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European Journal of Social Theory 2002; 5; 265
DOI: 10.1177/13684310222225441

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An Interview with Axel Honneth

The Role of Sociology in the Theory of Recognition

Interviewed by Anders Petersen and Rasmus Willig

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Introduction

Axel Honneth, the successor of Jürgen Habermas at the Department of Philosophy, University of Frankfurt, has over the last decade written several important essays and a handful of comprehensive books in social philosophy and critical theory. At the centre of his work we find a new and insightful theory of the good life, that of human self-realization, which was completed in his path-breaking study *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Honneth, 1996a). Honneth's approach can be summarized as follows: the possibility of realizing one's needs and desires as a fully autonomous and individual being, that is, the possibility of identity formation, depends on the development of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. It is important to note that these three concepts serve as theoretical, technical concepts, and their meaning differs from our everyday usage (Zurn, 2000: 16). What is important to Honneth is that these three forms of relating to oneself can only be maintained in intersubjective, symmetrical and reciprocal relationships, since they ensure a successful life. Each form of self-relation is situated within three corresponding modes of recognition: (a) emotional support as experienced in primary relationships; (b) cognitive respect in legal relations; and (c) social esteem within a community of shared values. Therefore, violations of recognition patterns, withheld recognition or forms of disrespect such as abuse, denial of rights, exclusion, denigration and insult, can be viewed as distortions of the good life (Honneth, 1996b). Thus, Honneth is concerned with pointing out the disruptions, pathological distortions, everyday troubled identities and experiences of humiliation, suffering and injustice, ranging from the relatively harmless case of not greeting someone to the serious case of stigmatization (Honneth, 2000b: 27). The task is therefore, according to Honneth, to elucidate and diagnose those developmental processes that can be characterized as social pathologies (Honneth, 1996b: 370).

Although Honneth's work is primarily focused on social philosophy, it invites and inspires new sociological thinking. First, his recent appointment as director for the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt University, whose work is primarily empirical, allows Honneth to situate and further develop his theory

within a sociological research frame. Second, Honneth's work allows empirical sociologists to work from the basis of a normative theory from which normative claims can be articulated about contemporary societal developments. Third, Honneth's highly systematic categories of different forms of recognition and disrespect – supplemented with empirical examples – can serve as operational empirical categories and are therefore open and accessible for further empirical data. Fourth, Honneth's recent book with Nancy Fraser moves more in the direction of social theory, or as Honneth formulates it in the interview: 'so that the approach gets a more Durkheimian twist'.

A lot more could be said about Honneth's work and his theory of recognition, just as much could be said about expectations of his future work; but this is not the aim of this introduction. The basis for the interview that follows was an agreement to talk more specifically about the role of sociology within the theory of recognition, targeting views on contemporary societal developments, the role of empirical work, its methods and its emancipatory potential. In this context we have formulated our questions for general clarification and about this recent work.¹

Rasmus Willig, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, 18 March 2001

RW Rasmus Willig

AH Axel Honneth

RW It seems clear to us that your use of the phrase 'social pathologies', that is, societal developments that are wrong rather than unjust, something which you also have stated in another interview,² refers to a redirection of the ways in which Adorno, Horkheimer and Habermas viewed and criticized social pathologies. Your perspective of an abstract or formal concept of the good life as the standpoint from which our criticism should be justified is certainly to be seen in that way, and moreover to be seen as a way in which to move critical theory in a new direction. What seems a bit unclear to us is, however, which specific traits or aspects of contemporary society you see as creating social pathologies as such?

AH The reason why I left this out in the longer article,³ and in that interview as well, has mainly to do with the fact that I wanted to start by a formal description of the task of such a diagnosis of social pathologies. It all then depends on how you fill in the formal concept of the good life. I mean, this is the determining factor of what you see in a given society as creating social pathologies. My own starting point here would be a fuller and more differentiated concept of social recognition as it is structured by the normative premises of our existing society, and in that respect I would think that there are, at least, three dimensions in which we today expect social recognition. So, we could say that our formal concept of the good life is determined by

those three principles of recognition, which then would mean that social pathologies have to be diagnosed on the background of those normative premises. I mean, to put it more concretely, that would mean that social pathologies today are somewhat suited to the realm of the intimate atmosphere of families in which we can observe certain tendencies of disintegration and de-structuring connected with tendencies of creating new forms of families. But this is a transition in which certain expectations for a form of emotional recognition are not fully satisfied, so that we in that sense can speak of certain signs of a social pathology. The same would be true of the two other dimensions I would think of, namely the realm of modern law and legal recognition. I think we have new phenomena, especially in our highly developed western societies where a growing group of outsiders, for instance newcomers, immigrants and refugees do not have enough legal security to find themselves in a position to obtain a 'good life', or in a position of securing a good enough life. So, here I would also speak of a certain social pathology created by a lack of legal recognition.

RW And that will be, in terms of a welfare state, the dissolution of the welfare state?

AH No. This is more a problem of not being able to create new dimensions of legal recognition by which outsiders acquire subjective rights enabling them to be respected in our society. This is not yet the dimension of the counter-effect of the social welfare state. These counter-effects of the social welfare state also create certain social pathologies, but mainly by a kind of bureaucratic labelling of whole clusters of people with certain characteristics; these people then feel, let us say, alienated by these socially forced policies. The third dimension, in which I would see a huge tendency towards a social pathology, has to do with a third normative principle, namely that of accomplishment [*Leistungsprinzip*], which until now has been working as a source of normative integration. I believe this principle is currently in a process of dissolution because of the fact that there are more and more opportunities of getting income and money by ways which have nothing to do with any form of accomplishment. This has mainly to do with a new dimension of simple economic luck as created by stocks and shares, the whole stock-market, the whole financial market as such, which create opportunities to make a lot of fast money without being able to justify these gains in terms of the principle of accomplishment. Thus, these spheres are all leading to a kind of weakening of that principle. On the other side, there is an increase in unemployment, with more and more people who do not see any chance of getting any kind of social esteem, nor do they get rewarded for any accomplishments. So, these are tendencies which I would describe as social pathologies on the basis of a formal concept of the good life, a concept that is filled out by my own, more differentiated, concept of recognition.

RW Staying with the question of social pathologies within the realm of recognition – it would be interesting to know how this can be projected empirically. When reading *Pathologien des Sozialen. Traditionen und Aktualität der Sozialphilosophie* (Honneth, 1994, 1996b, 2000a), where you outline the programmatic course for social philosophy/critical theory, we do not find any particular methodology that can guide empirical sociologists who are concerned with using your social philosophy as a normative base in sociology. We think for instance of Pierre Bourdieu who has committed a great deal of his work to developing a clear methodology. Does social philosophy/critical theory not need methods of its own that could guide empirical sociologists; or does it rely on a wide spectrum of different methods?

AH That is a difficult question. We have a lot of discussions on that now in the Institute for Social Research. My own feeling is that we should rely on what you call a wide spectrum of different methods, so that there is no need to create a methodology of one's own. I think we can rely on some of the methods, which have been used in the Institute for Social Research before, in the traditional and classic studies. I believe that empirical research mainly depends on a clear hypothesis of certain social developments, preferably certain social pathologies. The way to prove those hypotheses empirically would be by connecting different empirical methods. I would say, as a starting point, that traditional methods of structured interviews and group discussions would be useful. The latter is a method which we, at the Institute for Social Research, would like to use in a wider way. Group discussions, by giving certain thematic incentives and then letting people discuss those questions that were brought to them by the researchers, were I think a very important method used in early empirical investigations at the Institute in the 1950s. For example, when we want to do research on the normative validity of the accomplishment principle, what we have in mind is to have certain social groups organized by different strata, and then give them incentives and let them discuss what they think. I think this is still a valid method to find out what the real convictions and beliefs of people are. Moreover, a qualitative method of some sort, like deep interviews, sometimes using more sociological premises, sometimes using more psychoanalytic premises is preferable. So, to put it in one sentence, I do not believe there is a need for our own methodological approach, our own empirical method, but we should find a clever way of combining existing methods.

RW I am thinking of your essay in *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit – Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie*, 'Zwischen Aristoteles und Kant – Skizze einer Moral der Anerkennug', where you say that studying forms of disrespect requires a phenomenological approach, that is, via departmental interviews. In another place you have spoken of the biographical research method as a useful method.

AH Right. Both mentioned methods are qualitative and thus fall under the category of those I mentioned before as suitable. When used either with a certain biographical orientation, that is, in biographical interviews, or in qualitative interviews using psychoanalytic insight to structure the interview, I think they give good insight.

RW This leads us to a question which follows up on some of the things we have just talked about. As you have stated in an interview with *Widerspruch*,⁴ there is a critical potential in describing the everyday struggle for recognition '... eine Art von Realisierungspraxis der eigenen Beschreibung'. As you have also stated earlier and latest in your new book: social philosophy can be a guideline for a normative empirical sociology. Are we to understand it so, that the empirical sociologist, for example, should play the role of this *Realisierungspraxis* by uncovering the everyday struggle for recognition, that is, patterns of disrespect?

AH Again a difficult question. I do not believe any longer that empirical research as such should play the role of political activation because there is always the danger of instrumentalization and of manipulation. On the other side, what I have always believed and still believe is that empirical research done in an accurate way has, whether we want it or not, a certain consciousness-raising effect.

RW A form of reflexive emancipation?

AH Yes. And in that sense I would still stick to what I have said in this particular interview, namely that by using the framework of recognition, for example, as incentive for group discussions, or in phrasing questions in a qualitative interview by using that moral language, it has the effect of raising the consciousness of people about that whole dimension, which is very often simply repressed or neglected. In that sense it has a consciousness-raising effect which has mainly to do with a simple social fact, namely that there is a certain tendency in our society institutionally to ignore the whole spectrum of moral experiences, which are somewhat neglected or even repressed in the public language. I think, in raising questions and stimulating answers by thematic incentives using that moral language, we can, indirectly, make people aware of a whole hidden sphere of moral reality and of moral experiences which we are not aware of in everyday life because there is no public language of those moral experiences. The public language as such is highly demoralized, and empirical research using a certain moral vocabulary encourages the recovery of the specific language necessary for articulating moral experiences. In that sense it has a certain effect.

RW An example of such an institutional lack of moral language would be new forms of organization, for instance flexible organizations where people find

themselves lost. In another conversation we had last year you talked about being responsible for your own *Verkaufbarkeit* [marketability], that is when employees constantly work under changing conditions where they feel pressured to commercialize themselves. Would that be a situation where moral experiences are ignored or repressed?

AH That could be an example. Another example which probably, in praxis, would lead to a lot of problems, is if one studied skinhead groups. If one tried to have a group discussion within which incentives were given by using a certain language, for example the language of disrespect, experiences of humiliation in early family situations and so on, then that would probably have a consciousness-raising effect for those who participate in those discussions. They would thereby have a certain chance to see that there are background experiences deep-rooted in their own biographical history which have to do with these negative experiences. So, this could probably, in the best case, lead to a situation in which they themselves understand the hidden motives of their own strange racist actions.

RW But that would then be, compared to the other questions raised here, a form of emancipation taking place within the research. And the other form would then be of those reading it, speaking of *Realisierungspraxis* – there you would say that that had to be carefully written so it will not be manipulated for political use/abuse?

AH Yes. But that effect can also be seen in novels. I mean novels that use a certain language can have the effect of raising consciousness.

RW This leads us to a question on the state of contemporary society as such. As you write in *Disintegration – Bruchstücke einer Soziologischen Zeitdiagnose*: ‘Here, the chosen title “Disintegration” has double meaning. It refers to the situation of the sociological time diagnosis, but it also refers to the objective condition of society itself. Because the different developmental tendencies in society have failed to succumb to one integral description, the sociological time diagnosis finds itself on one hand in a state of theoretical disintegration; on the other hand the object of this time diagnosis, that is the highly developed contemporary societies, are in a situation where the concept of disintegration will be applicable if we only take the actual degree of privatization, the dissolution of the family and the economic misery seriously enough’ (Honneth, 1995: 10).

Concerning your last point, namely your time-diagnosis of contemporary society, that is, a society that is disintegrated (i.e. the dissolution of the family, individualization, etc.). We could then ask, bearing your moral theory of recognition in mind: is it at all possible to receive *continual*/recognition under circumstances of disintegration, that is when families are broken, mobility is increasing, individuality is at its peak, etc.? Or, as

Bauman writes in his latest societal analysis, that we live in a liquid modernity⁵ – where everything is in flux?

AH It is still my belief that the success of the normative integration of societies depends on their potential to create stable structures of social recognition. The situation of our present societies is progressing towards becoming more and more flexible, and in that sense, liquid. These traits can be described as forms of disintegration even as the dissolution of forms of recognition, thus creating societies which are less and less able to realize normative integration. But, believing that those societies are depending on, in their normative integration, stable forms of recognition, does also mean that our present situation must lead to certain social pathologies, and in that sense, even to social pathologies in a non-metaphorical sense, namely to individual pathologies. I believe that the increase in depression, for example, is a sign of the dissolution of stable forms of recognition, of satisfying ways of leading your own life due to the dissolution of social recognition patterns. On the other side one has to acknowledge that there are always opportunities for people to create counter-cultures of respect in compensation for absent forms of social recognition. This is something Richard Sennett⁶ once worked out, and I believe that was a very helpful insight. One example of such a counter-culture of respect can be seen in the very aggressive form of the skinhead culture, a subculture of respect which definitely tries to compensate for all the humiliation and disrespect which those young people definitely got in their own biography in the form of certain negative family experiences, or being absolutely superfluous on the labour market.

RW The next question is to be seen in continuation of this specific point. Since forms of exclusion, insult and degradation can be viewed as violating self-confidence, self-respect or self-esteem, they provide a ground for social critique. As you also write, once these reactions towards experience of disrespect become collective, a potential emerges for action, aimed at expanding/opening social patterns of recognition. It seems, though, that sociologists are often dealing with a fragmented group that shares the same forms of degradation. How do we go about this? For us it seems that this is *the* problem of our time, if we stick with Bauman's 'fluid modernity' [see note 4], that even though we can systematically and empirically capture a coherent group who share the same forms and biographic histories – they are, however, unable to form collectively, they are in a sense isolated.

AH On the one hand that approach is describing a social process which I believe we will never overcome. There is a tendency to fragmentation, but in what sense? Namely in the sense that there will be more and more cultural groups which will have the potential to create their own internal vocabulary of respect. This is already going on now. This is a tendency

towards pluralization, towards cultural pluralism, which has a very good effect. It gives more and more people the chance to find a certain kind of social esteem in groups which are somewhat de-coupled from those overarching processes of normative integration. So, this is something that has no dangerous signs, but is a sign of cultural pluralization. The other tendency, which I tried to describe before, is somewhat more difficult. There people do not get recognition for something for which recognition can only be given by the whole society – for something which you, in a certain way, cannot decouple from social values and norms as such. This is, for example, the social esteem you are expecting for your own contribution to society. You cannot, to give an example, compensate for being useless on the labour market by being a good tennis player in your own club. It does not help. In that sense I believe, unlike a lot of other sociologists, that our very complex societies are still somehow depending on creating overarching patterns of social recognition.

The other question, which is somewhat part of that question, is leading to another problem, namely the question of how to organize political movements for recognition in our present society, where we have all these tendencies of individualization and fragmentation. This is normally the task and goal of social movements and of political parties, that is, their purpose is to find the language or moral vocabulary which has to articulate experiences which people could not articulate or represent before. In that sense I do not believe that the high degree of fragmentation and individualization, as such, is forcing political parties and social movements into a situation where they are unable to successfully fulfil this task. If we could have the right social movements or the right political parties I believe they could support people by creating the language that would enable them to articulate their experiences collectively. One example would be Bourdieu's engagement with the movement that tries to organize unemployed people in France.⁷ This is a movement which tries to give voice to a new vocabulary in which they can articulate their very specific experiences, namely of being superfluous in the whole society as such.

RW The next question tries to elaborate on the theme of being superfluous. In your new book *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit – Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie*, you outline in the essay 'Zwischen Aristoteles und Kant – Skizze einer Moral der Anerkennung' (2000: 171–93) the preconditions for recognition and disrespect. You state that self-respect has to do with a sense of oneself as a person, as a morally responsible agent, as someone capable of participating in a sort of public deliberation, to assert claims. That is, the person's social capacity depends on his or her capacity to raise and defend claims. As you note, this social capacity can only become a basis for self-respect if it can be exercised. For us, however, it is unclear what it means to have a social capacity which cannot be exercised?

AH Again a very difficult question . . .

RW Perhaps the purpose of this question becomes clearer if we combine it with another very central aspect of your theory, namely the nature of intersubjectivity. What if a person or a group does not have anything to offer in the intersubjective relation, that is, they are unable to live up to the principle of accomplishment? Some good examples would be people who are suffering from a chronic illness, are depressed, isolated, elderly, etc?

AH Sure. I would like to answer in two steps. The first answer is that there are certain possibilities within society of creating opportunities for even people with certain disabilities, be that physical or mental disabilities, to make a contribution. But take the simple case of old people, for example. I think the degree in which we are not able to create, by means of sociological fantasy, forms of tasks or contributions for them, and thus allow them to feel needed in society and via that, integrated in society, is a scandal. So, I would say that either physical or mental disabilities, as such, are not an obstacle to being needed in a society. There are forms of articulating a need for people on that basis, when we consider social contributions which lie beyond the labour market but are still, let us say, practices which create a certain form of social recognition. In those cases where it is clear that people cannot contribute, where there are no chances whatsoever for contributing, and in that respect achieving something, I think the only chance we have is to compensate them by economic redistribution, a practice that is almost accepted in society. On the other hand, speaking on a more social level, we believe that close friends and relatives of the persons in question have a certain obligation to provide recognition in other ways.

RW Could one say that in these situations it becomes a duty to give care instead of recognition?

AH Right, exactly. By giving them that kind of care which probably can be a certain compensation for what they must recognize as the impossibility of being useful for society. But clearly, this is one of the moral questions of our time.

RW The second to last question is also about the principle of accomplishment as we see it. In your introduction to *The Fragmented World of the Social* you have stated that 'When individual identity formation also depends upon the social esteem which one's work enjoys within one's society, then the concept of work simply cannot be so constructed that it categorically overlooks this psychic connection' (Honneth, 1995: xviii). Whereas the concept of personal identity in *The Struggle for Recognition* is strongly connected with the concept of intersubjective recognition, it seems unclear

to us which concept of work would fall within that exact paradigm of recognition? Knowing that you have worked on this within the sphere of accomplishment, the question is to be understood within that.

AH Right, exactly. Again I would answer in two steps. Theoretically the link between recognition and the concept of work is, for me now, the normative principle of accomplishment. This principle is, as I would describe it, one of the leading normative principles in modern capitalist society. This principle of accomplishment means, I think, that everyone has a certain right to feel and to get recognition for any kind of contribution to society, which counts as work. The question here is what counts as work in a certain period and in a certain time, and there is a whole dimension of social conflicts and symbolic struggles over the question of what counts as work. I think we can observe those symbolic struggles from the early beginning of modern societies. There were those who had the feeling that their contributions were not seen and respected as kinds of work. One of the modern forms of that symbolic conflict is the struggle of (mainly) women for a redefinition of housework as work, namely as something which has to be socially recognized and therefore economically compensated. So, this is the link I would see between the concept of recognition and the notion of work. The second step in my answer would be to say that this allows us to see the need for our present societies to radically redefine and open up the concept of work on a social level. It is much too restrictive to really compensate for all those contributions which we, using fair principles, have to describe as forms of work. There are so many housewives doing practical work, the education of children and so on, and there are also many elderly people doing a lot of work for the socialization of their grandchildren. These are clear indications that we have, within our societies, a lot of socially necessary forms of work that are not seen as such, are not recognized, and therefore cannot be compensated. So, the consequence of that is the hypothesis, first, that there will be an increase in social and symbolic struggles on the validity of the notion of work, and second, that there will be a need for our societies to increase and broaden the given notion of work.

RW So there will be a more reflexive awareness of the change in the definitions of work incentives?

AH Right. And I think that political parties, which describe themselves as defending reflexive modernization, have to do exactly that job.

RW That would be an indirect swipe at Anthony Giddens's project?

AH Yes, for example.

RW This leads us to the last question. In your new book⁸ you have worked further on the concept of recognition. For us it seems you have moved on with the moral aspect, that is, there is an explicit right (*Recht*) and a duty (*Pflicht*) to become recognized and to give recognition. Two other books are forthcoming: one with Nancy Fraser,⁹ another on Hegel's philosophy of right.¹⁰ Are they also moving on with the moral/ethnic perspective of recognition?

AH These two books, the first one which derives from my discussions with Nancy Fraser and the other one on Hegel's philosophy of right, are the results of engagements and work I have done over the last two years. The first is going more, if you like, in the direction of social theory, namely differentiating my own concept of recognition [from that of Nancy Fraser] by reformulating it as the basis of a normative concept of modern societies. That then allows me to formulate a pluralist concept of justice for our present societies. So, this is more social theory and political philosophy. The other book on Hegel is, beyond the interest of reconstructing Hegel's philosophy of right, an investigation into the question whether there is a certain necessity for connecting a theory of justice with a diagnosis of social pathologies. My idea there is to show that Hegel did exactly that: he connected, internally, the development of a concept of justice with an insight into social pathologies of his time, so that the one is not independent from the other. This helps me, methodologically, to make the structure of my own approach clear.

RW Concerning the book with Nancy Fraser, am I to understand that the principle of accomplishment develops within a new sphere, a sphere independent from the three spheres of recognition?

AH No, it is a reformulation of what I have said before on social solidarity. I think it has an increasingly Durkheimian impact. Because I think Durkheim's insight was, in the study on the division of labour, that the degree of social solidarity in modern society depends on reflexive and democratic forms of the division of labour. This is something I am taking up to a certain degree, so that the approach gets a more Durkheimian twist.

RW Thank you.

AH You are welcome.

Notes

This interview took place in Frankfurt am Main, 18 March 2001.

- 1 We would like to thank Mikael Carleheden for his constructive comments on the questions, the members of Axel Honneth's colloquium who were always helpful when needed, and Axel Honneth for the preliminary discussions which helped to clarify the most naive questions. Furthermore we would like to thank Anja Bjerre University of Aarhus, Denmark and Gwynn A. Markle, PhD Candidate at Fordham University, USA, for their helpful corrections.
- 2 Berg and Oenen (1999).
- 3 Honneth (1996b).
- 4 Honneth (1997b).
- 5 See, for instance, Bauman (1999) and Bauman (2000).
- 6 Sennett and Cobb (1972).
- 7 Bourdieu (1993) and (1996): Issue on Social Suffering.
- 8 Honneth (2000a).
- 9 This has now been published: Fraser and Honneth (2001a, b).
- 10 This has now been published (Honneth, 2001). See also Honneth (2000b).

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