex social theory. In the texts published since, Honneth has further explored these diverse avenues. Whilst he has retained the framework of his previous work and most importantly the systematic links that hold it together, a number of shifts have changed the overall direction of his thinking. This chapter attempts to highlight these shifts and outline some of their most important implications for Honneth’s project of a viable renewal of critical theory.

**The critique of neo-capitalism**

In a series of recent texts Honneth has sharpened his sociological, critical diagnosis of contemporary capitalism. Up until the debate with Fraser, he had not provided a detailed account of the latest developments in capitalistic modernisation.¹ In “Paradoxes of

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¹ The texts gathered in *Desintegration* are the closest one gets to a fully-fledged account of contemporary capitalism, but they only give an implicit image of Honneth’s diagnosis.
Capitalism” and “Organised Self-realisation. The Paradoxes of Individualisation”, the substantial links between socialisation and individuation, between social and individual flourishing, or negatively, between individual and social pathology, are confirmed and fleshed out through an exhaustive appropriation of contemporary sociological research into post-fordist capitalistic rationalisation and its effects on subjectivities, inter-individual relationships and communities. The starting point of the analysis remains the shift from traditional to “post-traditional” societies, the “fact” that “for the first time, the subject appears as an entity individuated through its life-history”. Beside the three usual spheres where subjective dimensions acquire a new normative potential (intimacy, equality in rights and the recognition of social contribution), individuality itself, taken as a normative fact, is explored more fully: with the emergence of modern subjectivity, the individual for the first time appears as a unique being with her own authenticity and unique life history to be constantly explored and self-constructed.

The critical insight into capitalistic modernisation is gained with the next move: these normative advances which, according to Honneth, are cashed out in the “moral progress of the social-democratic era” are said to undergo an important change of meaning and function with the gradual winding back of the welfare state under the pressure of neo-liberal policies. From that perspective, the neo-liberal turn consists in the exploitation of the normative resources and subjective potentials that have been made available by the rise of modern individualism. The explosion of new possibilities for individual self-exploration and self-definition are used by the new economic organisation first of all as an instrument of justification for the transformations in management techniques and labour organisation, leading to ever increasing flexibility and atomisation; and secondly and very simply as central factors to increase productivity and open up new areas for profit. Extended individualism becomes a central ideological and production factor of the new “decentered capitalism”. The central thesis and the attendant diagnosis propounded by the articles are well summarised in the following lines:

the neoliberal restructuring of the capitalist economic system exerts a pressure to adapt that does not undo the previously enumerated progressive processes, but durably transforms them in their function or significance.
Within the framework of the new organizational form of capitalism, what could previously be analyzed as an unambiguous rise in the sphere of individual autonomy assumes the shape of unreasonable demands, discipline, or insecurity, which, taken together, have the effect of social desolidarisation.\(^2\)

The overall structural shift that occurs with neo-liberal policies has distinct effects in the four normative spheres highlighted by the theory of recognition. The emancipation of the individual from rigid cultural and social frameworks opens the door to a colonisation of the individual by the demands stemming from the world of work. This leads to an invasion not only of private, but even of inner life, by requests and pressures stemming from the work place; in particular, the invasion of intimacy triggers processes of remodelling of subjectivities according to the logics of commodification and marketisation. The social ties that were established through work and created important support networks in the Fordist era\(^3\) are severed and individualisation produces social isolation. Alternatively, the remaining intimate and social relations themselves increasingly come under the sway of the imperative to self-market and are instrumentalised. In the legal sphere, social desolidarisation undermines the notions of collective risk and collective responsibility for individual welfare. As a result, individuals benefiting from welfare programmes are subjected to a “moralistic” and “paternalistic” discourse of responsibility. More generally, all individuals tend to view their own performances in strictly individual terms, without acknowledging the social context and the great part it plays in their social destiny. Finally, the egalitarianism that seemed to be analytically embedded in the new individualism also suffers from the destruction of solidarity.\(^4\) With the emancipation of the individual came the emancipation of

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4 To recall, “solidarity” for Honneth is another word for the mechanism of social integration through recognition.
individual performance: the performance principle was operating as a normative constraint or as an ideal requiring that personal performance be judged as such, and not according to paternalistic prejudices attached to ideas of gender or class. But with the unravelling of social bonds and of solidarity, individual performance tends to be assessed more and more in strictly individual terms as individual success, measured strictly in economic terms. In this new framework, privileges and unearned advantages, like birth and favourable social and economic positions, are no longer viewed as contradicting the normative meaning of the performance principle but simply as factual, “fair enough” factors contributing to individual performance.

Whilst these critical analyses of contemporary capitalistic evolution exploit the framework of recognition and its critical potential established in the earlier writings, the interconnections are now sharply refined and strengthened by the introduction of the notion of a “paradox” of modernisation, which Honneth is now no longer afraid to refer to as a paradox of capitalistic modernisation. By “paradox”, Honneth understands a type of contradiction such that “it is precisely when an intention is realised that the likelihood of seeing that intention realised is reduced”.5 Post-Fordist capitalism by inverting the meaning and function of the normative spheres of modernity makes their “intention” ever less likely to be realised.6

The theoretical and clinical implications of this methodological position show how much the central intuitions that inspired Honneth’s critical theory of society are maintained and strengthened. First, the notion of paradox enables the critical theorist to develop a critique of social pathologies without renouncing the idea of a normative progress in modernity. Paradoxical developments which invert the normative potential of modern institutions do not by themselves demonstrate the nullity of these advances. Consequently, the radical critique of the pathological development of contemporary capitalism does not

5 Honneth/Hartmann, “Paradoxes of Capitalism”, p. 9.
6 These recent diagnoses of contemporary capitalism were already well adumbrated in one of Honneth’s earlier sociological reviews, in “Diagnose der Postmoderne” in Desintegration, in which he criticised idealised visions of postmodern freedom.
lead into a negativistic philosophy of reason or history, but nor does it have to blunt its critical edge.

Secondly, the “struggle for recognition” receives an important sociological clarification. By exploiting the discourse of individual freedom to its own advantage, modern capitalism manages to justify its current practices and make them appear as adhering to the ethical self-understanding of contemporary society. But those criteria arose in most cases with the purpose of bringing limits to an economic logic that was expanding at the expense of other rights. Modern rights, for example, gradually came to include social and economic rights as a result of social struggles, and these rights put limits to purely economic considerations, for instance in the relationship between employer and employee. With the economic exploitation of the normative potential contained in modern freedom, contemporary social struggles are deeply affected. On the one hand, those interested in expanding and intensifying valuation processes are able to use the discourse of individual freedom as a justificatory tool. On the other hand, the demise of social responsibility and the pressure on individuals to think of themselves as self-entrepreneurs tend to undermine their capacity to argue and organise collectively, and even undermine the individuals’ ability to conceive of their own difficulties as resulting from the social-economic organisation. The model of a paradox in late capitalism thus also helps to account for the depoliticisation witnessed in the social life of industrialised countries, in other words for the absence of resistance where it would be expected. But uncovering the cause behind depoliticisation is obviously a first step towards a recovery of political intervention in the economic and social domains.

A remarkable trait of the conceptuality developed in the latest sociological writings is that it enables Honneth to maintain the tradition and indeed the language of left-Hegelianism without renouncing the parameters he had defined as necessary conditions for a relevant contemporary critical theory of society. For instance, the logic of paradoxical contradiction allows sufficient critical complexity to avoid the unilaterality of Lukács’s influential diagnosis of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* whilst continuing to employ its very language. The diagnosis of the rampant commodification of subjective capacities and intimate relationships can be supported by sociological research, without resorting to the overly general, quasi-metaphysical theory
of commodity-fetishism. The same remark would apply to Honneth’s recent recourse to the notion of ideology.7

In recent years, Honneth has made the striking attempt to salvage the most important critical tools of the Left-Hegelian tradition, notably the notions of “ideology” and “reification” by reframing them in the light of current methodological and conceptual presuppositions. We return to this problem at the end of this chapter with a brief discussion of his latest book, Reification.

**Affective recognition**

A second major direction in Honneth’s recent work has resulted from his further exploration of the interactionist paradigm in contemporary psychoanalysis. The increased importance granted to object-relations theory has led to an important shift in the conceptualisation of recognition.

Donald Winnicott’s object-relations theory was used in *The Struggle for Recognition* as a later, cross-disciplinary vindication of Mead’s interactionist social psychology. In “Postmodern Identity and Object-Relations Theory: On the Seeming Obsolescence of Psychoanalysis”,8 published in 2000, Honneth continued to use the parallelisms between the American behaviourist and the English psychoanalyst’s models of ontogenesis to underpin his intersubjectivistic subject-theory. But in texts published since,9 Mead’s theory of socialisation, which until then represented the central reference, has been abandoned.

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The rejoinder to critiques published as the postface to the third edition of *The Struggle for Recognition* explains this move very clearly.\(^\text{10}\) After developing the model that is presented in *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth concentrated his efforts on establishing the precise conceptual and normative structure of recognition, what he calls the “moral epistemology of recognition”.\(^\text{11}\) This requires a precise analysis of the specificity of recognition as a basic form of attitude towards the world, almost as an existential category. Mead, however, as Honneth now argues, “reduces recognition to the act of reciprocal perspective-taking, without the character of the other’s action being of any crucial significance”.\(^\text{12}\) Mead, despite his strong interactionist premises, therefore cannot teach us much about the specific normativity of recognition.

With Mead now dropped from Honneth’s central model, object-relations theory becomes the central reference in Honneth’s social philosophy. In particular, the notions of *symbiosis* and of *transitional object* become his central explanatory notions. The common argument shared by Mead’s social psychology and object-relations theory was that it is through the internalisation of external viewpoints that the child learns gradually to develop a reflexive stance on his or her own internal states as well as on external reality, in other words develops the conditions for practical identity and autonomy. The specific contribution of object-relations theory in this argument is to show that there is in fact one antecedent condition necessary for such a process of “individuation through socialisation” to take place at all, and Honneth proposes to call this primordial precondition a process of recognition. Since this process of recognition is the condition for subjective formation itself, it becomes the ground of all subsequent forms of recognition in which subjects interact with each other in specific ways.

What is *affective recognition* in those new readings of psychoanalysis? It is intimately related to the notion of symbiosis; whether the notion can continue to

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\(^\text{11}\) See the Preface to *Unsichtbarkeit*, p. 7.

be accepted as such, or whether it is in fact more accurate, following recent genetic psychology, to talk about episodic fusional states in which the young child experiences a total fulfilment of its physical and affective needs through a dissolution of its original sense of self.\textsuperscript{13} These moments of fusion seem to be the exact opposite of recognition moments, since recognition seems to entail the interaction of two separate, already constituted subjects. Honneth however maintains that they must be called recognition, from a descriptive and from a functional point of view. Descriptively, there can be any such fusion only because each of the two subjects (the attachment figure and the infant), each in its own ways (caring gestures for the parent; gestures calling for attention and expressing needs for the infant) yet both in unreserved fashion, dedicates itself fully to the other. On this descriptive level, both from the subjective point of view of each subject engaged in this interaction and from the point of view of the actions directed towards the other, the interaction is one where each lets itself be affected by the other’s very presence and acts accordingly. This, however, Honneth understands precisely as an interaction of recognition. Indeed, it becomes the very model of recognition itself. Such interaction is clearly purely affective: it is neither an epistemic nor a moral experience, but rather a quasi-existential experience of letting oneself be affected, literally, by the other.

Functionally, the child must first have affectively “recognised” the attachment figure, that is, identified with her, before any process of internalisation of that person’s viewpoints and normative expectations can occur. Without this primary identification, later normative and epistemic learning processes would simply not begin. For the child to start to internalise the viewpoint from its specific attachment figure (the “concrete other”), there must be an attachment in the first place. Primary, affective recognition describes this primordial process of attachment that is the functional condition of all subsequent processes of identity-formation.

This highly significant new element in Honneth’s conception of recognition also bears well-known traits. Following Winnicott, Honneth consistently argues that this primordial form of recognition is also the condition for the

\textsuperscript{13} See the shift on that point in Honneth, “Facetten des Vorsozialen Selbst”.
subject’s access to the world via the affective mediation of the loved object. It is through identification with the concrete other that the gradual decentering can take place, which leads to the perception of an independent material reality and indeed to the capacity for symbolic thought. The ontogenetic story underpins Honneth’s fundamental new axiom, that “recognition precedes cognition”. Despite the new emphasis on current debates in genetic psychology and psychoanalysis, it is clear however that Honneth simply returns to an argument that was actually the initial source of his thinking, which the first book written with Joas already articulated with so much force. This is the idea that the most significant anthropological marker, the feature radically separating the human animal from all other creatures, is intersubjective dependency understood in a strong genetic sense. As we saw already with Honneth’s retrieval of the tradition of philosophical anthropology, the genetic story leads to a fundamental conceptual claim. Intersubjective dependency is not just the genetic condition of identity formation and individual autonomy; it does not just undergird the process of individual needs-formation. For Honneth intersubjective dependency is more fundamentally the quasi-metaphysical condition of any access to the world at all. This, we recall, is something he had already found in Feuerbach and in his first rereading of Mead.

Today, however, the increased recourse to interactionist psychology means that new dimensions have been added by Honneth to this old argument. For example, he now sees in the gradual realisation by the child of the independence of the loved object, and thus of the impossibility of fusional experiences, the root of antisocial behaviour. In other words, he now finds in the ontogenetic story the reason explaining why individuals systematically fail to accept the independence of others, or to put in Hegel’s terms, the source of the dialectic of “dependence and independence”, which is at the heart of

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14 This is the central thesis defended in Honneth, “Invisibility” (2001).

the logic of recognition. In several passages, Honneth indicates that there is a structural link between the painful experiences of the other’s independence, inasmuch as it recalls the loss of the loved object, and the negativity driving struggles for recognition. The bridging thought seems to be that denials of recognition are ultimately grounded in the traumatic experiences of broken symbiosis. The experiences that lead to denials of recognition would therefore be experiences in which the subject is reminded of those unbearable moments in which the impossibility of the fusion with the other was realised (both epistemically acknowledged and experienced). Struggles around recognition would be rooted in the mnemonic traces left by early traumatic experiences. The tendency of the human being to seek to reproduce throughout her life the initial moments of fulfilment in the other have, as their dialectical, necessary counterpart, the structural difficulty for that same being to accept the independence of the other. And so, recognition is necessarily (dialectically) destined to turn into its opposite, into denial of recognition.

This, we can note, constitutes a significant psychological complement, indeed perhaps a significant correction to the problem of the motivation behind the struggle for recognition. In his interpretation of the Jena System of Ethical Life, Honneth had interpreted the motive leading to crime as a hostile reaction to an unsatisfactory recognition, an “opposition to opposition”. Now the hostile reaction is the product of subjective formation itself, rooted in the very structure of subjectivity. In the earlier model, it was possible to read the struggle for recognition, as do many critics, as deriving from the frustrations of an already constituted subjectivity. We noted that this reading misses the fundamental constitutive dimension of recognition for Honneth: recognition is not just a “good” that is due to already constituted subjectivities; it is a condition of subjectivity itself. Passages like the interpretation of the crime section in the System of Ethical Life, however, lent themselves to the other interpretation. With the psychologisation of recognition, this interpretation is no longer possible. Negative reactions to the other’s independence are now intimately tied to the process of identity-formation itself, and are not just by-products external to it.

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16 Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition, p. 20.
Honneth is well aware that this new argument is not sufficient to explain the moral content of demands for recognition. It only gives a clue as to the motivational origin of the denial of recognition. But since both are premised on the utter intersubjective dependency of the subject in her very constitution, the link is not difficult to find: as Hegel had already highlighted, the logic of a demand for intersubjective confirmation of my self entails both at the same time my demand for recognition by the other and, initially, the rejection of the other’s independence.17 This rejection is only ‘initial’ because the full experience of the struggle for recognition is precisely the discovery by the subjects of their reciprocal relations of dependence and independence: that they can be autonomous only by acknowledging the other’s autonomy, and yet that this acknowledgement is also just as much the mark of their radical interdependence. What is striking in all this is that Honneth continues to refuse to relate his model of recognition to the most famous passage on recognition in Hegel.

In an important new text on Freud,18 Honneth confirms these speculations on the genetic origins of the demand for recognition and the urge to deny the independence of the other. The text repeats a significant aspect of Honneth’s use of psychoanalysis, one that has been noted already yet needs to be emphasised once more, namely: his rejection of any reference to the biological roots of psychodynamics, and in particular to the notion of drive, as having any heuristic merit. Earlier on this led him to abandon classical Freudianism in favour of object-relations theory. In a recent article, Honneth attempts to uncover an “intersubjectivistic” Freud, by focusing on texts in which the founder of psychoanalysis no longer refers to drives, but speaks rather of the fundamental needs of the child, notably of the needs that arise from the specific vulnerability of the young human animal as a being that is “born too early”.19 In this intersubjectivistic Freud, Honneth finds an important complement to the idea of the genetic origin of the dialectic of dependence and independence at the

17 See in particular “Grounding Recognition”, p. 316.
19 Ibid., p. 168.
heart of subjective identity. According to this new reading of Freud, the fear of losing the loved object also explains the creation of the subconscious. On this reading, following a 1926 text, the child represses some of its desires because they threaten to reproduce a situation of being abandoned by the loved object, a situation which the young infant had earlier lived in total panic as an experience of complete vulnerability. In brief, “the child represses all the desires into the subconscious, whose pursuit would endanger the love of its person of attachment”.20 In other words, “intersubjective angst” is now described as the core affect at the heart of subjectivity, that is, the fear of being abandoned by the other.21 It is easy to see how this intersubjective angst is another way of making sense of the tendency to deny the other’s independence. We could say that intersubjective angst names the subjective side of the subjective logic, whilst the aggressive reaction against the other’s independence names the resulting, external implication of that angst towards the other.

With these speculations, Honneth greatly enriches the core notion of “positive self-relation”. The dialectic of dependence and independence and the notion of intersubjective angst give more precise characterisations of the tensions inherent in subjective formation. Honneth, like Habermas, defines subjective autonomy as the creation of an inner space in and through which the subject is able first of all to control her own bodily and affective life, and also to define for herself and by herself her own goals and desires. The increased reference to psychological arguments gives much more detail about the precise contours of this inner space, with significant philosophical implications. For example, the end of the Freud article leads to an important intervention in contemporary debates on agency and autonomy: Honneth’s reading of Freud helps him to demonstrate the necessity to conceptualise autonomy as a gradual subjective self-appropriation, by the working through of all the inner obstacles, rooted in intersubjective angst, that prevent one from fully articulating one’s own values and desires. We could say that after attempting a naturalisation of dialectic, as was achieved at first with Mead’s social

20 Ibid., p. 169.
psychology, Honneth now engages in a psychologisation of dialectic. The purpose is the same: to retrieve the power of Hegelian ideas and reformulate them in a revised, non-metaphysical, “materialist” framework. And the aims inspiring such an attempt remain the same: namely, to avail oneself of the best theoretical means for a critical theory of contemporary society. Indeed, as will be shown in a moment, the psychologically informed conceptualisation of subjective formation directly underpins the critical vision of neo-capitalism already highlighted in the previous section. The enriched theory of subjective formation provides original arguments to further delineate the notions of self-realisation or of autonomy as integrity, which, as we know, constitute the fundamental normative building block of Honneth’s entire critical and conceptual enterprise.

To illustrate the enrichment of Honneth’s social psychology in his recent texts, and the philosophical benefits he draws from it, we can focus briefly on the critical review of Franz Neumann’s “Angst and Politics”, a review reprinted in *Pathologien der Vernunft.*22 Honneth’s review shows the value of conceptualising autonomy as self-appropriation for a political theory developed from a Critical Theory perspective. First generation Critical Theory, by contrast with normativist approaches, addresses the problem of politics from the point of view of the social causes responsible for its perversion or indeed its disappearance. The distinctive critical theory approach to politics is the Hegelian-Marxian idea that politics cannot be studied separately from the social conditions in which it is grounded. With his enriched psychological model, Honneth repeats with the help of different conceptual means the same approach to politics. The notion of intersubjective angst, by highlighting the subject’s structural vulnerability to the social context can become the key to a new social-psychological diagnosis aiming to explain political deformations. Whilst the paradigmatic example was of course the links and interrelations between individual, social and political pathologies at the time of National-Socialism, the same methodological constellation between psychology, sociology and politics can be reformulated under different terms to new social contexts, namely contemporary neoliberal societies. On the conceptual level, this renewed Critical Theory approach to politics underscores the necessity

constantly highlighted by Honneth in previous writings to link the theory of democracy to individual and social considerations. The new psychological arguments give more weight but also a different light to this fundamental methodological approach to politics. In particular, these new arguments indicate that the problem of psychological obstacles to political participation is in and of itself a core problem of politics, which political theory ignores at its peril.23

The latest speculations on the ontogenetic origins of recognition overlap in major ways with the sociological writings. They provide the ontogenetic counterpart to the socio-psychological and sociological studies, which emphasised the extension of individual autonomy and the pluralisation of individual identity in modern society. The sociological perspective on modern individualism highlighted its ambiguous effects. Whilst the increased individualism undoubtedly opens the door for an increase in autonomy, it also delivers the individual over to the damaging desolidarising flexibility demanded by the new capitalistic economy. The very same ambiguity is detected in the corrected theory of ontogenesis. On the one hand, the reinterpretation of object-relations theory in terms of recognition highlights fundamental trends in the transformation of personality structures, from relatively rigid types of identity development, to the pluralised identities characteristic of the subjects of contemporary society. On the other hand, this shift has the ominous effect of divesting subjects from the strong defences that would be required to resist the attacks to psychical identity and well-being that stem from the changes in work management and the marketisation of self and sociality. Psychoanalysis thus offers the same diagnosis as social theory, and provides parallel accounts of individual pathologies: the very plurality and flexibility that is the source of autonomous self-realisation can also be the reason for the lack of individual resistance against pathogenic modes of social organisation at work and outside work.

However, the increased reference to psychoanalysis has another philosophical implication that reaches beyond the social and the political. Already the appropriation of Winnicott and the importance of transitional objects in the latter’s model encouraged Honneth to focus on the problem of the genetic and conceptual conditions of ontological differentiation. Transitional objects are objects with an ambiguous ontological status, both real and fictive, on which the child experiences the limits of his or her own body, as well as the reality and independence of the external world, that is, not just the reality and independence of his loved object(s), but also of others and indeed of other “objects”. With the increased importance of psychoanalysis in Honneth’s thinking, the problem of the relation between inner life and external reality, basically the problem of the origin and powers of symbolic functions is thus directly brought into the centre of his reflections. In particular, Honneth’s strong leaning on Winnicott seems to commit him to the following thesis: because of the primordial role of early attachments, and more particularly, because of the decisive, structuring role of the individual’s reactions to experiences of intersubjective fusion as well as the impossibility of their permanence, one of the most fundamental anthropological traits is the necessity for the human being to regularly reengage in experiences of dissolution of the limits of the self. Because of its fundamental intersubjective dependency, the human being is structurally prone to attempt at regular intervals to flee “reality” and engage in forms of experience that allow a reminiscence of the early happy experiences of fusion. Honneth seems to agree with Winnicott’s speculative remark that transitional objects are not just necessary tools of subjective formation for the child, but also, under different shapes but on the basis of the same structural function, for the adult. Transitional objects help the child experience the limits of his own self and the resistance of the external worlds (the interpersonal, the social and indeed the material worlds) in a dialectic of pleasure and displeasure. But given the structural role they play in the psychic economy, as bridges between reality and psyche, such objects continue to be essential in the adult’s life. The adult human being creates his own “transitional objects”, in the form of cultural, symbolic objects, institutions,

forms of experience and so on, with similar functions as the objects of the child, namely enabling the subject to test the limits of the self and creating possibilities for experiences of dissolution of those limits. Given the unbearable yet unavoidable independence of external reality, and notably of the others to which one is affectively attached, sophisticated transitional objects also allow the adult human being to engage in socially acceptable forms of taking flight from reality.

With such theses it is obvious that Honneth reconnects the theory of recognition in fascinating if as yet largely unexplored ways, with the tradition of anthropology. Honneth’s radical intersubjectivism, however, forces him to repeat once more the unilateral stance that has already been diagnosed in the previous chapters. For example, the angst at the heart of subjectivity is for him only the fear of being abandoned by the other. He does not take into account another possible fear, namely the fear caused by the resistance of the world; the body of the subject is considered only from the perspective of its possible control through the process of individuation through socialisation, not as being itself a source of action and meaning, and so on. Other psychoanalytical and philosophical perspectives give more variegated accounts of the ways in which subjects gradually learn to take their place within their interpersonal, social, cultural, but also natural, worlds.

**New readings of the Critical Theory tradition**

The strong connection between social critique and psychoanalysis has naturally always been a hallmark of critical theory. In his latest texts, Honneth has revisited the heritage of Critical Theory and this is where another significant shift has occurred. Already in “The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society”, the harsh judgement over Adorno’s methodology was revised and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was reconsidered in a more positive light. Honneth

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25 We can therefore apply the same critique to Honneth that he once expressed against Foucault, of failing to take the body as an active source of social action, see “Disziplinierung des Körpers” in *Desintegration*, p. 68.

26 Published in *Constellations* in 2000, republished in *Disrespect*, pp. 49-62.
does not retract his criticism regarding the implausibility of Adorno’s negativistic interpretation of modernity, and indeed more generally, the implausibility of his explicit social theory. However, he now defends the book against the critiques that have attacked it for its alleged theoretical naiveties, by shifting the perspective. A more generous reading of the text is made possible once it is no longer taken as a proposal in philosophical anthropology or as a social-theoretical model, but rather as “world-disclosing critique”, as a form of “argumentation-through-narration” that uses specific rhetorical strategies in order to challenge the perception of social reality and make the pathological aspects of the present visible.

A number of recent texts confirm this reappropriation of Adorno in Honneth’s recent work. In recent years, Honneth has insisted more explicitly than before on his affiliation with the first generation of Critical Theory, and he has attempted to recast his own enterprise in the terms of a continuous tradition of thought. In his earlier reflective reconstructions, Honneth had emphasised the rupture between the first generation and Habermas. His own model of social philosophy was clearly presented as following the “communicative” turn and as rejecting the outdated and unrealistic presuppositions of the first generation. In the latest texts, Honneth now highlights much more willingly the shared theoretical premises that have made Critical Theory one continuous, coherent tradition of thought. Indeed, the three central points that Honneth singles out as characterising this tradition are also definitional of his own model.

The first defining feature of Critical Theory according to Honneth is that pathologies of the social arise as a result of the deformation of a rational potential that is historically achieved, but that is perverted or undermined by the


28 See also, A. Honneth, “Herbert Marcuse und die Frankfurter Schule”, Leviathan, 31(4), 2003, pp. 496-504.
social organisation. The rationality potential in question bears the mark of
universality, such that the normative criterion for the self-realisation of sub-
jects is not just that they should be able to develop according to the rationality
immanent in their time, but also within non-pathological social contexts in
which this rationality is embedded:

The representatives of Critical Theory hold, with Hegel, the conviction that
the self-realisation of the individual is only successful if it is interwoven in
its aims—by means of generally accepted principles or ends—with the self-
realisation of all the other members of society.

In other words, the good life, in Critical Theory’s Hegelian view, is the prod-
uct of a solidarity grounded in reason. Autonomy in the tradition of Critical
Theory is defined, according to Honneth, as “cooperative self-realisation”.

The second characteristic is that Critical Theory attempts to explain the pathol-
ogisation of social reason by recourse to sociology. With the help of the criti-
cal sociology of capitalism, it tries to explain the apparent contradiction that
contemporary subjects do not attempt to reject the pathological circumstances
under which they live. The theory is requested to show how social organisa-
tion not only produces specific kinds of suffering, but also their invisibility.

The third characteristic is that the critical theory of society must also con-
tain a theory of subjectivity in order to demonstrate how subjects can still be
made to see the structures responsible for their alienation. The aim behind
this process of self-enlightenment is that this insight into the social causes of
one’s predicament will in turn provide the impetus for a transformation of
these structures. Critical Theory famously relies on the methodological prin-
ciple according to which the theoretical relies on a practical interest and can in
turn inform this interest towards its political realisation. This methodological
imperative specifies the notion of “suffering” constantly used in the Critical
Theory tradition: the suffering caused by the pathological dimensions of social
organisation cannot be so deep that it would render impossible the reaction

29 This seems to contradict slightly Honneth’s previous position in which he
criticised Habermas precisely for having reduced the problem of social pathology to a
pathology of rationality.

of subjects against the social causes of their suffering. This is because subjects and groups can always retrieve and expand the core of rationality that is not suppressed in alienation. The “interest in emancipation” which is the ultimate ground of critical theory points to a rational core that remains present even in the most extreme forms of subjective and social alienation.

This late reconstruction of the “heritage of Critical Theory” reads like a retrospective self-description of Honneth’s own project. Honneth from the outset and with great consistency has always used as a guideline the theoretical-practical programme defined by the founders of Critical Theory, even though he has also always insisted that that programme could not be realised in the way its founders were thinking, namely as a simple alliance of historical materialism and the empirical social sciences. His initial dissatisfaction with the first generation originated precisely in the fact that he saw the theoretical tools they were using as making impossible the achievement of their research programme. But there seems to be more at play in Honneth’s recent rapprochement with the first generation than just the attempt to emphasise a continuity of theoretical intuitions. The late shifts in Honneth’s theory, notably his fleshing out of the critique of capitalism and the changes in the theory of the subject, could be interpreted as having been the result of the new, much more positive, attitude towards the critical tradition as a whole. It is as though a new found consciousness about the unity and coherence of the project of Critical Theory has had an impact on Honneth’s own theory. This is most obvious with the new notion of “paradox of capitalistic modernisation”. The notion of paradox is not supposed to replace, but to refine, the classical notion of contradiction. To say that contemporary capitalism is “paradoxical” is to say that it is contradictory in a very specific sense: it develops in a way that makes impossible the realisation of what it normatively harbours. This, however, fits very well with a reconstruction of Critical Theory as a theory centred on the “social pathology of reason”. In both cases, a potentiality for greater rationality is blocked, misshaped, and repressed by the very social organisation that emerged with the new rational potential. The thesis of the paradox of capitalistic modernisation can therefore be interpreted as the attempt to be true to the theoretical requirements entailed in the notion of “social pathology of reason”, whilst taking into account what contemporary sociological and psychological knowledge has to say. In other words, the “paradox of capitalistic modernisation” thesis could be read as the necessary correction of
earlier critical-theoretical theses (notably Habermas’ theory of the colonisation of lifeworlds), for the sake of a consistent pursuit of the programme of Critical Theory.

Reification

The significant theoretical impact that Honneth’s rapprochement with the first generation of Critical Theory had on his own theses can be verified by focusing on the changes in his theory of the subject. “A Physiognomy of the Capitalistic Lifeform”, the text that Honneth wrote for the 2003 Adorno conference is quite telling in that respect. In it, the three general features highlighted above are repeated, each with a specific Adornian twist. And as is so often the case with Honneth, it is clear that the reconstructing exegesis is in fact driven by more systematic concerns. The explicit theses outlined in the author studied are also implicitly accepted as valid by the exegete. Accordingly, Honneth now reads Adorno as having propounded a Hegelian premise of a “direct parallel between social situation and the constitution of reason”.31 Adorno’s own interpretation of “cooperative self-realisation” and of the rationality of solidarity is found in the theory of “mimetic reason”:

Only through imitative behaviour, which for Adorno originally refers back to an affect of loving care, do we achieve a capacity for reason because we learn by gradually envisioning others’ intentions to relate to their perspectives on the world.32

Capitalism is viewed by Adorno as that social organisation which, by expanding indefinitely the logic of marketisation and commodification, produces a “social pathology of reason” by severing subjects from their capacity to take the perspective of the other. This corresponds to the second, “sociological”, feature that Honneth now sees as defining Critical Theory. Finally, in what corresponds to the third feature, modern subjects are not totally disconnected from their childhood memories and are therefore still potentially sensitive to the demands of mimetic reason. Despite his pessimism, Adorno therefore still

32 Ibid., p. 55.
points to the avenues of possible emancipation. Even more pointedly, Adorno himself is now read by Honneth as propounding a theory of paradoxical contradiction:

Adorno begins with the observation that today the ‘organisational overshadowing of ever more spheres of life’ causes a feeling of powerlessness above all because it collides with the historically grown expectation of individual freedom.33

The question then arises: is this an Adornian take on the notion of paradoxical modernisation, or is a rediscovery of an Adornian inspiration in Honneth’s critical theory at play here? The latter would seem to be the case if we remember the shift in Honneth’s theory of ontogenesis. The shift to an affective theory of recognition corresponds exactly to the reevaluation of Adorno’s social philosophy and in particular of his theory of mimetic reason. As said, there is now a strong link between the moral epistemology of recognition and the focus on the affective dimension of primary intersubjectivity. The new axiom that “recognition comes before cognition”, that the primary relations of intersubjectivity, the affective relationship with significant others, is the origin of rationality is also a return to the founder of Critical Theory.

The 2005 Tanner Lectures present a synthesis of all the strands developed by Honneth in recent years.34 The lectures confirm the significant shift already signalled by the recent psychoanalytical studies: namely, the grounding of the three spheres in the more primary, affective form of recognition. Now Honneth is very explicit about this:

I now assume that the “existential” mode of recognition is the foundation for all other, more substantive forms of recognition, since the latter revolve around the affirmation of particular qualities or capacities of other people.35

Honneth is not afraid now to endorse explicitly the quasi-metaphysical reach of the concept of recognition with this shift to affective recognition. Indeed, that more primordial form of recognition is also called “existential”, and its

33 Ibid., pp. 57-58.
35 Ibid., note 19, p. 60.
affiliation with authors such as Sartre, who study the conditions of ontological access for the human being, is embraced. Recognition is now explicitly characterised as the origin of all symbolic capacities, of rationality itself, and in particular, of communicative reason.

The central argument is the same as in the recent texts on psychoanalysis. The Tanner lectures articulate it in the clearest and most systematic way. First, both from a genetic and a transcendental point of view, the perception of a world of constant, independent objects requires a decentering of perspective. The initial egocentric perspective for example is not sufficient to establish the boundaries that are necessary to allow an objective world to emerge as such. More generally, the subject is only able to perceive the world objectively when he/she can take a series of different perspectives upon it, in other words, when he/she is able to leave his/her own idiosyncratic perspectives and look at the world from different viewpoints.

This argument, which, as we know, is defended by many authors, in particular by Mead, is however insufficient. This initial process of looking upon the world from a perspective other than the first person perspective, itself requires a more primordial condition—precisely the identification with an important other in whose perspective one can learn to decentre oneself. Without “attaching” oneself to important others, one would never be in a position to leave the first person perspective. Attachment to others (at first to important “concrete” others) is thus the condition of possibility for being able to project oneself into a different perspective, a projection that is itself the condition for thinking and for all symbolic capacities generally.

Recognition therefore has a dual character: it is the condition of thinking itself; in essence, however, it is not itself of cognitive or epistemic nature, but rather, as identificatory attachment to another, purely affective.

A number of problems are raised when such a heavy load is placed on the notion of recognition. First, as noted above already, it seems at first problematic to describe as recognition a process of affective identification with an important other. However, there is for Honneth in fact no contradiction in

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36 See chapter 4.

37 Honneth, *Refication*, p. 49.
equalling recognition with identification, precisely because of the emphasis on the existential quality of this recognition: to recognise, in this primordial sense, means to be altered, affected, by the presence of the other, well before any cognitive or reflective moment, and thus to “acknowledge” her or him in the most intimate way, through a transformation in one’s own “way of being”.

The second problem relates to the tensions in the use of recognition. On the one hand, recognition is said to be the genetic and indeed quasi-transcendental condition of all world-relations, including objectifying, cognitive attitudes. On the other hand, Honneth is really concerned only by the ethical and moral import of the notion. Beyond ontological and transcendental questions, the dimension that interests Honneth is the social-philosophical one: any ethical (or un-ethical) attitude towards another is premised upon a more primordial affective acknowledgement of the other human being as human being. In brief, all human praxis, including the communicative one, is premised upon recognition. The tension between the ontological and the ethical is particularly palpable in the shift from the second to the third section of the lectures. Whilst the second section, with reference to Heidegger, Dewey and Cavell, makes the general point that cognitive, objectifying attitudes are grounded in non-cognitive, affective, “pre-reflective” (as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty would say), experiences of the world, the third section abruptly restricts the problematic to the more narrow problem of “other minds” or “intersubjectivity”, that is, to the classical sceptical question: how do I know that the other being in front of me is also a human being? In the shift from the first problem to the second, a serious reduction seems to have occurred: whilst the authors quoted above all have in mind an affectively, if not normatively, charged relation to the world in general, Honneth restricts it to inter-personal interaction.

It is the meaning of “interaction”, which seems to suffer an immense reduction in this shift. This is particularly striking on page 41 of the English translation, where Dewey’s use of “interaction”, which encompasses the relations to all forms of “environment”, is said to be synonymous with “recognition”. This identification is plausible only if “interaction” is reduced to interpersonal,

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38 _Ibid._
inter-human interaction. There seems to be a profound problem in Honneth’s argument: even if we accept as fact the genetic argument that recognition (identification with an important other) is the condition of all world-relating relations, this does not mean that all the normativity of all interactions is reducible to the specific normativity of recognition. Indeed, beyond normativity, putting the emphasis on interactions that are not interactions of interpersonal exchange makes one immediately sceptical of the claim that the only form of interaction that is structurally required to establish a decentering of perspective is the I-Thou relation. It could be the case for example, that this relation is indeed structurally decisive, yet is also fundamentally interconnected with other forms of relation of the growing subject with other poles: its own body; the world of material objects; the world of symbolic objects, and so on. For example, from a phenomenological perspective, Honneth’s exclusive focus on interpersonal exchange seems to give insufficient place to the bodily dimension of identity-formation: one of the conditions of world-access for the subject is also perception and the capacity to act in the world. Is it plausible to argue that learning to move and act in the world by coordinating one’s bodily powers of motion, perception and prehension, is only a derivative phenomenon; that the gradual appropriation of one’s own body, in difficult, indeed dangerous, interactions with the natural and material worlds, is not in and of itself just as much a “condition”, of a quasi-transcendental status, for any subsequent objective relation to the world? The answers do not have to be an either/or: for example, Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on perception as the ground of all world-relations is combined with the acknowledgement of the primacy of symbolic, human-made objects in ontogenesis.

Honneth, it must be said, is fully aware of the difficulty and embraces the problematic implications of his position without concession. Accordingly, now using Adorno as his central support, he argues that all relations to the world are dependent, not just on a genetic but also a normative level, on the relation of recognition.39 Such normative exclusivity put on inter-human relations sounds difficult to defend. The transcendental and genetic exclusivity placed on recognition, to the detriment of other forms of interaction does not sound very plausible.

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39 Honneth, Reification, pp. 75-76.
Be that as it may, Honneth’s recent return to Lukács and the category of reification is very significant. Since Honneth believes that the acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of the interaction partner is the core of all subsequent normative attitudes, he is also committed to the claim that the absence of such acknowledgement or its forgetting is also the core of all normative breaches. Reification therefore becomes the core critical category paralleling the normative centrality of recognition. This means that Honneth is now committed to finding in all forms of injustice and social pathology a core of reification, as “forgetting of recognition”. This is a striking conclusion in today’s intellectual context. It represents his latest attempt at defending the validity and fruitfulness of the “Left-Hegelian” tradition on an updated basis. Beyond all the changes and shifts, Honneth has thus been able to maintain with extraordinary consistency his initial programme of research.
The most impressive aspects about Honneth’s work are the quiet assurance and the amazing consistency with which he has been able to maintain a deeply original intellectual vision over three decades, despite all the changes in the intellectual contexts and despite all the criticisms. Indeed, as the mood of the academic context in which Honneth’s thinking is located has been taking an ever greater Kantian tone, Honneth’s position has become increasingly uncomfortable. And yet, as his latest texts demonstrate, he has not recanted on the fundamental features of his project; in fact he has now made the existential core of his theory of recognition perfectly explicit. At the end of this long journey retracing the steps in his philosophical evolution, we can see that in his recent Reification lectures Honneth simply attempts to find the clearest, most precise formulations for the fundamental intuition that was already driving his early neo-Marxist studies, his critical reception of Critical Theory as well as the embrace of philosophical anthropology, in particular Mead’s social psychology. This intuition is that the most basic, defining feature of the anthropos is the affective, existential response.
of the human being to the other human being, and that recognition, therefore, before it designates specific normative strands of modern societies (recognition of needs, of rights, or contributions), is primarily the name of the most fundamental feature of the human condition, at the core of all forms of human interactions (with others, with the world and with oneself). Honneth’s fundamental intuition is that, since human beings become subjects capable of rational conduct and practical agency, only via the interactions with other human beings, these primary interactions are also the most fundamental condition of any elaborate interaction, in natural, symbolic or social worlds, including objectifying or cognitive interactions. Without primary attachment, that is, the processes by which the human subject takes his or her place in the human sphere through the human (affective) acknowledgement of the human, human beings could not develop specifically human modes of conduct.

Indeed it is this dual status of recognition, as a triploid, normative concept, \textit{and} as a fundamental philosophical-anthropological concept, equal in its paradigmatic scope to ‘labour’ or ‘communication’, which is the key to understanding both the power and the difficulties of Honneth’s model. Recognition is a lot more than just a normative concept grounding an alternative theory of justice. It is also a concept with explanatory value in social ontology, inspiring an alternative theory of society, for example, as we have seen, an alternative theory of social action, social movements, power, domination, class relations, politics, institutions, including the economic ones, and so on. But of course such paradigmatic use of recognition brings with it tremendous theoretical difficulties, which Honneth’s critics have not failed to highlight. In the end, a concept borrowed from social psychology, a mere psychological notion, seems not just to inspire an intervention in normative debates on justice or moral action, but in effect to support the whole edifice of a new social theory, including the basic lineaments of a critique of political economy.

This book has attempted to show the great scope of Honneth’s contribution, well beyond the narrow focus on contemporary normative discussions. Indeed, it is precisely the goal of showing the full breadth and import of recognition theory that required the return to the sources of Honneth’s mature theory of recognition. It is only against the background of his substantive exchanges with historical materialism, classical social theory and Critical Theory, that one fully appreciates the great systematic force and the deep philosophical originality of Honneth’s thinking.
However, if the *Reification* lectures bring to the highest point of clarity the driving inspiration behind Honneth’s work, they also explicitly reveal to what extent recognition provides only a truncated version of interaction. As we noted in the last chapter, whilst Heidegger and more particularly Dewey retain the multi-dimensional aspects of interaction in their critique of the objectivistic prejudice, Honneth brutally reduces the experience of interaction to just interpersonal recognition. This tendency to reduce interaction to interpersonal exchange was already at play in his first reading of Mead or indeed in his rediscovery of Feuerbach, as he failed to note the objectual side of interaction which these two authors emphasised so strongly. In both Feuerbach and Mead, the subject develops the capacity for autonomous agency not just through the affirmative acknowledgement of important others, but also through the interaction with the material world. As Feuerbach said, the “I” of perception is “object of the object”; that is, the transcendent “I” in fact owes the consciousness and mastery of its own unity in part to its bodily encounters with the world. For Mead also, the resistance of the objects to my acts of touch and grasping constitutes, by retro-action as it were, my own bodily unity.\(^1\) A similar idea can also be found, as Honneth himself described it very well, in Adorno’s “mimetic” theory of subjectivity. In all these authors Honneth could have found the idea that the human subject develops a sense of self, gradually masters its capacity for autonomous agency through “sensuous” (Feuerbach), “mimetic” (Adorno), “empathic” (Merleau-Ponty) interactions with the material world. And in all these cases, such an emphasis on the sensuous aspect of subjective formation is never synonymous with a rejection of the structural importance, indeed the primacy, of intersubjective relations. Indeed, the same could also be said of Marx who never loses from sight the ontological and normative importance of intersubjective interaction even in his immanent critiques of political economy. Similarly, the interpersonalist reduction of intersubjectivity led Honneth to adopt a unilateral stance on institutions, a stance noticeable especially in his readings of Hegel.

In the end, it looks as though the general Habermasian edict of a definitive “paradigm shift” from the paradigm of consciousness to the paradigm of

\(^1\) See the third part of my article “The Loss of Nature in Honneth’s Theory of Recognition” for a more detailed exposition of this argument in Feuerbach, Mead and Merleau-Ponty.
intersubjectivity had been interpreted both by Habermas himself and by Honneth in overly exclusivist, dualistic fashion. Rather than a total rejection of the subject-object scheme, the tradition that Honneth had rediscovered for the purpose of regrounding critical theory could have been interpreted by him as emphasising the articulation of intersubjectivity with other constitutive interrelations. Rather than intersubjectivity, or recognition, the core paradigmatic notion would therefore have been interaction, taken in a complex sense, with recognition only one, if the most important, type of interaction. Indeed, the basic idea would be to think of interaction as an interaction of interactions, and so to replace dual schemes (subject-object replaced by inter-subject) by triangular ones, where all the poles are in relation to each other, and more importantly, the relations between two poles depend on the other relations between the other poles.

Instead of concentrating solely on intersubjective dependency (the I-Thou axis), the emphasis could have been put on the fact of the human being’s constitutive openness to its different environments. Indeed, this is precisely what one learns from philosophical anthropology: the plasticity of the human being’s needs, desires and faculties means that such a being can fulfil and develop these faculties and needs only through feedback mechanisms with the different environments in which it is acting. Human beings develop their potential through dialectics of action and reaction, proactive and integrative mechanisms, so that these environments are both spaces in which human action takes place and spaces which determine and indeed shape human action. On such a broad view, environments refer therefore to the natural and spatial environment but also, and primarily, to the historical, social and, yes, interpersonal environments. We can continue to uphold the fundamental philosophical-anthropological argument that it is the human being’s evolutionary under-specialisation that constitutes the key to understanding the source of its symbolic capacities as well as its historical essence, the fact that it is a being condemned to meaning and to learning, or as Rousseau said, a being defined by the power of “perfectibility”. But in this anthropological picture, the decisive feature is the general capacity of interaction of the human being with its environments, the different dialectics of activity and passivity, not just interpersonal interaction, or inter-subjectivity understood in a purely inter-personal sense.
This suggests that a crucial missed opportunity in Honneth’s development was the lack of a fuller engagement with Merleau-Ponty. As we saw, the reconstruction of the tradition of philosophical anthropology in the book with Joas could not fail to mention him, since Merleau-Ponty’s strong intersubjectivistic approach to subjective formation overlaps so significantly with the lessons the young Honneth found in Feuerbach and Mead. But already then, the interpersonalist prejudice was at play, repressing for example the elements in Feuerbach and Mead that could have drawn attention to the other aspects of interaction besides interpersonal relations.² It is perhaps this interpersonalist slant that prevented a more serious interest in the work of Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty already conceived political emancipation and struggle against social domination on the model of “the recognition of man by man”.³ This goal of recognition was also premised on a vision of the core relation between human beings as existential “coexistence”.⁴ His theory of intersubjectivity was already developing the core idea of the affective impact made by the presence of the other on my own existence.⁵ All the epistemological considerations that Honneth presents in the first chapters of Reification also apply to Merleau-Ponty. Like Dewey, Merleau-Ponty’s central philosophical intuition consisted in retrieving the “forgotten” affective, pre-reflective, experiential ground upon which all complex symbolic and notably cognitive attitudes are premised.⁶ And indeed, within his analysis of the different axes of the human being’s general “openness to the world”, Merleau-Ponty also granted

² See chapter 4 below.
³ It is worthwhile for that reason to reread Humanism and Terror, a largely forgotten book of Merleau-Ponty’s, in which “the recognition of man by man”, in direct, explicit reference to Marx, is the core notion with which social and political emancipation are characterised.
⁴ This is one of the core expressions throughout Merleau-Ponty’s work with which he characterises the basis of all “social action”.
⁶ Page 43 of Reification would apply very well as a basic summary of Merleau-Ponty’s own project.
primacy to interrelations between human beings, that is, to recognition in the primordial sense Honneth now gives to it.\textsuperscript{7}

But what is the point of this historical remark, one might well ask? Merleau-Ponty on top of Hegel or Mead, alright, why not, so what?

What a more sustained engagement with Merleau-Ponty would have shown to Honneth was that he did not have to choose between recognition and interaction, or reduce the latter to the former, but that he could very well articulate the two together. Merleau-Ponty is the philosopher who best delineated the fundamental philosophical lesson to be gathered from the fact of the human being’s biological under-specialisation, via his general notion of “openness”. Precisely, however, Merleau-Ponty shows very well that there are different worlds to which one is open, the intersubjective, the “social”, the world of natural and of man-made objects, the different symbolic realms of course, and history.\textsuperscript{8} Merleau-Ponty’s approach to recognition was always connected with other forms of mediation. The following passage, one amongst a great many other possible illustrations, brings all these features together nicely: “the human being is to be defined (…) as ‘suffering’ or ‘sensible’ being, that is to say, as a being who is naturally and socially situated, but also open, active, and capable of establishing, on the basis of this very dependency, its autonomy”.\textsuperscript{9}

It is worthwhile adding that it was Marx and what he saw as the irreplaceable philosophical truth in him that Merleau-Ponty always returned to in order to

\textsuperscript{7} See for example, Phenomenology of Perception, “Other Selves and the Human World”, II, 4, p. 405.


tie together intersubjective recognition to other forms of interaction. Even in his last, “ontological” period, when he was fully engaged in the ontological project of the *Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty continued to see in Marx’s materialistic reinterpretation of the Hegelian dialectic the right way of thinking of the human being’s core ontological feature.

Given the trajectory of Honneth’s thinking, it will seem very odd to seem to advocate a return to historical materialism and to its more than dated existentialist interpretation. Was not the recognition category brought to the fore precisely to avoid the ambiguities and confusions inherent in the notion of “social labour”?  

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10 See the following quote from “Marxism and Philosophy”, which captures quite well what is intimated here: “Marx has often called his materialism a “practical materialism”. What he meant by that was that matter intervenes in human life as the fundament and the body of praxis. (...) Marx’s materialism is the idea that all ideological formations of a given society are synonymous with, or complement, a certain type of praxis, that is to say the ways in which a given society has set up its fundamental relationship to nature. (...) This means pushing to its most concrete consequences the Hegelian conception of a spirit that is phenomenon, or of an objective spirit that is carried by the world and is not withdrawn in itself. The spirit of a society is realised, transmitted and perceived in the cultural objects it gives itself and in the midst of which it lives. Its practical categories are sedimented in them, and conversely they suggest to human beings ways of being and of thinking”. “Marxism and Philosophy”, p. 179.

11 See the Preface of *Signs*, the last text published by Merleau-Ponty before his death in 1961, in which, against the widespread thesis of his rejection of Marxism after 1950, he defines a new, “philosophical”, “heuristic”, that is, non-dogmatic, use of Marxism in which he sees “a matrix of intellectual and historical experiences, which can always be saved from failure by means of some additional hypotheses”, and “an immense field of sedimented history and thought where one goes to practice and to learn to think”. *Signs*, trans. R.C. Mc Cleary, Evanston, Ill. Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 6-13. Honneth’s project in its inception can also be defined as the search for the “philosophical heritage of Marxism” (this is the subtitle to his article on “Work and Instrumental Action”).

12 See chapter 1.
But a closer look at Merleau-Ponty enables one precisely to see in what way Honneth’s critical stance towards classical Marxism (the criticism that the paradigm of “social labour” conflates instrumental and normative interactions) can be reformulated through an interactionist retrieval of historical materialism. Accordingly, one would not need to abandon the notion of recognition. One would simply have to complement it with a focus on the ways in which recognition is mediated by material interactions. This would lead first of all into the type of considerations that Honneth himself has developed lately, namely the study of the ways in which recognitive relations are expressed in material worlds: in objects, public and private spaces, and so on. But Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on the “chiasm”, that is, the reciprocity, the feedback loops, that bring together subjects and world, would also open up other avenues: the ways in which material mediations are not only passive carriers of recognitive relations but can, in turn, influence the latter. “Cultural objects” are not only concretions of social relations; they also “suggest ways of being and ways of thinking”.

13 See for example the revealing footnote in Reification, p. 79, note 2, which quotes Tillman Habermas’ fascinating study of the role of objects in subjective formation (T. Habermas, Geliebte Objekte, Symbole und Instrumente der Identitätsbildung, Frankfurt/M., Suhrkamp Verlag, 1999). T. Habermas’ study, however, shows precisely that objects are not just significant in onto-genesis as carriers of intersubjective attachments or as medium for self-expression and self-articulation. They also play a direct influence, as quasi-“partners of interaction” so to speak. If that is the case, however, then they also have normative value. This is immediately obvious if one thinks in terms of social pathologies: the branding of minds, bodies and souls that goes on in “advanced” Western societies, starting with the unrelenting sexualisation of the world of childhood, can be described as a massive invasion of psychic economies by objects designed to manipulate. If one accepts such a diagnosis at least minimally, then it is not far-fetched to enounce a very simple, basic normative principle, that subjects should be able to relate to their everyday objects in a way that does not harm them or their capacity for autonomy.

14 These “interactions” between human subject and its environments, including the world of things are analysed in the most detailed fashion in the end of the 1959-1960 Nature lectures.
Of course, this suggestion of an enrichment of the theory of recognition through Merleau-Ponty defies all methodological and normative prohibitions currently accepted as given in contemporary Critical Theory. One could remark that social theory outside the narrow frame of academic Critical Theory is full of highly interesting and innovative proposals that attempt to conduct descriptive and critical analyses of contemporary societies by marrying the study of social relations with the study of the ways in which the latter are intermeshed with new technological practices, new forms of work organisation, express themselves in material objects, are shaped by the spaces in which they take place, and so on; in short, how the symbolic order of society expresses itself and is in turn determined by the material dimensions of social reproduction. Bruno Latour’s “actor-network theory”; Bernard Stiegler’s (very Marcusean) critical analysis of the rise of technology in modernity; the social anthropology of the “gift”; the interest in “material culture” within contemporary sociology; the development of an interactionist school within the cognitive sciences (inspired by naturalistic readings of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) with strong relations to the social sciences; these are just a few examples of the many attempts in the contemporary intellectual landscape to conceive of social relations in terms of complex interactions, rather than just horizontal, moral deliberations. However, such examples will not be enough to make the proposal of an enrichment of recognition more acceptable by the standards of contemporary Critical Theory because it is not clear in what exact way they address the problem of normative justification, or indeed, how they go about justifying their own normative stance.

Here, it is important to distinguish between two critical audiences. A number of contemporary critical theorists have rejected Honneth’s theory of recognition because they see very well that, beyond Honneth’s argument that the spheres of recognition emerge historically as normative consequences of the rise of post-traditional society, recognition retains an irreducible philosophical-anthropological core. As we just saw, the Reification lectures confirm this in the most striking way. For these critical readers, the suggestion to reread Merleau-Ponty as a useful reference for contemporary Critical Theory will be totally unacceptable. But since the basis for this rejection is also the basis for the rejection of the theory of recognition, and since I am more concerned with Honneth’s project, I am not too worried by this rejection.
More significant is Honneth’s own reaction to this proposal. Honneth himself will most likely object to the actual usefulness of a retrieval of Merleau-Ponty, again for normative reasons. Whilst he does make reference to what can be called “ontological” features of the human subject, his theoretical interest is also squarely normative, driven by the question of the justification of the norms of social critique. The “ontological” moment in Honneth is very limited and serves only for a very specific purpose, namely to describe the normative foundations of modern societies. What would an emphasis on the material mediations of recognition add normatively? That would be the question. From Honneth’s perspective, the material expressions of relations of recognition are indeed interesting, and form something like a “social-ontological” pendant to the normativity of recognition. But they are not the main game. The main issue is the question of the fundamental normative structures underpinning contemporary social orders, and to address that issue, thick programmes of social-ontological description, like the ones mentioned above, do not have much to say. It is not that they are not interesting. It is just that they do something different.

It is precisely this dualism, however, of recognitive-normative versus material-ontological, in other words, the reduction of material mediations to mere “expressions” of recognition, that the expansion of recognition into interaction aims to challenge. This means that the onus in the proposal put forward here is on showing the normative significance of “material mediations”. Already in chapter 10, regarding the implications of recognition theory for moral philosophy, we saw that the expansion of the recognition paradigm would lead to a decisive questioning of its anthropocentric assumptions. Many other normative dimensions of an enlarged concept of interaction can easily be pointed out. For example, the enlarged concept of interaction leads to an insistence on the embodied, “sensuous” nature of the socialised subject. This, however, has significant implications for normative moral, political and social philosophy. Indeed, it is on the basis of similar concerns that Honneth himself insists on the necessity to “complement” political philosophy with insights from the social sciences. At the forefront of his concern is the phenomenon of rac-

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15 See the previously mentioned review published in the Frankfurter Rundschau, “Die Stimme der Gerechtigkeit”.
ism. Honneth argues that, in order to take full measure of racism, one has to put the emphasis on socialisation processes which make racist attitudes much more intractable than if they were simply false representations, or rationalisations on the basis of economic disadvantage. The notion of “habitus”, that is, the idea that subjects gradually acquire the capacity to take their place in social settings through the development of largely non-reflective, bodily dispositions, this idea immediately complicates the problem of politics. It makes social domination, the exercise of authority, the structures of class relation, much deeper than if they were just based on explicit norms or beliefs. From this perspective, most political-theoretical debates in contemporary Critical Theory appear highly rationalistic and intellectualist. They fail to take full measure of the problem of injustice as an experience and, as a result, gloss too easily over the social obstacles to political participation.

In another area, the emphasis on the fact that the socialised subject is an embodied subject leads to a much more substantive description of pathologies of recognition at work. Whilst the demand for the recognition of one’s general social contribution is certainly very important, an emphasis on the actual activity of the subject at work, and of the difficulties of the work activity in contemporary work places, can lead to a great differentiation of the recognition demanded in and through work. It is not necessarily as self-evident...

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16 Honneth, “Rassismus als Wahrnehmungsdefekt”. As we have shown, this focus on the socialisation processes through which social pathologies are produced and reproduced is one of the most original defining traits of Honneth’s work and has been so consistently. It is difficult, however, to reconcile the “thick” view of embodiment that the notion of habitus implies with the interactionist stance.

17 An exemplary critique of rationalistic political theories from the perspective of the habitual dimensions of obedience and authority is conducted by Bourdieu in Pascalian Meditations.

18 Here the work of Christophe Dejours points to decisive potential additions to the theory of recognition. Dejours shows in particular that the normative import of recognition is not just in terms of the subject’s being, but also in terms of the most concrete aspects of the subject’s “doing”. The end of Travail, Usure Mentale (Paris, Bayard, 2000) proposes a “triangular” scheme of recognition where the I-Other relation is mediated by the I-Real interaction (the challenge of reality on the subject’s inner life) and the Other-Real interaction (the way in which a given society interprets and shapes
as Honneth makes it sound that the demand to have one’s activity acknowledged as activity, as concrete, practical accomplishment of a task, does not deserve to be called a normative principle next to the \textit{Leistungsprinzip}.\footnote{See Honneth’s strenuous rejection of the normativity of work as activity in “Arbeit und Anerkennung. Versuch einer Neubestimmung”, \textit{Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie}, 56(3), 2008, pp. 327-341.} Many contemporary social movements expressing deep dissatisfaction about working conditions revolve not so much around the general social representation of the professions, as on the conditions in which workers are forced to accomplish their tasks. In many cases, it is the total incompatibility between the reality of working conditions and the need to “do one’s job well” that is the source of dissatisfaction. If workers did not place normative value on their work as an activity, this type of widespread discontent would not make sense. With sophisticated psychological models of work, however, one can show that the normative content of work as an activity is directly related to specific demands for recognition, directed not at the general social context, but rather at the community of peers. And the subject of recognition in this case, is the acting subject, the subject exercising “practical intelligence” (Dejours).

The constitutive role of “vertical” relations with institutions also enriches the notion of recognition, since it forces one to see that relations of recognition are to a large extent defined by the institution in which they take place, rather than just providing an external normative standpoint over them.\footnote{See chapter 8, with reference to the decisive suggestions on this particular point by Emmanuel Renault.} To say that cognitive relations are to a large extent defined by the institutions in which they take place is a huge problem at first, because it leads to a constructivist position from which it is not necessarily easy to extract a normative perspective. But as the example of the critique of political economy has shown, an “institutionalist” take on recognition does not necessarily rule out through technique its intervention in reality). In \textit{Souffrances en France} (Paris, Seuil, 1998), Dejours has shown how this differentiated theory of recognition can be used fruitfully for social criticism. I have attempted to present Dejours’ psychodynamics of work as a serious contribution in contemporary social theory in “Work and the Precarisation of Existence”, \textit{European Journal of Social Theory}, 11(4), 2008, pp. 443-463.
the possibility of “transcendence within immanence”. Whilst the market creates the socialising conditions of its reproduction, it can never be certain that the fundamental normative consensus upon which it is based cannot at some point be questioned again. When entire societies are disintegrated by the noxious effects of unbridled financial power, there can come a point where the same societies say “enough is enough”, and ask that the rules under which resources are allocated be explained to them and their efficiency and equity justified.

We can briefly generalise from these disparate examples. Systematically exploring the different “ontological” and normative articulations between fundamental types of interaction might well define a new avenue of research for Critical Theory. This programme would demand of Critical Theory that it expand its theoretical interest beyond the analysis of the norms of communication, and that it broaden the scope of “critique” beyond the theory of democracy. This programme would force it to engage with other innovative contemporary programmes in social theory that rely on different traditions of thought. But by moving beyond communication, it is not certain that Critical Theory would lose sight of its initial programme. In fact, it might then be better equipped to propound more robust critical analyses of our contemporary world.

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21 I see an exemplary attempt in this direction in Stéphane Haber’s recent attempt to mount a defence of the notion of alienation as a key clinical concept for a contemporary critical theory of society. See Haber, L’Aliénation. Vie Sociale et Expérience de la Dépossession, Paris, PUF, 2008.
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1 This bibliography is not complete yet it aims for some kind of exhaustivity, notably in relation to the secondary literature. For the books published by Axel Honneth, the first date is the date of first publication, mostly the date of the German publication. I am greatly indebted to Ruth Cox and Titus Sfahl for the completion of this bibliography.

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