

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Axel Honneth**, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Oxford: Policy Press, 2007, 296 pp. \$31.95 paper (978-0-7456-2906-3) hardcover (978-0-7456-2905-6)

**A** peculiar feature of sociology as a discipline is that, despite frequent efforts to define it in terms of its activist aspirations as a form of “public sociology,” issues of normative critique have never been developed systematically in the manner found in political philosophy in philosophy and political science. Paradoxically, the curriculum of modern sociology does not include courses that are explicitly dedicated to issues of moral philosophy and normative foundations; at best, one finds rather superficial accounts of the “ethics of research” that focus more on administrative fears of adverse publicity than the moral implications of social research as part of social transformation. The most significant exception to the neglect of the systematic analysis of normative theory in sociology has been the Frankfurt School tradition of “critical theory” which, in its earlier phases, proposed a normative critique grounded in the Marxian theory of revolution, hence a philosophy of history based on a secularized, sociological reading of Hegel’s theory of historical development. The second generation of the Frankfurt tradition as initiated by Jürgen Habermas, however, broke with this metaphysical conception of history (“objective reason”) in order to provide a less dogmatic alternative strategy of justification for normative critique. Whereas Habermas initially pursued this question via an epistemological effort to ground critique in a theory of “knowledge interests,” he eventually abandoned this strategy in favour of a more ontological, postfoundationalist approach based on a theory of communicative action that located normative reason in the universal structures of language and communication.

Axel Honneth’s work — as part of a third generation of the Frankfurt tradition — can be viewed as a sympathetic critique of Habermas’s ambivalent legacy that seeks to overcome the excessive formalism and proceduralism of his later theory of communicative ethics. As opposed to the side of Habermas’s work that lends itself to more accommodative integration into the liberal democratic tradition (e.g., his later theory of law), Honneth seeks to address issues related to the conflicts revealed by the social pathological features of capitalist society. Though preceded by explorations of social and political theory collected in the original

German editions of *The Critique of Power* (1985) and *The Fragmented World of the Social* (1990), Honneth's constructive alternative was first published in German as *The Struggle for Social Recognition* (1992). In this latter book he developed a synthesis of Hegel's and George Herbert Mead's accounts of mutual recognition, differentiating between three bases of identity formation: love (self-confidence), legal rights (self-respect) and solidarity (self-esteem). Rather than locating critique primarily in material production, this strategy analyzes the moral grammar of social conflicts in the perception of injustice as a negative violation. The present collection of essays reflects efforts over the past 15 years to extend this concern with a theory of recognition into more general questions of political and moral philosophy. Titled in German with the Hegelian expression of the "other of justice," the more accessible English alternative of "disrespect" effectively conveys the central theme of locating a theory of justice in processes of mutual recognition under conditions of unequal power. Most of the essays were previously published (sometimes in truncated form) in English translations edited or translated by Joseph Ganahl.

In a brief review, only the highlights of this wide-ranging volume can be noted. The essays are grouped in three sections. Part I on "The Tasks of Social Philosophy" develops the following themes: how a focus on "pathologies of the social" can illuminate more general issues in social philosophy (ch. 1); a reconsideration of Adorno and Horkheimer's "dialectic of enlightenment" thesis in relation to contemporary social criticism (ch. 2); and the use of Honneth's own theory of disrespect for two critiques of Habermas's approach: as failing to make "work" sufficiently central to recognition (ch. 3), and (ch. 4) ignoring "all those potentialities for moral action which have not reached the level of elaborated value judgments, but which are nonetheless persistently embodied in . . . collective protest, or even in mere silent 'moral disapproval'" (p. 83).

Part II on "Morality and Recognition" takes up issues related to normative justification: Habermas's critique of postmodern ethics as exemplified by Lyotard, Levinas, and Derrida (ch. 5); the concept of recognition in "practical philosophy" from Aristotle to Kant (ch. 6); the family as a context of moral disputes torn between justice and affection (ch. 7); the moral context of emotional ties based on love (ch. 8); and a conception of "decentered autonomy" that responds to the reductionist denial of autonomy in Freud and Nietzsche (ch. 9). Of particular note here is Chapter 5 on "The Other of Justice," which sympathetically assesses Derrida's notion of "caring justice" (derived from Levinas) for having identified a productive but irresolvable tension between "care" and the equal treatment implied by legal justice:

Just as solidarity constitutes a necessary counterpoint to the principle of justice inasmuch as it furnishes the affective impulses of reciprocal recognition in a particularistic manner, care represents its equally necessary counterpoint, because it supplements this principle of justice with a principle of unilateral, entirely disinterested help. (p. 125)

Finally, Part III focuses on “Problems of Political Philosophy”: an analysis of the limits of moral universalism in the context of human rights (ch. 10); an engagement with Dewey’s understanding of reflexive cooperation for contemporary democratic theory (ch. 11); the identification of a fundamental tension between Isaiah Berlin’s concept of negative freedom and cultural belonging (ch. 12); and a conceptual proposal for “post-traditional communities” that questions the failure of both liberals and communitarians to adequately take into account the presuppositions of community in modern societies (ch. 13). As opposed to the dominant, “external” notion of community based on norms shared by society as a whole, Honneth proposes an “internal” conception concerned with the forms of interaction that “derive from the normative development of the community-forming mechanism itself” (p. 258), an approach that displaces a hierarchical conception of value by a more plural, horizontal one that diversifies the bases of self-esteem that are of value to society.

In short, this book and Honneth’s work as a whole remain an indispensable reference point for postmetaphysical efforts to ground normative theory in a theory of communication and mutual recognition that provides a persuasive alternative to the normative weaknesses of post-modernism and poststructuralism. It should be noted that this collection makes no reference to Honneth’s subsequent illuminating debate with Nancy Fraser over the question of the relative priority of “recognition” versus unequal “distribution,” explored in their dialogical encounter in *Redistribution or Recognition?* (London: Verso, 2003).

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