

# The Failure of the Recognition Paradigm in Critical Theory\*

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## 1. Prologue

Critical theory has been decidedly transformed over the past thirty years by the influence of ideas that, in many basic ways, run counter to the initial set of ideas and propositions that defined and shaped the first generation of critical theorists. Now, critical theorists deal with questions of human rights, dignity, justification, and theories of democracy. They have broken with a more robust, more insightful, and more radical project of understanding the mechanisms of social domination, the deformation of character and the deformations of cognitive and epistemic powers that explain the increasing acceptance of the prevailing social order and the increasing integration and legitimacy of pathological forms of social life.<sup>1</sup> The break was effected with a move toward pragmatist themes on the one hand and toward a concern with neo-Idealist ideas rooted in Kant and Hegel. This reworking of critical theory has been centered on the elimination of ideas rooted in Marxism and into a kind of system building that champions the supposed self-transforming powers of intersubjective social action.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, whereas Habermas has been highly successful at promoting a Kantian-pragmatist paradigm based in discourse, Axel Honneth's work has been premised on a neo-Idealist return to Hegelian themes fused to pragmatist ideas about social action and self- and social transformation. I believe that this move

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\* Forthcoming in Volker Schmitz (ed.) *Answers to Axel Honneth*. (New York: Palgrave). Parts of this chapter were previously presented at the Symposium on Self and Society at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 2016, in Chicago.

<sup>1</sup> For a recent expression of these themes in what now passes for critical theory, see Penelope Deutscher and Cristina Lafont (eds.) *Critical Theory in Critical Times: Transforming the Global Political and Economic Order*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> I have developed this thesis more extensively in *The Domestication of Critical Theory*. (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

has been lethal for the actual political relevance of critical theory, that it has drained it of its potency even as it has allowed for more professionalized success within mainstream intellectual and academic circles. The price paid for winning this acceptance, however, has been dear and it has compromised the very methodological and philosophical commitments of critical theory.

The problem with this move has been that, despite its success in academic and intellectual professional circles, it has failed as a comprehensive and satisfying paradigm for a critical theory of society. What I want to focus on in this essay is the Hegelian-pragmatist ideas proposed by Axel Honneth and seek to defend the thesis that it fails the task of fulfilling a critical theory of society. As I see it, the central flaw of recognition theory is that it abstracts its theory of social relations from actual, realist structures of power and domination; that it seeks to forge a theory of moral development and social change that is unwarranted given the actual, real nature of modern social life and, as a result, evaporates into a rarefied philosophical system devoid of concrete critical power and potency. Indeed, I will go so far to argue that the turn toward the recognition paradigm in contemporary critical theory constitutes the failure of its aspirations for human emancipation and the confrontation with the nature of modern forms of power and domination. In addition, I maintain that it continues trends in contemporary social theory – trends that began with Habermas’ move toward a postmetaphysical turn – to achieve a more nuanced, more sophisticated critique of modern society. Much of this can, I think, be blamed on the embrace of the postmetaphysical turn and on the move away from a more sophisticated reading of Marx and his essential place in any critical theory of society, something I will discuss in more detail below. But perhaps most importantly, it should be seen that the failure of the recognition paradigm is more than an intellectual or academic concern: it also entails a diminution of the vibrancy and vitality of the tradition of critical theory more generally.

In this essay, I present two theses that show how the theory of recognition put forth and developed in the work of Axel Honneth fails as a paradigm for critical theory. My main argument is that the theory of recognition cannot achieve the status of a critical theory of society for three reasons. First, it is unable to deal with the dynamics and effects of social power in any meaningful way. Specifically, it is unable to deal with what I see to be as the core of critical theory as a tradition of thought, what I have called *constitutive power*. Second, it rests on a flawed theory of the social as intersubjective practices and not as structural and normative based systems of functional integration. This derives from its insistence on the pragmatist ideas that essentially shred society of its structural-functional features and reduce it to its intersubjective practices. The problem with the pragmatist thesis, however, is that it is both insensitive to issues of power and domination and also can inculcate conformity to the prevailing reality. By shutting Marx out of his revisionism of critical theory, Honneth therefore ends up defanging it as a system of ideas. The result of these two theses is that the theory of recognition fails as a satisfying account of modern social reality and its pathological impulses and trends.

## **2. Recognition and Critical Theory**

Before I begin to construct my argument against the plausibility of recognition as a viable model for a critical theory of society, I want to point to what I see are its essential, buttressing arguments. Honneth has been consistent in seeking to defend the idea of recognition as a critical theory of society because it possesses what he sees to be the defining hallmark of critical theory as an enterprise: the capacity to summon an awareness and transformation on behalf of social agents of the pathological dimensions of their social world via intramundane mechanisms of sociation and self-development. A moral awareness of disrespect and misrecognition are

supposed to be rooted in an intrinsic sense of self that is shaped by the intersubjective-recognitive relations to others in various stages of socialization. The core idea of this approach is that the resources for critical reflection and attitudes are inherent in the very socialization practices that constitute modernity. If we are to take Honneth seriously, then a gradual emancipation of society is happening due to the moral awareness of subjects.

Honneth offers a core argument about the nature of self-formation. The thesis is that recognition carries with it a symbolic-interactionist dimension that provides the subjects with the second order capacity to see himself as a subject through interaction with an other: “a subject can only acquire a consciousness of itself to the extent to which it learns to perceive its own action from the symbolically represented second-person perspective.”<sup>3</sup> (Honneth 1995b: 75).

Recognition now can be seen as a process of identity-formation and self-formation, one that Honneth sees as developing a practical identity for the subject over time. It is this core process of identity-formation that holds much of the descriptive and normative weight for the theory, since it is Honneth’s claim that recognition is both a formative and evaluative mechanism. On the one hand, it is the means by which we form our sense of self through others and our self-conception of ourselves, our identities, as well. This then leads us to have a kind of base line for how we are respected by others. We seek to have our identities recognized not only by discrete others, but through the legal and political system itself. The “struggle for recognition” is therefore the means by which modern subjects seek to change and assert their desire for respect and for their identities to be accepted by the society to which they belong.

Honneth maintains that individuals articulate an identity and a sense of self-worth from the very processes of social relations that constitute them. But these relations are seen as being

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<sup>3</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Grammar of Social Conflicts*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 75.

recognitive relations in that we receive approval and recognition for our actions and for who we are from others. This creates within us a sense of integral identity that constitutes our self-identity as an individual: “human individuation is a process in which the individual can unfold a practical identity to the extent that he is capable of reassuring himself of recognition by a growing circle of communicative partners.”<sup>4</sup> It is only through the intersubjective pattern of communication that allows for the transfer of emotional ties between subjects that a practical identity is able to emerge. This begins in childhood, with relations to parental and specifically “maternal” relations that develop into a search for respect and dignity in the world as adults: “Just as, in the case of love, 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 own actions as the universally respected expression of their own autonomy.”<sup>5</sup> To the extent that this happens, we can speak of the existence of an integral sense of self that is formed through recognition and which also comes into tension with the existing social relations that frustrate or deny this recognition in later stages of social development. Hence, the concept of “disrespect” (*Mißachtung*) comes to the fore which constitutes what he calls a “moral injustice” which, he claims, “is at hand whenever, contrary to their expectations, human subjects are denied the recognition they feel they deserve. I would like to refer to such moral experiences as feelings of social disrespect.”<sup>6</sup>

The ideas of “respect” (*Achtung*) and “disrespect” (*Mißachtung*) rest on a prior model of self-development that is produced by a struggle for one’s identity and a need to have one’s identity recognized by others. This moves through the initial stage of childhood and then into

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<sup>4</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 249.

<sup>5</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 118.

<sup>6</sup> Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 71.

the secondary stage of an assertion of one's right to be recognized as who one is. But the model then culminates with a form of society that has been shaped from these struggles for recognition that grants social integrity and respect to individuals. A new conception of Hegelian "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*) now opens up, one which is "now meant to include the entirety of intersubjective conditions that can be shown to serve as necessary preconditions for individual self-realization."<sup>7</sup> Since personal identity is seen to be intersubjectively structured and constituted, the model of recognition provides, according to Honneth, a convincing paradigm for a critical theory of society. It meets, in his view, the theoretical conditions of post-metaphysics, of an intramundane, practical theory of social action, as well as an intersubjective account of social action. But all along, the model that he espouses, and which plays an almost axiomatic role in his social philosophy as a whole, is that the process of recognition is one that is endogenous to human sociation and which is also secure from the infiltration of exogenous social forces.

Honneth further maintains that the process of recognition is a more deeply rooted process of self-formation because it precedes cognition itself. According to this claim, there exists what he calls an "ontogenetic priority of recognition over cognition."<sup>8</sup> Recognitive processes set up within the structure of consciousness itself not only a sense of self, but also inheres within the subject a second-person perspective which, through healthy forms of social relations, produces a sense of moral self-worth and also a capacity to adopt the perspective of others. Fusing the ideas of G.H. Mead to those of the early Hegel, Honneth argues that the developing ego "learns step by step and through the perspective of a second person to perceive objects as entities in an objective

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<sup>7</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 173.

<sup>8</sup> Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

world that exists independently of our thoughts and feelings about it.”<sup>9</sup> What this essentially means for critical theory is that recognitive relations shape a sense of moral awareness about self and other which foster a moral awareness that in turn cultivates a sense of critical opposition to the forms of misrecognition and disrespect. What Honneth believes this achieves is a sense of morally motivated struggle that informs a new, modern and critical process of will-formation that creates and sustains a new, democratic ethical life.

I think that these conclusions are unfounded. It is not simply enough to focus on issues of respect and recognition for the simple reason that the forms of power and the structural and functional forces of modern social structures shaped by material resources of power disable the socialization processes that Honneth assumes in his model of sociation. To put the matter more bluntly, recognition is rooted not in our critical-rational faculties, but in our phenomenological-interpretive capacities. Its embeddedness in the structures of social relations that are ordered and shaped by administrative-capitalist society and imperatives cannot serve as a fulcrum for the development of a critical rationality. There is no doubt that recognition as a process is one rooted in the progressive aspects of modern society over pre-modern institutions and norms. But the architectonics of modern society are such that a contradiction emerges between the expansion of the rights proffered by recognitive relations on the one hand and the mutilating inequalities of the capitalist order. This contradiction is precisely what critical theory is supposed to call to our attention; it is a contradiction between what appears to us as the progress of relations of respect on the one hand and the continued vertiginousness of social hierarchies and inequalities of social power and control. The real test of the theory of recognition is therefore whether or not it can

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<sup>9</sup> Honneth, *Reification*, 43.

resolve this contradiction and whether or not it is capable of providing a critical vantage point from within its intramundane and postmetaphysical assumptions.

### **3. The Contours of Power and Domination**

The problem of the intramundane genesis of critique is an important weakness. Essentially, Honneth claims – after Habermas – that any critical theory of society must be generated from the actual practices of social agents and not derived from a transcendental or a priori set of categories or concepts. It must be rooted in our inherent practices and capacities, for Habermas it is the syntactic structure of language and speech acts, and for Honneth it is the process of recognition. But in either case, the intramundane thesis runs up against the problem of power and, more specifically, of domination. As the first generation of critical theorists saw the matter, domination was not simply a relation between agents or between classes. It was also, and more importantly, a systemic and processual phenomenon that had the capacity to constitute the self and the cognitive, affective and evaluative dimensions of the individual.

In contrast to this, Honneth's theory rests on a series of deep assumptions that deeply distort the reality conditions of social relations and self- and cognitive development. Honneth has maintained in his writings that the work of much of the first generation of critical theorists should be seen as resting on an outdated and essentially untenable theory of social action. Whereas they perceived modern society as operating within a structural-functional model, Honneth insists upon the intersubjective turn and its model of social relations as forms of practices embedded in intersubjective webs of activity. Although it is true that the early critical theorists did not pursue a theory of social action, they were nevertheless concerned with the ways that the forces of structural and functional imperatives embedded within the historical conditions

of administrative capitalism and technical-bureaucratic society shaped and affected ego- and self-formation. Indeed, the price Honneth pays for rejecting this perspective is high – so high, I believe, that it renders his theory of recognition essentially a-critical and, perhaps unwittingly, contains the very mechanisms of justification and anti-political passivity that the Frankfurt School had seen as one of their central concerns to explain.

In order to defend this thesis, let me begin with the issue of social power and domination. The main ideas that inform the tradition of critical theory with respect to the question of power and domination remain perhaps the most salient and crucial contributions to the potency of critical theory. As I see it, the question of a modern form of rational domination – of a form of social power that renders extractive, subordinating social relations legitimate in the minds and character structure of individuals – is a core concept for the critical theory tradition. What they saw in their integrated analyses of modern society was that modern subjects were being shaped by the increasingly rationalized and totalizing administrative institutions of modern society. Marx, Weber and Freud had all pointed toward an implicit thesis about the nature of rationalizing institutions not only to administer everyday life but also to constitute the consciousness, agency and personality of the self as well. What the Frankfurt School saw as an essential pathology of modern capitalist society was a kind of deep seated reification of consciousness that permeated all spheres of personal, social and cultural life. The issue of power here is not difficult to discern. Following from Marx and Lukács they saw that the central problem was one of the deformed self-constitution of our agency by social processes that would not only conform our actions and practices to the prevailing reality, but also, and more importantly, conform our will and cognitive process toward those systemic imperatives as well.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For a more technical discussion of this approach to the theory of domination and reification, see my paper “Collective Intentionality, Social Domination and Reification.” *Journal of Social Ontology* (in press).

What was central in the thesis of reification that they all came to adopt in one form or another was the idea that – whether due to the impact of instrumental reason, commodification, and so on – the rational faculties of individuals were distorted and shaped to accommodate the systemic imperatives of the social order. This was accomplished through the inculcation of consciousness and the personality structure of the individual – i.e., his cathexis and drives – toward the imperatives, goals and interests of the existing social order. I have called this kind of power *constitutive power* and I believe we can define it as the capacity of superordinate groups, via their control over material resources, to shape the institutional norms, practices and collective-intentional rule-sets of the community as a whole. The more that this superordinate group is able to do this, the more *constitutive domination* it has over the community. Since the logics of economic and technical rationality generate ever-growing tendencies toward surplus extraction, efficiency, stability and control, constitutive norms proliferate as more and more institutions are absorbed by their logics.<sup>11</sup>

The point of this thesis is that domination must be seen as more than simply an inter-agent, structural phenomenon, it is also, and more importantly, a functional phenomenon that constitutes the social and the subjective world.<sup>12</sup> Hence, anytime we operate within the confines of a phenomenological and socially-embedded approach to an emancipatory theory, we will run up against the boundaries of this problem. Honneth argues that there is a pre-social rootedness to the basis of recognition in the mother-child relationship. But the problem here is that this relation is not in any sense immune to the pathological impulses of the social world. The relation between mother and child and, in very short time, between the relations of the family are not to

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<sup>11</sup> For a fuller discussion of this thesis, see my *The Domestication of Critical Theory*, 91ff.

<sup>12</sup> For a more developed, technical discussion of this mechanism of domination, see my paper “A Functionalist Theory of Social Domination.” *The Journal of Political Power*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2013): 179-199.

be construed as in any sense autonomous from the socializing forces of the world external to it. Quite to the contrary, the family is in many ways the incubating sphere for the values that promote the status quo as a whole.<sup>13</sup> What Harry Dahms has called the “constitutive logic of modern society” should be seen here as a central problem in the move toward a recognitive paradigm in critical theory since there are few places where the self can develop outside of the constitutive powers and logics of these institutions and norms.<sup>14</sup>

Honneth might well respond to this criticism that this simply misses the point. His main claim is that recognition begins with a relation between mother and child and then extends, over time, outward. As this process unfolds, we develop a sense of self- and other-respect that we seek to have recognized in the world. But there is also a problem here. The phenomenon of a “struggle for recognition” which animated Honneth’s early writings of the subject, recreates the central problem that the early critical theorists were seeking to explain: namely the ways that the dominated in fact *do not* experience their world as one of disrespect and as pathological. Rather, they come to internalize its goals and values and accept them as implicitly legitimate, reifying them in their own consciousness and practices. What results is the same problem that motivated Wilhelm Reich’s problematic in his *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* – namely, why is it that those who have been exploited and disadvantaged by the system *not rebel*? The crucial issue with respect to the recognition paradigm is that if we take the thesis of constitutive power seriously, we have no way of securing the assumptions about self-formation that Honneth maintains as the core of his model. Indeed, we are left with the more plausible outcome that individuals are so socialized by the systemic imperatives and norms of the social order that

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<sup>13</sup> See the important discussion by Herbert Marcuse, “The Obsolescence of the Freudian Conception of Man.” In *Five Lectures*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 44-61.

<sup>14</sup> See Harry Dahms, *Modern Society as Artifice: Critical Theory and the Logic of Capital*. (London: Routledge, 2018).

recognition can serve hierarchical psychic needs. Thus, in order to be “recognized” in the eyes of a domineering parent, lover, or superordinate one might actually reproduce power relations that do not disturb the hierarchical relation and instead play into roles that comfort and secure that hierarchical relation. Recognition is a process that happens *within the context of other power relations*, not external to them and therefore cannot escape the problem of constitutive power and constitutive domination. The thesis that recognition and critical-moral self-development are unified is therefore deeply mistaken.

What this means is that *recognition is a process that is itself shaped by power relations*; that it is itself vulnerable to the distortions and pathologies that it is supposed to in fact combat. The implication of this is that recognition can then become a process that retards the development of critical attitudes and critical consciousness. This is because power relations shape the cognitive relations between others and the particular attachments and cognitive relations and roles that individuals come to adopt are shaped via the structural and functional imperatives of the political economic forces of the society. This is no reductionist argument – rather, it is a more critical view of the actual processes that shape social and psychological content. Indeed, by marginalizing these concerns, Honneth’s recognition paradigm lapses into a neo-Idealism: an abstraction of cognitive relations from the actual structures and forces that constitute modern society. Even if we cede that recognition is a phylogenetic feature of human development, what we cannot accept is that its ontogenetic manifestation is not constituted by the structures and processes of capitalist economic life and its pathologies. Looking for respect/recognition from others within hierarchical contexts generally leads not to an awareness of a moral wrong, but to justificatory attitudes toward those authority-relations themselves.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Frederick Solt, “The Social Origins of Authoritarianism.” *Political Research Quarterly* vol. 65, no. 4 (2012): 703-713. But this can also be seen in the earlier studies by Robert Lane, “The Fear of Equality.” *American*

But even more, the thesis of constitutive power entails certain effects on our subjectivity and agency that also disable the critical potentiality of recognition. This is because the culture of capitalist society is such that the alienating effects of everyday life are such that the ego folds back in on itself, and becomes a refuge from the increasingly dehumanizing world of damaged social relations. This ego is now in less of a place to challenge the social order and more likely to create a protected space of identity that seeks its affirmation from others. As Marcuse insightfully notes on this problem: “the ego that has grown without much struggle appears as a pretty weak entity, ill equipped to become a self with and against others, to offer effective resistance to the powers that now enforce the reality principle, and which are so very different from father (and mother) – but also very different from the images purveyed by the mass media.”<sup>16</sup> The weakened, withered ego that Marcuse describes should be seen not only as a consequence of damaged social relations, but also as a counter-thesis to the idea that recognitive relations, embedded in the “intramundane” fabric of everyday life, is unable to articulate selves with the psychological resources requisite for moral-political resistance.

#### **4. The Postmetaphysical Fallacy**

This leads me to a second flaw in the recognition paradigm. As I sought to demonstrate above, the problem of constitutive power and constitutive domination roots itself in the everyday life – the institutions, practices, norms, and so on – that shape and socialize our agency. But if this basic thesis is accepted, it entails a second thesis: namely that the assumptions of pragmatic social action are also not antecedent to the same processes of power and domination but in fact constitutive of those practices and constituted by those practices. At its core, the thesis of

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*Political Science Review*, vol. 53, no. 1 (1959): 35-51; as well as Jonathan Cobb and Richard Sennett, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972).

<sup>16</sup> Marcuse, “The Obsolescence of the Freudian Conception of Man,” 50.

the postmetaphysical turn is that we can no longer look to any ground for our norms external to our intersubjective, justificatory practices. For Habermas, this means that valid, binding norms can only be rooted in the consensus of the public itself. The criterion of universality for any given moral utterance is the consensus around that utterance; it is the procedure of the way we achieve consensus that counts. Hence, we no longer need to look for the ontological grounding of any given moral concept, but must seek to secure consensus through exchange of reasons via language to obtain moral validity. The pragmatist thesis here is implicit in the capacity to exchange reasons and to accept that morality has a cognitive content to the extent that person X is capable of acknowledging the truth-potentiality of the utterance of person Y.<sup>17</sup>

For Honneth, taking off from the work of Habermas and his followers, pragmatism offers us a kind of paradigmatic turn in the theory of social action and self-formation. The reason for this is that he sees recognitive relations as essentially constitutive of one's identity. The basis for this claim is rooted in G.H. Mead's thesis that the ego develops a second-person perspective through his interaction with others, thereby internalizing this other-perspective and creating the basis for the self as an intersubjective phenomenon. As Mead states the matter: "any psychological or philosophical treatment of human nature involves the assumption that the human individual belongs to an organized social community, and derives his human nature from his social interactions and relations with that community as a whole and with the other individual members of it."<sup>18</sup> This is because the individual develops a self only in intersubjective conjunction with others: "The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there,

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<sup>17</sup> As Habermas argues: "The speaker's illocutionary goal is that the hearer not only acknowledge her belief, but that he come to the same opinion, that is, to share that belief. But this is possible only on the basis of the intersubjective recognition of the truth claim raised on behalf of *p*. The speaker can realize her illocutionary goal only if the cognitive function of the speech act is also realized, that is, if the interlocutor accepts her utterance as valid." *Truth and Justification*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 4. Also cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 115ff.

<sup>18</sup> George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934), 229.

at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that it, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.”<sup>19</sup>

For Honneth, the core of this “process” is the recognitive relation between persons. Honneth uses Mead as well as Dewey to defend this thesis arguing that “a subject can only acquire a consciousness of itself to the extent to which it learns to perceive its own action from the symbolically represented second-person perspective.”<sup>20</sup> Now the crucial move becomes connecting this basic thesis about the development of a social self via recognitive relations and a sense of moral awareness. The postmetaphysical and pragmatist thesis here is that the process itself is sufficient as a means to generate critical awareness and resistance – no other resources are needed or even rationally acceptable. For Honneth: “The connection between the experience of recognition and one’s relation-to-self stems from the intersubjective structure of personal identity. The only way in which individuals are constituted as persons is by learning to refer to themselves, from the perspective of an approving or encouraging other, as beings with certain positive traits and abilities.”<sup>21</sup> But this is a large leap, for now, Honneth maintains, the socialization process of recognition forms essentially a moral-experiential pattern within the self that is a kind of indicator of social injustice. We come to experience blockages to our recognition as acts of injustice; we begin to see that the hampering of recognitive relations in mature social life go against the grain of our socialized experiences of love and respect that has, he believes, constituted us as intersubjective selves.

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<sup>19</sup> Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 75. Interestingly enough, Mead seems to have anticipated what Honneth elaborates in his recognition theory when he writes about the individual in modern society: “If he could not bring that peculiarity of himself into the common community, if it could not be recognized, if others could not take his attitude in some sense, he could not have appreciation in emotional terms, he could not be the very self he is trying to be.” Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, 324.

<sup>21</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 173.

But this runs up against the same issue of constitutive power that I discussed above, but in a more pathological way. I want now to advance the thesis that Honneth does not appreciate the concept nor the deep effects of the reification of consciousness that stems from modern forms of power and its capacity to hamper the very practices and reflective capacities that he assumes. Honneth continually rests his entire theoretical edifice on the brittle assumption that recognitive relations are themselves constitutive of the social. But this sidesteps the ontological dimension of social structure and function. Mead was indeed correct about the formation of the self through social interaction with others. But it is an idealized model of sociation, devoid of the problems of dominance and reification. The pragmatists almost completely side-stepped the issue of social power and domination and its effects upon self-formation and cognition.<sup>22</sup> Honneth makes the same error in the core of his model. If we consider that there can be no unsullied recognitive relation, one not tainted and shaped by a power relation in some form, then it becomes difficult to accept the idea of recognition as an intramundane source for critical reflection and critical will-formation. But this does not strike me as a plausible hypothesis.

If we take the thesis of reification seriously, then it effects the socialization of the self and its cognitive capacities in particular ways. Through internalizing the constitutive rule-sets of the prevailing social institutions via the routinization of their norms and practices, they come to be reified in the cognitive and intentional structures of consciousness. This conceals from view much of what is objectively pathological within the society. This is why Marx points to the power of theoretical knowledge to gain access to a critical vantage point. For Honneth critique is immanent within and an emergent property of sociation and recognitive intersubjective relations. But against this, Marx sees that alienation and false shapes of consciousness in fact conceal from

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<sup>22</sup> See the important discussion by Lonnie Athens, *Domination and Subjugation in Everyday Life*. (London: Routledge, 2015).

view the actual mechanisms that generate the pathologies that individuals experience. The lifeworld – no matter how pathologically shaped – is not sufficient to generate a rational critical consciousness. Indeed, the problem is that without a rational critical vantage point, as supplied by theoretical knowledge, there can be pathological responses to pathological conditions – as with far right-wing movements, anti-immigrant sentiments, drug use and abuse, *ressentiment*, etc. Indeed, although Marx and Mead share a common theoretical view in presuming “the fundamental social nature of man and, indeed, they argue that it is only through their sociality that men can be individuals. . . . [M]an does not exist as man except in terms of social interrelation and interdependence.”<sup>23</sup>

But for Mead, the limitation exists in his lack of the perception of the constitutive power of pathological relations. Indeed, his own view was that domination was essentially a phenomenon of the past, that modern social relations were giving way to freer forms of sociation, something that Honneth makes a central contention of his normative theory. But the problem here, again, is that it simply sidesteps the entire edifice of critical theory itself: i.e., the essential question of how false forms of consciousness continually harness the subject to dehumanizing structures and practices of social life. The pragmatist thesis is therefore insufficient to deal with the phenomenon of alienation and reification. Because they radically divorce intersubjective sociation from the causal powers of social structures and their constitutive powers over self- and cognitive development, pragmatists continue to operate in a neo-Idealist framework, deluding themselves that they are somehow “postmetaphysical.” Critical theory must mitigate against this trend, for there is no way to secure the capacity of agents, through recognition, communication, reason exchange, or whatever, to extirpate the reified structures of

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<sup>23</sup> Tom W. Goff, *Marx and Mead: Contributions to a Sociology of Knowledge*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 87.

consciousness and the defective forms of cognition to which it gives rise. Rather, it seems more likely that these kinds of sociative relations will simply reproduce those acritical views rather than call them into question.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the problem here is that there is no, what I have been calling, vantage point for critique. Tom Goff has rightly pointed to the problem in Mead that “while Mead’s perspective also suggests the critical orientation, it does not explicitly contain any comprehension of a problematic that would constitute the rationale in terms of which critical analysis would be necessary and meaningful. Mead stops short of any details consideration of a conceptual equivalent to Marx’s ideas of alienation.”<sup>25</sup>

Hence, my thesis comes full circle: the recognitive paradigm fails because: (a) it ignores or at least deeply under-theorizes, the nature of modern forms of social power and domination and its *causal powers to shape and structure consciousness and the self*; and, *ex hypothesi*, (b) that the pragmatist thesis of intersubjective sociation, also lacking a robust theory of domination, alienation or reification, unwittingly *reproduces the pathologies of consciousness* that emerge from pathological-domination relations. Honneth’s thesis about the immanent, intramundane capacity of recognition to generate critical consciousness is therefore bankrupt and a return to the ideas of the first generation of critical theorists is therefore in earnest. The postmetaphysical move takes us too far into the realm of the abstract, noumenal realm of subjects and away from

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<sup>24</sup> Empirically, this seems to be the case. See Henrik Friberg-Frenros and Johan Karlsson Shaffer, “The Consensus Paradox: Does Deliberative Agreement Impede Rational Discourse?” *Political Studies*, vol. 62, no. 1 (2014): 99-116 as well as Edward T. Walker, “Legitimizing the Corporation through Public Participation.” In Caroline W. Lee, Michael McQuarrie and Edward T. Walker (eds.) *Democratizing Inequalities: Dilemmas of the New Public Participation*. (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 66-81; as well as Dan M. Kahan, “The Cognitively Illiberal State.” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 60 (2007): 101-140. Also see the still relevant discussion by Milton Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind*. (New York: Basic Books, 1960); See Cass Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization.” *Journal of Political Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2002): 175-195, as well as R. Robinson, D. Keltner, A. Ward and L. Ross. 1995. “Actual Versus Assumed Differences in Construal: ‘Naïve Realism’ in Intergroup Perception and Conflict.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 68, no. 3 (1995): 404-417; J. Berdahl and P. Martorana, “Effects of Power on Emotion and Expression during a Controversial Group Discussion.” *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 36 (2006): 497-509 as well as Cass Sunstein, “Deliberative Trouble? Why Groups Go to Extremes.” *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 110 (2000): 71-119.

<sup>25</sup> Goff, *Marx and Mead*, 93.

the ontological questions that ought to ground our concepts about social reality – both in descriptive and normative senses. Anti-essentialism entails a lack of critique. The reason for this is that, unlike the pragmatist understanding of truth-claims, the nature of reality is not dependent on my or our collective concepts of it. A critical grasp of the world is one that is able to grasp its essential features, i.e., those things that make it what it is. And, from a truly Hegelian vantage point, this entails seeing any thing as a metaphysical entity because it must be more than its material or analytically composed parts of the sum thereof. From the Hegelian point of view, valid knowledge, philosophical, *critical* knowledge, grasps the essentially dynamic nature of objects. Understanding social pathologies therefore must take this strategy, as I will demonstrate now.

### **5. Recognition and Social Pathology: Fromm versus Honneth**

Now we come to the central and indeed essential concern: to what extent can we see the theory of recognition as a critical theory of society? In order to explore the limitations of the recognition paradigm, I want to compare Honneth's approach to social pathologies to that of Erich Fromm. What I want to show is that the move away from the ideas about the constitutive power of social structure and the damaged relations under capitalism mutes our understanding of social pathologies. Indeed, the Marxian and Freudian elements of the first generation of critical theory was able to diagnose the problem of the desiccation of the self that emerged from the pathologies of alienation and reification that were themselves rooted in the social-structural forces of modern capitalism. Not only the production process itself, but the elaboration of consumerist, technicist and conformist pressures that it requires for its success. The problem of recognition becomes perhaps even more problematic because now we are forced to face the

extent to which we actually have a critical criterion for what kinds of identities are indeed worthy of being “recognized.” Indeed, Honneth’s claim is that the cognitive and the normative layers of the process of recognition are intertwined with one another.

The concept of social pathology is once again of interest in social philosophy and the social sciences. For critical theorists, the concept had always denoted a series of different kinds of deviations from a healthy, rational and self-developing form of subjectivity and social relations. The basic thesis that they accepted was that modern social relations – primarily those dominated by commodified, capitalist market forces and instrumental rationality – had the effect of distorting the cognitive and personality structure of individuals thereby rendering them passive subjects within the context of any system imperative. Pathological social relations, therefore, gave rise to pathological persons. The key problem that the Frankfurt School sought to remedy, in its various projects, was to expose the mechanisms of this kind of pathology-formation in order to reignite the capacity for critique and social emancipation. Critical theorists therefore rejected the linked concepts of “normal” and “pathological” that Durkheim had laid out which stated that “the generality of phenomena must be taken as the criterion of their normality.”<sup>26</sup> Rather, their idea of social pathology was rooted in the Marxian thesis that saw alienation, commodity fetishism and reification as the product of a society increasingly organized around the imperatives of surplus production and consumption.

Honneth has taken a decidedly conservative view of the older, Marxian-inspired concept of social pathology that critical theory took as the center of their diagnostic project of social critique. In *Freedom’s Right*, Honneth has chosen to see the concept of social pathology not as the product of a pathological society organized around alienating and reifying relations rooted in capitalist social relations, but rather as a lack on the part of persons to recognize the norms

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<sup>26</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*. (New York: Free Press, 1938), 75.

immanent within modern social institutions, norms that will lead to their pursuing recognitive relations with others and as allowing those norms to guide their personal and collective projects. The important point is that in Freedom's Right there is a disconnect between the "actual rationality of norms in social practices and the participants' reflexive uptake of these norms (or of their significance) – a disconnect that is itself (purportedly) caused by some internal dynamics of the norms in question (in contrast to misdevelopments, where the disconnect is caused externally)."<sup>27</sup>

According to this view, social pathologies are now to be seen not in Marxian terms, as the by-product of a contradictions within the social order, but rather as a result of the lack of proper recognitive relations which allow the (supposedly) democratic norms of modernity to seep into the practices and norms of intersubjectively related social agents. A non-pathological society, for Honneth, would not need to change the structure of society, but would need to allow for the proper uptake of modern norms which, he maintains, already possess the normative content of equality, reflexivity and self-development. But it must be seen that Honneth's idea of social pathology is in fact deeply flawed and is unable to capture the fuller dimensions of the causes of failed sociality. In order to provide the groundwork for this critique, I will contrast Honneth's conception of social pathology with that Erich Fromm who I believe has a richer conception not only of the dimensions of social pathologies and their manifestation in the self and psyche of individuals, but how these pathological states of self and psyche are rooted in the specific historical conditions found within capitalist economic life.

In particular, I would like to point to Fromm's alternative account of normal-pathological relations in order to show how Honneth's contention is in fact unworthy of the aims and goals of

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<sup>27</sup> Fabian Freyenhagen, "Honneth on Social Pathologies: A Critique." *Critical Horizons*, vol. 16, no. 2 (2015): 131-152, 144.

critical theory. Fromm holds that capitalist modernity produces flaws in social relations and subjects; that these pathologies are not simply a matter of the recognition of other or of norms, but rather becomes embedded in the character or personality system of the individual. To go further, I also want to suggest that the pathologies that Fromm points to in his study *The Sane Society*, are in fact today considered normal parts of late capitalist society and culture.

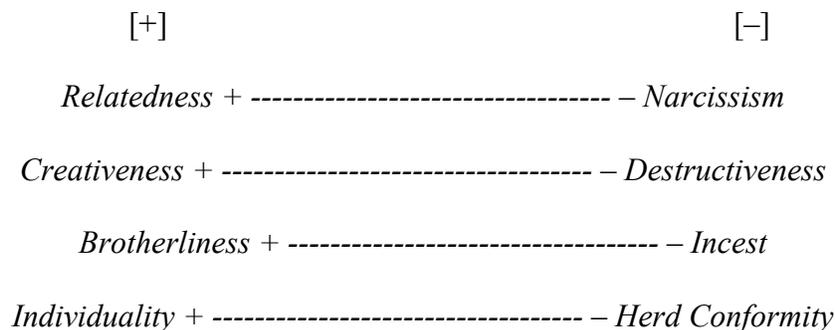
Fromm differs from this approach by arguing that failed sociality is the result not of a blockage of recognitive relations, or a failure recognize the rationality of modern norms, but rather a result of the ways that defective social relations are shaped and form the self. In this sense, Fromm is working within the shadow of Rousseau's thesis that modern forms of liberal society – premised on atomism, egotism, and interpersonal extraction of benefits (what Rousseau called *amour propre*) – lead to pathologies of the self: i.e., to a distended sense of self-interest, and so on. This occurs because social relations give rise to what he refers to as *moeurs*, or the norms and customs that exist to protect the powerful and the propertied. Rousseau also points out that it is only when we abandon this defective form of civil society – one based on inequality and domination – that we can glimpse the proper, good community: i.e., one appropriate to man's needs within society.<sup>28</sup> This he sees as a community that is made up of autonomous agents who are cognizant of living within a social context of interdependence. It is not man who is himself evil or bad or ill by nature (à la Augustine or Kierkegaard) but man's defects the result of a poorly constructed society: of institutions, norms, practices and so on that allow and even legitimate inequality and domination. This kind of society is not yet ours; we therefore cannot take the norms already empirically present within the community as valid, but rather must think dialectically: we must follow the social pathology back to normal or healthy situation of which

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<sup>28</sup> I think Honneth's conception of social pathology is marred by his misunderstanding of Rousseau's more complete social theory. See his "Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy." In *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007): 3-48.

the pathology is the negation. And inequality and domination shape the practices and norms of individuals, shape the cognitive and evaluative capacities of subjects, and render them, over time, inhere them to the patterns and goals of the social system as a whole. The idea that this is an out-dated and overly-mechanistic model of modern society is simply false: it is the growing tendency within industrial and post-industrial society.

I think Fromm is working within this same logic of reasoning.<sup>29</sup> Although he takes Marx and Freud as his intellectual fonts, he nevertheless shares with Rousseau’s basic thesis the notion that social pathologies originate in the patterned forms of social life (institutions, practices, value-orientations, and so on) that are unique to capitalist society. Fromm, also not unlike Rousseau, sees that there is a central way to understand social pathologies or defects of the self and of society more generally by positing that only those social relations that normal, non-pathological are those capable of curing the pathologies of the culture and the self. For Fromm, this state of normalcy would be one where each individual’s autonomy is shaped and cultivated by relations that are creative and solidaristic. He points to four crucial continua of normalcy-pathology that cluster these values:




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<sup>29</sup> Also cf. the important discussion by Ernst Tugendhat, *Vorlesungen über Ethik*. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993): 263ff.

For Fromm, the content of all social pathologies are rooted in the deformation of social relations which then lead to the shaping of the personality of the self. It also shows how the dialectic can serve as a means of critique by showing us how the relative pathology is also the negation of the healthy, normal state of being. The key for the critical theorist is to seek to understand the ways that different social formations, institutional practices, different cultural patterns of life, value-orientations, and so on, can be seen to routinize either the positive or negative values on each of these continua.

But the cause of these pathologies, as Fromm repeatedly points out, is the social conditions rooted in the organization of society itself. Whereas Honneth's new path for critical theory advocates interpersonal recognition and respect as the fundamental ethic of socialization, one that must be seen as the central normative value of modernity, Fromm follows Marx in seeing that this cannot suffice to overcome pathologies of the self. This is because the very thesis that Honneth advocates cannot properly emerge within the confines of capitalist society. Fromm's notion of an "analytic social psychology," as he notes in an essay with the same title, posits that "[t]he role of primary formative factors goes to the economic conditions. The family is the essential medium through which the economic situation exerts formative influence on the individual's psyche."<sup>30</sup> In short, the task of a critical social psychology must therefore point to the "influence of economic conditions on libido strivings."<sup>31</sup> What this means is that the root of social pathologies is the structural organization of social life which imprints itself on the family and onto the developing ego. Honneth's thesis of an "ethic of recognition" occurs *within the pathological conditions* Fromm analyzes. As a result, the mechanism of recognition can still take place between pathological forms of self. Although it may be able to overcome some extreme

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<sup>30</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1970), 149.

<sup>31</sup> Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 149.

forms of narcissism or acute forms of destructiveness, it does not qualify as an antidote to the kind of automaton conformity that Fromm points to, nor does it do anything to prevent the emergence of more general forms of egotism, of self-absorption that follow from atomized, reified, commodified, culturally empty forms of life that characterize modern societies.

But at an even larger level of analysis, Fromm's point is that this kind of recognition cannot emerge within a social system that reproduces pathological relations. Honneth's basic idea of social pathology is further called into question since the very antithesis that he proposes cannot fully emerge as a social practice, let alone as an ethic, of modern social life. We cannot separate out, as Honneth does, the social practice of recognition from the social processes that mitigate against it, nor against the social forces that shape and constitute the self and the cognitive and intentional features of the ego's agency. At best, it is a figment of philosophical optimism; at worst, it manifests as a shallow, apolitical means to fortify a inwardly collapsing ego that has withered under the conditions of capitalist modernity.

This calls into question the analytic distinction between first- and second-order pathologies. Fromm's thesis seems to be that the pathologies of society (of structure, social goals and values, relations, and so on) are functionally related to the pathologies of the self: pathological relations form pathological selves who, in turn, recreate pathological relations. But the key for Fromm is that the nucleus of this dynamic is to be found in a social order that orients and channels the inherent powers and drives of human nature into forms of life that misdirect them and our energies toward contradictory forms of life, thereby necessitating the emergence of personal pathologies as a means to sublimate and even rationalize such irrational forms of life.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Fromm notes on this that: "For most of them, the culture provides patterns which enable them *to live with a defect without becoming ill*. It is as if each culture provided the remedy against the outbreak of manifest neurotic symptoms which would result from the defect produced by it." *The Sane Society*. (New York: Henry Holt, 1955), 16.

Unfortunately for Honneth, there is no phenomenological way out of this circle. We cannot assume, as Honneth does in his earlier writings, that the experience of the pathology will lead to an emancipatory interest in overcoming and eliminating that pathology. Rather, Fromm seems to be saying that it is only through a rational grasp of the objective mechanisms that create and recreate defective society and defective selves that we can hope to overcome them. Even more, Fromm's ideas retain a radical political content in that they point to the necessity of social transformation as opposed to some reformist impulse toward accommodating the norms of what we should see as a deficient form of modernity.<sup>33</sup> As he writes in *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*: “In present-day society it is *other* impulses [i.e., other than sex] that are repressed; to be fully alive, to be free, and to love. Indeed, if people today were healthy in a human sense, they would be less rather than more capable of fulfilling their social role; they would, however, protest against a sick society, and demand such socio-economic changes as would reduce the dichotomy between health in a social and health in a human sense.”<sup>34</sup>

What Fromm is particularly against is precisely what Honneth's conception of social pathology embraces. Fromm is opposed to any notion of social accommodation, to the idea that health can in any way be equated with an adaptation to the existing reality or its norms. But Honneth is claiming precisely this: namely, that the modern world – the modern form of the family, a regulated market society, modern ideas about rights, and so on – contain within them norms that can promote the recognitive relations and self-development that is modern social freedom. But this is only because Honneth chooses not to see that these socio-cultural forces in

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<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere I have advanced the thesis of “deficient modernity” as a way to show a Hegelian distinction between a mal-formed, irrational form of contemporary life and a genuine, rational manifestation of modernity. See my paper, “Capitalism as Deficient Modernity: Hegel against the Modern Economy.” In Andrew Buchwalter (ed.) *Hegel and Capitalism*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015): 117-132. Unlike Honneth, therefore, we should not see modern economic institutions as fostering a modern form of ethical life, but instead more in a Marxian sense that shows the pathological consequences of atomized market relations and the effects of unequal wealth on the common purposes, relations and ends of the community as a whole.

<sup>34</sup> Fromm, *The Crisis of Psychoanalysis*, 37.

fact act as *modes of sublimation*: that the increase in economic consumption, production, exploitation, inequality, and so on, require new cultural modes of interacting to aid in the adaptation of the self into the dominant values and practices of the community – and these dominant values and practices are only permitted to flourish insofar as they further or at least do not threaten the concrete power relations within society. The domination of classes over one another continues, and the vertical slope of inequality increases. In the meantime, individuals “enjoy” rights to their identities and find the concept of freedom in these narrow confines.

The recognition of another’s identity therefore becomes a crucial mechanism of escape from the realities of the social order itself. The weakened ego now seeks comfort in the non-threatening embrace of his or her identity-community. The pathological nature of this move is two fold. On the one hand, the weak ego is one that seeks not resistance, but acceptance from particularistic communities. This then reinforces the fragmentation of social life insofar as one becomes increasingly embedded in and psychically invested in such particularist communities. What is lost from view are the ways that this search for identity and acceptance are not generally fragment the totality and instead make room for the particular self rather than a fully developed individuality. These pathologies are not gasped as they are, but are internalized and normalized through different psychological and cultural codes and norms. We cannot get at their essentially pathological nature via recognition, but only through critical reflection. Indeed, at the same time, these newer modes of sublimation not only cement the dominant social forces and social order, they also necessitate a passive legitimacy to this system. Whereas Fromm was concerned to point to the dialectical relation between a pathology and its healthy state in order to draw attention to their respective mechanisms of causation within the dynamism of the social

structure, Honneth now asks us to reject this and instead to see that there are simply some pre-modern blockages from the “uptake of modern norms.”

But the problem of these new modes of sublimation should instead be seen to be proliferating, in fact melding themselves into the very structure of a culture of sublimation in general. The trends of popular culture (music, film, literature, and so on) ever more evident: what we see is a progressive series of cultural forms that normalize the pathological forms of self to which Fromm points. We can take Erich Fromm and his ideas about the nature of the pathological personality as a starting point for what I am trying to say here. For Fromm, one of the central consequences of damaged social relations that emerge from capitalist society are forms of self that seek out pathological self- and other-relations. But it is equally plausible that they will seek out forms of acceptance that protect the weakened self from the forces of social life external to it. In either case, recognition can now be seen to function not as a critical mechanism, but as a sublimating mechanism: as a means to escape the damaged world rather than confront it and change it.

## **6. Resuscitating Critical Theory: The Ontological Point of View**

The key problem that emerges from the above discussion can be seen as follows. If we reject the postmetaphysical and pragmatist ideas about truth-claims and about the validity of norms, how can we rationally discern the reasons why Fromm maintains that certain social relations are “pathological” and others “healthy” or “good”? I think this is an important question, and one that needs to be sketched here. My criticisms of Honneth’s paradigm of recognition as a critical theory of society is meant not in purely negative terms. Rather, as I see it, it takes us away from the foundational concepts and structure of thought that makes critical theory distinctive and

compelling. Returning to a deeper reading of what Hegel and Marx shared in their ideas about social reality, it is an ontological perspective that grants their ideas a distinctive power. The ontological paradigm is opposed to the recognition and communicative paradigms because it seeks to privilege the objective structures and processes that constitute human sociality. It does not negate cognitive relations, but rather sees them as a layer among a rich assortment of different kinds of relations that we share. But even more, it grants us access to a critical metaphysics: one that allows for us to have an objective-critical vantage point.

In contrast to the phenomenological, action-theoretic perspective, Fromm shows how it is the specific structure or shape of our social relations that has causal powers over self- and will-formation. There exists an ontology to our social relations, to the kinds of processes that those relations articulate, and the kinds of subjects that are shaped by them. Fromm sees that the social pathologies are negations of correct or healthy relations, but we know this not because one feels “disrespect,” or some form of misrecognition. We cannot rely on an internalist and phenomenological reaction since it is far too susceptible to the problem of reification and alienation. The struggle for critical reflection is more difficult than this and, in many ways, the tendencies of modern culture and society show a growing tendency away from the kinds of moral awareness that Honneth proposes dominate modernity.<sup>35</sup>

What is necessary is not simply the act of intersubjective recognition, but rather *a broader form of cognition that is able to recognize our institutions as needing to fulfill the goals of self-development.*<sup>36</sup> Not a simple, one-sided form of development, but a manifold, dynamic

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<sup>35</sup> See the important discussion by Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017).

<sup>36</sup> In contrasting Marx and Mead, Tom Goff rightly argues that: “It is precisely Marx’s intention to develop a mode of analysis that would enable one to pinpoint and transcend the specific, contingent limitation expressed in the concept of alienation, so that the ‘natural problematics,’ on the level of praxis, could be handled on a rational, less trial-and-error basis, free of the paradoxical limitations of man’s own products.” *Marx and Mead*, 93.

and progressive conception of the self. Fromm is in line here with Marx, with Hegel, Rousseau and even Aristotle on a basic thesis: that human beings are social, that they are relational beings, and that their subjective, individual self is a function of the ways that these relations are shaped and structured. And even more, they are of the view that as a result of this basic social ontology, that social relations can be arranged so as to progress the human condition, to lead to a kind of perfectionism and self-development that is humane, creative; one that nurtures equal relations and has in critical view the notion that society exists for our collective and individual good. If we go back to Hegel's *Phenomenology* for a moment, we recall that it culminates in "Absolute Spirit," in the thesis that all human cognition is truly rational and universal once it is able to grasp that all our institutions, values, and forms of life are created *by us*.<sup>37</sup> What is needed is that these relations be seen not simply as manifesting relations of recognition, but that we orient all social forms toward the values of normalcy that Fromm points to and that we keep in view the fact that this can only be achieved through rooting out the pathological as a feature of the social institutions we are supposed to call our own.

But this is a very different operation of consciousness and thought than that put forward by Honneth and the thesis of recognition. What we need to see is that the recognitive relations pointed to by Hegel and Mead still have salience. But what they entail is not an immanent sense of moral consciousness but, rather, the possibility of an expanded subjectivity capable of cognizing the ontological dimensions of human social-relatedness and the kinds of processes,

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<sup>37</sup> As Philip Kain has commented on this section of the *Phenomenology*: "The very alienation that leads to estrangement is also the alienation that overcomes the estrangement. When we come to see that it was our own alienation that produced the object as our estranged self in the first place, the consciousness of this fact means we have overcome the estrangement of the object. We no longer see it as other. We see it as our self, our own product, our own essence. We are at home with it." *Hegel and the Other: A Study of the Phenomenology of Spirit*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), 222. Cf. Jean Hyppolite, "The knowledge of being was shown to be a knowledge of self, and, inversely, self-knowledge has led back to the knowledge of being; finally, reason, the synthesis of consciousness and self-consciousness, did indeed grasp being as thought and thought as being, but it did so in an immediate fashion." *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 576.

relations and purposes toward which our social lives ought to be organized.<sup>38</sup> Against the postmetaphysical move, we need to see – as did Hegel and Marx – that the core of any radical critical theory of society requires of us that we grasp, rationally, the essential nature of human life; this essence consists of the ontological categories of relations, processes, and purposes. This grants us a critical vantage point rather than an immanent-phenomenological sense of moral awareness. What the ontological vantage point grants us is a means to understand the essential structures of human social life and ask about the kinds of relations, processes, structures and purposes our social world commits us and whether they have validity. The criterion of validity can be seen only if those relations, institutions, norms, practices and purposes generate realized selves. Of course, this does not mean jettisoning the ideas of recognition no less than the ideas about discourse. What it does mean is that these theoretical approaches cannot serve, on their own, as a critical social theory.

In their attack on the metaphysical tradition, these approaches have missed the idea that they can offer us a kind of rational-critical grounding for normative claims. The critical ontological perspective does not embrace a transcendental metaphysics but, rather, an *immanent metaphysics*: one where we keep in view the metaphysics of the social world and the kinds of relations and purposes it contains.<sup>39</sup> There is no final recipe of how any community should be ordered, no Aristotelian point of certainty. But this does not vitiate the ontological perspective. Indeed, when we turn to a social-ontological dimension, we are able to give form and content to our critical capacities. We cannot deny the essential existence of social relations, of social

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<sup>38</sup> For some preliminary discussions of this, see Joachim Israel, *The Language of Dialectics and the Dialectics of Language*. (London: Harvester Press, 1979); David Weissman, *A Social Ontology*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Michael J. Thompson, “Social Ontology and Social Critique: Toward a New Paradigm for Critical Theory.” In Dan Krier and Mark Worrell (eds.) *The Social Ontology of Capitalism*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 15-45.

<sup>39</sup> I argue for an immanent metaphysics in my paper “The Ontological Infrastructure of Hegel’s Practical Philosophy.” In M. Thompson (ed.) *Hegel’s Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Politics*. (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

processes, structures and purposes. Unlike the postmetaphysical fallacy, we cannot simply create through reflexive action valid social norms. Indeed, what gives critical reflection cognitive ballast is its capacity to think concretely about the social world and how it can provide us both a critical and diagnostic point of view. Perhaps this is why we need to rethink the direction that the recognition paradigm has taken critical theory. The pragmatist and neo-Idealism of current critical theorists requires a response informed by the desire not only for a more humane and dignified social world, but from a rational point of view that can secure those claims and avoid the pitfalls of alienation, deformed cognition and relativism. Lacking this, what passes now for critical theory will simply continue to lose its critical edge, and lapse into abstractions of theoretical solipsism.