A Social Democratic Form of Life

– An examination of Axel Honneth's political philosophy

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Abstract: This thesis examines the work of Axel Honneth, focusing on how the neo-Hegelian theory of justice Honneth presents in *Freedom's Right* (2014) and *The Idea of Socialism* (2017) might be useful to social democracy. In the thesis, I argue that Honneth's theory requires a more stable philosophical grounding, but that this could be accomplished by discarding some elements of *Freedom's Right* and instead drawing on elements in Honneth's other writings which go into more detail on how and why human beings can only exercise freedom together. Having discussed the social democratic tradition which Honneth unfortunately did not engage with in *Freedom's Right* (2014) and *The Idea of Socialism* (2017), I then outline how the reframed Honnethian theory can be utilised as a new foundation for a social democratic ideology. I argue that Honneth's theory of justice should be read as part of a larger theory of the human, ethical form of life, and that the political philosophical aspect thereof yields the ideal of a social democratic form of life.

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Abbreviations

FR	*Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*
PoIF	*The Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory*
SfR	*The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*
TIoS	*The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal*

Introduction: A Social Democratic Form of Life

Axel Honneth is a leading figure of contemporary social philosophy and critical theory, best known for his role in developing "a new paradigm of justice that puts recognition at its center"[1], in particular through his hugely influential 1992 work *The Struggle for Recognition*. Having previously trained under Jürgen Habermas (whose philosophy continues to influence Honneth), Honneth is now professor of Social Philosophy at the University of Frankfurt and professor for the Humanities in the Department of Philosophy at Columbia University, and he served as Director for the Institute for Social Research at Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main between 2001 and 2018.[2] In 2015 Axel Honneth's *The Idea of Socialism* was published, with an English translation following in 2017. This work is a shorter follow-up to Honneth's 2011 monograph *Freedom's Right* (English translation published 2014). With *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth apparently moved in a new direction compared to his earlier work on recognition. With *Freedom's Right,* Honneth's aim is to reactualize the approach to justice found in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. *Freedom's Right* centres on the concept of social freedom, and with *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth moves to show how this Hegelian idea can renew the faltering socialist tradition.

In *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth makes the case that the normative core of socialism may be found in the first generation of socialists' desire to reconcile the value of freedom with the value of fraternity or solidarity, and he goes on to argue that in order to recover this core idea it is necessary to rid socialism of a series of flawed ideas inherited from Marxism. Although some Marxist socialist traditions might take issue with Honneth's analysis, one part of the wider socialist tradition that is sure to find it intriguing is the social democratic tradition. Since its inception, social democracy has been critical of Marxism on grounds that are very similar to the ones Honneth puts forward in *The Idea of Socialism*. At the same time, social democracy has committed to the values of freedom and solidarity in ways that seems to line up rather well with what Honneth calls for. And perhaps most importantly, social democracy is a tradition in serious decline. Even if we dismiss claims that it was never a socialist tradition at all, it is not a stretch to say that in the face of decades of losing ground (first to neoliberalism and now a resurgent ethno-nationalism) social democracy is now in a state of serious confusion about what its core ideology is, or should be. Given the points of convergence and the obvious need, Honneth's theory should be of particular interest to social democrats looking to renew their political tradition.

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[1] Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?: a political-philosophical exchange* (New York: Verso, 2003), p. 7.

[2] "Mitarbeiter_innen: Axel Honneth, Prof. Dr." Institut für Sozialforschung an der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Accessed February 20, 2020. http://www.ifs.uni-frankfurt.de/mitarbeiter_in/axel-honneth/

The initial aim for this thesis was to determine whether, or to what extent, social democracy might be helped by Axel Honneth's political philosophy. In one sense, this aim remained unchanged throughout the project, and the thesis does answer the question. However, my understanding of the question itself has evolved in time with my understanding of Honneth's philosophical project. I initially assumed that the idea of socialism that Honneth presented in the book of the same name, which he calls social freedom, could be understood as a political ideal akin to e.g. equality, fairness, or community. Consequently, I initially thought of Honneth's social freedom idea as something that social democracy might be able to adopt or incorporate. But this was a mistake. Honneth does not offer something that can be adopted or incorporated into some other political-philosophical tradition; instead, his account offers a fundamentally different way of conceptualising politics, society, and the human form of life overall.

In chapter 1 I start out with a discussion of Honneth's latest book, *The Idea of Socialism*, with an eye to whether Honneth's prescription for a renewed socialism might address social democracy. Since Honneth does not engage with the social democratic tradition in *The Idea of Socialism*, I introduce it and try to show why it would be a good addressee for Honneth's account in chapter 2, before I turn to examine Honneth's philosophical framework, and the development of the position that *The Idea of Socialism* is part of, in more detail. Chapters 3 and 4 trace the development of Honneth's position from his earlier recognition-centred approach to the later social freedom-centred theory.

In chapter 5 I discuss what I identify as the most serious problem for Honneth's theory, viz. the lack of grounding. I make the case that we can draw on some of the roads-not-taken indicated in Honneth's earlier writings to address this issue, and in chapter 6 I discuss some of the more recent texts of Honneth's, highlighting how they open for the type of grounding I argue is necessary. In Chapter 7, I bring together the various elements and argue that we can see one grand theory developing throughout the different phases of Honneth's writings, and I then proceed to present how this theory of the intersubjective human form of life could be reframed to address social democracy, or rather, allow for a new social democratic approach to politics.

Chapter 1: Honneth's Idea of Socialism

1.1 Recovering Utopian Energy

The stated intention of *The Idea of Socialism* is to show that "socialism still contains a vital spark" (*TIoS* viii).[3] This statement of intent follows introductory reflections in which Honneth notes that even though we live in an era marked by increasing popular outrage directed at the "social and political consequences unleashed by the global liberalization of the capitalist market economy" socialist movements and visions for the future no longer appear capable of giving a direction to popular political energy. Although there is no lack of political anger today, especially in the wake of the inequities wrought by financial crises, there is a palpable lack of 'utopian energy' as Honneth calls it – by which he means that there is not now a vision of a possible future society or societal order that is capable of motivating broad political movements.

Honneth raises and quickly dismisses two stock answers to the question of why the current situation has arisen. First, he says we cannot explain the current lack of utopian energy by pointing to the fall of the communist bloc. It is not as if the people outraged with the inequities of capitalism today did not know before 1989 that Soviet-style state communism was deeply flawed. Moreover, the lack of a concrete example of an alternative to capitalist societies – however flawed – obviously is not a prerequisite for people to push for radical social change. After all, the revolutionaries of the nineteenth century did not need to have an example to point to in order to dream of a different, solidaric form of life.

Furthermore, the oft cited influence of postmodernism also fails to explain the current situation. The claim, writes Honneth, is that postmodernism has "devalued characteristically modern conceptions of teleological progress" and that the new postmodernist conception of history makes "transcendental imagination" – the ability to anticipate a new and better kind of society – impossible. "However," says Honneth, "the very fact that we have become accustomed to advances in medicine or the enforcement of human rights casts doubt on this presumption." (*TIoS* 3)

A third possible explanation, to which Honneth is more sympathetic, is that the current capitalist economic and social order is simply too complex (especially in terms of the mechanisms governing economic globalisation) to appear changeable, and that it has therefore become 'reified'. The current state of social relations has become 'fetishized' – that is, the basic structure of contemporary societies has started to be regarded as being

[3] Honneth, Axel, *The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017). Henceforth abbreviated as *TIoS*. Page numbers will be given in-line.

"impervious to change, just like things" (*TIoS* 4). But even if this is the case, says Honneth, it still does not explain why "visions of socialism no longer have the power [as they clearly did in the past] to convince the outraged that collective efforts can in fact improve what appears 'inevitable'." (*TIoS* 5)

Honneth sets out to answer what factors, internal and external, are responsible for the loss of motivational power of socialist ideas. To do so, he says, he is going to begin by reconstructing the original idea of socialism. Honneth argues that the original idea of socialism should be identified as an ideal of freedom that he calls 'social freedom'. Social freedom is to be understood as a normative, or ethical, ideal or value. Thus, Honneth rejects the notion that socialism is about asserting the value of equality over the value of freedom – arguing that this was never the case, but that it was always a more expansive ideal of freedom that motivated the early socialists.[4] Only after having presented this idea can he turn to a discussion of why socialist ideas have become antiquated, and thence to consider how they may be revitalised; what "conceptual changes [are] needed to restore the vitality these ideas have lost". This is the general outline for *The Idea of Socialism* that Honneth gives in his introduction, and in the rest of this chapter I am going to look at the case he presents in some detail.

In my critique of *The Idea of Socialism*, I will argue that Honneth does not engage sufficiently with socialist traditions that are not orthodox Marxist in nature, and that therefore it becomes very difficult to discern whether, or to what extent, the philosophical insights regarding 'social freedom' can be practically-politically useful. Honneth's attempt to show the potential force of the social freedom idea by showcasing how it can help pinpoint the flawed ideas that were attached to 'the idea of socialism' in its early history is, I will argue, unconvincing. In chapter 2, I will present the socialist tradition with which I think Honneth ought to have engaged – social democracy – before moving to examine his philosophical framework in more detail, with an eye to whether or how it might be useful to social democracy.

1.2 Recovering the Original Idea

The term 'socialism' is incredibly difficult to define. At one point near the beginning of *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth refers to a classic and influential attempt at defining socialism by Émile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) which then serves as something like a point of departure for Honneth's own account. Durkheim, says Honneth, attempted to define the common

[4] In making this point, Honneth simultaneously, though more implicitly, rejects Engel's claim that Marxism is a non- or post- ethical theory (i.e., 'scientific socialism'). Indeed, in some ways Honneth's *The Idea of Socialism* can be seen as the polar opposite of Engel's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880).

denominator of the disparate kinds of socialist doctrines as the idea that "the only way to put an end to the misery of the working classes was to reorganise the economic sphere, thus subjecting economic activities to the greater social will" (TIoS 9). Honneth says that although Durkheim's definition is not wrong *per se* it fails to capture the normative intention of socialism. Indeed, it is a mistake – committed by many influential observers, including J.S. Mill and Joseph Schumpeter – to reduce socialism to "a desire for a more just distribution of resources". Certainly, that is an important aspect of socialism, says Honneth, but it is not the normative core. (*TIoS* 10)

To identify the normative core of the idea of socialism, Honneth's approach is to reconstruct the normative common denominator in the early socialists' various suggestions for how to reform society. His initial contention in *The Idea of Socialism* is that the idea of socialism emerged in the wake of the French Revolution (roughly, 1789 – 1799). As Honneth presents the story, the early socialists embraced the Revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity: *liberté, égalité, fraternité.* But, says Honneth, the normative impetus for the early socialists came from the conviction on their part that the manner in which these ideals had been institutionalised was insufficient, and even contradictory. Specifically, he says, the early socialists all shared a sense that the *liberté* institutionalised in the wake of the Revolution could not be squared with *fraternité;* the liberal version of individual freedom could not easily be squared with fraternal or solidary coexistence. The disparate group of early socialist thinkers and activists of the 1830s were, writes Honneth, "fully aware of their debt to the values established by the Revolution" and they framed their demands for a radically different social order not as rejections of these values but rather as demands that they be fully lived up to. (*TIoS* 8)

Honneth picks out three different groups of first-generation socialists, represented by Robert Owen (1771 - 1858), Charles Fourier (1772 - 1837) and Henri de Saint-Simon (1760 - 1825). All three proposed variously radical ways in which to fundamentally reorganize the structure of the economy; through the setup of relatively limited worker-cooperatives (Owen), full-fledged intentional communities (Fourier) or by a version of centralised economic planning and wage-policy (Saint-Simon). Already with these three early socialist groups we can see, argues Honneth, that the fundamental moral impetus of their projects lay not in appeals for equality or fair distribution of resources. Rather, the appeals were to the good of community, or more precisely, the perception that the new capitalist economic system was incompatible with the kind of fraternal coexistence they embraced as a moral ideal: e.g. "mutual benevolence" between people; ideals of "'universal association' of mutually responsible persons", or a "free association of producers". (*TIoS* 10)

Crucially for Honneth's argument though, he says that the early socialists did not reject the ideal of freedom. Instead, he says, although they may not have been aware of it, they all sought to "expand the liberal concept of freedom in order to reconcile it somehow with the aim of 'fraternity'" (*TIoS* 12). The reason for proposing such radically different economic schemes, writes Honneth, was their conviction that fraternity (*fraternité)*, mutual solidaric relationships between members of society, could not be built and maintained so long as freedom (*liberté)* was understood as the private, egotistic freedom of market competition. Consequently, the plans that early socialists drew up to either abolish or at least supplement the market economy were

> intended primarily as a way to realize a kind of 'freedom' in economic relations that no longer conflicted with the demand for 'fraternity'. The contradiction in the moral demands of the French Revolution could only be removed if individual freedom was no longer understood as the private pursuit of interests, but rather as a relation in which the pursuits of individual members of society complemented each other in the economic power-center of a new society. (*TIoS* 12)

This normative intention became clearer with the second generation of socialists, says Honneth, of which he singles out Louis Blanc (1811-1882) and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809 - 1865). With Proudhon's writings in particular, according to Honneth, we can see progress towards formulating an ideal of freedom that is distinct from the liberal-individualist conception and more of what Honneth calls an ideal of "social freedom". In *Les confessions d'un révolutionnaire* (1849) Proudhon writes that "liberty and solidarity are identical expressions from a social perspective" and that "contrary to the declaration of civil rights in 1793, socialists understand the 'freedom of each' not as a 'limitation', but as an 'aid' for the freedom of all others." (*TIoS* 14)

Even so, Honneth does not think that Proudhon quite manages to deliver the idea of 'social freedom' since he vacillates between a couple of different alternative conceptions of freedom. According to Honneth, it comes down to whether or not we understand a free action as something that is done by an individual on their own, and which then requires the right social framework to be successfully carried out – or whether a free action is only able to be 'completed' through the mutual supplementation by others. As we will see, the model Honneth prefers is one where "cooperation in the community is the social condition allowing the members of society to become completely free by mutually supplementing each other's still incomplete actions." (TIoS 14)

As this passage highlights, the story that Honneth presents of the early (pre-Marxist) socialist movement is one in which we can see a concept of social freedom in the process of being born, yet not quite arriving. The question is then whether it did arrive with Marx.

1.3 Achievements of Marxism

Even though a major part of *The Idea of Socialism* is dedicated to exposing how key Marxist ideas have harmed socialism, Honneth certainly acknowledges the importance of Marx's contribution. Marx was, Honneth notes, by far the most skilled and insightful economist of the early socialist movement, and this proficiency together with his Hegelian philosophical training allowed him to pick up and develop the socialist idea of the free market as a hindrance to fraternity (or solidarity) in important ways. Marx makes important progress in formulating the problem the way he does, viz. the market economy fostering an understanding of freedom which is fundamentally adversarial and that stands in contrast to solidarity. Honneth especially notes Marx's use of an idea from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* when Marx talks about how the market transforms "our mutual recognition" (which Honneth connects with "social relationships of fraternity or solidarity") into a "struggle". (*TIoS* 17)

Focusing on the writings of the younger Marx, Honneth says that we can see at least the outlines of a concept of 'social freedom' in the "concrete, rather vague economic model" that Marx proposed. What we see then is how Marx "envisions a social model in which freedom and solidarity are interlinked, in which each individual can view his own aims as the condition for the realization of the aims of others" in the sense that "individual intentions must be so clearly interlinked that we can only achieve our aims cooperatively, conscious of our dependence on others" (*TIoS* 18). Honneth argues that Marx's model represents a genuinely different model of social life because it is one that aims to create social communities where the aims of the members aren't just *overlapping* but thoroughly *intertwined* such that

> the subjects not only act with each other, but 'for each other'; they act directly and consciously to achieve commonly shared purposes. In the first case […] of overlapping aims, the fact that my actions contribute to the realization of our shared aims is a contingent effect of the pursuit of my own intention; in the second case, that of intertwined aims, the same result arises as a necessary consequence of my conscious intentions. (*TIoS* 19)

In subsequent chapters I will examine more closely the nuances and background of what Honneth understands by 'social communities where the aims of the members are intertwined rather than just overlapping' (viz. a society based on or around social freedom

rather than individualistic freedom). For now, it is enough to note that Honneth makes the case that the normative impetus behind Marx's socialism was the same as that of the earlier socialists, and that Marx came a lot closer than the early socialists to laying out a concrete account of how an alternative organisation of society could reconcile the moral demand for individual freedom with the moral demand for coexistence in solidarity/fraternity.

Honneth's claims about Marx are, I think, somewhat contradictory. He simultaneously claims that Marx did manage to "offer a concrete account of what it would mean to predicate the achievement of individual freedom on coexistence in solidarity." But he also says that Marx's economic model (an 'association of free producers') is "vague", and that that it is only by accentuating certain elements in Marx's thought that "the concept of social freedom" can be found. We are left with the impression that what makes Marx's conceptual contribution most valuable is primarily his Hegelian training. Since Honneth's account of social freedom is based in a Hegelian framework (which I will explore in the following chapters) this makes it easier for him to find and draw out connections. Apart from this, it would of course be imprudent not to recognise the value and contributions of Marx's analysis to the idea of socialism. (*TIoS* 15)

Having made the case that rather than looking to principles of distributive justice we should look to the ideal of a fraternal, or solidaric, form of life as the core of the idea of socialism, Honneth concludes part I of *The idea of Socialism* by noting that this idea was nonetheless burdened by some "congenital" defects. I will turn to consider the arguments around this next. (*TIoS* 20)

1.4 Defects

In Honneth's treatment of the defects of socialism in part II of *The Idea of Socialism*, we find him identifying three faulty "background assumptions" – assumptions which we are to understand as the root cause of the failures of socialism today. The background assumptions in question are: (a) that it is only the economic sphere that need concern us; (b) that the struggle for socialism is carried by and dependent on the objective interests of the industrial proletariat; and (c) that the progress towards a socialist society is somehow inevitable and necessary, determined by the inexorable movement and mechanics of history.[5] I will be referring to these three premises as the assumptions of economic fundamentalism, objective interest, and historical necessity, respectively, and briefly lay out how Honneth critiques them in turn. (*TIoS* 32)

[5] Cf. "the economic sphere as the locus of the struggle over the appropriate form of freedom; the reflexive attachment to an already present oppositional movement; and, finally, the historical-philosophical expectation of the inevitable victory of the movement." Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, p. 32.

1.4.1 Economic fundamentalism leaving no space for liberal rights

Although he says these three background assumptions are interconnected, Honneth clearly sees the issue of economic fundamentalism as the most deep-seated. Certainly, the earliest socialists emerged as critics of the effects of the new market economy and the harms it seemed to create. They did not necessarily see material inequality as the core issue, but rather focused on the detrimental effects that the new economy had on social and spiritual life. Nonetheless, it was the shared diagnosis among the early socialists that the organisation of the economy was to blame for these ills. They all shared the conviction that the internal logic of the economic system compelled individuals to pursue their own private interests and so view other people as competitors, making fraternity impossible. Honneth notes that it was this "equating of fraternity with a transformed economic system, of social freedom with a cooperative economy […that was] the reason that socialism would almost immediately be regarded – by socialists and non-socialists alike – as a purely economic project." (*TIoS* 54)

This focus on the economic sphere, which would become cemented in the socialist movement through the influence of Marxism, had the unfortunate side-effect of robbing "the entirely different sphere of democratic popular rule […] of any normative value" (*TIoS* 32). From very early on, writes Honneth, socialists tended to deny the value of liberal democracy and the individual political rights it rested on. Even if they did not outright deny the value of such political rights, the logic of their own theories would inevitably lead them to an ambivalence about them. Honneth writes that according to Marx, liberal rights to freedom only had a role so long as the separation between "'civil society', i.e., the capitalist market economy, and the 'state'" existed. But this division into '*citoyens*' and '*bourgeois*', into "citizens of the state and individual economic subjects", would be abolished in a future socialist society (*TIoS* 35).

This last step in Marx's argumentation is particularly important for present purposes: Liberal rights to freedom, which according to Marx 'proclaim that every member of the people is an equal participant in popular sovereignty', lose all normative value in socialist society, because there would no longer be a separate sphere of common will-formation apart from the economy, which would in turn mean that individuals would no longer require the right to self-determination (*TIoS* 35). And Honneth goes on to say that no matter which "founding socialist document we examine, we always find the same tendency to deny any role for liberal rights to freedom" simply because the early socialists all envisioned that a better version of freedom – what Honneth calls social freedom – would be realized when a truly cooperative form of production was implemented. The result of

this, however, was "not only an inadequate understanding of politics, but also a failure to grasp the emancipatory potential of these same rights to freedom." (*TIoS* 36)

On Honneth's view, this tendency to denigrate or ignore the role of liberal freedom rights has been disastrous for socialism. In the background of this part of the discussion is of course the violations of liberal rights committed by some socialist or communist regimes. But Honneth does not focus on that; instead he highlights how the inability to grasp the importance of liberal rights meant that the real idea of socialism would begin to slip away. Liberal freedom rights, on Honneth's view, are necessary conditions for real (social) freedom, and therefore indispensable for any idea of socialism.

1.4.2 Economic fundamentalism blocks experimentalism

The pre-Marxist socialists entertained an 'experimentalist' approach in their efforts to 'expand relationships of solidarity and cooperation'. Pre-Marxist socialist ideas and efforts, says Honneth, were basically different ideas of how to ensure that the working masses gained a stronger position in the new economic order; and usually the prescription was some mix of 'self-managed cooperatives', 'fair distribution of starting capital' and a market 'restricted by price regulations and legal guidelines'. Since many of these early socialist ideas of reorganisation did not seek to totally abolish markets or market mechanisms (but rather to bring market forces under the control of the wider social community) it would not be too far off, says Honneth, to call them 'market socialist' approaches. (*TIoS* 55)

The most important difference between these early ideas and the later Marxists on Honneth's account, however, was that the pre-Marxists could maintain an open and experimental spirit when it came to precisely how the bad effects of the growing market economic system should be countered. This became practically impossible once Marx's analysis of capitalism became the dominant theoretical perspective in the socialist movement. Marx was convinced, says Honneth, that the three elements of i) the law of supply and demand, ii) the capitalist ownership of the means of production, and iii) the propertylessness of the proletariat made up the "indissoluble unity, a 'totality' in the Hegelian sense" he named 'capitalism'. "Only occasionally" says Honneth "does Marx's work seem to allow for the possibility that the capitalist market is not a fixed entity, but a constantly changing and changeable set of institutions whose reformability was to be tested through repeated experiments." (*TIoS* 54-6)

The fact that Marx's analysis of capitalism had this 'totalizing' feature set socialist thinking on a path which would prove to be very difficult to deviate from. Once the idea was accepted that the market economy was an integral part of a larger socio-economic system where the different interconnected parts worked to reaffirm and uphold each other – i.e.,

the dynamics of the political system being geared towards upholding the market, the market being geared towards upholding a certain popular culture which, in turn, worked to uphold a certain political system as well as the market itself and so on – the idea of trying to 'fix' just one of these parts became almost incoherent. On the Marxist analysis, the internal dynamics of the whole capitalist mode of production – 'capitalist civilization' – would simply auto-correct any such attempts at limited socialist change.

This had the unfortunate result, writes Honneth, of forcing socialists to conceive of a future socialist society as one where no traces of a market economy remained. The problem with this, he says, is that there was really only one alternative that socialist thinkers could come up with to a society that had some kind of market, and that was a centrally planned economy. The socialists were, Honneth writes, "forced to conceive of the new economic order as a vertical relationship with all actors on the one side and a superior authority on the other, even though according to original socialist intuition the producers should relate to each other horizontally." (*TIoS* 56-7)

In light of these problematic features of the Marxist legacy, Honneth argues that "the most important task when it comes to reviving the socialist tradition consists in revising Marx's equating of the market economy with capitalism, thereby opening up space for alternative uses of the market." (*TIoS* 57)

1.4.3 Determinism and objective interest

In addition to – and intertwined with – economic fundamentalism, Honneth identifies two other 'background assumptions' that have crippled the socialist tradition: the assumption of objective interest and the assumption of historical necessity. Honneth writes that the assumption of objective interests is first seen clearly with (first generation socialist) Saint-Simon and his adherents, who "were convinced that the entire class of industrial workers […] were just waiting for the moment when their common activities and abilities would finally be freed from the yoke of a feudal-bourgeois property order in order to increase their productivity in free association." (*TIoS* 37)

Early socialists tended to present a theory about how society was developing, and that theory usually involved the basic posit that there was a class of workers and that this class of workers had an interest in (more or less revolutionary) change of the current economic system. This posit is par for the course when it comes to socialist theory, but the problem, writes Honneth, was that it was more an article of faith than it was an empirical observation. Some early socialists simply ascribed interests to the industrial workers, and then used these ascribed interests to justify their theories of why and how society had to change.

This tendency to draw self-referential conclusions became even worse with Marx, who in his analysis of the capitalist mode of production assumed the existence of a collective subject with a shared 'objective' interest in revolution. And, says Honneth, "[a]s a result of this highly dubious methodological presupposition, socialist theory would henceforth be bound to the virtually transcendent precondition of an already present social movement, even though it was necessarily unclear whether it actually existed in social reality." (*TIoS* 40)

This presupposition of a more or less cohesive and revolutionary industrial proletariat was combined, says Honneth, with the assumption of necessary historical progress. In the Marxist analysis the three points make up a whole: a historical tendency is built into the way that society is structured that continuously deprives a large portion of the population; this portion of the population therefore has (or develops) a class consciousness, realizes their collective interest in the overthrow of the kind of society that due to its internal logic cannot help but impoverish them – and brings about revolution. The idea of necessary historical progress – seemingly independently of what any person or group of persons does or does not do – was part of this way of understanding the world and the socio-economic forces that shaped it.

1.4.4 The failure to recognize functional differentiation

Why does Honneth spend the effort to critique the ideas of historical determinism and the idea of an industrial proletariat with an objective interest in revolution? After all, on Honneth's account, those ideas weren't as fundamental as the economic fundamentalist outlook, and so might have been ignored. In fact, there seem to be two reasons for Honneth's singling out these defects, and like everything else in his analysis, these reasons are interlinked. The first and most obvious reason is that these two defects, regardless of how faulty these ideas were, did serve for a time to ground socialism in 'active social forces', and thereby make it something much more than just another ideal theory about how society ought to be. Honneth writes that the early socialists viewed their movement as something more than a political theory akin to liberalism. Socialism was understood by its early proponents as "a future-oriented theory which would help realize an interest already present in society by activating and correcting that interest with visions of social freedom" (*TIoS* 41). The 'already present interest' had been firmly identified with the industrial proletariat's objective interest in revolution, resulting from its continuous growth and impoverishment. As soon as it became clear, and undeniable, that the industrial proletariat was not going to play this role in the relentless march of history, socialism began to founder. Honneth writes that

> if such a pre-theoretical interest could no longer be presupposed given the lack of even the weakest empirical evidence, then socialism necessarily faced the danger of losing its right to exist along with its ties to a social movement. Without a link to active social forces, socialism would become just another normative theory about a reality that fails to live up to the theory's ideal. Therefore, the corrosion of the workers movement was more than a mere hitch; as soon as the hope was dashed that the proletariat might embody at least a fragment of the interest in revolutionary change once ascribed to it, socialism was struck to the core, for it could no longer claim to be the theoretical expression of a living movement. (*TIoS* 42)

In line with this view, Honneth makes it clear that his idea of socialism will be able to offer an alternative form of 'active grounding'. I will discuss this aspect of Honneth's philosophy more in chapter 4 (see also section 3 in chapter 6). For now it is enough to say that a core ambition of Honneth's brand of philosophy is that it is not just asserting normative principles which would then be applied to nonideal reality. The general ambition is to analyse social reality as it is, to use critical philosophical analysis to identify the 'emancipatory potential' that exists, and to clarify and thereby further emancipatory strivings.

The second, and perhaps less obvious reason for Honneth's discussion of these defects is that taken together as expressions of the 'spirit and culture' of early industrialism, the three defects serve to explain why the socialist tradition overlooked a fundamental feature of societal development in the modern era: 'functional differentiation'. Honneth writes that the early liberal philosophers, e.g., Hobbes, Locke, Hume etc., had begun to separate out different sub-systems of society in their analyses on the basis that these subsystems were said to operate according to their own 'laws'. Accordingly, early distinctions are made between 'morality' and 'legality', and subsequently between 'society', 'state', and eventually 'economy'. Honneth goes on to note how Hegel built on this nascent social analysis, writing that

> Hegel reacted to these liberal differentiations and took them into account in his *Philosophy of Right*, going on to propose a way of distinguishing between different spheres of action in terms of their specific tasks. According to his theory, the law or "right" has the task of preserving the private autonomy of all individual members of society; the family is responsible for the socialization and the satisfaction of natural needs; the market should guarantee the sufficient provision of means of subsistence; and, finally, the state is to ensure the ethical and political integration of the whole. (*TIoS* 79)

On Honneth's account, the inability of the early socialists to give proper consideration to and build on these insights into how modern society was constituted proved to be one of socialism's greatest liabilities. The origin of the idea of social freedom, writes Honneth, was the early socialists' and the young Marx's understanding that in order for the contradictions of the liberal-capitalist order to be overcome, it was necessary to establish a social order where "the freedom of each would directly presuppose the freedom of the other" (*TIoS* 77). There is nothing that says that this idea couldn't take account of the fact that different social spheres operate according to different internal logics, and that therefore what it would mean to "regard each other as partners in interaction" – and thus be able to realize (social) freedom – would be very different in the sphere of e.g. family and personal relationships vs. the political public sphere vs. the economic sphere. But, says Honneth, the "founding fathers of socialism were unable and even unwilling to take account of the process of functional differentiation occurring before their eyes, because they were all convinced that in the future the integration of all social spheres would be determined solely by the requirements of industrial production." (*TIoS* 79)

In this and connecting passages, Honneth suggests that the doctrines of historical determinism and objective interests together made it less pressing for early socialists to reconsider the idea of the primacy of the economic sphere, and that the idea of the primacy of the economic sphere, in turn, made the doctrines of historical determinism and objective interests seem more reasonable – and in this manner, with these defective ideas acting to reinforce each other, socialist thought lost sight of (or failed to continue to develop understanding of) functional differentiation.

1.5 Recommendations

Having presented the story of how social freedom should be seen as the normative core of the idea of socialism and of how the key defects rendered socialism unable to reckon properly with functional differentiation, Honneth moves to his recipe for renewal. This recipe will revolve around the imperative of breaking down barriers to communication within a functionally differentiated social system.

The reason Honneth found it necessary to critique the assumptions of objective interest and necessary historical progress was that, regardless of how faulty these ideas were, as I noted, they did serve for a time to ground socialism in active social forces, and thus make it something more than just another normative account of how society ought to look. The claim that Honneth makes now – and in a way this really is the most important claim of *The Idea of Socialism* – is that we can and should understand contemporary social movements as being struggles for social freedom. Honneth is making the claim that we can and should

understand many contemporary social movements as movements aimed at getting rid of obstacles – usually norms in one or more social spheres – that makes it difficult for some group of people to view themselves and be viewed by others as part of a mutually supplementing 'we'. Another way to put this is to call it – in line with John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas – struggles against "barriers to communication". (*TIoS* 96)

However, a recognition of the functional differentiation between social spheres means that it has to be recognized that the struggle for social freedom, the struggle against barriers to communication, will look different in different spheres and in different contexts. The example of the feminist struggle and its troubled relationship with the socialist workers movement serves to highlight the basic idea. When discussing the early socialists' inability to recognize functional differentiation, Honneth notes that the early socialists were unable to recognize the fact that the emerging women's struggle could not properly be understood – and thus advanced effectively – by reducing the dynamics behind women's oppression to economic ones. The relationship between feminism and socialism could have been a lot better from early on, says Honneth, if the socialists had made room in their analysis for functional differentiation, and thus been able to recognise that social freedom in the economic sphere does not automatically translate to and look the same as social freedom in the sphere of personal relationships. If they had been able to recognise this, he writes, they would have been able to more easily recognise the fact that the oppression of women in that sphere had to do with the imposition of stereotypes "with open or subtle forms of violence, leaving them no chance to explore their own sentiments, desires and interests" (*TIoS* 86). This, in turn, would have meant a recognition of the fact that the issue was not primarily one of trying to involve women equally in economic production, but instead of

> granting them authorship over their own self-image, independent of male ascriptions. The struggle for social freedom in the sphere of love, marriage and the family would have primarily meant enabling women to attain as much freedom as possible from economic dependency, violence-based tutelage and one-sided labor within the hatchery of male power. This would enable women to become equal partners in relationships based on mutuality, and it is only on the basis of free and reciprocal affection that both sides would have been capable of emotionally supporting each other and articulating the needs and desires they view as a true expression of their selves. (*TIoS* 86)

Hence, the remedy to economic fundamentalism is a proper recognition of the fact that different spheres of social life operate according to (linked but still in important ways independent) different internal logics. Recognition of functional differentiation means a

recognition of the fact that the internal logic of other social spheres cannot be reduced to that of the economy.

Honneth proceeds in Part IV of *The Idea of Socialism* to try to provide a sketch of a renewed socialism based in the recognition of social freedom and functional differentiation.[6] First, a renewed socialism would substitute its economic fundamentalism for the recognition of the three spheres of action that "require free cooperation and thus social freedom" and it would recognize that "modern society cannot be genuinely social as long as the spheres of personal relationships and democratic politics have not been freed of coercion and influence" (*TIoS* 90). But, says Honneth, although this is a good start, it does not amount to "a new, more complex version of the traditional socialist vision of a better form of life". What is needed is a "vision of a future way of life necessitated by the forces of history and tangible enough to awaken the willingness to realize it at least experimentally" and for that, this new socialism had to "be able to say something about how the different spheres of social freedom are to harmonize with each other in the future." (*TIoS* 90)

Socialism can no longer address itself to people in a single role; "after all, there is no longer merely an opposition between 'workers' and 'capitalists', but also equally relevant and conflictual antagonisms between family members and citizens of the polity" (*TIoS* 95). Instead, socialism must embrace a vision of society that affirms the differences in internal logic between the social spheres. The obvious candidate for this kind of socialist vision for a future society, says Honneth, is that of 'a democratic form of life' (*demokratischen Lebensform*). We should, he says, imagine the "consummately democratic society" where "every possible change should be re-examined in terms of whether it gives each sphere enough space eventually to grow into an organ of democratic life, while still operating according to its own norms." (*TIoS* 93)

Honneth says that he is expanding on John Dewey and Sidney Hook's ideas of democracy as an entire way of life by pairing it with the idea of functional differentiation, and he continues to identify the 'public democratic sphere' as *primus inter pares* among spheres of social action; here Honneth notes that he is following Dewey, Durkheim and Habermas in saying it has to take on the role of 'reflexively steering overall social reproduction'. Socialism should therefore view its addressee as being "the citizens assembled in the public sphere" or "all those who, within the sphere of democratic interaction have an ear open

[6] Since Honneth criticised the early socialists for their failure to "distinguish sufficiently between the empirical and the normative level of [their] diagnoses" we must assume that these two elements are meant to be clearly distinguished here.

for complaints over grievances, discrimination and the use of power, all of which point to symptomatic restrictions within the various spheres of society." (*TIoS* 98)

Having presented his account of the new socialist vision as a democratic form of life and the main addressee as the democratic public sphere, Honneth ends his discussion in *The Idea of Socialism* by noting the problem of nationalism v. internationalism for the socialist movement. The democratic public spheres that do exist are still predominantly national and limited in character, whereas globalization has ensured that the issues that have to be dealt with are increasingly beyond the reach of merely national public will-formation. Still, socialism cannot be purely internationalist, since

> spheres of action are affected to much different degrees by the tendency toward global regulation. Although the economic system is largely controlled by 'global society', this is in no way true for the family or for intimate relationships and friendships, which are still largely determined by the moral and legal conditions prevailing in individual countries or cross-country cultures. (*TIoS* 100)

In addition, the fact that large parts of the population taking part in the public political sphere still believe that their nation-state has substantial power even in matters that have in reality moved to the transnational level is a problem for a renewed socialism. It is not possible to simply "skip over the 'lagging' consciousness of citizens" says Honneth, since the political project can go nowhere without the support of the people: avant-gardism clearly is not the way to go. Even so, says Honneth, it is undeniably the case that nation-states have lost much real power, and denying that fact in order to garner support would be a dangerous populist proposition. (*ToIS* 101)

This leads Honneth to suggest that a renewed socialism adopt the kind of model exemplified by successful NGOs such as Amnesty International or Greenpeace: "a global network of local experiments […] predicated on the existence of a global organizational centre […] with chapters in as many countries as possible that can take over the necessary work of coordination." However, beneath this international level "socialism must remain rooted in geographical spaces with enough cultural and legal commonalities to enable public spheres to come about at all". This is just to say what all serious democratic political movements already know of course: transnational action is necessary for real impact and change (especially and primarily when it comes to the economic sphere) but democratic support and engagement must be sought locally. (*TIoS* 103)

1.6 Problems

In the introduction to *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth frames his project as one where he is going to be able to explain why 'visions of socialism' have lost their power to inspire, despite there being no lack of popular outrage in the face of capitalist inequities. The diagnosis he offers is one where the original normative impetus of socialism became burdened by flawed ideas, which eventually dragged the whole project under. Thus, the case made in *The Idea of Socialism* contains two intertwined but separate elements. The first, and more fundamental, is his claim about the role of social freedom. The second is his diagnosis of why and how the 'idea of socialism' lost its power to inspire. There is a hint of a third element, viz. an idea of what a renewed socialism would look like, but it is only a vague suggestion, and as such it is unlikely to have (nor be intended to have) much impact.

I would argue that of the two main elements, the first (social freedom) is intriguing, but that it fails to land. The social freedom idea fails to land in *The Idea of Socialism* because of how tightly bound up it is with the historical analysis, or diagnosis of socialism. There is no real independent, philosophical case made for why or how this (social freedom) is the ethical ideal socialists should embrace. Instead, the case is made in terms of a historical diagnosis: by showing how damaging ideas have obscured the core ethical ideal we will be able to see the reason for the decline of socialism more clearly and as we do, we will see that the decline can be (could be) addressed by getting rid of those damaging ideas and recovering the original idea.

Unfortunately, even Honneth's historical diagnosis is unconvincing. We begin to see why and how Honneth's historical diagnosis in *The Idea of Socialism* is problematic when we ask the question: which socialism is he talking about? There is not now, nor has there ever been, one 'socialism' – neither one socialist political movement nor one socialist theory. But Honneth never tells us explicitly which one he is talking about, or to. We can make some plausible assumptions to try to narrow things down of course: We know that Honneth views the various versions of early socialism as expressions of the same underlying normative ideal, that of social freedom, and that this includes Marx's socialism. Moreover, we know that his diagnosis holds that 'socialism' lost its potency due to the influence of a set of damaging Marxist ideas i.e., economic fundamentalism, historical determinism, the assumption of objective interest of the industrial proletariat. The obvious inference from this would be that the socialist traditions Honneth is concerned with are those that embrace or have embraced these damaging ideas.

The problem with this, however, is that the kind of 'socialism' that embraced these ideas ceased to be a dominant form of socialist thought more than a hundred years ago. As I will

show in the next chapter, the type of Marxist socialist position Honneth describes in *The Idea of Socialism* most closely resembles the position known as 'orthodox Marxism' in the mould of Engels and Kautsky. Orthodox Marxism was indeed the dominant socialist doctrine during the time of the Second Socialist International (1889–1916), but it lost this preeminent status around the time of World War One. Thus, if we read *The Idea of Socialism* as addressing itself to those types of socialism (i.e., those that do adhere to orthodox Marxist doctrines) then the book appears irrelevant. It would be as much of a curiosity as it would be to find a physicist today publishing a heated denunciation of the phlogiston theory.

To try to make sense of *The Idea of Socialism* as something other than a re-litigation of a long dead debate, there are a couple of possibilities. First, we could read Honneth as implying that socialism started to decline when orthodox Marxism did. If this is indeed what he is saying, it would have to mean that most of the political movements that have taken themselves to be socialist in the post-World War Two era would have to be designated as 'not actually socialist'. Alternatively, the implication could be that most or many of the socialist political movements of the post-war era have continued to be influenced by the damaging orthodox Marxist ideas even though they may have officially discarded them; not realizing that they were so influenced.

The first of these suggestions is obviously problematic, since Honneth cannot really judge which historical movements should or should not be deemed 'truly socialist' in light of a standard that he says he has only now formulated, and there is nothing in the text that suggests that this is what he thinks he is doing, or wants to do. But the second suggestion, i.e., that socialist thought has continued to be influenced by orthodox Marxist ideas even if they have not realized it, is potentially even more problematic. If this is what Honneth is saying, it would mean that he would be saying that the democratic socialist/social democratic tradition actually continued to be influenced by orthodox Marxist ideas, even though the democratic socialist/social democratic tradition broke with orthodox Marxism around the time of the First World War – explicitly citing precisely the key problems with orthodox Marxism that Honneth lists in *The Idea of Socialism*.

I note the democratic socialist/social democratic tradition in particular here, since it seems to me to be the most obvious addressee for Honneth's account in *The Idea of Socialism*. However, Honneth does not seem to recognize this as a real socialist tradition at all. He only mentions 'democratic socialism' in a brief aside, and where he does, he dismisses it without discussion.

There is, I think, a lot of unintentional parochialism at play in this dismissal. Due to the particularities of German history, the social democratic labour movement did not end up playing the same central role as it did in many other Western countries. Briefly, we might note that in the German Empire, it was conservative chancellor Otto von Bismarck who pioneered welfare programmes aimed at industrial workers, with the specific intent of undercutting support for the Marxist Social Democratic Party, which he also banned outright for long periods of time at the end of the nineteenth century. Following bitter infighting during the First World War, the party did gain significant influence during the Weimar Republic era, but was then banned once more following Adolf Hitler's ascension to the chancellorship. German social democrats were heavily persecuted during the Nazi era, and when the war finally ended, the German social democrats found that most of their traditional voter base in the protestant north-east had been cut off by the Soviet occupation and subsequent creation of East Germany (*Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR*; 1949–1990). Thus, post-war West Germany came to be dominated by Konrad Adenauer's conservative Christian-Democratic Party (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, CDU). Adenauer's CDU managed to build on the basis of the majority Catholic and traditionally conservative states that remained in West Germany and expand from this base to become "entrenched as an umbrella party of the majority center."[7] German Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands,* SPD) elected as their first post-war leader Kurt Schumacher, a heroic figure of the SPD, having been staunchly anti-Nazi from the beginning, and having spent nearly 12 years in concentration camps as a result. Schumacher held firmly on to the party's old Marxist political programme from 1891 (the Erfurt programme) and opposed Adenauer and the CDU's plans for Western integration through what would become the European Union. Tony Judt writes:

> The trouble was that Schumacher's Social Democrats had nothing practical to offer instead. By combining their traditional socialist programme of nationalizations and social guarantees with the demand for unification and neutrality they did respectably in the first […West German…] elections of 1949 […] But by the mid-fifties, with West Germany firmly tied into the Western Alliance and the incipient project of European union, and with the Socialists' doom-laden economic prophecies demonstrably falsified, the SPD was stymied.[8]

The 1891 Erfurt programme was only replaced in 1959 when, as Judt puts it, a new generation of German Socialists decided to "abandon the party's seventy-year-old

[7] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), p. 266.
[8] Ibid., p. 268.

commitment to Marxism and make a virtue of the necessity of compromise with West German reality."[9] In this context it might be somewhat more understandable that Honneth only mentions 'democratic socialism' in passing as a "stopgap solution" that the German Social Democrats adopted in 1959. Moreover, Honneth's philosophical context (i.e., the Frankfurt School) has long been dominated by Marxian perspectives, and the Marxist tradition(s) have tended to dismiss the social democratic tradition as nothing but an "unstable halfway house between Marxism and liberalism, cobbled together from elements of incompatible traditions"[10] – and it is not unreasonable to assume that Honneth would have been influenced by this view, even as he rejects parts of the Marxist tradition. (*TIoS* 36)

But the history of the German Social Democrats is not the history of democratic socialism/social democracy. And, more generally, Honneth is wrong when he says that socialism was 'struck to its core' as soon as the belief and hope that the industrial proletariat embodied an 'objective interest in revolutionary change' was dashed (cf. §1.4.4). The fact of the matter is that the workers' movement grew in strength and achieved its greatest victories after it had left orthodox Marxism behind, which it did in most places much earlier than in Germany.[11] Not only that, if we look at those parts of the workers movement that had the greatest success in the West (i.e., the social democratic labour movement) their success seems to coincide with their move away from the Marxist ideas Honneth discusses.

1.7 Conclusion

In the preface to the book, Honneth tells us that he has two major motives for writing *The Idea of Socialism*. On the one hand, he says, he wants to show that "socialism still contains a vital spark, if only we can manage to extract its core idea from the intellectual context of early industrialism and place it in a new socio-theoretical framework" (*TIoS* viii). On the other hand, he says that with *The Idea of Socialism* he wants to illustrate how the theory he developed in his previous work, *Freedom's Right*, did indeed have the potential to inspire social change, and that it was not, as many critics had worried, an exercise in conservatism. *The Idea of Socialism* is supposed to show the theoretical framework of *Freedom's Right* entailed a vision of an "entirely different social order".[12]

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Sheri Berman, *The Primacy of Politics: Social Democracy and the Making of Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 10.

[11] Socialism was 'struck to its core' with the realization that the assumption of historical determinism and a revolutionary industrial proletariat was wrong only if being 'struck to the core' means successfully establishing social democratic welfare states in the West and revolutionary communist dictatorships in e.g. the Soviet Union and China.

[12] Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, p. viii.

I have argued that Honneth does not accomplish the first goal. Indeed, it remains unclear what it would even mean for him to do that, given that he does not address any actual socialist tradition. Even so, it is possible that the theoretical framework focused on the idea of social freedom could hold potential for a socialist tradition. I believe that if so, the best addressee would be the social democratic tradition – and in the next chapter I will show why. But in order to assess the potential of Honneth's framework for contemporary social democracy (or any other political movement), we need a deeper understanding of his philosophical project. It will be necessary to examine the idea of social freedom in the context of Honneth's larger philosophical *oeuvre*. This examination makes up chapters 3 through 6.

Chapter 2: Social Democracy

2.1 Revisionism, Reformism and Social Democracy

Someone unfamiliar with the topic might be forgiven if, having read *The Idea of Socialism*, they came away with the impression that orthodox Marxism was the dominant tradition in the socialist movement until somewhere near the fall of the Soviet Union. Of course, Honneth almost certainly expects his audience to have some familiarity with the history of socialism, but even so, it is hard not to read Honneth as suggesting that orthodox Marxist ideas remained dominant in the socialist movement for a very long time, and that they (only) slowly began to lose their power "as social conditions were radically changed by technological advance, structural transformation and political reforms in the 1960's and 1970's" (*TIoS* 49). As for the tradition of democratic socialism, as I noted above, Honneth only mentions it in passing as a "stopgap solution". (*TIoS* 36)

In this chapter I am going to present a counter-narrative to Honneth's history of socialism and make the point that the socialist *qua* social democratic tradition is a significant intellectual and political tradition that Honneth could have looked to and sought to address his social freedom narrative to. The benefits of doing so would be twofold. From Honneth's point of view, he would be addressing himself to a tradition with which his social freedom analysis fits more seamlessly, as it builds on and elucidates points that have long been embraced by that tradition. From the perspective of the social democratic tradition, Honneth's social freedom theory offers the prospect of a theoretical framework that would allow it to understand its long-held principles and its historical achievements in a new light. My contention is that social democracy is the socialist tradition that has been most clearly committed to something like the ideal of social freedom. It is also the case, however, that social democracy is currently in a state of deep crisis – in part, I would argue, due to its inability to formulate its ideological programme in a clear and compelling way in the present context. I believe that the social freedom theory could offer some guidance to social democracy, but this cannot and should not be a one sided exchange; the challenge will be to use the ideas Honneth develops and adapt them in such a way that they make sense in the social democratic context.

The first step towards some kind of synthesis between Honneth's theory of social freedom and social democracy, then, is to try to zero in on the social democratic understanding of socialism, now that we have seen Honneth's. To this end, we should begin by emphasising that the orthodox Marxism that Honneth describes in *The Idea of Socialism* was never unquestioned in the socialist movement. It was, to be sure, the dominant and official doctrine of many socialist parties during the time of the Second International (1889 –

1916), but the First World War and the Russian Revolution[13] spelled the end of orthodox Marxist dominance, even if it remained the official programme of the German party for longer than that. Second, and more importantly for the purposes of the current discussion: the theoretical tradition that would become social democracy had its roots even earlier than the First World War. It received a systematic theoretical formulation through the work of Eduard Bernstein in the late 1890s. It was then further developed and put into practice in Sweden, beginning in the 1930s.

I should note that my own understanding of the social democratic tradition is informed to a large degree by studies of Swedish history and involvement in the Social Democratic Labour Party (and wider movement) in Sweden, and lately in New Zealand. With respect to the ideology or political theory of social democracy I have been influenced by the writings of Ernst Wigforss (1881-1977), who tends to be seen within the Swedish social democratic movement as its premier ideologue. In the following account and historical overview however, I will be drawing on the work of Sheri Berman, and her 2006 book *The Primacy of Politics* in particular. Berman, who is American and a professor of political science at Columbia University, writes of the history of social democracy from a more international perspective. Although I do not share all of her conclusions (particularly as they relate to recommendations for the contemporary political left), her historical analysis of the origins of social democracy is masterful and (as I will demonstrate) provides a particularly fruitful counterpoint to Honneth's narrative.

2.2 Revisionism

Berman writes that when it comes to 'ideologies', it is important to recognize that they always "exist at the juncture of theory and practice, with one foot in the realm of abstract ideas and the other in everyday political reality. They have their greatest impact when they can seamlessly relate the one to the other, offering adherents both a satisfying explanation of the world and a guide to mastering it."[14] Accordingly, Berman argues that the best way to understand the emergence of social democracy as a political ideology is to set it in the wider context of 'revisionism'[15] as it developed during the *fin-de-siècle* and the interbellum period. Indeed, Berman places Eduard Bernstein's democratic socialist revisionism in the same wider category as both Georges Sorel's proto-fascist revisionism, and Vladimir Lenin's revolutionary communist revisionism. The common denominator between all the various forms of revisionism that developed during the period, according to Berman, was

[13] Lenin's revolutionary communism was a rejection of official orthodox Marxist doctrine; especially of historical materialism and economic determinism.
[14] Berman, *The Primacy of Politics,* p. 9.
[15] Ideas of how to 'revise' the official socialist doctrine; i.e., the orthodox Marxism of the Second International.

their insistence on the 'primacy of politics' rather than the 'primacy of economics'. On this view, classical Liberalism and orthodox Marxism are placed on one side emphasising the primacy of economics, and fascism, Nazism, revolutionary communism and social democracy stand on the other, emphasising the primacy of politics.

Like Honneth, Sheri Berman explains the initial popularity of orthodox Marxism during the 1870s and 1880s by reference to the fact that, during this time, much of Europe was suffering from a serious economic depression. These lived experiences, Berman says, "made orthodox Marxism's stress on the misery, inefficiency, and imminent collapse of capitalism easy to believe."[16]And, she adds, because socialists were persecuted by the state in many parts of Europe (and beyond) at the same time, orthodox Marxism provided "workers with a conviction that history was on their side and with a collective identity as the group tasked with propelling history forward" and as such "helped many socialists weather dark and depressing times and united and strengthened the young movement for the struggle ahead."[17]

However, as the end of the nineteenth century approached, faith in the orthodox Marxist doctrine was already starting to wane in some circles, and again, it is fairly easy to see why. For all intents and purposes, orthodox Marxism was a prophecy, and as the years went on, it became increasingly obvious that history was not progressing in the manner it predicted. The doctrine faced its first practical challenge in France, in large part due to the fact that under the Third Republic (1870-1940) socialist parties had the ability to engage in electoral politics in a way that was not possible in more autocratic systems. Already in 1882, a group split off from the French Workers Party (*Parti Ouvrier Français*, POF) specifically because they objected to the POF's orthodox Marxist stance on the value of the Republic and democracy. The underlying issue was whether and to what extent socialists should engage in electoral politics at all: orthodox doctrine held that no lasting improvements could be achieved through reforms utilising the framework of the bourgeois state, but the realities on the ground were such that the voters who supported the French socialists required more than just a counsel of 'wait and prepare for the collapse'.

By the last decade of the nineteenth century, three factors combined to give rise to revisionism. First, Marxist parties increasingly found themselves wielding real political power; not only in France but in places like Italy, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire as well. Second, it was becoming clearer by the day that the prophesized collapse of the capitalist system was not coming anytime soon; the system seemed to be growing

[16] Berman, *The Primacy of Politics*, p. 26.
[17] Ibid.

more stable, not less. Third, social fragmentation and economic injustice – although perhaps not at the extreme level as during early Manchester capitalism in the 1840s – was still a pressing issue acutely felt by large swaths of the population. This was a time of intense urbanization and concomitant social fragmentation.

Berman argues that against this background, two shared convictions emerged that became fundamental for very different kinds of revisionism. The first was the conviction that, if a better future was not going to come about as a result of 'economic laws of motion working with iron necessity towards inevitable results,'[18] then it would have to be actively created through human, political action. Berman calls this the assertion of the 'primacy of politics' over the 'primacy of economics' as the driving forces in societal development. The second conviction that came to be shared by otherwise very different revisionist thinkers was one regarding the role and importance of national community. These two ideas would be cashed out in very different ways, largely depending on how the revisionists viewed the liberal state.

Looking first at the democratic revisionist tradition, we see that it grew from an early division between socialists who, in accordance with Marxist orthodoxy, completely rejected the value of the liberal (bourgeois) democratic state, and those who were inclined to argue that real progress could be made towards socialism through democratic reformism. Berman quotes one of the earliest democratic revisionists, Jean Jaurès, who rose to prominence in the French socialist movement during the Dreyfus Affair, when he argued (against the orthodox position) that the socialists should embrace and defend the Republic from reactionary forces, saying "the democratic Republic is not, as our self-styled doctrinaires of Marxism so often say, a purely bourgeois form . . . it heralds Socialism, it prepares for it, contains it implicitly to some extent, because only Republicanism can lead to Socialism by legal evolution without break of continuity."[19]

Although this division had been evident in France for a while due to the nature of Third Republic politics, by the time Jaurès entered the scene the split had begun to show in Germany as well. And it was in Germany that the theoretical foundation for democratic revisionism would be laid. Although they were the oldest and largest socialist party in the world, the German Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands,* SPD) had been banned from participating freely in elections during the autocratic regime of chancellor Otto von Bismarck. But after Bismarck left the scene in 1890, and the anti-socialist laws lapsed, the SPD too found its theoretical commitment to orthodox Marxism

[18] Paraphrased from Karl Marx's preface to the first German edition of *Das Kapital.*
[19] Berman, *The Primacy of Politics*, p. 32.

increasingly at odds with its practical political reality as it found itself an important political player with considerable influence in both national and regional political assemblies. "It was," writes Berman, "against this background of a growing gap between the party's official ideology and the reality it faced that Eduard Bernstein launched the most comprehensive and formidable theoretical critique of the orthodox position that the continent had yet seen."[20] And, she continues, quite apart from the substance of his critique, the fact that it came from Bernstein was extremely important, since

> Bernstein was no ordinary socialist. He was one of the SPD's most important leaders and intellectual figures, a trusted and early colleague of Marx and Engels, and a good friend of Kautsky's. As such, his views had to be taken seriously. As one observer noted, "when Bernstein challenged the accuracy of Marxian prophecy it was as if the pope declared there would be no Second Coming." In addition to his background, the fact that Bernstein's home base was the continent's most powerful socialist party and one that viewed its identity as being tied up with orthodox Marxism also gave his theoretical critique added weight.[21]

Bernstein recognised all the flaws of orthodox Marxism that Honneth points to as its defects in *The Idea of Socialism,* and in *The Preconditions of Socialism* (1899) he critiques them all in turn. The middle classes were not disappearing; the masses were not suffering from increasing impoverishment, and the capitalist system was not suffering from increasingly frequent crises. And because the orthodox Marxist predictions about the development of the capitalist economy were demonstrably false, the connected notion that the socialist transformation would come about as an inevitable result of economic forces was little more than a "fairy tale".[22] It is, wrote Bernstein, "neither possible nor necessary to give the victory of socialism a purely materialistic basis."[23]

In contrast, Bernstein presented a model of socialism that placed political activism front and centre. The SPD had, much like their French comrades, been forced by political realities to engage in democratic politics and found themselves wielding considerable influence in parliament by the late 1890s. Bernstein argued that the SPD should embrace democratic politics and recognise it not only as an important tool for progressing towards socialism, but also part of the very ideal of socialism itself. In a passage that turns orthodox Marxism on its head both rhetorically and doctrinally, he writes that:

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[20] Ibid., p. 38.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Eduard Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, ed. Henry Tudor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 168.
[23] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism,* p. 200.

> anyone who has not succumbed to the utopian idea that, under the impact of a prolonged revolutionary catastrophe, the nations of today will dissolve into a multitude of mutually independent communities, will regard democracy as more than a political expedient the only use of which, insofar as it serves as an instrument for the working class, is to complete the ruin of capital. Democracy is both means and end. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism, and it is the form in which socialism will be realised.[24]

Bernstein could hold this view of democratic politics in part because he understood socialism not as the antithesis of liberalism, but rather as the "legitimate heir" of liberalism "not only chronologically, but also intellectually".[25] Consequently, he makes the point in *The Preconditions of Socialism* that socialists should concern themselves with "the defence of civil liberty" since the "aim of all socialist measures, even of those that outwardly appear to be coercive measures, is the development and protection of the free personality."[26] This view of democracy also went hand in hand with Bernstein's view of the class struggle. In short, Bernstein rejected the orthodox Marxist view of the class struggle and argued that socialism should be understood as "addressed to the people as a whole rather than as an ideology tethered to only one social group".[27]

We should, I think, understand Bernstein's view of cross-class cooperation as part and parcel of his view of socialism as democracy. In *The Preconditions of Socialism*, Bernstein famously asserts that democracy should be defined as "the absence of class government".[28] In the discussion that follows, he goes on to argue that although the right to vote, universal suffrage, must be understood as a necessary condition of democracy, it is not sufficient. "The right to vote in a democracy" he says, "makes its members virtual partners in the community"[29] – but the next step must also be taken, whereby "real partnership" is achieved. In the context of this discussion he refers to the case of England, and the extension of the vote to urban workers in 1867. There is not, he seems to be saying, a real partnership in England yet; no real democracy – but by extending the vote (virtual partnership) steps are being taken towards real democracy.

This, I think, is what he wants to illustrate when he writes of the positive developments in England since the reform. The establishment of state schools in addition to private and

[24] Ibid., p. 142.
[25] Berman, *The Primacy of Politics*, p. 72.
[26] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, pp. 147-8.
[27] Ben Jackson, "Social Democracy" in *The Oxford handbook of political ideologies*, Michael Freeden and Marc Stears eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 350.
[28] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, p. 140.
[29] Ibid., p. 144.

church schools; decreases in indirect taxation and increases in direct taxation; agrarian legislation rendering "the property-absolutism of the landowner less overwhelming" as well as "the expansion [of] factory legislation" – all of this, and "similar developments on the Continent" writes Bernstein,

> is due, not exclusively, but essentially to democracy - or to that element of democracy which the countries in question have instituted. And if, in some areas, the legislation of politically advanced countries does not proceed as expeditiously as it occasionally does under the influence of energetic monarchs or their ministers in countries that are relatively backward politically, then at least there is no backsliding in these matters where democracy is established.[30]

Bernstein follows this up with a condemnation of the Marxist doctrine of 'class dictatorship' as a necessary means of transitioning from capitalist to socialist society. That idea was conceived, he says, during a time when the current possibilities of using democratic politics to "transition from capitalist to socialist society" was not imagined. He then goes on to make a fine, but quite important point about the language that is used and how it impacts the conception of progress towards a socialist society. In German, he points out, the word for citizen and *bourgeois* are the same: *Bürger*. And, relatedly, the word for 'civil society' and '*bourgeois* society' is also the same: *bürgerlich*. So, he says, while "everyone in the end knows what is meant when we speak of opposing the bourgeoisie and abolishing bourgeois society" it is something of an open question what is meant by "opposing or abolishing civil [*bürgerlich*] society". Thus, Bernstein argues, the Social Democrats should be clear on the matter and say that while they want to abolish bourgeois society, they certainly do not want to abolish civil society. Rather:

> in Germany, the priority is still to get rid of significant elements of feudalism which stand in the way of civil [*bürgerlich*] development. No one thinks of destroying civil society as a community ordered in a civilised way. Quite the contrary, Social democracy does not want to break up civil society and make all its members proletarians together; rather, it ceaselessly labours to raise the worker from the social position of a proletarian to that of a citizen [*Bürger*] and thus to make citizenship universal. It does not want to replace a civil society with a proletarian society but a capitalist order of society with a socialist one.[31]

This 'raising' of people to the status of full citizen, where that is in turn understood as someone who participates as a real, not just a virtual, partner in a democratic community

[30] Ibid., p. 143.
[31] Ibid., p. 146.

is, I think, emblematic of Bernstein's reformist socialism. It is also in this light that we should understand the connection between Bernstein's view of cross-class cooperation and nationalism. All throughout the nineteenth century, nationalism was a growing force in Europe, and the issue of how the socialists should relate to it grew in urgency. Berman writes that Bernstein

> recognized nationalism's powerful emotional and psychological appeal – and the danger to the socialist movement that could come in ceding the issue to others. Bernstein often bemoaned "Bebel's and Kautsky's defeatist strategy of dealing with the national question by invoking a 'meaningless' Marxist utopia in an 'international socialist future' which would make the issue of nationalism irrelevant." He feared that if the SPD continued to champion a "mushy internationalism" that it would "push the proletariat into the arms of nationalist fanatics while also failing to attract progressive segments of the bourgeoisie." Bernstein urged his colleagues to avoid "the Schylla of ethnonationalism and the Charybdis of an amorphous internationalism," and instead champion a noble patriotism based on citizens' "natural feelings of love for their own country and their people." He saw no contradiction between this kind of patriotism and true internationalism; in fact, he believed that they reinforced each other.[32]

While Bernstein's recipe for a revision of socialist doctrine was democratic and argued for a non-chauvinistic type of nationalism as a help to build a democratic community, there were other forms of revisionism that emerged at the same time. To wit, the most famous of the revisionists that emerged around the end of the century was not Bernstein, but Lenin. Lenin's revisionism must be understood in the context of Russian political and economic realities of the time: Russia was still a largely agrarian society ruled by an absolutist emperor, so if socialism were to come – as orthodox Marxism predicted – when capitalism had developed to a sufficiently late stage, it seemed that the Russians would have to wait a very long time for it indeed. Lenin thus concluded that if it was to be achieved on any reasonable timescale, socialism would have to be brought about by means of direct political action. "This realization" writes Berman,

> Lenin shared with other revisionists; where he differed is in the conclusions he drew from this. Where democratic revisionists put their faith in the ability of an inspired majority to effect fundamental change through democratic means, in Lenin's

[32] Berman, *The Primacy of Politics* p. 62. Although, it should be noted that Bernstein did not see any problems with colonization of "savages". Cf. Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, p. 170.

> revisionism historical materialism was replaced by the view that socialism could be imposed through the politico-military efforts of a revolutionary elite.[33]

In addition to these two strands of revisionism (democratic socialist/social democratic and revolutionary communist/Leninist) however, there emerged a third (nationalist and revolutionary) variant around the same time. The nationalist revolutionary strand of revisionism shared with the others the conviction that political action was needed to overcome the ills of the modern capitalist world; thus, they rejected orthodox Marxist historical materialism and asserted the primacy of politics. They also rejected the orthodox Marxist doctrine of class-struggle and shared with Bernstein and Jaurès the conviction that broader cross-class alliances needed to be built – and that this could be done by building on the national community. Where they differed from the democratic revisionists was in their complete rejection of liberal democracy: "influenced by the larger anti-Enlightenment backlash of the fin-de-siècle" writes Berman, these revisionists "had nothing but disdain for liberalism and all it represented."[34]

I do not have the space to discuss the details of Berman's analysis of the emergence of Fascism and National Socialism and how it related to the larger revisionist movement around the turn of the century and the interbellum period, but one aspect of it is worth emphasising: the moral dimension. For the democratic and the anti-democratic revisionists both, the embrace of the primacy of politics as opposed to the primacy of economics also meant a (re)assertion of the role of morality and idealism for social struggle – something that orthodox Marxism rejected. As I noted above, democracy for Bernstein was an ethical ideal, something like a synthesis of the ethical values of community and individual freedom. And in a similar way, the (anti-liberal, anti-democratic) community of the nation was a moral ideal for the Fascists and the National Socialists. Thus, writes Berman,

> while both liberals and orthodox Marxists denigrated it – the former because they wanted to maximize individual freedom and liberty, the latter because they saw the state as a tool of the elite – Fascism placed the state at the center of its transformative vision, portraying it as a powerful entity that stood above the interests of particular individuals or groups. This view they shared with their social democratic counterparts, but they went beyond them by imbuing the state with nearly mystical qualities. As Mussolini put it, for Fascists, "The State . . . is a spiritual and moral entity because it is the concrete political, juridical, and economic organization of the nation. . . . Therefore for the Fascist, everything is in the State,

[33] Berman, *The Primacy of Politics*, p. 66.
[34] Ibid., pp. 68-9.

> and nothing human or spiritual exists, much less has value, outside the State. In this sense Fascism is totalitarian, and the Fascist State, the synthesis and unity of all values, interprets, develops and gives strength to the whole life of the people."[35]

Before moving on to look at how social democracy developed out of democratic revisionism, I want to end this section by outlining the commonalities I see in Berman and Honneth's view of socialism. Berman's analysis in *The Primacy of Politics* and Honneth's in *The Idea of Socialism* and *Freedom's Right* share some important features. Like Honneth, Berman is heavily influenced by Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* and Ferdinand Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*. Accordingly, Berman draws on Tönnies and Polanyi in framing the basic problem that each of the disparate strands of revisionism were a response to the destruction of community wrought by capitalist market society; "'Re-creating through political means the social unity which modernization has destroyed' has thus been, as we will see, one of the main challenges facing modern societies."[36] Thus both Honneth and Berman are revisionists in the sense that they seek to assert an understanding of the impetus behind socialism that differs from the mainstream view; and in both cases they locate the heart of the issue in the dislocation and sundering of community wrought by capitalist modernity. Additionally, both Honneth and Berman indict orthodox Marxism for losing sight of this moral core of socialism.

2.3 The Ideology of Social Democracy

Insofar as the theoretical tradition that we label 'democratic revisionist socialism' developed into a distinct ideology called 'social democracy', the clearest example of where and how it did so would be the case of Sweden. Over the years, Swedish social democracy has achieved "an almost iconic status among international observers of social democracy and welfare policy, as a paradigmatic case of social democracy."[37] This iconic status is not difficult to explain, since, until the 1990s, the Swedish Social Democratic Party (*Socialdemokratiska Arbetarepartiet*; abbreviated SAP) held a position of dominance that is unmatched in the history of any modern democracy. The SAP held the office of prime minister for forty consecutive years between 1936 and 1976; the party gained an average of 44.8 percent of the votes in the elections held between 1921 and 1985, and received over 50% of the total vote share in five elections – all of which was achieved in a multiparty

[35] Ibid., p. 132.
[36] Ibid., p. 5.
[37] Jenny Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop: Social democracy and Capitalism in the Knowledge Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 14. ProQuest Ebook Central.

system with proportional representation.[38] And the SAP's dominance was cultural as well as political. In her 2016 book *The Rise and Fall of The Miraculous Welfare Machine,* Carly Elizabeth Schall describes it in terms of a Gramscian hegemony where the SAP successfully established "a hegemonic way of thinking about the role of the state and the features of a 'good society.'" And that, in a wider sense, "Swedishness [became] synonymous with social democratic values".[39]

In his book *The Political Theory of Swedish Social Democracy* (1990), Timothy Tilton argues that the SAP adopted a revisionist approach almost from the beginning. Although around its founding in 1889 it did model itself on the German SPD and considered itself Marxist, it never went in for the kind of hard-line doctrinaire approach that the German party took under the direction of Kautsky. In large part this was due to the influence of the SAP's early leaders. Hjalmar Branting in particular, who led the party from its founding until his death in 1925, was enormously influential in shaping the character of Swedish social democracy. Branting considered himself a Marxist and the SAP a Marxist party, but his was undoubtedly a revisionist Marxism, and his enduring legacy for the SAP lies in his focus on the importance of organisation, pragmatic cross-class cooperation, and above all his insistence that the SAP must be a broad mass-party; a people's party, rather than a class party.[40] Tilton writes:

> The triumph of Swedish democracy in 1918 [when universal suffrage was passed, L.I] vindicated Branting's strategy. It resulted from a Liberal-Social Democratic alliance and three decades of effort. It assumed parliamentary form, but was pushed forward by massive popular protests, held in check by Branting and the Social Democrats. In the final stages Branting deliberately limited his demands to what he believed represented a general consensus. 'What we want' he said in his 1917 May

[38] Göran Therborn, "A Unique Chapter in the History of Democracy: The Swedish Social Democrats", in. *Creating Social Democracy: A Century of the Social Democratic Labor Party in Sweden*, Edited by Klaus Misgeld, Karl Molin, and Klas Åmark, 1-35, (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1992). These numbers may appear inherently suspicious to observers used to electoral systems marked by vote-rigging and other forms of corruption. Sweden is, however, consistently ranked as one of the least corrupt countries in the world (cf. Transparency International; transparency.org)

[39] Carly Elizabeth Schall, *The Rise and Fall of the Miraculous Welfare Machine: Immigration and Social democracy in Twentieth-Century Sweden* (Cornell University Press, 2016), p. 10 and p. 2. ProQuest Ebook Central.

[40] This was an approach that Bernstein urged the SPD to adopt as well, as Berman writes "When [the SPD] decided to revise its program in the early 1920s, Bernstein and others urged the party to recognize changed times and make an explicit commitment to a *Volkspartei* (people's party) strategy and declare itself the party of the "working people" – a term explicitly designed to include groups outside the traditional proletariat – and drop the doom-and-gloom scenario of historical materialism. Yet this shift was ultimately rejected, with the party accepting a draft designed by Kautsky that returned the SPD to the rhetoric of economic determinism and class struggle." Berman, *The Primacy of Politics*, p. 99.

> Day oration, 'is not simply to win in a moment of stormy upheaval, something that we cannot hold on to. We want something *lasting*…'[41]

If the foundations for the Swedish social democratic ideology were laid by Branting and his contemporaries in their building of a broad people's party, this was then developed further by the second generation into what has been called the People's Home (*Folkhemmet*) ideology. The concept of the *Folkhem*, the People's Home, is central to understanding Swedish social democracy because it encapsulates both the ideal and the strategy of the movement.

In 1928, Branting's successor as leader of the SAP and prime minister, Per Albin Hansson held a famous speech, later dubbed *folkhemstalet*. In the speech, Hansson picks up on what had previously been a traditionally right-wing rhetorical and ideological device; the analogy between a good home and a good society. He begins his speech by reminding of how, in the past, this imagery of the nation as the people's or citizen's home had mainly been used as a way for the ruling elite to instil a sense of duty in the masses, a willingness to bear burdens and to sacrifice for the nation. While a sense of duty on behalf of the individual towards the common is all well and good, he goes on to say, it should not be one-sided, and it should not be of a hierarchical nature. Accordingly, he goes on to outline his vision of a social democratic conception of the nation as the 'people's home' in the most famous lines of the speech:

> The foundation of a home is the sense of community and togetherness. A good home does not have divisions into privileged and deprived; no favourites and no neglected stepchildren. A good home is marked by equality, consideration, cooperation and supportiveness. Applied to the greater people's and citizens' home this would entail tearing down all the social and economic barriers that now separate citizens into privileged and deprived, rulers and ruled, plunderers and plundered. Swedish society is not yet a good people's home. For although it is formally equal with respect to political rights; from a social perspective class society remains, and from an economic perspective the dictatorship of the few reigns. For Swedish society to become a good home for all citizens, class divisions must be removed, social care must expand, wealth inequality must be levelled, the working people

[41] Timothy Tilton, *The Political Theory of Swedish Social Democracy: Through the Welfare State to Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 28.

> must be afforded their share of management of the economy as democracy is realized and applied both socially and economically.[42]

The adoption of the *folkhem* device is described by Berman as a strategy used by the SAP in response to the growing forces of nationalism. During the 1928 election campaign, the right-wing parties settled on a strategy of portraying the SAP as a stalking horse of Soviet communism, and therefore a danger to the nation. In light of these attacks, Hansson became convinced that the way forward was for the SAP to shift even more decisively their appeals from that of the class of workers to the people (*folk*) as a whole. Thus, writes Carly Elizabeth Schall, "By the 1932 election, language appealing to 'the general good,' 'societal interest,' 'all of the Swedish people,' and 'the whole nation' had become the dominant discourse from SAP."[43] This move allowed the SAP to withstand, and even harness the surge of nationalist sentiment that swept over Europe in the 1920s and 30s. Berman writes that "When the Great Depression hit Sweden, the SAP was thus already armed with the *folkhemmet* idea and committed to a strategy that emphasized the party's desire to help not merely workers, but the 'weak,' the 'oppressed,' and 'people' more generally".[44] And just as importantly, she goes on to note, the SAP's shift to a people's party strategy had been accompanied by the development of a new kind of economic policy.

The economic policy of the SAP would later become known as the model of a 'mixed economy', or else a 'third way' between capitalism and state communism. As such it has often been painted as the result of a compromise rather than as a result of socialist ideology. If we look at the rationale provided by the second generation of Swedish Social Democrats, we get a different picture, however. The main architect of the SAP's economic policies was Ernst Wigforss, who served as finance minister between 1925–1926; 1932–1936; and 1936–1949. Already in 1919, Wigforss submitted a programme to the party congress that would later be the basis for much of the reforms implemented later. In the programme, Wigforss proposed

> among other things, a recognized right to employment, shorter working hours, a statutory paid two-week vacation, higher old-age pensions, a national health programme, maternity allowances, survivors' benefits, public support of housing construction, equal educational opportunity, progressive income and inheritance

[42] My translation from *Riksdagens protokoll, Andra kammaren*, 1928:3, [Parliament's minutes, Second Chamber, 1928:3] p. 11. (https://www.riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/protokoll/riksdagens-protokoll_DP9O3) Cf. Tilton, *The Political Theory of Swedish Social Democracy*, pp. 126-7.
[43] Schall, *The Rise and Fall of the Miraculous Welfare Machine,* p. 41.
[44] Berman, *The Primacy of Politics*, p. 167.

> taxes, a capital levy, the socialization of finance and insurance, 'the development of production and the organization of economic life under society's control,' and the promotion of economic efficiency, extension of consumer co-operatives, and a strong dose of worker-codetermination in industry.[45]

Wigforss, who Tilton identifies as "the foremost ideologist of Swedish Social Democracy" was certainly a revisionist and clearly influenced by Bernstein. He published a text in 1908 where he argued forcefully against the economic determinism and disaster theory of orthodox Marxism. Moreover, Wigforss recognised that if it was the case (as he argued with Bernstein that it was) that socialism would not come about through economic developments alone, then it was imperative that the socialists understood what their normative ideals were, since they would have to guide day-to-day political work. In 1932, Wigforss published an election pamphlet that laid out the case for counter-cyclical public investment and work-creation programmes to combat economic depression and unemployment. In this, says Tilton, Wigforss was not drawing on 'Keynesian' economic theory; but rather anticipated it by drawing on what he understood as fundamental social democratic principles; the principle that society should control the economy, not the other way around.

Wigforss' approach initially faced pushback in the movement, since there was still a substantial wing of the party that wanted to go forward with a more traditionally Marxist socialization strategy (i.e., nationalization). With the backing of the party leadership however, the new approach was adopted by the party congress in 1932, which meant that Hansson's political strategy of rendering the SAP into a 'people's party' that sought to build the good 'people's home' was married to Wigforss' model of socialism as full (social) democracy – which included 'economic democracy'.

2.4 Golden Years, Third Way Reforms and Decline

This social democratic hegemony in Sweden can be said to have lasted until either the 1990s or the early 2000s. Since then, the SAP has not enjoyed the dominant position it did before. But when Timothy Tilton published his book *The Political Theory of Swedish Social Democracy* in 1990, the SAP could still plausibly view themselves as continuing a grand narrative, one that Tilton characterises as follows:

> The Social Democrats themselves characterise their history in three stages (cf. for example Palme, 1987: 21). From their beginnings until 1918 they focused on the struggle for political democracy; together with the Liberals they engineered a reform establishing equal and universal suffrage. Following the dissolution of the alliance

[45] Tilton, *The Political Theory of Swedish Social Democracy,* p. 45.

> with the Liberals and a period of frustrating 'minority parliamentarism' in the 1920's, the Social Democrats embarked on the construction of Social democracy in the 1930's. With the Keynesian-style economic policy devised by Finance Minister Ernst Wigforss and a series of social policy measures orchestrated by Social Minister Gustav Möller, the party sought both to accelerate economic growth and to distribute the gains more equitably. These efforts culminated in the post-Second World War 'harvest period' when the party, pursuing the aims outlined in the Post-war programme of 1944, achieved full employment, established a generous new basic retirement system, child benefit, universal health insurance, a more democratic single-track education system, longer statutory holidays, more progressive taxes, an active labour and market policy, and housing subsidies. A panoply of additional lesser measures also contributed to the Swedish welfare state's distinctive character – a provision of largely universal services of high quality affording *trygghet* (a Swedish word more evocative and warm than its English translation 'security') from cradle to grave. In the 1950's and 1960's the party reorganized and expanded its social welfare institutions, the most notable being the income-related supplementary pension scheme passed in 1969.[46]

The SAP timeline provided by Tilton above affirms the common view of the 'golden age' of social democracy as extending from around the early post-war years up until the 1970s. From the 1970s onward, social democracy would begin to struggle. A changing economic and social landscape made traditional social democratic policies less effective: the ability to control the forces of the capitalist economy lessened in turn with the globalisation of capital and production. At the same time, these policies became less popular. To this latter point, Jackson writes that

> Alongside […] quantifiable changes in social life came a more intangible cultural shift towards a widespread desire for greater individual freedom and self-expression, whether articulated via growing consumer purchasing power in the market, or in rebellion against social norms and institutions felt to constrain the individual (Eley 2002: 341–428; Kitschelt 1994). In such a context, the traditional outlook of social democracy appeared to be a doctrine oriented around manufacturing industry, a male breadwinner model of family life, hostility to the acquisition of consumer goods, and the defence of the impersonal bureaucratic institutions of the welfare state and trade unions.[47]

As a result of these economic and social shifts, the 1970s saw the rise of neoliberalism across the Western world, with the election of Margret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Raegan in the USA marking key shifts in the political landscape. 'Neoliberalism' is a nebulous term, but I will follow Johanna Bockman who gives a provisional definition of

[46] Tilton, *The Political Theory of Swedish Social Democracy,* p. 4.
[47] Jackson, "Social Democracy", p. 358.

neoliberalism as a political ideology and approach to government which has at its core the assumption that "governments cannot create economic growth or provide social welfare; rather, by trying to help, governments make the world worse for everyone, including the poor. Instead, private companies, private individuals, and, most importantly, unhindered markets are best able to generate economic growth and social welfare."[48] (To this I would add the basic contradiction at the heart of neoliberalism, viz. that the ideological belief in thoroughly free markets was always combined with state action to shape markets.) This, then, was the ideology that rose to challenge social democracy. And during the 80s and 90s it managed to do so incredibly effectively, with neoliberal political leaders or parties coming to power not just in the UK and USA, but across the Western world during the 80s, 90s and 2000s. Bockman writes:

> Most sociologists agree that political leaders began to forge neoliberal states in the 1970s. Capitalism had entered a series of worldwide crises—the oil crisis, fiscal crisis, stagflation, debt crisis, and legitimacy crisis due to the widespread popularity of socialism—all of which undermined capitalists' profits and control over the economy. For Marxist scholars like David Harvey, neoliberalism was a capitalist response. Capitalists and their political allies sought to implement neoliberal policies in order to restore the conditions for profitability and capitalist power. To that end, politicians privatized formerly state-owned industries, sold off public or pseudo-public land, and contracted out former state activities. Market actors, particularly corporations, did not have to generate new wealth, but could profit from ownership of entities often created by former socialist or progressive governments.

Berman notes that the initial social democratic response to the neoliberal and conservative resurgence starting in the 1970s was a purely defensive one, seeking to preserve as much as possible of their previous achievements. But, says Berman, "by this time, most in the movement had forgotten that these policies, while crucial achievements, were only means to larger ends"[49]. Consequently, the social democrats came across as backwards-looking and as having no distinctive solutions to deal with new economic realities, and so often lost out to the more innovative-seeming new right wing.[50]

Having lost out to this neoliberal surge, the eventual response from social democracy in the mid-1990s came to be known as the 'Third Way'. The Third Way is the name given to the new programme adopted by many social democratic parties during the 1990s and early

[48] Johanna Bockman, "Neoliberlism", *Contexts* 12(3) (2013): 14–15.
[49] Sheri Berman, "The Roots and Rationale of Social Democracy", *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20(1) (2003): 139.
[50] Ibid.

2000s. Key figures of Third Way social democracy were Tony Blair (leader of the British Labour Party between 1994 and 2007 and prime minister of the United Kingdom between 1997 and 2007); Gerhard Schröder (leader of the German Social Democratic Party between 1999 and 2004 and chancellor of Germany between 1998 and 2005) and to a lesser extent Göran Persson (leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Party between 1996 and 2007 and prime minister of Sweden between 1996 and 2006). In addition to these politicians, British sociologist Anthony Giddens can be said to be the main ideologue of Third Way social democracy, having published *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy* in 1998, and acting as a key advisor to Tony Blair in his construction of 'New Labour' and the Third Way programme.[51]

In general terms, Third Way social democracy can be said to centre on a recognition of the changed socio-economic circumstances brought about by globalization, and to be an attempted adaption of the social democratic policy programme to this new reality. "The notion of the Third Way" writes Jenny Andersson,

> became a term for a big project involved in rethinking the welfare state, of finding new means of social intervention after the deregulation and market liberalization of the 1980s and 1990s, and of finding new economic and social policies for the knowledge economy, which was almost unanimously hailed as the way forward.[52]

The Third Way did mean that some elements of the neoliberal surge were acceded to and taken on board. Most notably, the Third Way meant that private sector involvement in public services was accepted; 'market solutions' came to be seen as legitimate and, in many cases, superior. This represented a recognition of the validity in the neoliberal critique of the public sector as having grown overly bureaucratic and inert.[53] As a result, Third Way administrations were committed to carrying out different kinds of 'welfare reforms' to

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[51] "The metaphor of the Third Way was also quickly adopted by the social sciences to describe an institutional approach to social policy in search of a systemic fit or "optimal policy mixes" in adaptation to the new economy. The outcome of this was the creation of a modernization discourse, which on both the national and the European level was intimately linked to notions such as employability, social investment, knowledge economy, and welfare-to-work, all of which seemed to add up to a global imperative for change. The influence of the liberal center-left thesis, as it was put forward not only by Giddens but with variations by observers from John Gray in the United Kingdom to Francis Fukuyama in the United States, was substantial. It seemed, as David Marquand once put it, to mark a social democratic moment and provide a new rationale for social democracy in the modern era. It linked this rationale to forces of globalization, individualization, and information technology." Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop*, p. 16.

[52] Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop,* p. 15.

[53] "'Compared with the experience of the private sector', one [Labour] cabinet minister has written, 'services in local hospitals, schools councils were often too slow and inadequate. Much of this was due to a bureaucratic and statist regime of control and command.' A major injection of private sector techniques and market disciplines was deemed to be vital precisely because these faults were seen to be inherent in public provision." Eric Shaw, "What Matters is What Works: the Third Way and the case of the Private Finance initiative" in *The Third Way and Beyond: Criticisms, futures, alternatives*, Leggett, Will, Hale, Sarah, Martell, Luke (Ed.) (Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 74.

remedy the bureaucratic inertia of the old-style social democratic welfare state. In the UK under Blair, writes Armando Barrientos and Marti Powell, this meant an emphasis on "conditional or contractarian welfare":

> Rights were not 'dutiless' but tend to be given to those who have fulfilled their obligations. Services were largely financed by the State, but may be delivered by private or voluntary bodies in a 'purchaser–provider split'. Rather than hierarchies or markets, co-ordination and collaboration through 'partnerships' or networks was stressed. In some cases, there was encouragement to supplement basic state services with a private or voluntary extension ladder (e.g. pensions). There was a general tendency to prioritise services such as health and education that can be preventative in nature and can increase human capital over reactive–passive 'relief' cash benefits. Redistribution was 'for a purpose' and was based on endowments rather than effected in terms of transfer payments, although there has been some 'silent' or 'backdoor' fiscal redistribution, especially to families.[54]

The Third Way also meant that the social democrats abandoned Keynesian full employment policy, and instead shifted emphasis to anti-inflation policies, similar to those of neoliberal monetarism. Giddens characterised the Third Way approach here in contrast to both neoliberalism and 'old style' social democracy as one where

> Third way thinking emphasizes that a strong economy presumes a strong society but does not see this connection as coming from old-style interventionism. The aim of macroeconomic policy is to keep inflation low, limit government borrowing, and use active supply-side measures to foster growth and high levels of employment.[55]

In light of this, critics of the Third Way reforms have argued that it amounted to nothing so much as a capitulation to neoliberalism, that Third Way social democracy "accepts the ideological parameters set by Thatcherism, including its use of a strong state in the interest of the market."[56] However, Andersson argues that although this is true in part, this line of criticism does not take into account the fact that the Third Way "also contains a strong rejection of both the social philosophy of neoliberalism and the economic doctrine of monetarism, as if not entirely ideologically misconstrued at least economically inefficient in an era driven by skill, knowledge, and information."[57]

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[54] Armando Barrientos and Martin Powell, "The Route Map of the Third Way", in *The Third Way and Beyond: Criticisms, futures, alternatives*, Leggett, Will, Hale, Sarah, Martell, Luke (Ed.) (Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 19.
[55] Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way and its Critics* (Malden: Polity Press, 2000), p 73.
[56] Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop*, p. 26.
[57] Ibid.

Andersson takes something approximating a middle position between those who would argue that the Third Way is a neoliberalization of social democracy and those who argue that the Third Way is just social democracy in a modern context. The Third Way is not a neoliberal ideology, she writes, but is instead "a political economy based on the assumption of the reality of globalization" one that accordingly "redefines the role of social democratic politics to act for the creation of wealth within the parameters set by globalization."[58] But, she continues to argue, this new economic analysis, that of the knowledge economy, does represent something fundamentally new for social democracy: a decisive ideological shift insofar as it involves a shift in the way that the individual and society is thought of; something that is most easily seen in Third Way social democracy's emphasis on 'building human capital'.[59]

With the Third Way came a shift in employment discourses, away from the old focus on full employment as something that was to be guaranteed to a discourse of 'employability'. The responsibility of the social democratic public sphere was no longer to make sure that everyone had meaningful work by actively intervening in the national economy, since such policies were recognized as impracticable in a globalized economy. The shift to a discourse of employability, writes Andersson, "is indicative of a substantial shift in notions of need, risk, and responsibility in modern labour markets. Public responsibility is no longer job protection or job creation but investment in human capital to help workers deal with the risks of a globalized era. The individual is responsible for obtaining and maintaining skills."[60] In presenting the positive case for this shift, Stephen Driver writes:

> Getting the unemployed back to work – social inclusion – is one thing. But the bigger picture is about equipping individuals ('education, education, education', as Tony Blair put it) with the tools to make the most of their lives – social justice. A more equal society is about widening opportunities to work. Helping people become more employable – 'employability' – has both the short-term goal of getting the unemployed into the labour market and the long-term one of building the stocks of human capital that shape an individual's life chances, including earning capacities.[61]

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[58] Ibid., p. 27.
[59] Ibid., p. 26.
[60] Ibid., p 30; "The shift from employment to employability discourses arguably constitutes a bigger difference for Sweden because the public responsibility for work in the United Kingdom was always more conditional and has in some ways been strengthened under New Labour, while in Sweden it was at the heart of the Social Democratic state".
[61] Stephen Driver, "North Atlantic Drift: Welfare Reform and the 'Third Way' Politics of New Labour and the New Democrats", in *The Third Way and Beyond: Criticisms, futures, alternatives*, Leggett, Will, Hale, Sarah, Martell, Luke (Ed.) (Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 31-2.

The problem with this approach, argues Andersson, is that although this may sound like classic social democratic policy – since social democracy has always upheld the ideal of individual autonomy in general and the right to self-development in particular – it used to be seen precisely as that, a *right*. With the Third Way, however, and the language of responsibility it employs, the right has transformed into a duty. Andersson writes:

> The idea of autonomous individuals has always, in some form, been at the heart of social democratic ideology. However, in the history of social democracy, the dream of free and emancipated people was part of its understanding of socialism's mission to break the chains of fettered individuals and of the idea that individual freedom rested on the shoulders of collective advancement: in short, that it is only through the solidarity of all that we are free. The Third Way, through its individualized discourses on flexibility, learning, and meritocratic ascendancy—discourses that shift the locus of social change, responsibility, and risk from the collective sphere to the individual—marks a break with this social democratic tradition regarding the role of the collective to free the potential of all. Despite its communitarian emphasis on the social embeddedness of individuals, the Third Way's idea of the learning individual reflects a concession to one of the utopias of neoliberalism, namely, that of the entrepreneurial and competitive person, one who is able to cast off the chains of circumstance and set his or her potential free.[62]

Andersson's book was written at an interesting historical moment. The main body of the text was written during a period when it seemed that the Third Way revisionism of social democracy had been successful and would be lasting. Labour under Tony Blair and SAP under Göran Persson and the SDP under Gerhard Schröder did deliver impressive electoral victories. But only a couple of years after Blair and Persson had both stepped down as leaders of the Third Way social democratic parties they had forged, European social democracy was in a worse state than it had ever been before, both in terms of electoral results and in terms of ideological confusion. In the epilogue to her book, Andersson writes:

> As I finish this book, climate change, the financial crisis, and the election of Barack Obama are changing the face of politics. Obama speaks to the idea that everything is possible, which is really precisely the opposite of what Third Wayers told us. The financial crisis challenges the rationale of the Third Way, the idea that the market economy is supreme and requires all our devotion. Crisis is indeed undoing the prosperous economy that was social democracy's pride, leaving us with the question

[62] Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop*, pp. 133-4.

> of how much of the new economy was ever for real. The 1990s and early 2000s are rapidly becoming history. Suddenly it is hard to think of a more outdated political slogan than the Third Way. European social democracy has spent the last years in a state of crisis—ranging from the fatigue of New Labour after Blair to the disintegration of French socialists who cannot agree on a road forward between anticapitalism, modernization, and old-style state socialism. Italian social democracy has once again lost the working class vote to Berlusconi.[63]

Swedish social democracy lost out heavily in two consecutive elections, in 2006 and 2010. In 2010, the SAP secured only 30% of the total vote share which was the worst election result for the SAP since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1921. Although the SAP managed to secure a coalition minority government after the 2014 election, they did not manage to significantly increase their vote-share, and Swedish politics is still in a state of flux, owing in large part to the entry of the far-right nationalist party The Sweden Democrats into parliament in 2010. The Sweden Democrats secured 12.9% of the total vote share in 2014, and 17.5% in the 2018 general election, while the Social Democrats' secured 28.3%– the worst result for the party since the election of 1911.

At this point, ten years on from Andersson's epilogue, I can add that we have seen the continued growth of far-right populism in the form of ultra-nationalist parties in Europe, Trump in the USA and (to some extent) the Brexit movement in the UK. Obama did not use the opportunity of the financial crisis to challenge the neoliberal economic system but was convinced to prop it up. It seems now that rather than signalling an end to the Third Way/Clintonite and neoliberal consensus of the 90s and early 2000s, the Obama era will go down in history as a crucial failure to overcome it. At this point it remains unclear if the left will be able to mount an effective response to the populist nationalist surge.

2.5 A Socialism

As I alluded to at the end of chapter 1, there has long been a tendency in Marxist circles to deny that social democracy is a *bona fide* socialist tradition. At this point I think it should be obvious why this view is nonsensical. To quote Ernst Wigforss: "If socialism indicates a range of ideas so wide as to range from unyielding anarchism to centralist communism, social democracy of today falls well within historical socialism as it tries to strike a balance between these ideas."[64] People can of course argue that social democrats have failed in their efforts to 'deliver socialism' – but then, so have all other variants failed to 'deliver

[63] Ibid. p. 148.
[64] Wigforss, Ernst "Socialism i vår tid" from *Skrifter i urval: V. Idépolitikern*, (Falköping; Nacka: Tidens Förlag, 1980) p. 16, my translation. Originally published 1952.

socialism', so practical success can hardly be used as a way to distinguish between what are and aren't 'actually socialist' ideas.

I also suggested at the end of chapter 1 that it was a shame that Honneth hadn't engaged with the social democratic tradition precisely because his idea of social freedom seems to chime so well with it. Certainly, Honneth's suggestion that an embrace of social freedom as the paramount ideal entails a political striving for a "consummately democratic form of life" appears an echo of Eduard Bernstein,[65] who I quoted in §2.2 proclaiming that "[d]emocracy is both means and end. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism, and it is the form in which socialism will be realised."[66] Relatedly, Ernst Wigforss wrote in 1952 that the social democratic socialist project did not mean elevating equality over and above freedom, as liberal critics would have it. "Equality," writes Wigforss,

> is an empty term until and unless we answer the question: equality of what? And the answer to this can only be that what is desired is equal opportunity for all to partake in the good as they see it. This does not only mean, then, equality in material living standards or equality in access to spiritual and intellectual culture[67] and the creations thereof; it also means equality in standing as free citizens. The demand for equality is also a demand for equality of freedom.[68]

Wigforss goes on to argue that the demand for equality of freedom is contained in the demand for democracy. The demand for democracy in the political sphere, argues Wigforss, amounted to a demand for equality of freedom – and more than that, it amounted to "a limitation in the power, and therefore freedom, of the few"[69] in favour of an expansion of the freedom and power of everyone else. This demand for equality of freedom, and of the limitation of excessive power was something that liberals were happy to call for in the name of democracy, writes Wigforss. But once equality of political rights was established, the liberals quickly sought to limit the demand for democracy to apply only to the political sphere, whereas socialists applied the same demand for democracy to the economic sphere as well, since there was an asymmetry of power that hindered equal freedom there as well. He then goes on to say, in what I think is a clear echo of Bernstein's

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[65] Honneth mentions Bernstein in *The Idea of Socialism*, but only in a brief footnote where he (erroneously) claims that he was "the only intellectual in the workers' movement to think through the theoretical weaknesses of industrial socialism already at the beginning of the twentieth century" Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, p. 116

[66] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, p. 142.

[67] *Andlinga kulturvärden*. Literally this term would be translated as: 'Spiritual cultural-values', although "spiritual" would here seem to indicate something more along the line of the German *Geistlich*; thus the fact that the term is ambiguous is part of the point. *Andlinga kulturvärden* indicates the world of the mind and the spirit, either or both. The addition of the suffix 'values' to culture could be viewed as superfluous, but it underlines, I think, the view that 'culture' indicates values or valuings.

[68] Wigforss, "Socialism i vår tid", p. 19, my translation.

[69] Ibid, p. 20.

point about 'virtual' and 'actual' partnership as the difference between a formal democracy and an actual (social) democracy:

> There is no doubt that the motive for "democracy" is to be found in the idea of a "human value" [*Människovärde*] – the "equal worth" [*Likvärdighet*] of all human beings in certain fundamental aspects. There seems to be no other justification for the equality already apparent in our societies. From the idea of equal human worth have then been deduced the "human rights" which at various times, in various societies, have been seen as preconditions for life as a full citizen.[70] The social democratic movement is concerned then, to vivify this as the motive behind the struggles for different forms of equality.
>
> Those who view equality in law or equal rights to vote to be obvious consequences of the notion of human value [*människovärde*], should find it difficult to dismiss the demands for equality in other spheres, which socialists advocate on the same grounds. If equal legal rights follow from human value, then surely this would also mean that everyone ought to have the ability to exercise their rights, and that no one is hindered from doing so by poverty, ignorance or the like. It is the old debate between formal and real equal standing [*likställighet*] which is at issue here once again. We could argue that the development towards real equal standing which is underway in our societies – with the levelling of citizens' economic, social and cultural conditions – constitutes a *de facto* acknowledgement of real equality as the mandate of our democratic societies, even if some are reluctant to formally acknowledge it. Although some democrats may be reluctant to acknowledge it, anyone who has openly accepted a democratic principle of equal worth cannot then limit its application to certain spheres of life.[71]

Additionally, I think we see Wigforss embrace something very much like the kind of 'experimental' approach that Honneth calls for in *The Idea of Socialism*, as he stresses that we cannot determine beforehand or set in stone "how, in practice, equal standing is to be expressed in the different spheres of societal life".[72] Indeed, I would argue that the pride social democrats typically take in being 'pragmatic' is, in part, an enduring legacy of the split from orthodox Marxism. In the face of accusations from Marxists that they were

[70] The phrase *fullvärdig,* which I have translated as "full" here, is an overtly and unmistakably normative term. It would literally be translated as 'full-worthy', and indicates that something or someone is a proper or good specimen. A meal may be described as *fullvärdigt* which would then indicate that the meal is (although not necessarily enjoyable) to be recognized as having all the properties a meal should have (i.e., properly nutritious, able to satisfy hunger etc.).
[71] Wigforss, "Socialism i vår tid", p. 21. My translation.
[72] Ibid.

straying from the proper socialist path, social democrats embraced a self-understanding of being the ones willing and able to seek smart, pragmatic solutions, where their more radical critics were ineffective doctrinaires.[73]

2.6 Social Democracy and Social Freedom

Even the brief overview of the social democratic tradition I have provided in this chapter should, I think, show why Honneth ought to engage with it. The critique of orthodox Marxism levied by Honneth and the one employed by the first generation social democrats overlap closely, and on the face of it at least Honneth's idea of 'a democratic form of life' (*demokratische Lebensform*) in *The Idea of Socialism*, as well as the experimental method he advocates, seems to chime well with social democratic practice. And yet, social democracy is undoubtedly a political tradition in decline, and so the question is whether Honneth's theory has anything to offer which might help address this. If it does, it will not be in the form of practical guidance for social democratic parties looking for strategies for electoral success. That is not the kind of thing that Honneth's theory – or any comparable political philosophy – is aimed at doing. If Honneth's theory were to have merit for social democracy, it would be in the form of clarification; i.e., a clarification of the fundamental political-philosophical ideal of social democracy paired with a clarification of where and how this core ideal was obscured. I will not have the full context for a discussion of what I think such a 'Honnethian' diagnosis of social democracy would look like until I have undertaken a more in-depth discussion of Honneth's theory, but I want to end this chapter by flagging where the core problem for social democracy will end up being located on such a Honnethian analysis.

One of the more famous lines of Bernstein's is his invocation of "Kant against cant" ('cant' meaning pabulum or empty recitation of doctrine) at the end of *The Preconditions of Socialism*. Bernstein argues against those[74] who hold that there is no place for 'idealism' in the socialist struggle; against the notion that "[th]e working class has no ideal to actualize".[75] Not only does he argue that it is necessary to have a moral basis for the socialist struggle – that "it is neither possible nor necessary to give the victory of socialism a purely materialistic basis"[76] – but he also says that just as Marx rightly pointed to the need for certain levels of material development as a precondition for socialism, so too must certain levels of "general social

[73] How well this self-image corresponds to reality is beside the point here.
[74] Especially Karl Kautsky, Georgi Plekhanov and Rosa Luxemburg
[75] Bernstein, *The Preconditions of Socialism*, p. 209.
[76] Ibid., p. 200.

progress, and in particular the intellectual and moral advance of the working class itself"[77] be recognized as essential preconditions of socialism.

The fact that Bernstein viewed 'moral and intellectual development' as equally important to socialism goes hand in hand, I think, with his conceptualization of socialism as a continuous movement to create and uphold real democracy. The difference between liberal and social democracy for Bernstein was the difference between virtual and real partnership between the members in a community, and in order for the working class to become real partners, and not just voters – not just having the right to "choose 'the butcher"' – they would have to increase not just in political influence but in "awareness" and "culture" too.[78] Indeed, Bernstein argued that unless the "awareness and culture of the working class was elevated," the idea of a socialist revolution was incoherent, since:

> You can overthrow a government, a privileged minority, but not a people. Even law, with all the influence of authority backed by armed force, is often powerless against the rooted customs and prejudices of the people. […] A nation, a people, is only a conceptual unity; the legally proclaimed sovereignty of the people does not in reality turn this unity into the decisive factor. It can make the government dependent precisely on those compared with whom it ought to be strong: the bureaucracy, business politicians, the owners of the press. And that goes for revolutionary no less than for constitutional governments.[79]

The problem was that since orthodox Marxism refused to recognize any real role of moral and cultural developments it could provide no guidance whatsoever for how the socialist movement could work to further the necessary intellectual and moral development. And it was the conviction that such moral direction was absolutely necessary that led Bernstein to, as he put it "invoke the spirit of the great Königsberg philosopher, the critic of pure reason, against the cant which sought to get a hold on the Labour movement and to which the Hegelian dialectic offers a comfortable refuge." And Bernstein was not alone in falling back on Kant either. In addition to the revisionism of Jaurès and Bernstein, Berman notes the influence of the Austro-Marxists, who "promoted an 'ethical' interpretation of socialism, advocated the injection of morality and Kantian thought into the socialist world view, and engaged in pioneering analyses of the modern state."[80]

[77] Ibid. p. 201.
[78] Ibid. p. 144.
[79] Ibid, p. 205.
[80] Berman, *The Primacy of Politics*, p. 62.

This move 'back to Kant' should not surprise us. Although they did not necessarily have to turn to Kant specifically – other major strands were Christian ethics and utilitarianism – the revisionist socialists of the early 20th century had to look somewhere for the moral guidance that Marxist thought could not provide. It is no accident, for example, that many Labour parties developed long-standing relationships with Christian temperance movements (persisting to this day in many cases). On this point, Wigforss derided the kind of simplistic historical materialism which for a long time made German social democrats "view alcoholism as a 'bourgeois ideology' which would disappear on its own in a socialist society".[81] In line with Bernstein, Wigforss argued that moral ideals are a crucial element of the socialist struggle – and in the following lines from his earliest text we see that this conviction followed as a natural consequence on the understanding that the industrial proletariat is not going to play the singular and historically necessitated role that orthodox Marxists thought:

> What is not compelled by bitter necessity must be wrought by enthusiasm for the great cause. The 'psychological immiseration' of which Kautsky speaks can be shaped into a real hunger and thirst for a worthy form of life[82]; for higher culture. And tendencies to complacency with what has already been gained among those workers who are best-off must be countered with class solidarity and a moral idealism which does not let the worker forget that his class constitutes the natural vanguard of the army which fights to abolish class society. […] And with an enlightened public majority, animated by cultural ideals, we might not need to wait for an economic 'catastrophe', or a complete concentration or socialization of the modes of production in order to take power and begin the work of societal transformation.[83]

In making the case for the legitimate role of 'moral idealism', Wigforss was well-aware that he, like Bernstein, would be accused of being 'petty bourgeois' by more hard-line Marxists. The tenor of the debate at the time when democratic socialism/social democracy was starting to emerge as a distinct socialist tradition is particularly relevant here because it helps explain why social democracy would eventually lose the ability to grasp the idea of social freedom. If it is the case (as Honneth argues) that despite its flaws, the Marxist

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[81] Wigforss, "Socialism i vår tid", p. 102, my translation; "To some adherents of a simplistic form of historical materialism, it is held as an article of faith, unproven and unprovable, that – to use Marxist terminology – certain ideological superstructures are only compatible with certain economic bases. It is this belief in a certain mode of production's inevitable consequences which, as an example, long made German social democracy view alcoholism as a 'bourgeois ideology' which would disappear on its own in a socialist society."

[82] '*Människovärdig*; literally: human-worthy; *tillvaro*; existence, life.

[83] Ernst Wigforss "Materialistisk historieuppfattning och klasskamp," In *Skrifter i urval: I. Socialisten* (Falköping; Nacka: Tidens Förlag, 1980) first published 1908, p. 101.

tradition carried forward a strand of radical critique of the liberal conception of freedom (the need to reconcile freedom with fraternity/solidarity) then we might suppose that social democracy lost its connection to that critique as it gradually disconnected from the Marxist-dominated socialist intellectual debate.

As I said, I do not yet have the full context to discuss this potential Honnethian diagnosis of social democracy, since it requires a more in-depth discussion of Honneth's philosophical framework overall. In chapters 3 through 6, I will examine Honneth's philosophical framework in some detail, tracing the development of the position that *The Idea of Socialism* is part of. The intent of this examination is to arrive at a better understanding of what it would mean to embrace the idea of social freedom as a political ideal, so that I can then consider whether or how it may be applied to the social democratic tradition. In chapter 7, I will explain why I think that Honneth's approach actually recommends a much more fundamental re-framing of the way we think of any political project than *The Idea of Socialism* makes apparent. The complete reconceptualization of persons, society and politics may seem too alien to the social democratic tradition, but I will outline how this could be translated into a social democratic ideal.

Chapter 3: Intersubjectivism and Struggles for Recognition

3.1 Honneth in Context

Honneth's *The Idea of Socialism* was written as something of an addendum to his 2011/2014 work *Freedom's Right*.[84] That work was in turn an ambitious attempt by Honneth to 'reactualize' G. F. W. Hegel's theory of justice from his 1820 *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* – and it is primarily from that work that Honneth draws out the concept of social freedom. But *Freedom's Right* must also be situated in the context of Honneth's overall philosophical development. Honneth has been working to 'reactualize', update and adapt Hegelian ideas to apply them to the modern world for over four decades – and over that time, his approach has evolved in important ways.

Honneth is probably still best known for his influential 'Theory of Recognition' laid out in *The Struggle for Recognition*[85] and connected works. At first glance, *The Struggle for Recognition* looks like an attempt at an empirically anchored work in moral philosophy, whereas *Freedom's Right* appears to be a more straightforward attempt at a 'theory of justice' – though also with a concerted effort to be empirically anchored. I will argue that, although this is not exactly wrong, the difference is more a shift in emphasis. Honneth has consistently been trying to develop a modern (non-metaphysical) version of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. This is both an underlying goal of Honneth's and a basic outlook, since it informs what he understands human nature and society to be, and consequently why he goes further than e.g. his teacher Habermas in rejecting any kind of division between political and moral philosophy.

In the following three chapters, I am going to examine the development of Honneth's philosophy from his first major work to his recent social freedom-centred work. Doing so will not only allow me to make proper sense of Honneth's social freedom-centred neo-Hegelian theory of justice – it will also allow me to address the serious problems that (as I will show in chapters 5 and 6) this theory faces. Subsequently, the solution that I will propose (primarily in chapter 7) will be one in line with the general intention of Honneth's philosophical project overall - not just his most recent work, but with his neo-Hegelian intentions overall. In the next section I will begin by outlining the starting points of Honneth's intersubjectivist project, drawn primarily from *SfR*, before turning to discuss that work in more detail.

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[84] Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014); abbreviated and referenced in line as *FR*.

[85] Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); abbreviated and referenced in line as *SfR*.

3.2 Honneth's Intersubjectivist Project

Honneth tells us that his aim in *The Struggle for Recognition* is to pick up on the theory of recognition and social struggle that can be found in Hegel's early writings. To set the scene for his project, Honneth outlines his understanding of what it was that Hegel was trying to do; what he is reacting to and trying to achieve. The picture Honneth paints in these chapters of the impetus and direction of the Hegelian project recurs in a slightly altered form in *Freedom's Right* – and this basic view remains the bedrock of his theorizing. Accordingly, Honneth opens *SfR* by saying that "Modern social philosophy entered the history of thought at the moment in which social life had come to be characterized as fundamentally about self-preservation" (*SfR* 7). Human individuals and political communities alike were said to exist in a constant state of strategic, and more or less vicious, competition. This view was first articulated by Machiavelli, says Honneth, and then enshrined as the basis and starting point of modern social (political and moral) philosophy by Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century.

The first point Honneth makes in *SfR* is that this way of conceptualizing human individuals and political communities was not always the natural, default way of thinking about it. Prior to the "struggle for self-preservation" becoming the default way of conceiving human social life, says Honneth, "[f]rom the Classical politics of Aristotle to the medieval Christian doctrine of natural law, human beings were conceived of fundamentally as entities capable of life in community, as a *zoon politikon*, as beings who had to rely on the social framework of a political community for the realization of their inner nature." Thus, in the old paradigm, writes Honneth, "political science" was always simultaneously "an inquiry into the appropriate institutions and laws as well as a doctrine of the good and just life". (*SfR* 7)

However, this tradition of thought was undermined – or as Honneth puts it, 'robbed of intellectual vitality' – from around the time of the renaissance onward. This time saw the emergence of what has been called proto-capitalism (though Honneth does not use this term) beginning in the Italian city-states. Among other things, the invention of the printing press, commercial banking, double-entry bookkeeping, and larger scale manufacturing, and the so-called military revolution – all combined to radically change the fabric of society, and so, writes Honneth, "the sphere of political and economic activity had so outgrown the protective framework of traditional morals that it could no longer sensibly be studied solely as a normative order of virtuous conduct." (*SfR* 8)

It was in this context, informed by his experiences as a statesman in the mercantile republic of Florence, that Machiavelli wrote his political treatises. In these tracts, says Honneth,

Machiavelli asserts a radically new model of human nature. According to this 'social-ontology', human beings are a) fundamentally egocentric and concerned with their own benefit, and b) aware that everyone else is also egocentric and out for their own benefit, which means that c) the default mode of human relations is a "permanent state of hostile competition between subjects"(*SfR* 8). But although Honneth identifies Machiavelli as a pioneer of this new social-ontology, he nonetheless identifies Thomas Hobbes as the key figure in enshrining this new way of thinking about human nature.[86]

It was Hobbes who established the field of political science and political philosophy as we know it today. He famously wrote his *Leviathan* in the wake of the reformation wars of religion, and the English Civil War, when the types of questions he sought to address were particularly burning. The modern state apparatus had emerged and replaced older medieval structures; the technical and scientific revolutions were gathering steam; global trade and colonialism were expanding rapidly. Hobbes, writes Honneth, entered that space with an "ambitious project of investigating the laws of civil life in order to provide a scientific basis for all future politics," (*SfR* 7) and as he puts it in *Freedom's Right*, he did so with "theoretical skill and rhetorical brilliance."(*FR* 22)

Even though the particulars of Hobbes's political philosophy would have limited influence[87] the manner in which he approached the subject matter and the basic concepts he used would become paradigmatic. In particular, Honneth tells us in *SfR*, the Hobbesian conception of the person would come to serve as the most fundamental socio-ontological premise of modern (Western) social philosophy. Hobbes himself, we are told, thought of human beings "mechanistically, as something like self-propelled automatons," and as exceptional mainly in virtue of their capacity to "concern themselves with their future welfare." (*SfR* 9)

Hobbes's famous 'state of nature' thought experiment was meant to illustrate what it would look like if all social institutions were removed. Since individuals "must remain mutually alien and inscrutable in their intentions" their anticipatory behaviour will create "a form of preventive power-escalation that is born in suspicion" such that "each is forced into a prospective expansion of its potential for power, in order to be able to defend itself in the future against possible attacks from the other". The *raison d'être* of the state is therefore to make sure that human nature does not drag us into such a destructive 'state of nature'. And, writes Honneth, "it was precisely this tendency of modern social philosophy to reduce

[86] Honneth is not clear on how much direct influence he sees between Machiavelli and Hobbes, and it is worth noting that although the reflections on the influence of Hobbes remain essentially the same in *Freedom's Right* as they are found in *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth does not talk about Machiavelli there.
[87] Though of course, his brand of social contract theory was and continues to be influential.

the activity of the state to the instrumentally rational establishment of power that the young Hegel opposed in his political philosophy." (*SfR* 10)

As Honneth presents it, although there had developed several distinct political-philosophical traditions since Hobbes by the time Hegel entered the scene, he argues that because they shared the same individualistic starting point, they ended up with the same basic problems. In *SfR*, Honneth picks up on an early essay where Hegel argues against both the empiricist and the rationalist approaches, saying that both proceed from 'atomistic premises'. In the case of the empirical approach (e.g. Hobbes, Locke, Hume) this means that "they always conceive of the purportedly 'natural' form of human behaviour as the isolated acts of solitary individuals, to which forms of community-formation must then be added as a further thought, as if externally" (*SfR* 12). The 'formal' or rationalist approaches of e.g. Kant and Fichte make the same kind of mistake according to Hegel: though their atomistic premises were about transcendental practical reason (which must be 'purified' from empirical human nature to be moral) rather than anthropological empirical propositions. Honneth summarises Hegel's critique of the two traditions as follows:

> Thus, both approaches remain trapped within the basic concept of atomism that presupposes, as something like a natural basis for human socialization, the existence of subjects who are isolated from each other […] The consequence of this, according to Hegel, is that within modern natural law, a 'community of human beings' can only be conceptualized on the abstract model of a 'unified many', that is, as a cluster of single subjects, and thus not on the model of an ethical unity. (*SfR* 12)

For theories following in the Hobbesian (empiricist) and Kantian (rationalist) traditions, a key issue had been how to account for the possibility of community; how was a complex society to be organised – and be considered legitimate or just – given the atomistic self-interested nature of individuals? Whether the answer is given in terms of a social contract or in terms of the civilizing function of the faculty of reason, the underlying tension would remain, i.e., that between society and human 'nature'. Hegel avoids this problem by asserting that human nature is fundamentally social. Honneth says that the young Hegel drew heavily on Aristotle as he argued that "every philosophical theory of society must proceed not from the acts of isolated subjects but rather from the framework of ethical bonds, within which subjects always already move." (*SfR* 14)

But this move raises a set of different problems and challenges for Hegel. First, says Honneth, it is necessary for Hegel to develop new conceptual tools to "replace atomistic basic concepts with categories that are geared to the social nexus between subjects". After

all, if the basic vocabulary and conceptual tools that modern social philosophy (since Hobbes onward) rests on are fundamentally mistaken, the first task must be to construct better conceptual tools and a vocabulary that allows us to talk about it in a better way. I will call this the first task of the Hegelian intersubjectivist project – and it would not be too misleading to say that it is what Honneth is primarily concerned with in *The Struggle for Recognition*. His 'recognition theory' is an attempt at providing a modern version of the conceptual tools and a vocabulary needed to develop Hegel's intersubjectivist project. (*SfR* 14)

Second, Hegel is concerned with developing a model of an ideal community, i.e., what a 'good society' would look like for fundamentally social beings. However, it might also be said that the task of developing new conceptual tools really comes second to the task of developing a model of ideal community – at least in the way that Honneth presents how Hegel came to his approach. Honneth tells us that Hegel objected to individualist-atomism because given that conception of persons, "a community of human beings" could not be seen as developing organically but could only be seen as an artificial constraint and not as an "ethical unity" (*SfR* 12). Precisely what is meant by 'ethical unity' is not clear. But this vagueness is not surprising, since, as I will argue, Honneth's entire philosophical project is about cashing out this Hegelian idea of 'ethical life'. What we do find Honneth saying in the framing of *SfR* is that the young Hegel had an "intuition" that "a reconciled society could be properly understood only as an ethically integrated community of free citizens" (*SfR* 12-13). Moreover, we are told that Hegel first came to this "intuition" within an "aesthetic framework" – presumably referring to the young Hegel's Romanticist enlightenment influences – which he later abandoned. The "intuition of his youth", writes Honneth

> had outgrown the aesthetic framework within which it had originated and, as a result of his confrontation with the Classical doctrine of the state, had found in the *polis* a political and institutional model. In the essay on natural law, whenever Hegel speaks, in a normative sense, of the ethical totality of a society, he has in mind the relations within the city-states of antiquity. What he admires about them is the romantically transfigured circumstance that, in publicly practised customs, members of the community could also witness the intersubjective expression of their own particularity. (*SfR* 13)

On this account then, Hegel had the normative intuition that an ethical unity was to be striven for prior to his developing the theoretical model for how such a "reconciled society" was possible. His intersubjectivist innovation was not just methodological, or

theoretical, then, but was tied from the start to a normative idea of an ideal community. Honneth identifies three key elements of Hegel's ideal community – and we will see all three recur in various forms in Honneth's own theory.

The first is the idea of unity between individual and universal freedom; "What this means" writes Honneth, "is that public life would have to be regarded not as the result of the mutual restriction of private spheres of liberty (Fichte), but rather the other way around, namely, as the opportunity for the fulfilment of every single individual's freedom." Second is the idea that the way in which individual and universal freedom is integrated is through the 'mores and customs' of the community. The term Hegel uses is *Sitte;* a wide term that is usually translated as 'mores', 'norms' or 'customs' (and sometimes as 'morals'). The wideness of the term is precisely the point according to Honneth. Hegel wants to underline the fact that neither formal laws nor individual morals, "but only attitudes that are actually acted out intersubjectively can provide a sound basis for the exercise of that extended freedom." (*SfR* 13)

The third key element is Hegel's inclusion of a sphere of market-mediated activities – something that is not part of the ancient conception of the *polis*. "This" writes Honneth, "is linked to the intent to show that individuals' market-mediated activities and interests – which later come to be gathered under the title 'civil society' – comprise a 'negative' though still constitutive 'zone' of the 'ethical' [*sittlich*] whole." Honneth apparently sees the point of this third aspect as being the attempt to "render his societal critique realistic", i.e. to be based in a realistic assessment of the economy as well as of social dynamics, rather than being (as presumably the Aristotelian and Platonic models of the *polis* are seen to be) in the main a normative prescription of an ideal social order. (*SfR* 13)

Having characterised these starting points – the intersubjectivist turn and the *desideratum* of an ethical unity – Honneth goes on to say that Hegel faces two major challenges. The first one I have already indicated as the 'first task'; though with a more explicit normative direction: "If indeed it turned out that modern social philosophy is not in a position to account for such a higher-level form of social community owing to the fact that it remains trapped within atomistic premises, then the first implication of this for political theory is that a new and different system of basic concepts must be developed."[88] The second task, however, is given by the normative intention. Hegel can draw on and develop the classical

[88] *SfR*, p. 14; "Hegel thus faces the question of what these categorial tools must be like, if they are to make it possible to explain philosophically the development of an organization of society whose ethical cohesion would lie in a form of solidarity based on the recognition of the individual freedom of all citizens. During the Jena years, Hegel's work in political philosophy was directed towards finding a solution to the systematic problems that this question generates. The various proposals that he developed within the context of the emerging system of the logic of the human spirit have their common roots in this enterprise, and they all refer back to it."

notion of *zoon politikon*; such that "one is to assume, as a kind of natural basis for human socialization, a situation in which elementary forms of intersubjective coexistence are always present" and that there is always "inherent in human nature, a substratum of links to community". In Hegel's terms, this is to say that human nature is always 'ethical'; human life is always an ethical form of life. We do not need to explain, as the Hobbesians and Kantians have to, how society is possible. But because Hegel is concerned with explicating the possibility of "ethical unity" ("a reconciled society", "a higher-level form of social community"), he now has the task of explaining the "transition from such a state of 'natural ethical life' to the form of societal organization that he previously defined as a relationship of ethical totality." (*SfR* 14)

Put differently, an account needs to be given of how (if it is the case that sociality is fundamental for human nature) we are to understand the development from simple, natural, or embryonic forms of society to what Honneth calls "more encompassing relations of social interaction". The first step towards an answer is given, says Honneth, in Hegel's conceptualization of the development of human nature and human society both (which is encompassed in the term 'ethical life') as a process of "recurring negotiations" where the "'moral' potential of natural ethical life […] is gradually generalized". But, says Honneth, this general (teleological) idea of an unfolding of the potential of ethical life leaves much unanswered. Honneth says that what needs to be made clear is, on the one hand "what these undeveloped potentials of ethical life must be like, if they are to be already inherent […] in the initial structures of social life". On the other hand, it is necessary to specify the "shape of this process of recurring negotiations by which these same ethical potentials could develop in the direction of universal validity". Honneth's positive project in *SfR* is geared to answer those questions, and as the title *The Struggle for Recognition* suggests, he thinks that the best way to conceptualize the structure of ethical life and its "recurring negotiations" is in terms of struggles for recognition. (*SfR* 15)

In the next section I will outline in more detail what Honneth's recognition theory says, but before doing so I will to flag a couple of questions regarding to the framing narrative I have just outlined.

To wit: we find in the first couple of chapters of *SfR* a rather straightforward presentation of modern political and moral philosophy being founded on individualist-atomistic premises, and Hegel is introduced as the first modern philosopher to systematically reject this. But we might well ask: on the basis of what was it rejected? What are the reasons given for why it is necessary to "replace atomistic basic concepts with categories that are geared to the social nexus between subjects"? The framing chapters of *SfR* that I'm drawing on

here tells this story of the emergence and thrust of the Hegelian intersubjectivist project – but all the while, it is never explicitly stated a) how and why the individualist social-ontology is detrimental, or following on from that b) why (Hegelian) intersubjectivism is the appropriate response to it.

The actual reason for Honneth's not addressing these questions straightforwardly is probably that an intersubjectivist approach with the intention of critiquing the vicissitudes of individualism is more or less a given in his philosophical tradition. The Frankfurt School critical theory tradition, which Honneth belongs to, has evolved in different directions over the years, but it is generally understood to inherit its *modus operandi* from Marx. In particular, it is the approach whereby a systematic sociological, economic, and historical analysis of modern society is combined with an explicit normative, 'emancipatory' intent that the critical theorists themselves would say they inherited from Marx. Barry Hindess describes the Frankfurt School version of critical theory as combining two elements, viz. "the critique of ideology which seeks to unmask the distorting images that conceal and legitimate the realities of power in modern societies; and the moral critique of political power based on the ideal of a society of rational and autonomous individuals." The aim, says Hindess, is to act as "a vehicle of human enlightenment and emancipation, enabling individuals and collectivities to determine what their true interests are and releasing them from those forms of coercion that depend on the mystifications of ideology.[89]

Although Honneth does not formulate it as straightforwardly as we might wish from an outside perspective, I think we can see his own fundamental commitments in what he does say about Hegel's motivations. As noted, Honneth presents these elements of an ideal ethical community as his reading of the young Hegel. And while it is that, I would also underline the fact that this also serves as an articulation of Honneth's own philosophical programme. Honneth is concerned with developing a theory of *sittlich* life. From the way Honneth presents it in the framing chapters of *SfR*, this kind of project is always going to involve two main elements. On the one hand, it is going to involve an effort to develop "categories that are geared to the social nexus between subjects" which can then "replace atomistic basic concepts" – in other words, a revised model of human (social) nature that allows us to speak of ourselves and how we live together in a way that does not lead us to create harmful social institutions. On the other hand, it is going to involve the development of (what could be called) a theory of justice that goes hand-in-hand with this model of human (social) nature. And it is understood that these two elements of the project can

[89] Barry Hindess, "Marxism," in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy,* Robert E. Goodin and Philip Pettit, eds., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) p. 319.

never be truly separate. In *SfR*, Honneth's focus is on the first of these tasks – i.e., the development of a model of human (social) nature; "categories that are geared to the social nexus between subjects" which can "replace atomistic basic concepts". (*SfR* 14)

3.3 Struggles for Recognition

Turning to the main lines of argument in *The Struggle for Recognition*, the lead question of Honneth's Hegelian social philosophy becomes how the process of development from natural ethical life to more realized forms of social life should be understood. It is thought that our intersubjectively constituted agency is such that there are always, implicitly or explicitly, normative claims made on the social context within which an agent finds itself – and the idea that Honneth picks up on and develops in *SfR* is that these claims, inherent in our nature, can be conceptualised as 'recognition claims'. The basic idea is that the key mechanism by which human agency develops is through recognition of and recognition by other human beings, and that the 'ethical potential' lies in the process of 'recurring negotiations' whereby subjects make claims on the social world in which they find themselves – claims to recognition of their individuality, their various qualities and abilities – i.e., of what constitutes their personal identities.

Honneth contends that this model of 'struggles for recognition' can be developed to serve as the foundation for a theory of justice, since it would allow us to determine the shape of 'healthy' social orders. The idea seems to be that by identifying what is required for mutual recognition we will be identifying the social prerequisites for being able to develop into autonomous individuals. This should then be able to inform a theory of justice where we can see which social institutions facilitate, and which undermine, mutual recognition.

To this end, Honneth develops a schema of three forms, or patterns, of intersubjective recognition: love, rights and solidarity. These serve as the basis for three forms of self-understanding: self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem (*SfR* 94).[90] In a retrospective, Honneth writes that in *SfR* he "set out to employ the young Hegel's model of recognition as the key to specifying the universal conditions under which human beings can form an identity; the underlying intention was basically to conceptualize the structures of mutual recognition analysed by Hegel not merely as preconditions for self-consciousness but as practical conditions for the development of a positive relation-to-self." To this end, Honneth draws on the theories of social-psychologist George Herbert Mead, and object relations psychologist Donald Winnicott to develop what he calls an "empirically informed

[90] The labels used should be understood as technical terms, and the division of forms of recognition into three spheres follows the model of Hegel's "family, civil society and State"

phenomenology"[91] – the most important aspect of which is arguably the ability to discern legitimate claims of harm, i.e., where violations or transgressions of legitimate recognition-claims cause harm to self-confidence, self-respect or self-esteem.

The first, and most fundamental form of positive relation-to-self we need to develop in order to become agents is what Honneth calls "self-confidence". This is to be understood as a basic sense of oneself as a differentiated individual with a sense of "autonomous control of one's body", and an overall stable sense of one's place in the world (*SfR* 133). This fundamental form of self-understanding is said to develop through the mode of recognition labelled "love". Here Honneth builds on Winnicott's subject-object relations theory in early childhood psychology. The first case of individuation happens in the 'struggle for recognition' that takes place in the parent-child relationship, in the development from the initial phase of symbiosis ("undifferentiated intersubjectivity") which gradually gives way to individuation in the form of a 'struggle' as the child learns to differentiate the 'mother'[92] from itself though the painful experience of not having control over the 'mother'. (*SfR* 98)

The experience of separateness, and the loss of symbiosis, is fraught with anxiety – and the connected claim is that it is only through the experience of loving care that children can develop the self-confidence necessary to be alone with themselves. The experience of a differentiated other that one knows oneself to be loved by, and whom one loves in return, makes it possible to "become responsive to inner impulses and pursue them in an open, creative way, without fear of being abandoned" (*SfR* 104). The parent-child relationship then works as the model for the mode of recognition called love – but which includes all close interpersonal relationships, including friendship and erotic love. Honneth writes that

> It is only because the assurance of care gives the person who is loved the strength to open up to himself or herself in a relaxed relation-to-self that he or she can become an independent subject with whom oneness can be experienced as a mutual dissolution of boundaries. To this extent, the form of recognition found in love, which Hegel had described as 'being oneself in another', represents not an intersubjective state so much as a communicative arc suspended between the experience of being able to be alone and the experience of being merged; 'ego-

[91] Axel Honneth, "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions." Inquiry 45, no. 4 (2002): 499-519. p. 500.

[92] 'Mother' does not have to refer to a biological mother, just the primary caregiver(s) in earliest age. Cf. Honneth, *The Struggle For Recognition*, p. xiii.

> relatedness' and symbiosis here represent mutually required counterweights that, taken together, make it possible for each to be at home in the other. (*SfR* 105)

Conversely, there are distinctive forms of harm in the form of intersubjective acts that disrespect, rather than recognise, personhood. In the case of the recognition mode of love, the forms of disrespect that forms the opposite are violations of physical integrity; rape and torture are the paradigmatic examples given. Here, "the combination of […] pain with the feeling of being defencelessly at the mercy of another subject, to the point of feeling that one has been deprived of reality" as a result of this kind of extreme abuse can cause a loss of fundamental self-confidence. (*SfR* 132)

The second mode of recognition discussed in *SfR* is labelled 'rights', or 'legal recognition', and is connected to the second form of self-understanding required for human agency labelled 'self-respect'. By 'self-respect' Honneth means the ability of a person to view themselves as an autonomous agent whose choices are worthy of respect simply in virtue of being their choices. This mode of recognition is said to evolve from pre-modern conceptions of rights whereby individuals were recognised as having certain rights and duties in virtue of their role in a community (e.g. peasant, aristocrat, priest, soldier etc.) (*SfR* 109). With the enlightenment, this idea was developed and expanded such that legal recognition was thought to be owed to all individuals in virtue of them being free, equal, and morally autonomous individuals. Honneth writes:

> The idea that self-respect is for legal relations what basic self-confidence was for the love relationship is already suggested by the conceptual appropriateness of viewing rights as depersonalized symbols of social respect in just the way that love can be conceived as the affectional expression of care retained over distance. Whereas the latter generates, in every human being, the psychological foundations for trusting one's own sense of one's needs and urges, the former gives rise to the form of consciousness in which one is able to respect oneself because one deserves the respect of everyone else. (*SfR* 118-9)

Conversely, the form of disrespect associated with legal recognition is denial of rights. By denying people equal rights, says Honneth, people are not only having their personal autonomy restrained – which is bad enough – but they are also being denied the status of full-fledged members of an ethical community. The experience of being a second-class citizen in legal status therefore goes together with a loss of self-respect – because one is not being recognized as a fully morally autonomous subject, it erodes one's own ability to view oneself as such.

The third form of recognition identified by Honneth in *SfR* is labelled 'solidarity', and it is said to be the kind of recognition which enables individuals to develop what is labelled 'self-esteem'.[93] By this mode of recognition, Honneth means the kind of recognition of other individuals whereby the other's traits and particularities are not just passively tolerated but actively affirmed as valuable for society – i.e., you are not just a person or citizen worthy of respect in the abstract, but you understand your particular way of living to be respectable or good. "This form of mutual recognition" writes Honneth, "is thus also tied to the presupposition of a context of social life, whose members through their orientation towards shared conceptions of their goals form a community of value." (*SfR* 121)

Conversely, the type of disrespect associated with the 'solidarity' mode of recognition is the kind that occurs when society systematically denigrates certain ways of life. If society systematically devalues certain individuals or groups' way of life as inferior or deficient, then those groups or individuals are robbed of the ability to view themselves as having proper social value. Because what they value (what they take as worthwhile etc.) is not recognised by society as such, their sense-of-self is diminished. Honneth writes:

> For those engaged in them, the result of the evaluative degradation of certain patterns of self-realization is that they cannot relate to their mode of life as something of positive significance within their community. For individuals, therefore, the experience of this social devaluation typically brings with it a loss of personal self-esteem, of the opportunity to regard themselves as beings whose traits and abilities are esteemed. Thus, the kind of recognition that this type of disrespect deprives a person of is the social approval of a form of self-realization that he or she had to discover, despite all hindrances, with the encouragement of group solidarity. (*SfR* 134)

The major upshot of this model of the forms of recognition is that it allows for analysis of social conflicts on the one hand, and on the other an approach to justice that goes well beyond the paradigm that the social sciences were founded on. When the social sciences emerged as distinct disciplines in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, they did so in the context of that liberal ('Hobbesian') paradigm discussed earlier in this chapter. When the phenomenon of social conflict was approached with the aim of devising systematic analyses to gain a scientific understanding thereof, the approach came to be defined "under the influence of Darwinian or utilitarian models, in terms of competition over material

[93] "for which, in everyday speech, the expression 'feeling of self-worth' predominates" Honneth, *The Struggle For Recognition*, p. 128.

opportunities" (*SfR* 160). Although there are a few notable exceptions, Honneth argues that academic sociology has not been able to adequately capture the 'moral element' of social struggles. In a key passage, he writes that

> The motives for rebellion, protest, and resistance have generally been transformed into categories of 'interest', and these interests are supposed to emerge from the objective inequalities in the distribution of material opportunities without ever being linked, in any way, to the everyday web of moral feelings. Relative to the predominance that the Hobbesian conceptual model acquired within modern social theory, the incomplete, even misguided, proposals of Marx, Sorel, and Sartre have remained mere fragments of an invisible, undeveloped theoretical tradition.(*SfR* 161)

By contrast, the recognition model claims to offer an approach to social conflict analysis that allows us to make sense of the moral elements. Instead of treating the phenomenon of 'hurt feelings' as secondary, here it is taken to be of primary importance and as having a key explanatory role. On the recognition model, 'hurt feelings' are taken to be an indicator of violations of recognition. Obviously, not all cases where feelings are hurt are of the right kind here; we are only talking about hurt feelings stemming from the perceived denial of recognition. Moreover, individual claims of violated expectations of recognition only have bearing on wider society if the experiences can be generalized. However, if a group of people share similar experiences of being denied recognition of some kind in, or by, society – if individual experiences of hurt feelings stemming from disrespect can be understood by members of the group to be an example of a general pattern[94] – then a social movement can begin to form. (*SfR* 162)

Honneth is careful to point out in *SfR* that he is not denying that struggles for resources are an important part of the dynamic of social struggles. What he calls the 'utilitarian model' of social conflict – whereby social conflicts are understood to follow the logic of pursuit of (group) interests – does have an important role to play. But this explanatory model cannot stand on its own, since the theoretical foundations thereof simply do not allow us to take seriously the role that moral motives (of hurt feelings stemming from a lack of recognition) play in social struggles. These are, I think, ideas that are carried through in some form all the way from *The Struggle for Recognition* to *The Idea of Socialism*, and it is interesting to note that already in *SfR* Honneth offers a critique of the Marxist social

[94] This mainly applies to the forms of recognition of 'rights' and 'solidarity', since the struggles for recognition involved in 'love' relationships are typically not of the kind that are easily generalized to a larger group.

analysis which focuses on its tendency to reduce to purely materialist claims what Honneth thinks should be understood as claims to social recognition. (*SfR* 150; 160)

Of course, the ability to identify hurt feelings stemming from violated expectations of recognition as part of the 'moral logic' of social conflicts would not by itself be enough; it must also be possible to discern which moral feelings, and concomitant social movements/institutions, "turn out to be retarding or accelerating an overarching developmental process." In order to do this, Honneth offers what he calls a 'formal conception of ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]' – which is to function as the normative standard which allows us to distinguish between "the progressive and the reactionary" and work as a "hypothetical anticipation of an approximate end-state […which…] would make it possible to mark out a developmental direction."(*SfR* 168-9)

The 'formal conception of ethical life' that Honneth proposes as the lodestar for the normative intentions of his theory amounts to a synthesis of the elements we have already seen: the fundamental Hegelian desiderata of the reconciled community where each subject is able to perceive the liberty of the other as the prerequisite of their own self-realization on the one hand, and the theory of the modes of recognition on the other. The ideal society, corresponding to the formal conception of ethical life, would be one where all the intersubjective conditions necessary for individual self-realization would be present; the precise manner in which the types of recognition are expressed or institutionalized cannot be determined beforehand, since it will vary with historical and cultural context; but it should still be possible to evaluate actual social institutions and gauge whether they do in fact allow for the kind of positive relation-to-self that is required.

3.4 Recognition and Justice

Apart from the sketch of the 'formal conception of ethical life', Honneth does not present anything that looks like a traditional theory of justice in *SfR*; that is not the focus of the work. But as I noted in section 3.2, the aim of developing 'categories that are geared to the social nexus between subjects' is always intertwined with a view of what would be an appropriate institutional social order. In this section I am going to consider the more clearly 'political-philosophical' views bound up with Honneth's recognition theory. In this respect, the most noticeable impact of Honneth's recognition theory relates to the debate between recognition, or identity approaches to justice, as opposed to redistributionist approaches to justice. Before I move to say something about that debate however, I will begin by considering a key article of Honneth's, published in 1998 titled "Democracy as Reflexive

Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today"[95]. Since many of the elements we find there are picked up on and developed in *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*, it is particularly significant here.

3.4.1 Early Dewey view

The 1998 Dewey article is Honneth's entry into the debate between 'proceduralist' and 'republican' theories of radical democracy that was going on at the time – and Honneth's article is in part a response to Habermas's *Between Fact and Norms*. Whereas Habermas had presented liberalism and republicanism as the "two prevailing paradigms in a theory of the democratic constitutional state" – to which Habermas then presented his own "procedural concept of democracy" [96] – Honneth presents republicanism and proceduralism as two radical theories of democracy that stand in opposition to the traditional liberal conception of democracy – and goes on to argue that Dewey's should be recognized as a (superior) third theory of radical democracy.

Honneth's gloss on Dewey's theory of democracy emphasizes two elements: first, Dewey's claim that "individual self-realization was only possible in a community of cooperation" and second, his "epistemological argument" for democracy, according to which "democracy represents the political form of organization in which human intelligence achieves complete development" since it is only in that form of social life that "the communicative character of rational problem solving can be set free in the same manner as this is done in the natural sciences by experimental research in laboratories".[97] According to Honneth, these two elements come together in a view of the public political sphere which sees it "not – as Hannah Arendt, and to a lesser degree, Habermas believe – the place for a communicative exercise of freedom but the cognitive medium with whose help society attempts, experimentally, to solve its problems with the coordination of social action"[98].

In a 2007 text commenting on Honneth's article, David Owen and Bert Van Den Brink says that Honneth's point is to connect the procedural idea of the public sphere as a problem solving centre with the idea of a pre-political community.[99] The state is supposed to function as the space where "connected publics" can "attempt to solve rationally

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[95] Axel Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today." *Political Theory* 26, no. 6 (1998): 763-83.
[96] Ibid, p. 780.
[97] Ibid, p. 773.
[98] Ibid, p. 775.
[99] David Owen and Bert Van Den Brink, "Self-Government and 'Democracy as Reflexive Co-operation' Reflections on Honneth's Social and Political Ideal"; in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory* ed. Owen, David & Van Den Brink, Bert, (Cambridge :Cambridge University Press, 2007) pp. 295-6.

encroaching problems of the co-ordination of social action" which also means that it has to have "vis-á-vis co-operating society as the sovereign, the function of securing with the help of legal norms the social conditions under which all citizens can articulate their interests without constraint and with equal opportunity" [100]. However, this notion of the state, as a kind of sovereign mediator (which is a proceduralist notion) is said to presuppose a "democratic ethical life" which in itself cannot be a product of the organization of the public space. The 'democratic ethical life' is understood as a consciousness on the part of the individual members of society that they are interconnected, and "co-operatively contributing with all others to the realization of common goals".[101]

Since democratic ethical life cannot be a product of the democratic public sphere, as the latter presupposes the former, it is said to have to be anchored in a "prepolitical association" between citizens, akin to what would have existed in e.g. pre-modern village communities. The "reintegration" of modern society – such that citizens can understand themselves as being cooperatively interconnected, and the institutions of the public sphere as an extension of that interconnectedness – can only be achieved on the basis of a fair distribution of labour:

> Dewey sees the presupposition for a revitalization of democratic publics located in the prepolitical sphere of the social division of labor, which has to be regulated in such a fair and just manner that each member of society can understand herself as an active participant in a cooperative enterprise. Without such a consciousness of shared responsibility and cooperation, Dewey correctly assumes, the individual will never manage to see in democratic procedures the means for joint problem-solving.[102]

Honneth proceeds to argue that the Deweyan model of radical democracy has three distinct advantages compared with republicanism and proceduralism. The republican position holds that democratic will-formation in the public sphere is supposed to be an expression of the political virtues of the citizens. A true democracy is a truly political *polis*; i.e., a society where citizens view democratic will-formation not merely as a means but as an end in itself. But this model amounts to much too strong an 'ethicization of politics' insofar as it is dependent on people placing participation in democratic procedures as one of the highest ethical values. According to Honneth, the advantage of the Deweyan model is that it recognizes, in Dewey's words, that "Man is a consuming and sportive animal as well as a

[100] Honneth, "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation" p. 775.
[101] Ibid, p. 776.
[102] Ibid, p. 777.

political one" and does not require that democratic activity be actively valued above others for its own sake. While in agreement with the republican point that a democratic ethical life, a proper democratic community, is necessary for real democracy, Honneth says that on the Deweyan model this community formation unfolds not in the political sphere "but prepolitically within structures of a division of labor experienced as cooperation." That is how the people of the *polis* understand each other as part of a democratic community. And, says Honneth, this avoids the anti-pluralistic strain of republicanism, since "within networks of groups and associations that relate to one another along the lines of a division of labor, the factual pluralism of value orientations is naturally of functional advantage because it sees to the development of an abundance of completely different interests and abilities."[103]

Honneth is lamentably vague on what he understands by a fair and just division of labour in this article, which makes it somewhat difficult to parse how it would work to ensure pluralism of value orientations; or how this would shore up rather than undermine a commitment to the 'sovereign, problem-solving mediator' of democratic procedures. The specification he provides of a fair division of labour is that it would be one "that grants each member of society, according to autonomously discovered abilities and talents, a fair chance to assume socially desirable occupations [that allow] consciousness of communal cooperation to emerge"[104] – which we might remark sounds a lot like Rawls's 'fair equality of opportunity' principle. The idea that something like fair equality of opportunity is a prerequisite for a proper democratic community is an important one, and I will return to it – but at this point it remains unclear how this would work to ensure a plurality among the 'socially desirable positions' themselves and an ethical pluralism therethrough.

Another thing to note here is that Honneth recognises that the Deweyan model presupposes a certain kind of moral psychology. "For his idea of a cooperative community" writes Honneth, "Dewey has to be able to presuppose – at a second, higher level – an individual orientation toward a jointly shared good; but this can be understood as that end to which each individual must be able to relate in the sense of a higher-order value, if this individual is to understand her activity as a contribution to a cooperative process."[105] This highlights the fact that this iteration of the Deweyan model is very dependent on a model of human agency which asserts something like a higher-order interest in self-realization or

[103] Ibid, p. 778.
[104] Ibid, p. 777.
[105] Ibid, p. 778.

integrated personality. I will return to the question of how much of this remains operative in Honneth's latest writings.

With respect to the advantages Honneth claims for his Deweyan model over Habermasian proceduralism, Honneth makes the point that Habermas cannot sufficiently account for the fact that the democratic public sphere "lives off social presuppositions that can be secured only outside this idea itself".[106] Whereas the Deweyan model can afford the demand for social equality "conceptual priority" (*qua* necessary condition) over "the principle of democratic will formation", Habermas's scheme does not allow this according to Honneth. This line of critique is also connected with a general line of critique of Habermas's theory of society. I cannot get into the details of that debate here,[107] but for present purposes it is enough to note that Honneth thinks it is a mistake for Habermas to try to separate his theory of democracy from a theory of society in general – and that this goes to a deeper problem in Habermas's theory viz. the separation between 'systems' and 'lifeworlds'. This line of critique relates to Honneth's insistence in *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism* that the market sphere must not be understood as a 'norm-free' system, but as always ethically embedded. To Honneth, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' system – and this is presumably why he thinks that any theory of democracy must be a theory of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) as a whole.[108]

Regardless, I think the key thing to note here is that the (sketch of an outline of a) model of radical democracy Honneth endorses in this article explicitly rests on the assumption that the experience of (pre-political) communal cooperation is a necessary condition for self-realization. And although it is not entirely clear, I think we can also say that 'self-realization' and 'individual freedom' are treated as reciprocal concepts in this article. We can see this, for example, in Honneth's approvingly quoting the following passage in Dewey (which also foreshadows Honneth's argument in *The Idea of Socialism*):

> In its just connection with communal experience, fraternity is another name for the consciously appreciated goods which accrue from an association in which all share, and which give direction to the conduct of each. Liberty is that secure release and fulfilment of personal potentialities which take place only in rich and manifold

[106] Ibid, p. 779; it is interesting to note the parallel to the claim in *Freedom's Right* that "both types of freedom [legal and moral] feed off the social life-praxis that not only precedes them, but provides the basis for their right to exist in the first place: Only because we have already entered into everyday obligations and have already developed social attachments or find ourselves in particular communities do we need the legal or moral freedom to detach from the associated demands or to examine them reflexively." Cf. Honneth, *Freedom's Right,* p. 123.
[107] Cf. Owen and Van Den Brink, "Self-Government and 'Democracy as Reflexive Co-operation'" p. 299-300.
[108] Whether Habermas would disagree on that point is another question.

> association with others: the power to be an individualized self making a distinctive contribution and enjoying in its own way the fruits of association. Equality denotes the unhampered share which each individual member of the community has in the consequences of associated action. It is equitable because it is measured only by need and capacity to utilize, not by extraneous factors which deprive one in order that another may take and have.[109]

3.4.2 The Redistribution or Recognition Debate

The concept of recognition has become central in contemporary sociology and political science, and Honneth is generally identified as one of the two or three key philosophers that have given shape to this 'recognition paradigm'. The recognition paradigm – if so we should call it – is far from uncontested however, insofar as it is bound up with an analysis of contemporary social movements and struggles which is said to be "engaged in a new form of politics, sometimes labelled 'politics of difference' or 'identity politics.'"[110] Accordingly, Honneth has been the subject of criticism from those who argue that his recognition theory is insufficient as a theory of justice, because the attempt to reduce social struggles to 'struggles for recognition' obscures the material, or socioeconomic, bases of injustice. More fundamentally, Honneth's recognition theory has been challenged as being fundamentally deficient *qua* social theory, insofar as it cannot account for important causes of injustice; and so cannot make sense of associated justice claims. These types of challenges have notably been levied against Honneth's recognition theory by Nancy Fraser ("a pioneer in feminist critical social theory"[111]), and the debate between Fraser and Honneth was subsequently presented in a co-authored volume titled *Redistribution or Recognition* in 2003.

Fraser is an opponent of any attempt to place recognition as a master-concept for the purposes of analysing and formulating social justice struggles, and argues instead for a 'bivalent' critical social theory where "the causes and remedies for cultural and economic injustices are distinguished from one another and analysed using different tools."[112] Fraser illustrates this point with the examples of the "African-American Wall Street banker who cannot get a taxi to pick him up" on the one hand, and the "skilled white male industrial worker who becomes unemployed due to a factory closing resulting from a speculative corporate merger" on the other. In the first case, she says, we cannot understand the cause

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[109] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Chicago: Gateway Books, 1946) p. 150.
[110] Mattias Iser, "Recognition", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.) URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/recognition/>.
[111] Christopher F. Zurn, *Axel Honneth*: *A Critical Theory of The Social* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015) p. 130.
[112] Ibid, p. 137 .

of the injustice if we only look at the distribution of rights and resources; there we must look to the "institutional patterns of cultural value". And in the second case, we cannot understand the cause of injustice if we look only at such patterns of cultural value; there we must consider the capitalist mechanisms of profit accumulation which are "relatively decoupled from structures of prestige"[113].

Fraser's argument here then is that although recognition patterns certainly influence economic injustice in many areas – for example, when it comes to the unpaid 'reproductive' labour of women – it cannot account for cases where the ultimate cause of distributional injustice is not anything other than a function of the economic system. In his treatment of the Fraser-Honneth debate, Christopher Zurn notes that both in his original account and in his reply to Fraser on this point, Honneth is noticeably ambiguous. In some places, says Zurn, Honneth seems to insist that it is indeed a society's recognition-schema that ultimately determines or dictates "the division of labour and its attendant pay schedules" – while at other times he apparently denies that his recognition theory claims to fully account for the dynamics of capitalist markets. "Thus" writes Zurn "we have stronger and weaker forms of Honneth's claims, sometimes considering recognition as fully determining economic outcomes and sometimes as only operating as an outer constraint on broad structures of the political economy."[114]

Following on this line of criticism, Fraser argues that Honneth's theory will not hold up as a practical critical theory of justice. In short, if Honneth's theory is unable to adequately parse the causes of injustice, the recommendations for political action that will come out of it will certainly be flawed. Fraser says that the recommendations to be had from Honneth's theory might well end up adding "insult to injury" since, if "misrecognition is identified with internal distortions in the self-consciousness of the oppressed, it is but a short step to blame the victim". Alternatively, she says, "when misrecognition is equated with prejudice in the minds of the oppressors, overcoming it seems to require policing their beliefs, an approach that is illiberal and authoritarian."[115] Zurn writes that Honneth might be able to avoid this charge if he insists on the 'weaker' reading of his theory. If, that is, the claim is merely that "the recognition order is one among several causal determinants of capitalist markets in general since there are recognitional preconditions for the very functioning of markets – laws, social norms, psychological dispositions – preconditions

[113] Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, Translated by Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (London/New York: Verso, 2003) pp. 34-5; abbreviated as *RoR*.
[114] Zurn, *Axel Honneth* p. 140.
[115] Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition*, p. 31.

that could be withdrawn should social actors no longer be convinced of their legitimacy".[116] On this reading of the recognition theory, Honneth would be able to avoid Fraser's charge, though, says Zurn, the price for this move would be that the theory becomes much less useful. Honneth may well be able to argue that "most distributive harms are experienced by individuals in recognitional terms"[117], but that is not particularly useful for practical-political purposes. If the theory cannot provide a more direct causal analysis of market dynamics, then it will not be able to provide guidance for how to address the justice claims that are raised. Zurn writes

> Should antiglobalization activists, for instance, seek to overturn international private law, change interpersonal norms concerning authority and trust relations between economic elites, or inculcate more altruistic dispositions amongst corporate decision makers through publicity and education? Perhaps all of these and more, or perhaps none. […] Avoiding a direct causal account of market dynamics or processes, but only highlighting their multivariate character, the weaker version cannot point out which of the possible "determinants" is most important in any particular example or distributive outcome" [118]

As Honneth's theory develops, some of these questions will fall by the wayside, or else have to be recast – though as I have noted in my discussion of *The Idea of Socialism*, the issue of practical guidance is certainly still pressing. I will return to consider those issues later, but for now I will focus on a connected, but more fundamental, critique raised by Fraser which raises questions that will always be at play in the background of Honneth's theorising, regardless of other developments. The charge is that a recognition-centric approach is not appropriate as a theory of justice for modern, multicultural societies, because it rests on the assertion of a particular interpretation of 'the good life'.

Today, writes Fraser, we find ourselves "[b]uffeted by competing claims for recognition, from amid conflicting schemas of value", and we need to find a "secure standpoint" for judging justly between them. Honneth's recognition theory cannot do that if it requires the existence of a "shared value horizon" against which divergent recognition claims can be adjudicated.[119] But this is precisely what Honneth's recognition theory does, says Fraser, because it asserts a particular conception of 'the good life' and then judges recognition claims against whether or to what extent agents' ability to partake in that 'good life' is facilitated or hindered. Fraser calls this approach 'sectarian' and says that what we need is

[116] Zurn, *Axel Honneth* p. 141.
[117] Ibid, p. 146.
[118] Zurn, *Axel Honneth*, p. 145-6.
[119] Fraser *Redistribution or Recognition*, p. 223.

a non-sectarian critical theory which does not assume or assert "a particular scheme of ethical value" but is rather "compatible with a diversity of reasonable visions of the good life", while at the same time being determinate enough to usefully help adjudicate between justice claims.[120]

In levying this charge against Honneth's theory, Fraser is to some extent equating i) a particular scheme of ethical value, ii) a particular conception of the good life, and iii) a theory of self-realization. Honneth's recognition theory is a theory of (the conditions of) self-realization, and Fraser's claim is that this makes it too substantial, too 'ethical', and too teleological. This core idea, "rooted in a standard Kantian contrast developed in Habermas's moral theory",[121] is that

> questions of justice are usually understood to be matters of 'the right', which belongs squarely on the terrain of 'morality'. Questions of self-realization, in contrast, are considered to be matters of 'the good,' which belong rather to the domain of 'ethics.' In part this contrast is a matter of scope. Norms of justice are universally binding; like principles of Kantian *Moralität,* they hold independently of actors' commitments or specific values. Claims about self-realization, on the other hand, are usually considered to be more restricted. Like canons of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, they depend on culturally and historically specific horizons of value, which cannot be universalized. Thus a great deal turns on whether claims for recognition are held to concern justice or self-realization.[122]

This view of the division between 'morality' and 'ethics' is bound up with the view that a theory of justice must be procedural, and that it cannot be teleological. For a theory of justice to be teleological means that it asserts that justice is aimed at some goal, a *telos*, and that society is just to the extent that it realizes that. But any articulation of such a *telos* will inevitably be 'ethical' in the sense that it will make essential reference to a substantial conception of the good life. Therefore, a teleological conception of justice will always be unacceptably parochial. A 'procedural' theory of justice on the other hand seeks to avoid any reference to what 'the good life' is, but only establish what constitutes a just procedure for adjudicating between competing (ethical) claims.

Honneth's response to this line of argument is, in short, that there is no such thing as a purely procedural theory of justice, since it will inevitably rest on implicit references to what is taken to be good, worthwhile, etc. Honneth argues that deontological theories like

[120]Fraser *Redistribution or Recognition*, p. 223.
[121] Zurn, *Axel Honneth*, p. 147.
[122] Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition*, p. 27-8.

those proposed by Fraser, Rawls, or Habermas cannot avoid making reference to the good in some sense, and in fact, they all make reference to the telos of individual autonomy. He writes "I take it that the reason we should be interested in establishing a just social order is that it is only under these conditions that subjects can attain the most undamaged possible self-relation, and thus individual autonomy. In terms of the distinctions on which John Rawls based his theory, here we have a weak idea of the good, without which a conception of justice would have no aim."[123]

Of course, it might be argued that even supposing that we cannot avoid some reference to 'the good' even in procedural theories of justice, it is better to keep those references to a minimum – to ensure 'reasonable pluralism'. Honneth's deontological and proceduralist interlocutors would argue that the opposite of such a cautious approach would be to offer, as Honneth does, a very substantial psychological and anthropological account of the good life. Indeed, the theory of recognition laid out in *SfR* does rest on a 'philosophical anthropology' which is constituted by a variety of empirical theses drawn from "diverse domains of social science: developmental psychology, moral psychology, social psychology, sociology, political economy, social history, political science".[124] This type of empirical approach makes Honneth vulnerable to a variety of charges – in particular regarding the wisdom of tying his theory too closely to specific psychological theories (e.g. those of G. H. Mead).

Defending the general approach of seeking the "empirical reference point" of critical theory in moral psychology, Honneth writes near the end of *Redistribution or Recognition* that:

> In contrast to Rawls, the idea of the good on which a recognition-theoretical conception of justice is based is tailored from the start to the intersubjective character of human relations. For it assumes that the subject for whose sake just social relations are to be established are aware that their autonomy depends on the autonomy of their partners in interaction.[125]

But although he will continue to champion an approach that takes its starting point in some kind of intersubjectivist moral psychology; after *Redistribution or Recognition* , Honneth does begin to move his account to what we might call a 'higher level of abstraction', and away from some of the more detailed moral psychological theses of *SfR*. Among other things, this means that in subsequent writings, the 'modes of recognition' become much less important; so although Honneth still seems to think that there are modes of recognition

[123] Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition*, p. 259.
[124] Zurn, *Axel Honneth*, p. 124.
[125] Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition*, p. 259.

that can be meaningfully distinguished, he is not concerned with detailed social-psychological accounts of their workings. For example, the distinctions between e.g. 'esteem' or 'respect' recognition does not seem to play any role *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*.

But although the focus for Honneth is less on the particular forms of recognition, recognition is still the bedrock of his theoretical approach overall. And what is always in the background of Honneth's writings is something like the claim that, as Bert Van Den Brink and David Owen put it, "[r]elations of recognition are a necessary – one is tempted to say a transcendental – condition of our moral subjectivity and agency".[126] Whether we may call it transcendental is controversial, but I will argue later on that Honneth can and should embrace some transcendental elements in his theory. He opens up for this possibility in a passage in *Redistribution or Recognition* which I will return to (cf. §6.3 and §7.2):

> [I]n the choice of the basic principles by which we want to orient our political ethic, we rely not merely on empirically given interests, but rather only on those relatively stable expectations that we can understand as the subjective expression of imperatives of social integration. It is perhaps not entirely wrong to speak here of "quasi-transcendental interests" of the human race; and possibly it is even justified to talk at this point of an "emancipatory" interest that aims at dismantling social asymmetries and exclusion.[127]

[126] Owen and Van Den Brink, *Recognition and Power,* pp. 5-6.
[127] Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition,* p. 174.

Chapter 4: A Philosophy of Right

4.1 Pathologies of Individual Freedom

This chapter will take a closer look at the more recent phase of Honneth's work which centres on the 2011 work *Freedom's Right*. Although there is no clear cut-off point, we can talk about Honneth's earlier works as belonging to the 'recognition phase' and the later as belonging to the 'social freedom phase' – so named after the most central concepts used. Here I will begin by considering the 2001 work *The Pathologies of Freedom* and the 2008 essay "The Fabric of Justice" which I think serve as important context for the subsequent discussion in §4.3 of *Freedom's Right* and its central concept of social freedom. The next chapter will discuss some of the key criticisms faced by Honneth's new social freedom centred philosophy.

In 2001, Honneth published *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory*, a work which in retrospect we can see signals a turning point in Honneth's theorizing. *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom* is a short work dedicated to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1820) and Honneth's aim in *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom* is to show how that work can be 'reactualized' and shown to contain the "nucleus of a theory of justice" that is both radically different from the prevailing "Kantian or Lockean" brands of justice theories – and, more importantly, one that is particularly well suited to the current socio-political climate.[128] This marks a shift for Honneth compared with his recognition-centric work, concomitant with Honneth's reassessing Hegel's later texts. (*PoIF* 2)

In a later text, Honneth reflects that in *SfR* he was working with the assumption that Hegel "sacrificed his initial intersubjectivism in the course of developing a monological concept of spirit". The focus in *SfR* was therefore on reconstructing the fragmented intersubjective theory of recognition of Hegel's early manuscripts. But, says Honneth, in his reassessment of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* in particular, he came to see that this assumption was mistaken and that in fact, "Hegel sought throughout his life to interpret objective spirit, i.e. social reality, as a set of layered relations of recognition".[129] Although he does not put it in these

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[128] Axel Honneth, *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory,* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 2; henceforth abbreviated and referenced in-line as *PoIF;* "Given the widespread awareness of the need for the social contextualisation of formally established principles of justice, Hegel's attempt at setting the abstract principles of modern right and morality within an institutional framework should look extremely attractive; further, in view of the increasing uncertainty about the place formal rights should occupy in our practical everyday morals, his efforts to develop an ethical metatheory of right ought to appear uncommonly seductive; and finally, in view of the problems of political philosophy today, there could be a particular appeal in the close connection between the development of his theory of right and his diagnosis of the age, which centres on the alleged threat of individualism."

[129] Axel Honneth, *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*. (Cambridge; Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2012) p. viii.

terms, I do not think it would be too far off the mark to say that with *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, we see Honneth shifting focus from a psychology-centric approach (centred on 'modes of recognition') to a more institutional-centric approach (centred on 'spheres of action'). Certainly, the focus now shifts from psychological-anthropological analysis of how recognition happens *tout court* to a historical and sociological analysis of the actually existing institutional patterns of recognition in modern societies (e.g. 'spheres of social action' labelled e.g. 'family and personal relationships'; 'law'; 'morality'; 'market relations' etc.).

Honneth begins *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom* by lamenting the fact that Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* has been so thoroughly overlooked by contemporary political philosophy. Since the collapse of the "Marxist phase" of political philosophy, says Honneth, "philosophers returned on a broad front to the rationalist paradigm of the Kantian tradition, which essentially dominates the debate from Rawls to Habermas". Philosophers who have pushed back against this paradigm[130] and attempted to "award a privileged position to ethics as opposed to formalistic principles of morality, or to communal values as opposed to arbitrary individual freedom" have nonetheless taken care to stay as far away as possible from Hegel's political philosophy. (*PoIF* 1-2)

Honneth suggests that Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* now "plays the unfortunate part of a classic that is widely read but no longer heard" due to two elements of that text (*PoIF* 3). The first of these is Hegel's notoriously undemocratic model of the state, and the second is the role played by Hegel's "ontological conception of spirit." Although Honneth signals that he does not think that the problems posed by these two elements are as serious as some commentators have made them out to be, he nonetheless chooses to pursue what he calls an "indirect" strategy to try to show how the approach and method of the *Philosophy of Right* can be "reactualized". (*PoIF* 4)

This 'indirect' strategy means that any reference to either Hegel's model of the state or the larger framework connected to his metaphysical concept of Spirit (*Geist*) is left out. Even without these parts, Honneth argues, the *Philosophy of Right* contains the outlines of a distinct and propitious approach to justice theory. The outline, or blueprint, of a theory of justice that Honneth finds in the *Philosophy of Right* then comes down to three core elements: the concepts of "ethical life" and "objective spirit" combined with the identification of a "general free will" as that which "determines the total extent of what we should call 'right'". (*PoIF* 6)

[130] Honneth gives Taylor, MacIntyre, Raz, and Waltzer as examples, though allows that Taylor is an exception.

In *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, 'Ethical life' is talked about in two more or less distinct ways. On the one hand, Honneth presents 'ethical life' as referring to the general thesis that the human form of life is a socially institutionalized intersubjective form of life. On the other hand, 'ethical life' is used to refer to a normative ideal; i.e., the form of life which the Hegelian theory of justice is aimed at. The ambiguity is due to Hegel's inconsistent use of the term – and in *Freedom's Right* we see that Honneth avoids this by calling the section which corresponds to the 'ethical life' section in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* 'social freedom' – and when he refers to the expansive ideal of a social order that enables true freedom, Honneth talks about "democratic ethical life'. (*PoIF* 6)

Honneth detaches the concept of "objective spirit" entirely from Hegel's metaphysics of Spirit and gives it a sociological-philosophical reading according to which it refers to the thesis that all "social reality has a rational structure and any breach of that structure by using false or inadequate concepts to try to understand it will necessarily have negative effects on social life as soon as those concepts come to be applied in practice" (*PoIF* 6). This formulation is further de-mystified by Honneth's reading of Hegel's claim that the objective spirit of modernity "takes the form of a 'will that is generally free"'. Honneth's reading of this claim is that the idea of individual freedom, or individual autonomy, functions as the central organizing normative principle for social reality in the modern world. Thus, the 'objective spirit' of modernity is understood to refer to the fact – still to be borne out – that in the modern world, individual autonomy is the normative value that determines the shape and legitimacy of all the key social institutions through which we exercise our form of life. (*PoIF* 9)

The claim that individual autonomy is in fact the objective spirit of modernity in this sense will be justified in the course of what is called the 'normative reconstruction' of the key social institutions – i.e., an in-depth examination of the normative principles that do in fact structure institutions. However, the aim and normative intention of that reconstruction is said to be given by Hegel's social model of freedom. Honneth quotes Hegel saying that the paradigmatic form of real freedom is that of friendship and love – the "being with oneself in the other" (*Beisichselbstsein in einem Anderen*) (*PoIF* 14). Honneth's interpretation of this famous formula holds that it is essentially the same as what Hegel argued against individualist atomism in his early writings:

> Hegel answers the question of how "free will" is really to be understood by, roughly, this train of thought: in order to be able to will itself as free, the will must restrict itself to those "needs, desires, and drives," in short its "first-order volitions," the realization of which can again be experienced as an expression, or confirmation, of

> its own freedom. But that is possible only if the object of the desire or inclination itself has the quality of being free, because only such an "other" can really enable the will to experience freedom. (*PoIF* 14)

As this passage shows, insofar as it rests on his analysis of freedom (what freedom really is), the Hegelian theory of justice Honneth is aiming to reactualize makes essential reference to Hegel's theory of agency and action. I emphasise this here because when Honneth presents his updated version of this kind of theory in *Freedom's Right*, he seems to want to avoid as much as possible references to substantial theses regarding the nature of agency and action – which, I will argue, ends up causing serious problems. In *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, Honneth follows up the passage quoted above by saying that Hegel's analysis of freedom translates into an ideal of justice as follows:

> as the quintessence of a just social order he [Hegel] regards those social or institutional conditions that allow each subject to enter into communicative relationships that can be experienced as expressions of their own freedom; for it is only insofar as they can participate in such social relationships that subjects are able without compulsion to realize their freedom in the external world. To put this intention of Hegel in somewhat more general terms, one might perhaps say that he regards communicative relationships as the "basic good" in which all human beings must take an interest for the sake of realizing their freedom. (*PoIF* 15)

If we accept the premise that individual autonomy is the central legitimizing principle of social institutions in modernity, the central tasks for the Hegelian theory of justice become: a) to determine what is required for the realization of individual autonomy and b) to examine extant social institutions against this yardstick and to judge their "existential claims" to legitimacy against it. (*PoIF* 17)

While Hegel is "convinced that only communicative relationships on the pattern of friendship actually allow the individual subject to realize his freedom," Honneth says that he recognizes "that other, incomplete concepts of freedom are a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of such a practical freedom" (*PoIF* 19). The 'incomplete' models of freedom here are called the 'abstract right' model and the 'moral' or 'optional' freedom model. Later, Honneth equates these two models of freedom with the 'negative' and 'positive' (or 'reflexive') freedom models respectively. This element of Hegel's theory is identified by Honneth as something that gives it significant critical potential. The critical potential emerges when existing social institutions can be analysed with an eye to whether one of the incomplete conceptions of freedom have been falsely enshrined as the full meaning of freedom. Where that happens, writes Honneth

> if either of the two ideas of individual freedom is treated as an absolute, be it in the form of a legal demand or equated with moral autonomy, the social reality itself will undergo some pathological dislocations that are a certain, almost 'empirical' indication that the limits of legitimacy have been transgressed. Thus, by illustrating the negative consequences that are bound to occur if incomplete, or inadequate, conceptions of freedom are allowed to establish themselves in society in complete independence, it is possible step by step to fathom the proper place in our communicative practice to which their structure entitle them. (*PoIF* 23)

I will show how Honneth develops the ideas sketched here in §4.3 *Freedom's Right*. Before I do, however, I want to point to an intermediate view of Honneth's, elements of which will be important in the critical discussion of the *Freedom's Right* project.

4.2 The Fabric of Justice

One of the essays published in the 2012 essay collection *The I in We* is particularly useful when considering the development of Honneth's thought leading up to *Freedom's Right*. The essay, titled "The Fabric of Justice: On the Limits of Contemporary Proceduralism" is based on a 2008 lecture, and provides us with a kind of bridge between the recognition and the social freedom projects. It does so, I would argue, because it gives a characterisation of the impetus for Honneth's recognition project which we can then see being carried over to the new approach, to be developed in *Freedom's Right*. In this essay, Honneth offers a critique of the dominant philosophical theories of justice, which he argues "completely fail to grasp the structure of justice."[131] By dominant theories of justice, he is referring to "proceduralist" theories with a focus on "just distribution" and "a certain fixation on the state". Most notably, he includes both Rawls and Habermas under this heading of proceduralist and distributional theories of justice; though the edge seems to be mainly directed at Rawlsian theories of justice. It's worth noting, too, that whereas the 'communitarian challenge' to traditional theories of justice was still a going concern in the late 1990s, Honneth states as a starting premise of "The Fabric of Justice" that "the debate over the relationship between liberalism and communitarianism has abated just as suddenly as it emerged two decades ago" – for which reason he focuses his critique on proceduralist theories in particular.[132]

Characterizing the positions he is concerned with critiquing, Honneth begins by picking out a couple of shared basic elements among the wide variety of proceduralist theories of justice. First, he says, they share a basic normative orientation in that they view the aim of

[131] Honneth, *The I in We,* p. 41.
[132] Ibid, p. 35.

social justice as the ensuring of individual autonomy. Second, they share a focus on distribution, where distribution of the necessary goods is meant to enable the realization of the aim of justice; i.e., individual autonomy. The focus on distribution, and the way it tends to be cashed out, Honneth argues, is a function of how the first principle of individual autonomy is understood.

The critique Honneth offers of the way that proceduralist theories tend to cash out the principle of individual autonomy can be glossed as follows: Individual autonomy, or liberty, is understood as an individual's ability and right of self-determination; something that must be understood in terms of the choices she makes about her life; which in turn must be understood in terms of what she autonomously takes to be valuable, worthwhile etc. On this understanding of individual autonomy/liberty, any extent to which a theory of justice asserts a substantial conception of the good as part of its scheme for what constitutes social justice will, *ipso facto*, circumscribe individual liberty. Consequently, if we want to offer an account of a just social order, we will be constrained to try to offer the best way to ensure that individuals have the ability to determine for themselves what is valuable, worthwhile etc. and to be able to go for that (complicating factors of incompatible ends notwithstanding). That is to say, we will end up with a theory of justice whose subject turns out to be that of designing an appropriate procedure which can ensure this individual autonomy. And because we must refrain as much as possible from predetermining what 'the good' for individuals can be, the appropriate procedure we will come up with is likely to be a procedure for ensuring the necessary goods for individuals to choose. Those goods have typically been understood in terms of political rights and material resources. Accordingly, Honneth writes that for the dominant theories of justice today

> the material of justice nearly always consists in generally valued goods to be distributed according to principles still to be determined. This presupposes a common interest in these means, which are required for forming and pursuing autonomous, freely chosen life plans. For these theories, what makes up a just social order is merely a question of what counts as a just distribution of basic goods.[133]

One of the issues with such a view of procedural-distributive justice – of which Rawls's Justice as Fairness would be the best-known example – is that it actually does presuppose more substantial ideas of what things are worthwhile pursuing in life than it acknowledges. After all, says Honneth,

[133] Ibid, p. 40.

> goods can only be grasped as useful means for realizing individual liberty if we presuppose that people are 'autonomous'. We cannot determine what it means to grasp financial resources or career opportunities as chances for freedom by considering the meaning of these goods themselves, but only by defining our respective relation to them. Therefore, even the most comprehensive and well-considered list of basic goods cannot tell us what it would mean to ensure conditions of personal autonomy.[134]

Of course, Honneth goes on to say that the conditions of personal autonomy cannot be understood in terms of goods at all. Rather, he says, individual autonomy is only possible through intersubjective recognition: "[w]e do not acquire autonomy on our own, but only in relation to other people who are willing to appreciate (*wertschätzen*) us, just as we must be able to appreciate them." This is why, says Honneth, "current theories of justice completely fail to grasp the structure of justice". [135] What we do when we assume that the autonomy-enabling goods can be distributed equally, is to assume that they are the kind of things that can be held individually. But if the "'material' of justice" is instead to be understood in terms of reciprocal recognition relations, then it does not make sense to think of it as something that can be held and enjoyed by individuals by themselves. So he says – in a passage that I will return to draw on later on (see §7.3.1) in my recasting of Honneth's theory:

> Autonomy is a relational, intersubjective entity, not a monological achievement. What helps us to acquire autonomy is not cut out of the same cloth as a good that can be distributed; it is fashioned out of living relations of reciprocal recognition that are just to the degree that they allow us to reciprocally value our needs, beliefs and abilities.[136]

Honneth goes on to say that the distributional paradigm goes hand in hand with a focus on the role of the state because "it is the only authority that possesses the power to distribute the goods needed to enable individual autonomy".[137] So Honneth says that if we shift our understanding of the goods enabling individual autonomy to 'reciprocal recognition relationships,' then it becomes obvious that we should not have such a strong focus on the state in a theory of justice. Operating with roughly the same division as in *SfR* between spheres of action correlating to types of recognition relationships and types of relation-to-self, Honneth says that while the state can be thought of as the appropriate

[134] Ibid, p. 41.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid, p. 43.

authority for ensuring that we relate to each other with respect as equal citizens; it cannot work in the same way in other social spheres. So, for example, he says that "[n]either in the family nor in the workplace can the state simply intervene to improve conditions of recognition, without running the risk of impinging on these spheres' autonomous conditions of existence." But these spheres of action are just as important – maybe more so – for individual autonomy. It is through healthy relationships of recognition in these spheres that individuals can develop self-respect and self-esteem that will allow them to have a healthy relation-to-self; to understand themselves as worthy of respect and to be able to articulate their needs. [138]

The starting point of an alternative model of justice, we are told, should be drawing on Foucaultian insights, and adopt a decentered concept of power. It must be recognized that political power does not flow from the top or the center – but is reproduced through a variety of "loosely connected points". Accordingly, the struggle for social justice must shift its focus to the real *loci* of political power. Although the state should not be ignored, Honneth emphasizes that a theory that 'gets the structure of justice right' must give due attention to "'pre-state' organizations". Examples given of such pre-state organizations are "family-like self-help groups, trade unions, church communities or other civilian groups". Foreshadowing a key aspect of *Freedom's Right*, Honneth adds that "[t]he structural model for such pre-state agencies can be found in Hegel's 'Corporations', whose function primarily consisted in establishing the moral principle of a certain social sphere – 'civil society' – and reinforcing it in practice."[139]

In the last part of the essay, Honneth says that he is going to switch from a negative critique of the deficiencies of the dominant theories of justice to suggest what his alternative conception would look like. To this end, he outlines three key features that would characterize his alternative model of justice: a) the replacement of a distributional schema with "the involvement of all subjects in a given relationship of recognition"; b) the replacement of a (original position-type) procedural method with the method of normative reconstruction, aimed at "uncovering the basic moral norms that underlie that relationship of recognition"; and c) replacing "the exclusive focus on the regulative activity of the state" in favor of a more balanced consideration of state as well as "non-state actors and organizations".[140]

[138] Ibid, p. 44.
[139] Ibid, p. 45.
[140] Ibid, p. 45.

The elaboration that follows is difficult to characterize properly – I think precisely because it sits at the intersection of the recognition and the social freedom projects. The concept of "normative reconstruction" is central to *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*, but absent from *The Struggle for Recognition*. The concept of forms of reciprocal recognition enabling forms of self-understanding is central to *The Struggle for Recognition,* but absent in *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*. It is noteworthy that in the last part of "The Fabric of Justice", Honneth talks about the need to undertake normative reconstruction to be able to determine what the material of justice is. Rather than constructing principles of justice through some idealized process, he says we must examine the actually existing relations of recognition and reconstruct their "conditions of validity". The idea seems to be that we cannot say, in general, what it would mean to recognize and be recognized in such a way that self-respect and self-esteem[141] is possible – because the precise form of the norms of recognition will depend on the specific, historically contingent, form of the social relationships obtaining in a given society. Therefore, we need to look at what the spheres of recognition are in our society to determine what justice requires here and now. In a footnote connected to this passage, Honneth notes that

> Habermas presents a similar justification for his 'reconstructive' approach in *Between Facts and Norms* (pp. 82ff.). The difference between our endeavours consists in the fact that he only treats the historical development of the modern constitutional state as an object of normative reconstruction, whereas I propose that, given the demands on a theory of justice, we undertake such a reconstruction with regard to the entire spectrum of the historical development of all the spheres of recognition that are both central and institutionalized in modern societies. Of course, this means I am faced with the problem of having to claim that all three different spheres of recognition are embodiments of principles of recognition whose practical realization in our interactions demands individual autonomy.[142]

From these passages and the associated footnote we see that Honneth talks about spheres of recognition in a way that comes very close to how he talks about social spheres of action in *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*. It is easy to see an echo of the argument that Honneth will develop about there being a set of social spheres in modern societies that all rest on the central legitimizing principle of individual autonomy – but spheres that are nonetheless functionally differentiated because what it means to affirm autonomy and have that autonomy affirmed in turn will be different in the different spheres. Accordingly,

[141] It is more unclear what we can say with regards to self-confidence.
[142] Ibid, p. 54.

Honneth ends "The Fabric of Justice" by saying that the praxis recommended by his alternative theory of justice would be to "demonstrate the institutional, material and legal conditions that would have to be fulfilled in order for different social spheres to take account of the norms of recognition upon which they are based". This, he suggests, will mean the promotion of individual autonomy by defending "deliberative equality within democratic legal relations, equity of needs within familial relationships, and justice of achievement in relations of work".[143]

This emphasis on the need for normative reconstruction of the norms of recognition in the various social spheres clearly anticipates the account in *Freedom's Right,* but there is a key difference. Immediately following on these points, Honneth adds that sphere-particular demands for recognition must always include demands that "all subjects be involved in these relationships of recognition".[144] He does not address the potential problem that the norms of recognition that have developed historically within one of these spheres may be exclusionary; as they have been and are in patriarchal, racist and/or class societies. As I will discuss in detail later, one of the main lines of criticism against *Freedom's Right* is that the method of 'normative reconstruction' is conservative in the sense that it does not allow for a pushing beyond the norms that underlie social institutions, since there is no external point of normative leverage against which to judge the validity of the norms that structure social institutions. It is very interesting to note that Honneth appears to recognise this problem in "The Fabric of Justice". He writes that while it is a great strength of a reconstructive theory of justice that it can focus on explicating the principles of recognition that have actually emerged in the different social spheres in historical reality, it will also recognize that "if these preconditions are absent – that is, if we are dealing with ethically damaged and demoralized social relationships – this theory of justice will be relatively powerless. It, too, will have to resort to an impartial standpoint in order to not wholly lose sight of the principles of social justice."[145] And in conjunction with this passage Honneth adds in a footnote that "This formulation parallels Hegel's idea that the merely 'moral point of view' – i.e. the internal nature of moral conscience – always has an important role when 'the world of actuality is hollow, spiritless, and unstable'".[146]

As we will see, *Freedom's Right* (and *The Idea of Socialism* after it) omits any reference to a 'merely moral point of view' which causes some problems for the theory laid out there. Subsequently, I will argue, Honneth reintroduces something that can play the role of a

[143] Ibid, p. 50.
[144] Ibid, p. 50.
[145] Ibid, p. 48.
[146] Ibid, p. 54.

merely moral point of view, with the aforementioned quasi-transcendental emancipatory interest (see §6.3 & §7.1-2).

4.3 *Freedom's Right*

Part I of *Freedom's Right* begins with the bold declaration that no other ethical value can rival the role played by freedom in shaping modern society. Even though there are rival conceptions of what makes a life good or well lived, and a social order legitimate, the status of freedom, *qua* individual autonomy, has come to exert such an "enormous gravitational force" over the last two centuries that when other values are asserted (as things that ought to be recognized and protected by society; e.g. community, religious expression etc.) they are asserted by appealing to the role they play for individual autonomy. It is, writes Honneth a defining feature of the modern world that the "normative legitimacy of the social order increasingly depends on whether it does enough to ensure individual self-determination, or at least its basic preconditions." (*FR* 16)

In a sense, this strong initial claim serves as both hypothesis and premise for the project Honneth undertakes in *Freedom's Right*. As premise, it is an echo of what Honneth noted of Hegel's project in *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*: i.e., that "[l]ike Rousseau, Kant and Fichte, he [Hegel] sets out from the premise that under the conditions of modern enlightenment any definition of morality or right can only be considered justified to the extent that it expresses the individual autonomy or self-determination of the human being".[147] On the other hand, it serves as hypothesis for the 'normative reconstruction' that Honneth undertakes in *Freedom's Right* to show how concepts of freedom have in fact come to serve as the central legitimizing principle of those key social institutions or norm-complexes which determine the shape of our form of life in modernity.

Freedom's Right is divided into three parts. The relatively brief Part I contains a historical-philosophical analysis of the development of the three conceptions of freedom which Honneth identifies as having shaped modernity: negative, reflexive, and social freedom. Part II is given over to a more in-depth analysis of how the conceptions of negative and reflexive freedom have shaped (by serving as the legitimizing principles of) the social institutional complexes of 'law' and 'morality' respectively. Part III (which takes up about two thirds of the book) is given over to an analysis of the key social institutions of modernity which are said to rest on the legitimizing principle of social freedom.

[147] "Like Rousseau, Kant and Fichte, he [Hegel] sets out from the premise that under the conditions of modern enlightenment any definition of morality or right can only be considered justified to the extent that it expresses the individual autonomy or self-determination of the human being." Honneth, *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, p. 10.

Although more accessible than Hegel's *Philosophy of Right,* on which it is modelled, *Freedom's Right* is still demanding – in part because of its volume, but more because of how unfamiliarly it reads as a 'theory of justice'. Typically, we might expect the strong claims about the role played by the ethical value of individual autonomy for the modern social order to be followed up directly; but that is not how Honneth proceeds. In his discussion of *Freedom's Right*, Christopher Zurn suggests that while it seems strange that the strong claim about the paramount status of individual autonomy in the introduction is not followed up with the direct argumentation we might expect, we should read "the bulk of FR – Honneth's extended, 300-year history of the central social institutions of modern Western societies, including law, morality, the family, the market, democracy, and the state – as vindicating these claims through extended, concrete, historical-sociological analysis." Accordingly, Zurn says that *Freedom's Right* is not arguing that "freedom is ideally the most important value of all values, or that all other values ought to be conceptually subsumed under freedom." Rather, says Zurn, the case in *Freedom's Right* is that "our actual social institutions, as really practiced in contemporary societies, are in fact all deeply structured to develop, facilitate, and realize individual freedom above all."[148]

Zurn's characterisation here is right as far as it goes. But, in my view *Freedom's Right* is not only, not even primarily, an immanent historical-sociological justification of the status of freedom. Above all, it is an analysis of the human – *sittlich* – form of life. If we read *Freedom's Right* with the understanding that it proceeds on the assumption that our *sittlich* form of life is constituted by social institutions, then I think we can see how an analysis of the keystone legitimizing value of the central social institutions of modernity is more than a descriptive justification of that value; it is also an analysis of what constitutes the good for our *sittlich* form of life in modernity. If I am right in saying we should read the argument in this way, we can say that it does amount to an argument for the primacy of the value of individual autonomy; only one that appears a bit backwards compared to how those usually go. Regardless, in the following I will try to present the argumentation in *Freedom's Right* as straightforwardly as possible.

Part I of *Freedom's Right* is the shortest part of the work, consisting in a partly historical-descriptive and partly conceptual-philosophical discussion of three conceptions, or models, of freedom. In it, Honneth presents an account of how the negative (e.g. Hobbesian, Lockeian) concept of freedom originated with Hobbes, how reflexive freedom (e.g. Kantian, Rawlsian) concepts developed (first with Rousseau) in reaction to the deficits of the negative model – and subsequently how Hegel sought to develop a distinct third model

[148] Zurn, *Axel Honneth,* p. 154.

of freedom, intended to overcome the inadequacies of both. Honneth's presentation of Hegel's position also serves as a philosophical-conceptual argument for that model of freedom – but because it is presented as an examination of Hegel's view, it is not always entirely clear which aspects thereof are elements that Honneth embraces and endorses, and which are just reports of Hegel's views.

Following on this relatively free-standing account, Honneth outlines the programme for the theory of justice he wants to pursue as follows. In order to overcome the problem of having to 're-connect' principles of justice arrived at through a more or less idealized legitimizing procedure with nonideal social reality, Honneth says that we should begin by examining the existential claims to legitimacy of the central institutions of the current social order – i.e., the norms in virtue of which the institutions are understood to be legitimate by those participating in them. Here, 'the social order' refers to the overall "institutionalized structure of systems of action in which culturally acknowledged values are realized in their respective functional manner". Central sub-systems are those spheres of action which "embody specific elements of the overarching ideas and values that ensure the legitimacy of the social order as a whole". The normative reconstruction will consist in an empirical examination of "whether and how culturally accepted values are in fact realized in the various different spheres of action, and which norms of behaviours ideally prevail". (*FR* 63-4)

On this approach, says Honneth, we will be able to determine 'the demands of justice' – in the sense of who is owed what – as being "the essence of the norms that contribute to the most appropriate and comprehensive realization of prevailing values within various different systems of action" (*FR* 64). That is to say, we will be able to determine what justice requires in any given sphere of action when we understand what the legitimizing value means in that context. But of course, this kind of examination of any given social sphere can only be undertaken "if we have a clear understanding of the ultimate ethical purpose [*Worumwillen*] of our common action" in that system of action; "only then" writes Honneth, "will we have a criterion for determining the necessary standards of just action" (*FR* 64). Thus, he writes that

> When it comes to modern societies, we assume along with a number of other authors such as Hegel, Durkheim, Habermas and Rawls that there is but one value that forms the basis for the legitimacy of social orders. Embodied in the different systems of action is the ethical idea that all subjects must enjoy equal support in their striving for individual freedom. What 'justice' entails depends on the meaning

> that individual freedom takes on in the differentiated spheres of action in accordance with their respective function. (*FR* 64)

Accordingly, Honneth will proceed on the assumption that in (the central-sub-systems defining) the modern social order, the 'ultimate ethical purpose [*Worumwillen*] of our common action' is the idea of freedom *qua* individual autonomy. From the discussion in Part I, we know that Honneth has distinguished between three conceptions of freedom, and we know that he thinks that it is only the Hegelian model which manages to capture what true freedom is. The three models of freedom, writes Honneth, entail "different assumptions about social-ontological preconditions of individual freedom", with the negative conception assuming that "a legally protected sphere in which subjects can act on their own unreflected preferences" (*FR* 65) is sufficient for freedom; while the reflexive model of freedom holds that preferences and aims have to be arrived at by the subject in a sufficiently autonomous manner, through an intellectual, 'reflexive' act (either an act of "rational self-restriction" or as a "diachronic process of self-discovery") (*FR* 34). The third, social model of freedom is the only one, writes Honneth, that takes the intersubjective nature of freedom adequately into account. Honneth reads Hegel's insistence that freedom must be 'objective' as meaning that "appropriate institutions, viz. institutions of mutual recognition, are needed to promote the actual realization of individuals' reflexive freedom". Thus, freedom must be 'objective' because social institutions are constitutive elements (not just enabling conditions) of actual freedom, because it is only through actually existing social institutions of recognition – i.e., "bundles of behavioral norms that 'objectively' integrate individuals' aims"– that individuals can form complementary aims and intentions and act on them. (*FR* 45)

Once we embrace this understanding of the nature of freedom, writes Honneth, it becomes clear that our approach to justice must "depart from a purely formal framework and cross the threshold to social reality" (*FR* 65). Honneth's point seems to be that we cannot actually say anything meaningful about what individual autonomy means before and unless we already have in hand an analysis of social norm complexes where individuals can form autonomous aims, intentions, etc. together. We cannot determine what someone is owed for the purposes of ensuring autonomy unless we know, approximately, what it means to actualize autonomy.

To this, Honneth adds a further point which informs the way the remaining three quarters of *Freedom's Right* will look. This is the idea that, although the negative and reflexive models of freedom are insufficient, they are assumed to have been influential enough to form the foundation for 'structure-forming institutions' in modernity – specifically the institutional

complexes of 'law' and 'morality'. The assumption he picks up from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* in relation to this is that "[t]he dependent and merely potential character of individual freedom embodied in the first two spheres [of legal and moral freedom, L.I.] will become apparent once we recognize the social pathologies that typically emerge as soon as these two types of freedom are asserted alone." (*FR* 66)

The discussion of the central sub-spheres of the modern social order that follows is too extensive for me to do it justice here, but for present purposes a brief characterization with some examples will suffice. Under the heading of "Legal Freedom", the institutional complex of 'law' is said to be characterised by the idea that individuals have the right to a private sphere that must not be interfered with, and by the fact that this protected private sphere is upheld through laws backed up by state force. This institutional complex is said to have the normative principle of negative freedom at its heart – its claim to legitimacy being the idea that everyone has a right to freedom from interference (cf. the 'existential claim to legitimacy' talked about in *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*). "In seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe" writes Honneth "the legal system gradually became more positive, while the normatively unjustified privileges enjoyed by the estates came to be replaced by a network of rules, guaranteed and sanctioned by the state and intended to ensure that each citizen enjoyed the same degree of private autonomy."(*FR* 71)

In contrast, the idea of positive (reflexive) freedom is not institutionalized in the same legalistic manner as negative freedom. Rather, Honneth says, it is institutionalized as a cultural norm: a "weakly institutionalized cultural pattern" (*FR* 96) in "liberal-democratic societies" (*FR* 100). It is in virtue of this cultural norm – which Honneth says started to permeate modernity through the influence of Kant's philosophy in particular – that individuals are understood to have moral freedom; i.e., being "empowered in the name of freedom to adopt a perspective from which they can oppose existing norms and constructively propose new systems of norms."(*FR* 104)

In his discussion of the institutional complexes of law and morality, Honneth continues to make the case that the conceptions of negative and positive freedom cannot be understood as sufficient conceptualizations of freedom – and, he argues, this can be further demonstrated by the fact that their institutionalizations in 'law' and 'morality'

> feed off a social life praxis that not only precedes them, but provides the basis for their right to exist in the first place: only because we have already entered into everyday obligations and have already developed social attachments or find ourselves in particular communities do we need the legal or moral freedom to detach from the associated demands or to examine them reflexively. (*FR* 123)

Having presented the institutional complexes that have the concepts of negative and positive freedom as their underlying legitimizing principles, Honneth moves to present those institutional complexes of social action that have the concept of social freedom as their underlying legitimizing principle: personal relationships, markets, and democratic will-formation. Honneth writes that, whereas 'law' and 'morality' only represent norms that "'regulate' actions in a way that ensures intersubjective coordination" this second set of institutional complexes are ones that "'constitute' a kind of action that the subjects can only carry out cooperatively or together."[149] To be clear – and as we have already seen in the discussion of *The Idea of Socialism* regarding the market sphere – Honneth is not saying that all of these spheres of action do in fact live up to the "normative promise" of social freedom; but he is claiming that social freedom does constitute their 'moral grammar'.[150] (*FR* 125)

For example, when discussing the development of the sphere of personal relationships labelled "family",[151] Honneth makes the case that what we have seen over the last 250 years is a developmental process that has transformed the social institution of the family from one whose underlying rationality was economic or material-strategic to one where the underlying rationality is one of care and emotional bonds of affection. In other words, the norm(s) which make up the 'existential claim to legitimacy' of the social institution called 'family' have shifted. But this has not been a linear or pain-free process. For example, Honneth writes that the structural transformation of the family, away from a patriarchal ideal to one based on equal partnership, will continue to face reaction and a "constant revival of the old role fixations". But, he says,

> On the other hand, almost all empirical data indicates that this new ideal is inevitable, because the non-coercive power to assert a normative surplus exercises a permanent pressure that will sooner or later destroy any remains of traditional practices. What has gradually begun to emerge from this conflict-ridden process is the realization of a normative promise that has accompanied the modern family since its beginnings in romantic love: Each of the three family members – father, mother and child – are equally entitled in the individuality of their subjectivity to be included in the family and thus to receive the care and sympathy that suits their needs. (*FR* 164)

[149] Honneth adds that "We can label such systems of social practices, following Talcott Parsons, 'relational institutions' or, following Hegel, 'ethical spheres'" Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, p. 125.
[150] See, e.g. Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, p. 227.
[151] Honneth's labels for the various sections of *Freedom's Right* are all taken to mirror Hegel's ditto in the *Philosophy of Right*, something I consider unfortunate, given that it serves no purpose beyond a stylistic one, but does add to the impression of conservatism that is going to be a problem for the project anyway.

This idea that there will be a 'normative surplus' exercising a permanent pressure wherever the legitimizing principle of individual autonomy is not sufficiently lived up to – this can be read, I think, as Honneth's 'reactualizing' and 'demystifying' the idea of objective spirit discussed in *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom*. Hegel's idea of objective spirit is generally read as bound up with his metaphysics – in this case the idea that reality has some kind of rational structure that is striving to be realized (Spirit striving to realize itself) and that that is manifested in social reality in various ways, in the objective spirit of the age. Honneth cuts away any such references to a teleological metaphysics, and is trying to make only the limited claim that the internal moral logic of social institutions exercise pressure in a certain direction. Moreover, he thinks that we can lay bare this moral logic with the help of contemporary sociological, historical and political-economic analysis.

The most controversial aspect of *Freedom's Right*, apart from the method of normative reconstruction itself, has proved to be Honneth's identification of the market sphere as a potential sphere of social freedom. Honneth's case for the market sphere's being a potential sphere of social freedom follows his description of Hegel's original case (see §4.3.1). In Part III of *Freedom's Right*, Honneth's assessment of the market sphere is not as optimistic as Hegel's, as he notes that "there can be no doubt that the current economic system in the developed countries of the West in no way represents a 'relational' institution and is thus not a sphere of social freedom." Honneth does not think that the market today represents a sphere of social freedom. But he argues that the current state of the economic system in the West must be seen as a 'misdevelopment', and that it was established with, or on, the normative promise of social freedom. In his discussion of the market sphere, Honneth draws heavily on Karl Polanyi, in addition to Parsons, Durkheim, and Hegel, and he appears to endorse a version of what he calls "normatively expanded functionalism" according to which the periodic crises of the capitalist system "not only manifests itself in economic inefficiencies" as per the Marxist analysis, but also in "citizens' rejection of its legitimacy in the name of their justified demand for economic security and social recognition." (*FR* 187)

Following the discussions of the sphere of personal relationships and the market sphere, Honneth moves to discuss the third sphere of social freedom which he calls the sphere of "democratic will-formation". In line with the account of the aforementioned spheres of social freedom, this takes the form of a historical account of how the modern "political public sphere" emerged (in the West) in the nineteenth century, and this historical account is then followed up (and intertwined) with Honneth's argument around what is required for the moral logic of social freedom to be actually and fully lived up to in this sphere. Whereas Honneth's discussion of the sphere of personal relationships and the market

sphere mirrors Hegel's discussion in the *Philosophy of Right*, he says it is necessary to depart more from Hegel in this last part, since the corresponding discussion in Hegel of 'the state' is one that unfortunately completely ignores "his own precepts that such spheres must represent institutions of unforced reciprocity in the satisfaction of needs, interests and aims". (*FR* 254)

One of Honneth's main points in the discussion of the sphere of democratic will-formation is that it should not be understood, as it sometimes is in proceduralist theories of justice, as some kind of "supreme court" where the institutional shape of the other spheres can be established through democratic deliberation. Instead, he says, it must be underscored that the possibility of social freedom in the sphere of democratic will-formation is intertwined with the possibility of social freedom in the market sphere and in the sphere of personal relationships. (*FR* 254)

The historical normative reconstruction focuses on showing that the emergence of the political public sphere in nineteenth century Europe was in fact based on the legitimizing principle of social freedom, rather than on the principle(s) of negative, liberal freedom. Honneth notes the emergence of various 'public spheres' starting around the seventeenth century; from urban bourgeois clubs, salons, and coffee houses (in conjunction with which newspapers and periodicals developed) and later to the development of the clubs, relief funds and charity organizations of the early labour movement. Gradually, he says, these emerging publics would "begin to discuss cultural and political affairs of broader interest in order to form more universalizable judgements". (*FR* 256)

Subsequently, Honneth relates how in the aftermath of the French Revolution and the overthrow of the Napoleonic Empire, a process of 'constitutionalization' spread across Europe and beyond. This process meant a shift away from aristocratic or absolutist rule to more constitutional models, and an "expansion of democratic participation through the introduction of voter rights or parliaments" (*FR* 259). The political rights that were established as part of this process were not established on the same grounds, with the same moral logic, as the liberal freedom rights established prior. Whereas liberal freedom rights were addressed to the individual as individual, the new political rights were addressed to "the citizen as a member of a democratic community of rights." (*FR* 260)

Honneth identifies ("in the order in which they historically entered the consciousness of the public") six conditions "considered indispensable for the equal exercise of social freedom in the democratic public sphere" (*FR* 290). These five conditions are: first, legal guarantees protecting speech, assembly, voting–right etc. Second, "a class-transcending, universal communicative space that enables different groups and classes affected by

political decisions to enter into an exchange of opinions." In nineteenth century Europe this role was typically filled by "constitutional states charged with national identity, whose dark side appeared whenever the unifying variety of nationalism switched into its excluding variety" (*FR* 290). The third condition of social freedom in the democratic public sphere is identified (following John Dewey) as the existence of a kind of mass media which allow people to "engage with each other, take turns speaking and listening, and thereby come to an agreement on the most desirable solution to social problems". While it was thought that newspapers, television, and film could play this role, Dewey pointed out how the "commercialization of mass media" would undermine this, and, says Honneth, it remains to be seen if the internet can be utilized to counter the commersialization of other mass media "by 'socializing' journalistic activities and media-communicated interactions" (FR 291). The fourth condition is identified as the willingness of people to put in voluntary labour to work to uphold public spaces vital to democratic interaction, since "[e]ven if the mass media were in ideal shape, there could be no public exchange of opinions without the willingness to re-concretize our communicative interaction over a longer period of time" (*FR* 292). As the fifth condition of social freedom in the democratic public sphere, Honneth identifies a certain general commitment to the public good, which he also describes in terms of "the existence of a political culture that nourishes and permanently enriches […] feelings of solidarity". (*FR* 292)

As a sixth condition for the possibility of social freedom in the democratic public sphere, Honneth identifies the existence of a social organ that can ensure that the outcome of democratic will-formation can be practiced/implemented in social reality. This role has typically been ascribed to the 'constitutional democratic state' – but the development of this social institution into one aimed at facilitating or ensuring social freedom in the larger democratic public sphere has been far from straightforward. I'm not going to relate Honneth's chronicling of the conflictual development of the state in the nineteenth and twentieth century in detail here: For present purposes it is enough to note that he identifies a long-running tension between nationalism as enabling the kind of community that is needed to allow the state to work as the organ of the larger democratic public sphere on the one hand (see the second condition above) and nationalism's acting to undermine that same role when the nation becomes end rather than means on the other. (*FR* 304 ff.)

The final section of *Freedom's Right* concludes with some remarks about the prospects for establishing the appropriate political culture in the future, i.e., the kind needed to enable social freedom. Honneth re-emphasises that the focus of a theory of justice cannot be only or primarily that of law, or the right democratic procedures. Instead, the focus should be on what is required for a "democratic ethical life" to obtain. Democracy is understood as

only obtaining when (or, I suppose, to the extent that) "the principles of freedom institutionalized in the various spheres of action have been realized and embodied in corresponding practices and habits" and the spheres of action are joined together in a "relation of reciprocity." Honneth's 'democratic ethical life' seems to refer to a culturally embedded understanding that actual democracy requires freedom in all spheres of social action, and that therefore the "political sphere of democratic will-formation" must support the struggles for social freedom in those other spheres. In other words, there must be some level of general understanding among citizens that the freedom of others, even in the personal and economic spheres, are conditions for our own freedom in those spheres as well as in the public political sphere. (*FR* 330)

I think we can understand Honneth's ideal of democratic ethical life in *Freedom's Right* as equivalent to 'the ideal of social freedom under the conditions of modern Western societies'. In other words, where 'social freedom' is the abstract ideal of freedom, 'democratic ethical life' is taking that idea and making it a bit more concrete, here and now. The phrasing of 'ethical life' is of course adopted from Hegel, and in *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth uses the term 'democratic form of life' for the same general idea; i.e., a social order where the spheres of social action are mutually reinforcing in the (functionally differentiated) striving for freedom in each.

To be sure, the discussion in Part III of *Freedom's Right* adds a lot of depth to the claim that the public political sphere of democratic-will formation cannot be a real sphere of freedom unless the other spheres of social action are too. But if we look at this claim from the perspective of contemporary democratic socialism/social democracy, it does not seem to add much. Indeed, I think that the general idea that political freedom, economic freedom and personal-relational freedom are inseparable has the status of a truism in most socialist traditions. Certainly the idea that real democracy requires real equality (the lack of any class and/or gender power disparities etc.) would be. So here again the social democrats are left to wonder – and political philosophers with them – if Honneth's perspective here has any practical significance.

It seems to me that what could potentially be instructive is the analysis of freedom itself; if we had a more straightforward answer to the question of why we should think that real freedom is actually social freedom, then that could potentially give a political movement a conceptual clarity which would allow people to coalesce around a shared understanding of the aim of the political project. Ultimately, I do not think that *Freedom's Right* is sufficiently clear in its analysis of freedom in order to serve this function on its own, but I will argue in the following chapters that if we draw on Honneth's other work we can find a better

foundation both for the claim that a) freedom should be recognized as the paramount political value, and that b) real freedom is social freedom. Before moving to that more critical discussion in chapter 5, I will finish this chapter with a more direct look at how Honneth introduces the idea of social freedom in *Freedom's Right*.

4.3.1 Social Freedom in Freedom's Right

In *Freedom's Right*, the concept of social freedom is presented as part of the historical overview in Part I. The discussion of negative, positive (reflexive), and social freedom in Part I builds on arguments that are familiar from earlier writings. As in *The Struggle for Recognition*, the account proper in *Freedom's Right* begins with Thomas Hobbes (though mention of Machiavelli as a forerunner is omitted). Although we are used to the idea today, Honneth reminds us of just how radical Hobbes's concept of negative freedom was when first presented. Hobbes defined 'natural liberty' as the absence of external impediments, as the ability of a body to "move naturally". And since Hobbes, as we saw earlier, understood human beings in a somewhat 'mechanistic' manner as bodies that could determine their own movements in accordance with future-directed aims, he defined human freedom as "being unhindered by external impediments while realizing one's aims." A deliberate feature of this definition of freedom on Hobbes's part, writes Honneth, was to exclude the possibility that 'internal hindrances', such as ignorance, fear, weakness-of-the-will etc. could be viewed as restrictions on freedom. (*FR* 21)

Since Hobbes's original formulation of negative freedom was a rather crude one, it might seem surprising that it nonetheless took on the dominant role it did in modern discourse. Honneth writes that the reason it did so must be put down to the fact that the idea did contain "a kernel of intuitive truth" that went well beyond Hobbes's original intentions. Though Hobbes certainly did not intend his concept of freedom to be used in defence of idiosyncrasy and individuality, the fact that it easily lent itself to justify the intuition that individuals have the right to a protected space of egocentric action is what allowed the idea to take root. Through figures such as Locke, Mill, Sartre, and Nozick, writes Honneth, "negative freedom have become part and parcel of the modern conceptual world because it justifies a striving for individuality". (*FR* 24)

The various 'social contract' theories of justice which have been formulated around negative freedom – most of which use some version of the 'state of nature' thought experiment – all end up with very similar and very restricted conceptions of justice. Honneth argues that without adding further moral demands – which it would be difficult to reconcile with the imperative of negative freedom in any case – the picture of justice we get from proponents of negative freedom is an austere one. This kind of liberal conception

of justice is one that "can thus only justify as many restrictions on individual freedom as are needed to ensure the peaceful interaction of all individual subjects." And this, of course, does not preclude social orders that we would identify as thoroughly unjust, viz. societies marred by systematic discrimination, relations of dominance and inequity. Honneth writes:

> All the flaws inherent in the idea of negative freedom ultimately derive from the fact that they stop short of the threshold of individual self-determination. In order to conceive of a type of freedom that would also include an element of self-determination, subjects' aims would also have to be understood as the outflow of freedom. (*FR* 28)

This is the approach historically taken by proponents of positive freedom (which Honneth calls 'reflexive freedom' in *Freedom's Right*). In Part I, Honneth picks out two main traditions of reflexive (positive) freedom: the autonomy tradition and the self-realization tradition. The autonomy tradition is traced back to Kant's development of the idea that an individual's will must be 'autonomously determined' if they are to be truly free. The other take on reflexive freedom, called the self-realization approach by Honneth, was developed by Johann Gottfried Herder in *On the Cognition and the Sensation of the Human Soul* (1778). Herder, writes Honneth, "outlines the reflexive process in which individuals learn to realize their 'inner I'" as Herder believed "individuals achieve perfection only once they have brought to bear all their inner powers and sensations to the extent that they can experience their own actions as the execution of authentic freedom." (*FR* 33)

What the theory of freedom will end up looking like in detail will of course differ considerably depending on if this act is conceived as either an act of rational self-restriction or as a diachronic process of self-discovery. But although these two models are very different, Honneth makes the point they both have, at their core, the notion that true individual freedom requires a certain kind of "reflexive act". For Honneth's purposes the commonality means that they share the same fundamental weakness. Neither model of reflexive freedom "interpret[s] the social conditions that enable the exercise of freedom as elements of freedom itself'. (*FR* 40)

Of the autonomy model, Honneth notes that Kant's approach has been given various empirical reinterpretations in both psychology and moral philosophy, and he especially singles out the 'de-transcendentalised' theories of Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas which, he says "locates the moral subject within a communicative community" such that what would, on the traditional Kantian story have been the product of "an act of a solitary, self-referential subject" would instead be viewed, "through a speech-theoretical turn, as the

communicative product of the members of a speech community" (*FR* 35). The problem he flags for this approach is that

> the expansion of the 'I' into the 'We' of autonomy is not sufficient for fully grasping the import of the idea of intersubjective freedom, for it entirely ignores the fact that both the 'I' and the 'We' can only achieve self-determination once institutional relations within social reality offer opportunities to achieve these aims. (*FR* 35)

This weakness is then seen again in the idea of social justice that accompanies the conception of reflexive freedom. Honneth suggests that Rawls's and Habermas's theories of justice suffer from the same kind of fundamental flaw, insofar as they are both theories of justice where the "procedure of individual self-determination is transferred to a higher stage of the social order once it is viewed as a shared process of will-formation in which equal citizens deliberate and decide on the principles of what they consider to be a 'just' social order." But this kind of proceduralist conception of justice can only lay out a process for collective will-formation, the outcome of which is considered just if it follows the procedure. Substantial limitations have to come as an addition, as they do in Rawls's case through the separate principles of fairness and equal opportunity, or by "naming a 'system' of individual rights that give shape to the procedures for forming a constitution" as with Habermas. In this manner, Honneth once again brings to bear the familiar Hegelian charge of 'empty formalism' at Habermas's more Kantian approach. (*FR* 37)

As for the self-realization approach to reflexive (positive) freedom, this is obviously a less clearly defined tradition, and so more difficult to pin down for discussion. For all that Honneth identifies Herder as playing a founding role, there is no equivalent figure to Kant as a point of reference, and moreover, he says, "After Nietzsche and Freud, it would become increasingly difficult to conceive of the process of self-realization as the reflexive liberation of a primitive and – furthermore – natural core of one's personality." Thus the picture of this tradition is more muddled, and as Honneth moves to consider the theories of justice supposedly tied up with it, he finds two separate strands. (*FR* 35)

One strand is easily identified and easily dismissed: it is seen in those parts of John Stuart Mill's writings where he argues for something like liberal perfectionism. There it is the task of the state to both protect the integrity of the individual and to ensure that they have the necessary resources available (education, culture etc.) to properly develop their talents. Obviously, as far as Honneth is concerned, this approach is hardly an improvement on the atomistic individualism of Mill's more negative freedom-centred writings. As for the other strand, Honneth says there are various forms of more collectivist ideals of justice which are also based in a reflexive concept of freedom; but he seems to find it more difficult to

assess these. Drawing on Charles Taylor, Honneth says that on this take on the self-realization model

> individuals cannot achieve self-realization on their own, because their authentic self is so much an expression of a social community that it can only be unfolded in collective action. Therefore, the notion of freedom presupposed here is the outcome of a reflexive act that can only be performed by a collective. The conception of justice to which this notion of self-realization leads can take on various forms, but all share the methodological necessity of viewing a desirable social order as one that embodies the actions in which subjects realize the aims they have in common. (*FR* 39)

Honneth then notes Hannah Arendt's republican theory as a "democratic" version of this approach; one where members of society are supposed to "come together to discuss and publicly negotiate their common affairs, such that intersubjective debate in the public sphere must be grasped as a collective form of self-realization". The connection between the self-realization understanding of freedom and this ideal of justice is then that the former requires a social order conducive to the kind of social cohesion needed for this process to take place. The major problem with this, however, is that it is by no means a given that this requires a democratic and egalitarian social order. (*FR* 39)

Following on from this, Honneth moves to present how Hegel's concept of freedom – particularly as found in the *Philosophy of Right* – represents a distinct third model of freedom. In typically dialectical fashion, Honneth writes that Hegel finds both the negative and the reflexive models of freedom lacking, and so will seek to present a synthesis that overcomes their failures. The negative model of freedom, he says, "must fail because the 'content' of action cannot itself be grasped as 'free'" whereas the reflexive model fails because "it opposes the actions it views as free in substance, viz. as self-determined acts, to an objective reality that must continue to be regarded as completely heteronymous." In other words, while the negative model fails to take account of the internal aspect of freedom, the reflexive model – addressing this problem by insisting that the aims and intentions of our actions need to be autonomously chosen by us for them to be free – fails to take into account that there is "no guarantee that reflexive aims can in fact be achieved". (*FR* 43)

Referencing his *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth goes on to say that the term 'mutual recognition' remains key to understanding Hegel's model of freedom. "In the first instance" writes Honneth, "'mutual recognition' merely refers to the reciprocal experience of seeing ourselves confirmed in the desires and aims of the other because the other's existence represents a condition for fulfilling our own desires and aims" (*FR* 44-5). It is

this mutual recognition that allows for intersubjective freedom. But although this sounds familiar from *SfR*, the 'merely' in the formation above suggests a different direction. Indeed, we could read what Honneth says next as suggesting that 'mutual recognition', and the intersubjective freedom it would create, is something like the ideal, abstract version of social freedom. If this is what Honneth is suggesting, it would mean that neither mutual recognition nor intersubjective (communicative) freedom ever really exist in social reality, because (just as such) they are empty formalities. On the Hegelian model it is only when we "encounter other subjects whose aims complement our own" that we can experience an aspect of 'objective reality' that is responsive to our aims and desires. (*FR* 44)

However, the key point here is that the 'encounter', i.e., the mutual recognition, is always institutionally mediated. What is required for intersubjective freedom in mutual recognition is that subjects "have learned both to articulate their own aims to the other and to understand the other's articulations in order to recognize each other in their dependency on each other." And, says Honneth, Hegel's view is that such "reciprocal comprehensibility is ensured by the institutions of recognition, that is, by bundles of behavioural norms that 'objectively' integrate individuals' aims." (*FR* 45)

Whether this means that Honneth has shifted to an 'institutional' view of recognition, which sees it as being constituted by concrete social institutions remains somewhat ambiguous here (given that he purports to be presenting Hegel's view). But it would make sense of the critique he levies against Habermas's and Apel's discursive freedom model. "In discourse theory" writes Honneth, "'discourse' is understood either as a transcendental event or as a meta-institution, but never as a particular institution in the multiplicity of social appearances." So on Honneth's view, the problem with Habermas's and Apel's model of freedom is that they "never draw the conclusion from their premise – according to which freedom is necessarily intersubjective – that structures of institutionalized practices are necessary in order to initiate the process of reciprocal self-determination" (*FR* 42). On his reading of Hegel's model, by contrast, Honneth says that:

> Because the individual's striving for freedom can thus be fulfilled only within – or with the aid of – institutions, the 'intersubjective' concept of freedom expands once again into a 'social' concept of freedom. A subject is only 'free' if it encounters another subject, within a framework of institutional practices, to whom it is joined in a relationship of mutual recognition; only then can it regard the aims of the other as the condition for the realization of its own aims. 'To be with oneself in the other' thus necessarily entails a relation to social institutions, for only established and routine practices can guarantee that subjects will recognize each other as the other

> of their self. And only this form of recognition can enable individuals to implement and realize their reflexively determined aims at all. (*FR* 45)

Further emphasising the institutional view of recognition, Honneth continues to relate how Hegel expanded his theory to account for the market sphere. Honneth writes that once Hegel had familiarised himself with the emerging science of economics, he came to see that it was not possible to "explain the ethical unity of modern societies directly on the emotional connectedness of subjects" (*FR* 46); i.e., on the "recognitional relationship of love". Instead, says Honneth, the "expanding domain of the market must also harbour its own potential for freedom, for otherwise we could not explain how large parts of the population could so quickly come to morally agree to its existence". Rather than abandoning the core idea that freedom requires an institutionally mediated recognition relationship, Hegel expanded the idea to account for how the market enabled recognition relationships. Honneth tells us that Hegel's "ingenious solution" was to assume that "in the sphere of the market, subjects must recognize each other as subjects whose economic offers guarantee the satisfaction of their own, purely egocentric needs" and that accordingly, "even in what seems to be the entirely atomized sphere of the market, freedom bears the institutional structure of an interaction, for it is only by recognizing their mutual dependency that individuals can achieve their respective aims." (*FR* 46)

Honneth says that we could go for a stronger or a weaker reading of the Hegelian social freedom model. Honneth identifies Joseph Raz as someone who advocates a contemporary version of the 'weaker' model, on which "our conceptions of 'autonomy' or 'self-realization' remain incomplete as long as we leave out the social resources needed to realize our goals" (*FR* 47). But Honneth argues that Hegel's social freedom model was stronger than this. Hegel, writes Honneth, "not only searches within social reality for the conditions that enable the realization of autonomous aims" but goes further and says that, for true freedom to obtain, "objective reality" must "accommodate individuals striving for freedom in the sense that it should want of its own accord, so to say, what subjects reflexively intend" (*FR* 48). And, he says:

> This strong, ontological requirement is only fulfilled if other subjects presume aims that demand that we achieve our aims. Then we can conceive of the objectivity embodied by others in such a way that objectivity asks or demands of subjectivity that the latter realize itself in its own reflexive freedom. (*FR* 48)

Although it might appear extreme – "downright peculiar, and even eccentric" (*FR* 49) Hegel's model of social freedom has, says Honneth, been influential in the development of the modern social order, though primarily through the indirect route of Marxism. Marx,

argues Honneth, was influenced by Hegel's intuitions ("though perhaps not consciously so") when he declared that "social cooperation" was the model of freedom. (*FR* 49) Marx began with a self-realization conception of freedom, but found the 'romantic' versions of this idea too abstract. Rather than following Herder's romantic model, Honneth suggests that Marx draws on Hegel in order to grasp the process of self-realization as an 'objectifying activity'. The general idea seems to be that self-realization is conceived as (to use Honneth's language) a 'relation-to-self', achieved when individuals understand their individuality to be expressed in their productive activities. And for Marx, says Honneth, self-realization cannot be a monological process, since our productive activities are always related to the needs of other humans. For this reason, says Honneth, the young Marx viewed "cooperative production" as the institutional medium of freedom; an idea that then served to give a "normative template" for his social critique. Honneth writes:

> While Hegel sought to provide liberalism with a conceptually broader and deeper foundation by demonstrating its dependency on institutions that guarantee freedom, Marx intended to criticize the capitalist mode of socialization as a whole: As soon as individuals' productive activities are no longer directly connected through the medium of cooperation, instead being coordinated by the 'alien mediator' of money, Marx claims that subjects will lose sight of their relationships of mutual recognition, and in the end each subject will experience itself as a 'self-interested', self-enriching, isolated being. (*FR* 51)

Having thus identified Hegel and Marx as the "forefathers of the concept of social freedom", Honneth goes on to say that although this does represent a distinct third model of freedom and therefore a distinct approach to justice, that approach to justice has remained somewhat unrealized. Although, writes Honneth, "there have been various attempts to interpret social institutions as an intrinsic part of individual freedom […] the categorical emphasis has shifted so often that the result has not been a more profound understanding, but a harsh critique of the modern individualism of freedom." (*FR* 51)

Here I have put special focus on how the social freedom concept is presented in *Freedom's Right*. As I noted in chapters 1 and 2, it is the idea of social freedom that appears most central and most promising as regards a possible 'renewal' of the democratic socialist tradition. However, it is not the concept of social freedom that has garnered most attention from commentators on *Freedom's Right* – at least not directly. In the next chapter I am going to consider some of the criticisms that have been levied against *Freedom's Right*, and subsequently I will demonstrate that Honneth's understanding of freedom is central to meeting those challenges.

Chapter 5: Problems of Freedom's Right and an Alternative Route

5.1 Problems with Normative Reconstruction

This chapter is going to focus on some of the criticisms levied against Honneth's *Freedom's Right* account, with a special focus on the criticism of Honneth's method of 'normative reconstruction'. Although the normative reconstruction method is by no means the only aspect of *Freedom's Right* that has faced criticism, in my view it is the most central, with other lines of critique losing much of their force if the challenges to normative reconstruction could be met. I am going to affirm some of the main lines of criticism of normative reconstruction in this chapter and raise some additional points that I think go hand-in-hand with this critique. As I will show, the fundamental problem with the normative reconstruction approach comes down to the question of why we should accept or affirm that freedom (should) have the role of 'central legitimizing principle' in our modern world. However, after having presented the issues that have been identified with the normative reconstruction approach, I am then going to move to present an alternative route that Honneth could take to avoid these issues. I will demonstrate that, if we look at some of Honneth's writings leading up to *Freedom's Right*, there are resources that could be drawn on, and a suggestion of an alternative approach that I think would avoid many of the problems with *Freedom's Right* by giving a better foundation for the claim that freedom is and should be identified as such a central value/principle. Then, in the next chapter, I am going to demonstrate how, in some of Honneth's most recent writings, we can see him moving in this direction.

When discussing the normative reconstruction approach in *Freedom's Right*, it is useful to consider how it amounts to a shift in method compared with the earlier *SfR* approach. Briefly, we might note a shift in the auxiliary perspectives employed by Honneth in his philosophical analysis: in *SfR*, the auxiliary perspective was a psychodynamic one, whereas in *Freedom's Right* it is a sociological one. Where the social-psychological theories of Winnicott and Mead played large roles in *SfR*, in *Freedom's Right* a similar role is played by the sociological theories of Émile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons.[152] Where the former was used to develop a theory of the development of personhood through recognition, the latter is used to develop a theory of the moral logic of social institutions. While the shift in auxiliary perspectives between *SfR* and *Freedom's Right* signals an important difference in approach, it is also emblematic of a central continuity in Honneth's thought. In *SfR*, the

[152] In addition to Hegel, Durkheim, and Parsons, Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* plays a very large role in Honneth's analysis of the market sphere as a potential sphere of social freedom in particular.

use of the psychodynamic perspective was motivated in large part by the perceived need to 'naturalize' Hegel's account of struggles for recognition – or at least to decouple it from Hegel's metaphysical commitments. Similarly, I think it is clear that the same rationale informs Honneth's use of (near) contemporary sociology to, as it were, bring Hegel's original method of normative reconstruction down to earth.

The original Hegelian approach to normative reconstruction that Honneth appropriates from the *Philosophy of Right* was tied up with commitments to the metaphysics of Spirit (*Geist*). As David McNeill points out in a critique of *Freedom's Right*, "Hegel is quite explicit in the *Philosophy of Right* that historical arguments can only exhibit the substantial manifestation of the actuality of a process whose normative validity has been demonstrated in terms of 'the immanent development of the thing [*Sache*] itself.'"[153] Honneth's approach to 'normative reconstruction' on the other hand, seeks to avoid any kind of strong metaphysical teleology. He proceeds on the assumption that it is possible to analyse social institutions as they have actually emerged, and to determine the moral grammar (the implicit and explicit normative commitments) that underpin them – and that through such an analysis we will not only be able to describe the status quo, not "merely affirm existing instances of ethical life" but also that we will also be able to show where and how "ethical institutions do not represent the general values they embody in a sufficiently comprehensive or perfect fashion." (*FR* 10)

In light of this, an obvious line of critique against Honneth's approach to 'normative reconstruction' is that it is not, in fact, possible to deliver a historical and sociological analysis of the moral grammar of social institutions which at the same time yields a theory of justice with transformative potential. Both David McNeill and Jörg Schaub put forth versions of this critique, with Schaub writing that Honneth's 'normative reconstruction' differs from related socio-philosophical attempts at 'internal critique' of social norms because it "entails a commitment to the particular norms that are underlying already existing, reproductively relevant institutions, since all it does is to assess whether these 'ethical institutions and practices' could realize the 'values they embody' in a more 'comprehensive or complete fashion.'"[154] In the same text, Schaub argues that it is a failing of Honneth's normative reconstruction approach that he cannot thereby account for the possibilities of 'normative revolutions'; i.e., calls for fundamentally different norms and

[153] David N McNeill, "Social Freedom and Self-Actualization: "Normative Reconstruction" as a Theory of Justice." *Critical Horizons* 16, no. 2 (2015): 153-69. p. 157.
[154] Jörg Schaub, "Misdevelopments, Pathologies, and Normative Revolutions: Normative Reconstruction as Method of Critical Theory." *Critical Horizons* 16, no. 2 (2015): 107-30. p. 111.

institutions. "[T]he only kind of progress that the method of normative reconstruction fosters" writes Schaub "is a form of gradual progress. This is because normative reconstruction is exclusively concerned with how norms that are already operative in reproductively relevant institutions can be realized in a 'better, more perfect or comprehensive way.'"[155]

Honneth's response to these concerns is of course partly given with the publication of *The Idea of Socialism* – as one of the intentions of that work is to show the critical potential of his theory of justice in *Freedom's Right*. More directly, Honneth's response to worries about the potential conservatism of his normative reconstruction approach to justice is to point to the nature of the value of individual freedom. In the introduction to *Freedom's Right*, Honneth does sketch an outline of the method of normative reconstruction, but he warns that this method will not make sense unless and until we have the substantial analysis in hand of the "universal values inherent in present societies" (*FR* 11). In his direct reply to Schaub, Honneth says that it is not a problem for his theory of justice that it does not account for the possibility of 'normative revolutions' because it is simply unimaginable at present. With the possible exception of the green/climate movement, he says, social struggles for a better future in modern societies all come down to appeals to freedom. Honneth writes that

> whether it is the Abolitionist struggle against slavery; the labour movement's fight against the "unfreedom" of wage labour; the Feminist movement's work for the emancipation and equality of women; or the struggle of homosexuals against their legal and cultural discrimination, all these movements appeal to or invoke, in one way or another, the principles of freedom as they are found in our social institutions. It seems to me that there is no normative alternative to the freedom principle; even where social or economic equality is called for, this appeal will ultimately be based on an appeal to individual freedom, because on closer inspection these are only struggles for the elimination of those inequalities which stand in the way of the equal exercise of freedom.[156]

It is not clear if this response would alleviate the commentators' worries that Honneth's *Freedom's Right* theory of justice is insufficiently critical – but this is in any case not the biggest problem they see with Honneth's approach in *Freedom's Right*. The main line of critique is, as I indicated above, that it simply is not possible for Honneth to ground the normative force of his theory entirely in normative reconstruction. We see two basic critical

[155] Schaub, "Misdevelopments, Pathologies, and Normative Revolutions," p 114.
[156] Axel Honneth, "Rejoinder" *Critical Horizons* 16, no. 2 (2015): 204-26. p. 209.

questions raised with regards to the pre-eminence of freedom that Honneth asserts in *Freedom's Right*. The first question is simply why we should accept the empirical claim that freedom is the single, preeminent value of modernity. The claim is far from being self-evident, since there are many who would argue that a plurality of values underwrites modernity. To this point, Christopher Zurn asks: "What, for instance, of equality, human welfare and flourishing, human perfection, fairness, legitimacy, non-domination, collective self-rule, and so on?"[157]

The second question is the normative version of the first: why should we accept the claim to pre-eminence for the value of freedom? Zurn formulates this as a question about the validity of what he calls the "social freedom teleology". To wit: *Freedom's Right* offers a teleological narrative about the tendency towards more and more encompassing institutionalizations of the ideal of freedom in modernity. The account paints a picture of how people have pushed for changes and developments of social institutions like law, family and the market by appealing to the underlying normative promise of these institutions – the promise of individual autonomy – and seeking to change them to more fully reflect the normative promise. Thus the account identifies instances of progress – in the abolition of special legal privileges of certain classes; the extension of voting rights; the institutionalisation of co-determination on the labour market; the acceptance of marriage equality etc. It also identifies instances of backsliding and misdevelopments – especially those where the legal/negative understanding of freedom have been (re)asserted as a sufficient institutionalisation of freedom, and institutionalisations of social freedom (such as the institutions of co-determination on the labour market) have been gutted as a result. But Zurn points out that this is not the only teleological story we could tell about the history of the institutions in question. We can perfectly well imagine a competing libertarian teleology narrative, he says, according to which the arch of history bends towards increased institutionalization of what Honneth would call legal/negative freedom, and the misdevelopments are the instances subverting that (misdevelopments that are then corrected for in the recent neoliberal reaction).[158]

Zurn argues that Honneth's "conventionalist internal historical reconstruction" cannot serve to justify the validity of what he calls the "social freedom teleology" since it is quite possible to offer competing teleological accounts that could provide a story which included the same data – and we would not have any criteria by which we could choose between the

[157] Zurn, *Axel Honneth*, p. 193.
[158] Ibid, p. 196ff.

two.[159] Rutger Claassen raises similar worries when he says that "it is hard to avoid the impression that Honneth only mentions those social movements which fit his preconceived normative position"[160]. Additionally, Zurn raises worries about Eurocentric and cultural imperialist implications of Honneth's method, writing that the attempt to ground the normativity of the theory in a teleological account of historical development of Western societies seems to imply that they are "the single and sole telos of legitimate or worthy history."[161] Amy Allen also forwards this line of critique in her 2016 book *The End of Progress,* where she argues against any version of critical theory that employs what she calls "the idea of progress as a historical 'fact'" in order to ground the normativity of said theory – and she gives Honneth, Habermas and Rainer Forst as prime examples of critical theorists who make this mistake.[162]

Allen's charge in *The End of Progress,* is twofold: she argues that a) it is epistemologically unjustified to claim progress as a historical fact, and that b) doing so is practically-politically harmful. The claim that the idea of historical progress as a 'fact' is epistemologically unjustified comes down to the following line of argument: in order to be able to talk about historical progress as a 'fact', we have to determine some objective criterion for what counts as progress. This leaves two alternatives: either we end up being hopelessly and unjustifiably parochial and self-congratulatory (simply taking our own standards to be universal and applicable back in time), or, we assert some kind of objectivism – that we have "access to some Gods-eye view or point of view of the Absolute, ideas that go against the basic methodological assumptions of critical theory, in particular its desire to avoid foundationalism"[163]

The political objection that Allen levies against theories which employ what she calls ideas of 'historical progress as a fact' is that this idea is thoroughly intertwined with Eurocentrism, colonialism, and racism. A substantial part of Allen's book is taken up by various illustrations of how the Enlightenment idea of progress developed as a direct result of, and in many cases as a justification for, European colonialism. The connected case then appears to be that not only was the idea of progress born in this way, but that it continues

[159] Ibid, p. 199.
[160] Rutger Claassen, "Social Freedom and the Demands of Justice: A Study of Honneth's Recht Der Freiheit." *Constellations* 21, no. 1 (2014): 67-82, p. 75.
[161] Zurn, *Axel Honneth,* p. 194.
[162] Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) p. 19.
[163] Ibid, p. 19.

to work as a subtle justificatory device for the current "postcolonial, neoliberal, capitalist" global order.[164]

In addition to these lines of critique, we may raise a third potential problem for the *Freedom's Right* theory of justice, viz. the worry that the ideal of social freedom might be compatible with inegalitarian social orders. In *Freedom's Right*, negative, reflexive and social freedom are presented successively, and Honneth does say that the third concept of freedom (social freedom) includes the other two. But the rationale behind this assertion is not entirely clear.

Social freedom is at times talked about in terms of taking up a 'we' perspective, and identifying with that 'we' perspective in a certain way. In one text (cf. 6.2) Honneth talks about a "reciprocal process of unforced intertwining of ends" where "the contribution of each is experienced as willed by the other" such that one has "the enjoyment of experiencing how one's own actions are seen by others as preparing the way for completing their own ongoing actions."[165] But here we need to ask: Unforced in what way? Let's consider an example of a strict caste-society. Different types of social orders where some version of a divinely mandated 'Great Chain of Being' determined the structure of the social order have been the rule rather than exception all over the world (at least) since the advent of agriculture, so we should easily be able to think of this example in generalized terms.

In this hypothetical caste-society then; if someone is born into the lowest servant-caste, and wholeheartedly believes (because they have been taught) that their purpose in life is to be a good servant to the master-caste, and if someone who was born into that master-caste wholeheartedly believes (because they have been taught) that their purpose in life is to exercise good mastery over their servants, then they can presumably take up a 'we' perspective together in acting out their respective roles in life. They could, it seems, experience the contribution of each as willed by the other, and certainly have the enjoyment of experiencing how their actions are seen by the other as preparing the way for completing their own ongoing actions. If we want to say (as I assume Honneth does) the parties in this scenario lack social freedom – what is missing?

From the outside, we can see that what is missing in the caste-society scenario is negative (legal) and reflexive (moral) freedom. Neither the master nor the servant is afforded the right to a private protected sphere (negative freedom) or freedom of conscience (reflexive

[164] Ibid, p. 68.
[165] Axel Honneth, "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty: A Proposal to Enlarge Our Moral Self-Understanding." Chapter. In *Hegel on Philosophy in History*, edited by Rachel Zuckert and James Kreines, 177–92. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) p. 189.

freedom). The question here is whether, or in what way, negative and reflexive freedom are constitutive of social freedom. In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth tells us that

> both types of freedom [legal and moral] feed off a social life-praxis that not only precedes them, but provides the basis for their right to exist in the first place: Only because we have already entered into everyday obligations and have already developed social attachments or find ourselves in particular communities do we need the legal or moral freedom to detach from the associated demands or to examine them reflexively. (*FR* 123)

This seems to mean that the normative weight of the negative and positive (reflexive) conceptions of freedom derive from the role they play for full (social) freedom. But it remains unclear if that role is a historically contingent one or a deeper, conceptual one.

5.1.2 Are We That Social?

By way of summary, worries about the normative reconstruction approach may be divided into two broad categories. The first, and more fundamental, are worries about the justification of the preeminent status of freedom. The second set of questions are more practical-political, e.g. worries about undue eurocentrism, cultural imperialism and/or the ability to adequately critique inegalitarian social orders. For the first set of questions, I think that Robert Pippin gets to the heart of the issue when, in a 2014 commentary, he suggests that Honneth does not adequately answer "why should we believe Hegel's claims about how deeply bound we are to each other? And, how can it be that a form of independence, autonomy even, should be understood as the realization of, not limited by, a form of dependence?"[166]

Although Pippin and Honneth differ somewhat in their respective Hegel-readings, Pippin's characterisation of the intention of Hegel's approach to justice is one I think that Honneth would be in full agreement with. To wit, Pippin writes that the Hegelian (*Philosophy of Right*) approach to justice differs from competitors not only in virtue of placing a "normatively critical assessment of contemporary society" front and centre, but further, in insisting that the yardstick by which to evaluate the institutions and practices of said society cannot come from e.g. "an Aristotelian standard of human flourishing (as in MacIntyre's contemporary reanimation), a Kantian-like norm of pure practical reason, a Rawlsian norm of disinterested contracting, or a Habermasian norm of the ideal communicative situation".[167] The Hegelian approach (that Honneth is attempting to reactualize) is distinctive, writes

[166] Robert Pippin, "Reconstructivism: On Honneth's Hegelianism." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 40, no. 8 (October 2014): 725–41. p. 728.
[167] Ibid, p. 730.

Pippin, because it recognizes (as the rival approaches do not) the essentially self-constituting and essentially historical nature of the human form of life.

The justification for the normative reconstruction approach in *Freedom's Right*, rests on the idea that that kind of immanent analysis is the only viable approach to social and political philosophy if it is indeed the case that there is no such thing as a (practically useful) ideal conception of human nature which can serve as the normative point of departure for such theorizing. If, as Pippin puts it, there are no "eternal problems of the human heart, or a fixed and stable human nature" underneath, or apart from the concrete social and political institutions through which humans exercise the human form of life, then "political and social philosophy must be essentially a historical enterprise" and the only way to approach "the question of the justice of social and political institutions" is to "consider the participants in such institutions as they are in this historical period, as they are in modern families, in modern educational systems, under conditions of modern labor, as members of mass consumer societies, and so forth".[168]

Another way to put this, I think, is to say that the *raison d'être* of the Hegelian approach to justice is that it takes full account of the thoroughly intersubjective and self-constituting nature of the human lifeform. But Pippin points out that this approach carries with it a formidable challenge: If the human form of life is not given, but continuously self-constituting (through historically situated social institutions) "what could possibly count as doing this well, better or worse, […acceptably…] or unacceptably?"[169] Pippin argues that the Hegelian approach to social and political philosophy only works if and to the extent that we can offer an account of the human form of life, i.e., if we can explain and justify the original assumption and assertion regarding the deeply social (intersubjective) and historically situated nature of our form of life. Whatever the particular merits thereof, Hegel obviously had such an account in hand, against which background his approach to justice was supposed to be read. The problem with Honneth's *Freedom's Right*, on Pippin's view, is that Honneth tries to do without such an account of the human form of life.

On Pippin's view, the problem for Honneth comes down to his reluctance to engage with Hegel's philosophy of Spirit (*Geist*). Pippin is a proponent of what we might call a 'deflationary' reading of Hegel which stresses continuities with the Kantian tradition.[170] In line with this, Pippin says that Honneth's reluctance to recognise the important role of the

[168] Ibid, p. 729-30.
[169] Ibid, p. 730.
[170] Cf. Robert Pippin, "Recognition and Reconciliation: Actualized Agency in Hegel's Jena Phenomenology." In *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, 57–78. Edited by Bert Van Den Brink and David Owen, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007,) p. 70.

theoretical philosophy of the *Science of Logic* is probably due to Honneth's reading the 'metaphysics of Spirit' found there as involving a denial of "the reality of the sensible world in favour of an immaterial monad, realizing itself in time". But Pippin argues that we must understand the *Logic* as offering something much more like a transcendental analysis of human agency.[171] Indeed, Pippin suggests that this is really what Hegel means by 'metaphysics' – and so what his 'metaphysics of Spirit' in the *Logic* should be understood as is an attempt to systematically map how the human form of life (i.e., Spirit, or *Geist*) can make sense of the world and itself.[172] In his 2008 work *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, Pippin writes that we should understand Spirit (*Geist*) not "as a thing at all, either material or immaterial, but as a self-conscious and socially sustained normative status, required within any full account of the mind's capacity to give accounts at all".[173] Pippin's argument is that it is only if we understand the metaphysics of Spirit in this (deflationary) sense that we will properly understand the idea of 'objective spirit', and so the Hegelian approach to justice. In contrast to the *Freedom's Right* account Pippin says that

> we need not only an account of the superiority of some set of institutions to what they replaced, and the internal, and historically developing, notion of rationality that can support such a claim for superiority, but we need a fundamental account of what sort of a being could be self-transforming in time in this way.[174]

Much of Pippin's critique of Honneth's *Freedom's Right* account is bound up with advocacy of his own preferred reading of Hegel, but the most relevant points may be summarised as follows. First, it is not possible to rest a theory of justice only on a normative reconstruction. Hegel's original attempt at normative reconstruction was never meant to stand alone. We can and should insist that we cannot begin reflection from an ahistorical, abstract point-of-view, and that we must instead begin our philosophical investigation with the actually existing normative framework which determines how we understand our form of life now. But it would be a mistake to think that we could arrive at a theory of justice solely by demonstrating how some currently existing social institutions constitute a 'better' or more 'complete', institutionalization of an underlying value, as compared to previously existing institutions. The *raison d'être* of normative reconstruction – the reason to believe we have no choice but to begin our analysis with nonideal social reality – lies in the account

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[171] Here I am using 'transcendental analysis of human agency' to refer to something like a Strawsonian understanding of Kant's transcendental analysis; i.e., a philosophical project aimed at delimitating the 'bounds of what we can make sense of' Cf. P. F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense: an Essay on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, (London: Methuen, 1966)

[172] Pippin, "Reconstructivism," pp. 732-3.

[173] Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 127.

[174] Pippin, "Reconstructivism," p. 730.

of human agency that is always concomitant to, intertwined with, such an analysis of nonideal social reality. In other words; the idea is that in the course of analysing how we can and do actually exercise our form of life, we will understand how and why we are the kind of lifeform that exercises its form of life in the thoroughly intersubjective and historically situated manner we do. And vice versa. If I am reading Pippin's underlying point correctly, he is saying that Honneth's mistake is to overemphasise one of these two ineliminable elements of the Hegelian analysis.

Building on this, the most apt line of critique Pippin raises against Honneth's attempt to 'reactualize' Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, in my view, is Pippin's insistence that to do so, Honneth would need to follow Hegel further and try to give an account of "the actuality" of freedom. Questions of 'actuality', writes Pippin, "are in no sense empirical questions, answerable by some fact of the matter", but are instead the kind of questions that arise

> when we ask, for example, if some practice is 'actually' religious; peyote-smoking, say, or scientology. We do not doubt that the practice exists and that many facts can be gathered about it; we want to know its 'essentiality', *Wert*, *Sache an sich selbst*, *logos*, and so forth. Or: we do not doubt that animals exist and have various capacities, many very like ours. We want to know if they are *actually* rights-bearers. We know computers can play chess and win, perhaps one day could even pass Turing tests, but we want to know, not whether these *facts* are true, but whether the computer is actually *thinking*. A gallery opens and some objects, clothes strewn around a floor, are displayed. Is it actually art?[175]

Pippin goes on to say that "the topic of the Philosophy of Right is the actuality of freedom" in this thoroughly philosophical sense,[176] and that without this crucial element of the analysis, a normative reconstruction of institutions of freedom will not make sense. I would agree with Pippin on that point – at least where *Freedom's Right* is concerned – although not necessarily with the claim that the answer lies in embracing a version of Hegel's *Geistmetaphysik*. Moreover, I agree with Pippin's injunction that Honneth cannot hope to base his account of freedom (if it is to give direction to his normative reconstruction) on "claims about what we supposedly now 'know', thanks to Winnicott or various sociological studies, about what people as such 'need' or require". Certainly, I think Honneth needs to explain how and why, for us, autonomy means being bound to each other in certain – historically contingent – ways. As I will explain in the next few sections, I think that there

[175] Ibid, p. 734.
[176] And, he adds: "we appear to be over our 100-year temptation to think the question must be about how we use the word, or the necessary and sufficient conditions of the meaning of the word" Ibid, p. 734.

is a theory of agency in Honneth's writings that we can bring out to play the role of a theory of Spirit to the 'objective spirit' of social freedom.

5.2 Recognition, Freedom and Second Nature

In this section and the one following it, I will break the chronological narrative somewhat to consider a couple of texts that Honneth wrote before the publication of *Freedom's Right*. I place the discussion of these texts here because as far as I can see, they represent a parallel track in the development of Honneth's thought, and one that I think we see picked up after, and partly in response to, the critique of *Freedom's Right*. The texts I have singled out for particular attention here are, first, two texts from 2002 where Honneth is dealing with critique of the recognition theory and exploring ways that John McDowell's theories could be modified to address some identified problems. Second, I will be discussing in some detail a 2008 essay where Honneth deals more directly than in other works with Hegel's theory of agency.

I will look first at the 2002 article "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions". This is a point where Honneth is struggling with critical questions regarding his recognition theory, but before he has turned to develop the project that became *Freedom's Right*. [177] In response to questions and worries about how the modes of recognition (laid out in *The Struggle for Recognition*) should be read, i.e., either "as constants of human nature or as the result of historical processes" – and what either answer would mean for the question of how recognition serves as the source of morality, Honneth presents a few suggestions for how the recognition theory could be developed. The question had remained open in *SfR* whether recognition (*qua* acts of affirmation of a person or groups' positive qualities) should be understood as "attributions" of qualities or as responses and actualisations of already present qualities. In "Grounding Recognition", Honneth affirms Arto Laitinen's argument that recognition must be a case of responding to valuable qualities that someone displays, since if it was only a case of attribution, we would not have any "criterion for judging the rightness or appropriateness of such ascriptions"[178].

Honneth goes on to argue that we must say that recognition is recognition of valuable qualities that exist independently of the particular act of recognition. In this way, we can say that recognition is "motivated by reasons, which we can also try to articulate as

[177] That move did not mean that Honneth repudiated his previous recognition theory – but he did put some important issues aside in favour of developing the normative reconstruction approach. In "Grounding Recognition" however, he does suggest some potential ways forward in response to critical questions – and these are elements that I want to pick up.
[178] Honneth, "Grounding Recognition," p. 507.

necessary". As for the status of these valuable qualities, Honneth goes on to say, they have to be understood to be ones that exist in intersubjective space; in the lifeworld. Accordingly, the values would not be immutable and unchanging, but would develop with the social lifeworld. Honneth proceeds to draw on the philosophy of John McDowell, saying that the social lifeworld "would have to be conceived of as a kind of 'second nature' into which subjects are socialized by gradually learning to experience the evaluative qualities of persons".[179]

Honneth refers to this modified version of McDowell's 'second nature' thesis as a "moderate value realism". In essence, Honneth's moderate value realism means that he picks up on McDowell's "central realist tenet"[180] in *Mind and World*, according to which "we have a socialized perceptual access to a world of moral facts".[181] But McDowell's metaethics resists relying on any kind of subjectivism, even of an intersubjective kind,[182] so Honneth's recasting of the idea of 'second nature' and the 'space of reasons' in terms of the intersubjective lifeworld is a significant departure.

One of the potential issues that McDowell wanted to avoid by resisting subjectivism (and instead creating a whole different set of problems for his theory) now appears for Honneth's 'moderate value realism'. In short, Honneth's suggested model carries with it the risk of a kind of relativism, since "the values in terms of which the appropriateness of acts of recognition would be assessed appear to have normative validity only for a single culture."[183] This relativism can be overcome, writes Honneth,

> only by equipping this moderate value realism with a more robust conception of progress. That would basically mean hypothesizing, with regard to the cultural transformations of valuable human qualities, a developmental path that would allow for justified judgments regarding the transhistorical validity of a specific culture of recognition.[184]

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[179] Ibid, p. 508.
[180] Nicholas Smith, (ed.) *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World.* (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 5. ProQuest Ebook Central.
[181] In a commentary on McDowell, Honneth points out the convergence between McDowell's approach and his own Hegelian tradition, and Habermas's "weak naturalism" in particular; Axel Honneth, "Between hermeneutics and Hegelianism: John McDowell and the challenge of moral realism," in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World.* Ed. Nicholas Smith, (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 247.
[182] Robert Pippin, "Leaving nature behind: or two cheers for "subjectivism"" in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World.* Ed. Nicholas Smith, (London: Routledge, 2002) p. 66.
[183] Honneth, "Grounding Recognition", p. 508.
[184] Ibid, p. 508.

In order to posit this kind of robust conception of progress (which would allow for comparative judgements of cultures of recognition) it is necessary to specify why recognition has the normative significance that is being claimed for it. The answer to this lies in the familiar idea of identifying "human autonomy as the goal of recognition" and say that "only the person who knows that she is recognized by others can relate to herself rationally in a way that can, in the full sense of the word, be called 'free'."[185] These passages in "Grounding Recognition" are only meant as a sketch that could potentially be developed, so we have to look elsewhere to see how that might look.

In "Between Hermeneutics and Hegelianism" (published 2002) Honneth offers a reading of McDowell's "expanded naturalism" which stresses continuities with Heidegger. The "expanded naturalism" here refers to McDowell's conception of second nature, the "key theoretical yield" of which, says Honneth, is "that with the proper education and socialization, our senses are in a position to perceive the demands of reality itself" – including moral demands.[186] The point of this is to widen "our idea of nature so as to accommodate intellect and rationality within itself" and thus to say that the 'world of reasons' is not a separate world from the 'natural' world:

> the world, how it moves human beings on account of their conceptual capacities, is not the ontological counter-sphere to the logical realm of reasons. Rather, because it has already been disclosed, worked upon, or transformed for the most part through our rational activities, the world extends into that realm in such a way that it confronts us with "rational" demands. Hence McDowell can interpret human socialization, and thus the introduction of children into "second nature," as a process through which we acquire the conceptual capacities that make access to the objective world of reasons possible. Again in connection with Aristotle, this means that the moral formation (*Bildung*) of human beings involves the mediation of rational competencies with whose help we are able to work out the meaning of the domain of rational demands.[187]

Honneth is very sympathetic to this kind of expanded naturalism, and especially the idea that learning to grasp the moral content of the world is not different in kind from learning to grasp the world 'theoretically' – insofar as it is all the formation (*Bildiung*) of second nature, or the human mode of interacting with the world through concepts, reasons etc. Where Honneth takes issue with McDowell is in how the formation process

[185] Ibid, p. 509.
[186] Honneth, "Between hermeneutics and Hegelianism" p. 252.
[187] Ibid, p. 253.

(*Bildungsprozess*) is understood. Rather than viewing the process as a kind of 'attunement' of perceptual faculties to a world of facts – which happens to include 'moral facts' – we should understand the process as an attunement of our practical reason – in the sense of participating in the intersubjective space of reasons. Thus, says Honneth, we should understand *Bildung* "as Hegel did: that is, as a process of unavoidable learning, and thus of "ongoing formation" (*Fortbildung*). He then adds that the ongoing formation in question "does not have the form, suggested by Gadamer, of an anonymous happening of tradition; rather it has the form characterized by Hegel as a successive realization of practical reason."[188] This view of practical reason, i.e., of human (rational, self-conscious) agency as an ongoing *Bildung* process is, it seems to me, just the kind of thing that I joined Pippin in calling for. It points to a conception of human agency – practical reason-agency – that may be used to give direction to inquiry into the 'moral grammar' of particular social institutions.

These articles give us a good indication of a position, but it needs to be fleshed out. In particular, we would need a more detailed account of a) why and how the development of practical reason as an individual capacity is actually something that is deeply social and b) how the social requirements of practical reason-agency may be translated into something like 'justice' claims on how we ought to organise social institutions. To make sense of the social freedom account we'd then need to c) spell out how this justifies something like the 'transhistorical validity' of the primacy of individual autonomy as central legitimizing principle of the social order. The first of these two questions can be reformulated as asking precisely why and how recognition is necessary for human agency. We find Honneth outlining an answer to this question in the 2008 essay (republished in the 2012 volume *The I in We*) "From Desire to Recognition: Hegel's Grounding of Self-Consciousness".[189]

5.3 Self-consciousness, Recognition, and Autonomy

In "From Desire to Recognition: Hegel's Grounding of Self-Consciousness", Honneth presents his preferred reading of those passages in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* which suggests that recognition by and of other subjects is somehow necessary for human self-consciousness.[190] In the following I am going to explore Honneth's reconstruction and (re)interpretation of Hegel's argument. Honneth begins by noting that Hegel's intention really is to "explain the transition from natural to conscious (*geistig*) being, from the human

[188] Honneth "Between hermeneutics and Hegelianism" p. 261 and 263.
[189] Axel Honneth, *The I in We: Studies In The Theory of Recognition.* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012)
[190] Thus being a good candidate to find an answer to the questions Pippin complains that Honneth fails to answer, viz. "why should we believe Hegel's claims about how deeply bound we are to each other? And, how can it be that a form of independence, autonomy even, should be understood as the realization of, not limited by, a form of dependence?" Pippin, "Reconstructivism" p. 728.

animal to the rational subject"[191] – and that interpretations which try to downplay this ambition miss the point. He writes:

> Hegel intended to do much more than merely prove that subjects must necessarily enter into a struggle once they have realized their mutual dependence. By employing his phenomenological method, he sought to demonstrate that a subject can only arrive at a 'consciousness' of its own 'self' if it enters into a relationship of 'recognition' with another subject. Hegel's aims were much more fundamental than historicizing or sociological interpretations cared to realize; he was primarily interested in elucidating not an historical event or instance of conflict, but a transcendental fact that should prove to be a prerequisite of all human sociality.[192]

The starting point of Hegel's chapter on self-consciousness, Honneth tells us, is one where the subjectivity which is the topic of inquiry (i.e., our 'spiritual' kind) "have already learned in connection with the steps previously described to grasp the dependence of the object of their cognition on their own actions." [193] As I will explain later, I think a good way to express this starting point would be to say that when we embark on the investigation of self-consciousness, we, as observers/readers, already know that we have to account for the sense of authorship that we experience as an integral part of our self-conscious agency. Honneth goes on to write of the starting point for the chapter on self-consciousness that:

> In a certain sense, both the observer and the observed have advanced to an epistemological standpoint already characterized by Kant's transcendental philosophy. As a result, both parties are faced with the question as to the nature of the knowledge that subjects can have of themselves as originators of true claims. The 'self', whose consciousness of itself forms the object of Hegel's subsequent considerations, is therefore […someone…] who is already abstractly aware of its constitutive, world-creating cognitive acts.[194]

Although Honneth does not get into detail on the Kantian theory of self-consciousness that figures in the background, I think it will be helpful to spell it out here. On Kant's theory, 'transcendental apperception' forms the most basic element of self-consciousness – and amounts to what we might call a 'proto-self-awareness' that human beings get/have

[191] Honneth, *The I in We*, p. 4.
[192] Ibid, pp. 3-4.
[193] Ibid, p. 8.
[194] Ibid p. 5; I have bracketed and replaced the term "the rational individual" for 'someone' in this quote, since I think 'the rational individual' is unnecessarily evocative. The more general and unspecific 'someone' is, I hope, more neutral.

when they experience the world around them. The way Kant puts it is to say that if conceptual ('representational') thought is to be possible, "[t]he 'I think' must be able to accompany all my representations"; i.e., a "representation" or "awareness" of an "I" that "thinks" – an "I" to which the representations belong.[195] On Kant's account, this 'proto-self-awareness' becomes a more full-fledged sense-of-self as humans engage in more advanced abstract thinking; i.e., as we develop and use our capacity to structure our understanding of the world through the use of concepts. On the Kantian view, this leads to self-consciousness as a sense of authorship, because we become aware of the role of our own thinking in the creation of our own perspective or understanding of the world. Moreover, it is this sense of authorship that Kant later tries to argue is the source of morality, as he claims that it necessitates an unconditional valuing of that authorship (since it is the condition of all other valuing). That capacity for self-conscious authorship is what Kant terms 'our humanity' – which is why he says that it is a rational requirement to always treat our humanity as an end and never merely as a means, or to afford it due respect and reverence (*Achtung*).[196]

In "From Desire to Recognition", Honneth relates the Hegelian criticism of Kant's apperception thesis, i.e., that the move from passive awareness of a subjective point of view to full-fledged self-consciousness (i.e., awareness of myself as an author; the capacity of a human agent "of perceiving itself as an authoritative source of its own knowledge about the world."[197]) is not sufficiently accounted for in Kant's story. We are told that

> [w]hat the subject would need to perceive itself as in order to truly possess self-consciousness is its own active role as an originator of reality […] There must be a difference between the type of consciousness I have of my mental activities and these activities themselves, one that is not yet present in the initial stage of self-consciousness. After all, I lack the experience that would make me aware of the fact that, unlike my accompanying and floating attention, the activities of my consciousness are active and modify reality.[198]

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[195] Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.) p. 246; B132 "I call it the 'pure apperception' […] or also the 'original apperception' since it is that self-consciousness which, because it produces the representation 'I think', which must be able to accompany all others"

[196] This is of course a potentially contentious reading, as most Kant interpretations will be. In addition to my own reading of Kant, I am drawing primarily on: Henry E. Allison *Kant's Theory of Freedom.* (Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity.* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.)

[197] Honneth, *The I in We*, p. 5.

[198] Ibid, p. 6.

It will be useful, I think, to gloss the above claim by drawing on McDowell once more. In *Two Sorts of Naturalism*, McDowell poses the question of what it would mean to say that some non-rational creature – wolves in his example – suddenly acquired 'reason'. This question, I would note, is a metaphysical question in the sense that Pippin tells us Hegel uses that term, i.e., the answer to the question can never be settled by any empirical examination, because it is not a question about a phenomenon, but rather about how we can make sense of a phenomenon. In this case, McDowell wants to say something about how we make sense of 'rationality' (which we could also call, rational agency; reason; *logos*; self-consciousness; *Geistigkeit;* humanity; or a number of other words meant to point to roughly the same thing or phenomenon). In this vein, if we are to try to imagine a 'rational wolf', says McDowell, we'd have to suppose that the wolf in question "would be able to let his mind roam over possibilities of behaviour other than what comes naturally to wolves". We must suppose this, he says, because "we cannot make sense of a creature's acquiring reason unless it has genuinely alternative possibilities of action, over which its thought can play". But – and this is where McDowell's point links up with Honneth's in the quote above – we cannot make sense of a creature's having genuinely alternative possibilities of action that its thoughts can play over unless we also understand the creature to be able to take its own conceptualisations to have the power to impact what happens in the world.[199] To this point, McDowell writes:

> We cannot intelligibly restrict the exercise of conceptual powers to merely theoretical thinking, on the part of something whose behaviour, if any, flows from a brutely natural aspect of its total make-up, uncontaminated by its conceptual powers – so that it might conceive 'its own' behaviour if any (it could not be its own in any very strong sense) as just another phenomenon in the world it conceptualizes. An ability to conceptualize the world must include the ability to conceptualize the thinker's own place in the world; and to find the latter ability intelligible, we need to make room not only for conceptual states that aim to represent how the world anyway is, but also for conceptual states that issue in interventions directed towards making the world conform to their content.[200]

The Hegelian case against Kant that Honneth is relating, then, is that Kant hasn't shown what experience could lead the subject to take its own conceptualisations to have the kind of active impact on the world McDowell is talking about. The claim is that Kantian

[199] John McDowell, "Two Kinds of Naturalism"; in, *Virtues and Reasons: Essays in honour of Philippa Foot*, ed. Hursthouse, Lawrence and Quinn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 152.
[200] McDowell, "Two Kinds of Naturalism", p. 152.

apperception simply is not enough to provide this sense of activity; since it would only be awareness of itself as "just another phenomenon in the world it conceptualizes" i.e., just its "accompanying and floating attention". [201]

The contrasting picture we see in Honneth's interpretation of Hegel's chapter on self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* is that there are two factors that together allow a subject to move from (a hypothesised) proto-self-awareness to awareness that my consciousness is active and can modify reality: i) the experience of embodiment in the striving to fulfil needs and desires coupled with ii) the experience of encountering other minds. The experience of embodied striving to satisfy needs and desires is said to be a necessary element (in contrast to the Kantian story) because self-consciousness is consciousness of a duality. It is an experience of being part of the flow of reality and yet being somehow apart from it through the experience of our mental activities' capacity to change that perceived reality in determining our activities. However, the experience of encountering other minds is the crucial aspect here. In the encounter with other minds, two things happen; the subject develops a 'theory of mind', and it comes to grasp its own authorship; the ability of its mind to shape its reality.

The previous paragraph is a gloss on the (re)interpretive work Honneth undertakes in his article. What I have presented as 'the experience of embodiment in the striving to fulfil needs and desires' and the 'awareness of a double nature' that this produces is my understanding of the upshot of Honneth's (re)interpretation of Hegel's concepts of 'Life' and 'Desire'.[202] In order to examine the case that Honneth makes using Hegel's text it is necessary to unpack these ideas – but I want to be clear that as I'm doing so, I am giving my interpretation of a case that Honneth is making using Hegel's text – not offering my own reading of Hegel.

We can try to pierce the obtuse Hegelian language by saying that 'Life' refers to 'something' that a subject (must) ascribe to (or take to be a feature of) the reality they are starting to grasp. This 'something' which gets the Hegelian label 'Life' is the understanding of reality as an organic whole rather than a countless number of "disassociated elements of perception".[203] The understanding of reality as an organic whole here means an

[201] Ibid, p. 6.
[202] Cf. e.g. "The subject experiences itself as both part of nature, because it is involved in the determining and heteronomous 'movement of Life', and as the active organizing centre of this life, because it can make essential differentiations in Life by virtue of its consciousness" and "As long as humans view themselves as needs-fulfilling beings and are active in the framework of their desires, they have unmediated knowledge of their double nature, which allows them to stand both inside and outside nature at the same time." Honneth, *The I in We,* p. 9
[203] Honneth, *The I in We*, p. 6.

understanding of the world as "a totality of genii whose generic qualities are constantly reproduced through the life cycle of its individual members". Thus, the term 'Life' is used because it describes how we understand reality as constant in form and yet continuously changing in particulars.[204] The notion of Life is important as a stage in self-consciousness, writes Honneth, because "the subject must understand itself as an individual member of a living genus. Hegel means that the subject is compelled to make such a transition from pure self-consciousness [i.e., apperception] to 'living' (*lebendig*) self-consciousness in that it must recognize its own liveliness (*Lebendigkeit*) in the liveliness of the reality it constitutes."[205] It is important, I think, to keep in mind that the terms 'Life' and 'Desire' are technical terms or terms of art that have a specific meaning in Hegel's original text – and which are then interpreted in a particular way by Honneth.

Honneth goes on to describe how the stance labelled 'Desire' works as a kind of negation of the stance labelled 'Life' for the subject itself. The idea is that, whereas the experience of reality as a totality of self-reproducing genii moves the subject to understand itself as part of that "organic life process", the experience of desire-satisfaction moves the subject to understand itself as separate from nature in some sense. Honneth writes that:

> In this stance the subject assures itself of its own biological nature in such a way that it expresses its superiority over all other beings. By virtue of its capacity to differentiate between what is good or bad for it, the subject is always certain of the element of its consciousness that makes it unique. For Hegel, the confirmation of desires, i.e. the satisfaction of elementary, organic needs, plays a double role with regard to self-consciousness. The subject experiences itself both as a part of nature, because it is involved in the determining and heteronomous 'movement of Life', and as the active organizing centre of this life, because it can make essential differentiations in Life by virtue of its consciousness.[206]

This formulation of the subject's expressing or assuring itself of its "superiority" in the satisfaction of 'Desire' turns out to be crucial for the next step in the argument as Honneth presents it, because it is the failure of the 'Desire' stance – and the subsequent need to overcome that failure in and through the 'Recognition' stance – that accounts for full self-consciousness. Ultimately, I would argue, Honneth has to make significant changes to Hegel's argument regarding the insufficiency of the 'Desire' stage of self-consciousness, but he begins by presenting Hegel's case as follows. In the stance of 'Desire',

[204] Kant might have described 'Life' in terms of a principle of the unity of the manifold of representations.
[205] Ibid, p. 8.
[206] Ibid, p. 9.

> the subject is certain of the 'nothingness' or 'nullity' of living reality; it views itself in its excentric position as superior to the rest of nature. As a human animal, the appropriate way to express this superiority is to consume the objects of nature in the satisfaction of its desires. […] The transition follows […when…] Hegel remarks laconically: 'In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own independence' […]. A few lines further on, Hegel asserts even more explicitly that self-consciousness is unable to 'supersede' its object 'by its negative relation' to this object; rather, 'it produces the object again, and the desire as well' (Ibid.). Hegel is therefore convinced of having uncovered an element of self-deception in the stance of Desire.[207]

The task for Honneth is to show how we can make sense of this and why it motivates the role of intersubjective recognition for self-consciousness. Honneth frames the above assertions as Hegel's claiming that Desire produces an "ontological assumption" in the subject – i.e., the assumption that it is able to "destroy the rest of nature by consuming its objects in the process of satisfying desires".[208] Honneth then talks about this as the stance of Desire producing a "delusion of omnipotence" in the subject.[209] This interpretation both moves Honneth's reading away from the focus on consumption to a more general assertion about control, and allows him to make an analogy with Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of ontogenesis. Winnicott asserted, writes Honneth, that in early development, children "follow a nearly ontological need to prove to themselves that their environment is dependent on their intentions. By destroying the objects they possess, children intend to prove that reality obeys their all-encompassing power."[210]

Honneth is quick to say that he is not asserting the empirical validity of Winnicott's theory, but only that it may help us understand Hegel's intention. Both Hegel and Winnicott, writes Honneth, "seem to claim that this subject strives, through needs-driven consumption of its environment, to assure itself that the entirety of reality it encounters is a product of its own mental activity."[211] With this in hand, Honneth proceeds to give his reading of "the most difficult sentence in the chapter on self-consciousness"[212], where "Hegel claims that in order for the subject to consummate its self-consciousness, it requires another subject

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[207] Ibid, p. 11.
[208] Ibid, p. 12.
[209] Ibid, p. 12.
[210] Ibid, p. 12.
[211] Ibid, p. 13.
[212] Cf. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Edited and translated by Terry P. Pinkard, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018) p. 107: "For the sake of the self-sufficiency of the object, self-consciousness can thus only arrive at satisfaction by this object itself effecting the negation in itself; and the object must in itself effect this negation of itself, for it is in itself the negative, and it must be for the other what it is."

that carries out the same negation 'within itself' (*an ihm*)".[213] We should understand this obscure formulation of Hegel's as referring to reciprocal recognition, and to determine precisely what recognition is supposed to accomplish (and therefore what recognition amounts to) we need to ask, writes Honneth, what need Hegel thinks can only be satisfied by such recognition. He writes:

> He cannot have in mind the organic drive previously expressed in the notion of 'Desire', because this need has already attained fulfilment in the consumption of the natural world. Despite all the disappointment the subject brought upon itself in this stage, it did succeed in appropriating from reality, according to its own discriminations, the materials that could satisfy its animal or 'erotic' needs. So the need that Hegel has in mind must lie deeper and be likewise contained in 'Desire', a need we could call 'ontological' because it seeks confirmation of a certain specific conception of the ontological character of reality.[214]

Accordingly, Honneth proposes a reading of Hegel which says that the only way that the subject can meet its 'ontological desire' is in an encounter with another consciousness where the encounter involves an act of reciprocal self-restriction, or "decentering". He writes:

> The moment […] two subjects encounter each other, both must perform a negation upon themselves in which they distance themselves from what is their own (*Eigenen*). If we add to this thought Kant's definition of 'respect' (*Achtung*), which he views as 'thwarting' (*Abbruch*) or negating self-love, then for the first time we see clearly what Hegel sought to prove by introducing the intersubjective relation. In the encounter between two subjects, a new sphere of action is opened in the sense that both sides are compelled to restrict their self-seeking drives as soon as they encounter each other[215]

In this encounter, says Honneth, the ontological desire can be satisfied (or the 'delusion of omnipotence' can in some sense become a reality) because now the subject(s) finally encounter an aspect of reality that they (or their subjectivities) have the right kind of 'ontological' power over. The image of reciprocal recognition we get on Honneth's account, then, is one where self-consciousness is consummated in the act of creation. The subjects can – and have to – create a part of reality that is completely under the (joint)

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[213] Honneth, *The I in We*, p. 13, c.f. "On account of the independence of the object, therefore, it can achieve satisfaction only when the object itself effects the negation within itself; and it must carry out this negation of itself in itself, for it is *in itself* the negative, and must be *for* the other what it *is*." Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 109.
[214] Honneth, *The I in We,* p. 13.
[215] Ibid, p. 15.

control of their consciousnesses when they act together. By pointing to the link with Kant's notion of respect on the one hand, and by once again employing the language of a 'space of reasons', Honneth moves in the last section of his essay to make the case that a) the reciprocal recognition which is a condition of self-consciousness can also be described as b) proto-morality, since it is a decentring and taking up of a we-perspective, and as c) the creation of a social reality, or space of reasons.

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Now, having sketched the outlines of Honneth's reconstruction here, I think it is clear that the notion of 'ontological desire' must be examined in more detail. As I noted, the expression 'ontological desire' is Honneth's gloss on Hegel's assertion regarding the failure of the 'Desire' stance or phase of self-consciousness – which Honneth uses Winnicott's language to elucidate. However, it seems to me that invoking Winnicott does little to help Honneth's case – while potentially causing it some harm. For one thing, it is clear that we should not understand 'ontological desire' in any kind of strong cognitivist sense; i.e., we must not think of 'the subject' as having a belief about their ability to destroy or control nature.

I think we have to remind ourselves that the 'subject' – which is talked about as if it is in the process of reaching self-consciousness – is nothing more than a philosophical reconstruction; it is no more to be thought of as an actual historical subject, or an actual discernible phase in human development than the Kantian subject with e.g. only the capacity of sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*).[216] The division into the 'stages' of self-consciousness must always be understood as an artificial distinction with the purpose of isolating and better understanding particular features – but we must not make the mistake of thinking they make sense on their own.[217]

For this reason, I think that Honneth's use of Winnicott's ontogenesis theory is unfortunate, since it can give the impression that Honneth is suggesting that the 'ontological desire' is something subjects 'have' at some distinct point and then come to grips with through recognition. But Honneth certainly is not claiming that this is Hegel's view, and he does not seem to claim that for his own interpretation either, since he is quite explicit that the case made is a transcendental one. Instead, I would suggest that a better

[216] Of course, on Kant's story we could speculate that animal nature would be sensible (*Sinnlich)* nature without understanding (*Verstand*) or reason (*Vernunft*) , but since we only understand sensibility in the context of conceptualising and synthesising (understanding and reason) agency, such speculation would ultimately be beyond the bounds of sense on a Kantian analysis.

[217] Indeed, we could read Hegel's chosen methodology of shifting back and forth between points-of-view (though it creates other issues) as being motivated in part by an ambition to avoid losing sight of this (i.e., to avoid the mistakes Hegel saw with Kant's transcendental method).

way to make the case that Honneth is trying to make in the essay would have been to say that what Hegel talks about as the stance of 'Desire' may be understood as the sense of authorship that takes the subject out of 'Life', i.e., the flow of nature.

Indeed, I think we can see that Honneth presents his case regarding the role of intersubjective recognition for self-consciousness as a kind of dialectic, whereby human consciousness is characterised by a tension between 'Life-understanding' and 'Desire-understanding' – a tension that is then able to be resolved in the continuous process of creating social reality, i.e., 'Recognition-understanding'. If we exchange the Hegelian names here, the argument becomes more clear: human consciousness is characterised by a tension between a) a grasping of reality as an organic whole of which the subject is part and b) a grasping of the freedom of their own consciousness in relation to that organic reality – and that tension is defused in the continuous process of creating social reality.

If I'm right in glossing the argument in this way, it would mean that the 'ontological desire' just is what Honneth described Hegel's 'Desire' stance as – which in turn is what I describe as the sense of authorship. And it would be much easier to see how the 'sense of authorship' would be in conflict with, as Hegel puts it, the experience "that the object has its own independence".[218] Moreover, 'the sense of authorship' that I talk about here is a vague phenomenological term, and a good way to explicate this could indeed be with terms such as 'ontological desire' or 'delusion of omnipotence' – so long as we are clear on the fact that all three of these terms point to the phenomenological sense of agency. And we will remember that this 'phenomenological sense of agency' is the transcendental starting point of the discussion of self-consciousness. We know that we have to account for this. That, as I quoted Honneth saying above; "The 'self', whose consciousness of itself forms the object of Hegel's subsequent considerations, is therefore […someone…] who is already abstractly aware of its constitutive, world-creating cognitive acts." [219]

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With this said, let me return to the upshot of Honneth's article. I said above that Honneth ends up making the case that the reciprocal recognition which is a condition of self-consciousness can also be described as proto-morality, since it is a decentring and taking up of a we-perspective, and as the creation of a social reality, or space of reasons. If we assume that when Honneth is employing the idea of a "space of reasons" he still has in mind the (amended) McDowell sense thereof, the picture we get from Honneth is one where learning to participate in a space of reasons is necessary for self-consciousness

[218] Ibid, p. 11.
[219] Ibid, p. 5.

because it is what allows us to understand ourselves as being simultaneously part of and separate from the world around us.

Here we see an answer to the question Pippin (in his 2014 commentary on *Freedom's Right*) calls on Honneth to answer, viz. "why should we believe Hegel's claims about how deeply bound we are to each other" and "how can it be that a form of independence, autonomy even, should be understood as the realization of, not limited by, a form of dependence?"[220] It seems to me that Honneth endorses an answer to this question that overlaps with Pippin's own. To pick out a couple of the more salient points where I think they are in agreement, I would note Pippin's insistence that (on Hegel's account) "freedom" should be understood as "a kind of state, not a causal power" but as the "achievement of a certain sort of negation of, independence of, nature, and that possibility as a kind of rational self- and other-relation."[221] Additionally, they share the view that recognition *qua* decentring and self-restriction should be understood not as a limitation on individual free will, but rather as "the original condition of free agency itself, a social relation without which my relation to my own deeds could not be conceived as free, and so a form of dependence in which independence is achieved, not compromised."[222]

Of course, Pippin argues strenuously – in part against Honneth – that we should not understand Hegel's claim about the necessity of recognition for free human agency as being any kind of empirical "need" – certainly not one that can be "derived from evidence in developmental or social psychology". Instead, according to Pippin, the claim is "a distinctly philosophical claim"[223] to the effect that a "*true individual* is a *free* subject and recognition relations function in a complex way as conditions for that possibility".[224] And to be sure, it is unclear if Honneth is making the kind of "distinctly philosophical claim" about what freedom "actually" amounts to for the kind of "spiritual (*geistig*)"[225] entity we are that Pippin is calling for – as opposed to a claim "about what we supposedly now 'know', thanks to Winnicott or various sociological studies, about what people as such 'need' or require."[226] It is unclear, but there is certainly room to read Honneth as making the more "philosophical" claim about what it actually means for beings like us to be free, especially if we read his gloss on self-consciousness in "From Desire to Recognition" together with the aforementioned response in "Grounding Recognition" saying that we should identify

[220] Pippin, "Reconstructivism" p. 728.
[221] Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, p. 195.
[222] Ibid, p. 189.
[223] Ibid, p. 215.
[224] Ibid, p. 186. Emphasis in text.
[225] "the central feature of which […] is that it is a product of itself"; Ibid, p. 252.
[226] Pippin, "Reconstructivism" pp. 737-8.

"human autonomy as the goal of recognition" and say that "only the person who knows that she is recognized by others can relate to herself rationally in a way that can, in the full sense of the word, be called 'free'."[227]

I will be drawing on the discussion here in §5.2 and §5.3, when in §7.3.1 I outline my version of grounding for the claim to primacy of autonomy, for the reframed Honnethian framework I'm proposing in that chapter. In the next chapter, however, I am going to discuss the development of Honneth's philosophical framework after the publication of *Freedom's Right*, in reaction to the critique of *Freedom's Right* and most recently some of the replies to *The Idea of Socialism*.

[227] Honneth, "Grounding Recognition," p. 509.

Chapter 6: Later Developments

6.1 Fraternal Coexistence?

In the previous chapter I focused on the main line of critique against *Freedom's Right* which said that the 'normative reconstruction' approach there could not serve to justify the primacy of the value of freedom. I then moved to discuss some pre-*Freedom's Right* writings of Honneth's which I argue can be used to find an alternative grounding. Such a grounding can be sought in a more explicit Hegelian theory of agency and the 'actuality' of freedom. However, the texts I drew on §5.2 and §5.3 were written prior to *Freedom's Right*, and as we saw in chapter 1, there is not much substantial in *The Idea of Socialism* to explain why we should accept 'social freedom' as 'actual freedom'. In this chapter I am going to discuss some of Honneth's most recent writings and replies to critique. Although it is not made very explicit, I think we can see Honneth gradually moving back towards asserting a "quasi-transcendental interest"[228] as he suggested in the exchange with Fraser (see §3.4.2), the "Fabric of Justice" view (§4.2), and the "Grounding Recognition" and McDowell commentary (§5.2). Whether this will go hand in hand with a move to embrace a more explicit account of agency and the 'actuality of freedom' is unclear at this point, although I will argue that it should. I will begin here by relating one line of critique that has been levied against the *The Idea of Socialism* account of social freedom, arguing that the account there is significantly more demanding than the account of social freedom offered in *Freedom's Right*. Accordingly, the criticism holds that the conception of freedom presented in *The Idea of Socialism* is both theoretically dubious *qua* conception of freedom and practically untenable as a political ideal. In Honneth's subsequent responses to these charges we see him elaborating a bit more on the 'actuality'[229] of freedom in his analysis.

In a 2017 article, Eleanora Piromalli argues that Honneth's response to critics' worries about the critical potential of *Freedom's Right* – i.e., the account in *The Idea of Socialism* – is an overcorrection. As Piromalli presents it, the problem of *Freedom's Right* was Honneth's insistence that "the sphere of capitalistic economy", or "the capitalist market"[230] should be understood as a potential sphere of social freedom. Honneth's response to the criticism of this position was to draw a sharper distinction between 'capitalism' and 'market societies'. In making this distinction, Honneth also suggests that that social freedom is not possible in the capitalist "form of social embeddedness of markets", but that "a completed

[228] Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition* p. 174.
[229] Although he does not use that term.
[230] Eleonora Piromalli, "Does Socialism Need Fraternity? On Axel Honneth's The Idea of Socialism." *European Journal of Political Theory*, July 2017, p. 3.

'socialization' of the market could only be possible under post-capitalist conditions"[231] Piromalli does not have a problem with this move towards a 'market socialist' view, but the issue, she says, is that it goes hand in hand with a recasting of the concept of social freedom.

In *The Idea of Socialism*, says Piromalli, Honneth "conjoins" the concept of social freedom "with the principle of fraternity deriving from his reconstruction of the proto-socialist perspectives"[232] which then leads to a view of social freedom whereby "it is a reciprocal disposition of fraternity, sympathy and benevolence that should lead subjects to cooperate with an attitude of concern for each other's needs." This marks a significant departure from the view of *Freedom's Right*, says Piromalli, because:

> The subjects' awareness of their mutual dependence, and the orientation of their actions towards common ends, in *Freedom's Right*, is seen as the result of an institutionally-mediated *Bildung*: society must be institutionally organized as a cooperative enterprise, in which subjects reciprocally coordinate their own actions and gradually come to understand their mutual interrelation: 'only by "growing into" practices aimed at the shared realization of complementary aims do subjects learn to view themselves as self-conscious members of communities that guarantee freedom'[233]

By contrast, the account in *The Idea of Socialism* suggests that, for social freedom to obtain, the subjects involved must have something like "subjective dispositions of fraternity" towards one another. Piromalli writes that, where the *Freedom's Right* account of social freedom emphasised the mediating role of social institutions (or the "role obligations" that allow subjects to "recognize their own free activities as the condition for the realization of the others' aims") on the *The Idea of Socialism* account "[t]he driving force behind the individuals' reciprocal and reflexive cooperation is not primarily the integrating, coordinating and 'objective' role of social institutions, but rather the presence, in every individual, of fraternal dispositions towards the others."[234]

Following on from this characterisation, Piromalli's critique is unsurprising. Honneth's "Future Fraternal Society" model of socialism is both theoretically implausible, practically unworkable, and morally undesirable according to Piromalli. The theory is implausible insofar as it posits that it is only when "everyone is concerned for the well-being of the

[231] Honneth, "Rejoinder," p. 224.
[232] Piromalli, "Does Socialism Need Fraternity", p. 5.
[233] Ibid, p. 5.
[234] Ibid, p. 6.

others and entertains feelings of fraternity, benevolence and sympathy"[235] that social freedom can obtain; and it is practically implausible to presuppose as "necessary for socialism" the "full development of the fraternal attitudes" among (almost?) everyone in a given society. Moreover, such an imagined 'fraternal society' would seem to imply a "hyper-ethicized" and "anti-pluralistic" society.[236] And, writes Piromalli, this raises the uncomfortable question of what place there would be in such a society for those that do not acquire the requisite fraternal dispositions.

Piromalli writes that by building on the ideals of fraternal community of the "proto-socialists", Honneth repeats one of the cardinal mistakes that Marx and Engels criticised the 'utopian socialists' for making; viz. making altruism a precondition for socialism. The *TIoS* account of fraternal community indicates that "subjects would act in social cooperation out of a *direct concern for other individuals*".[237] This is particularly unfortunate, on Piromalli's view, since it means that the account in *The Idea of Socialism* "falls prey to a dichotomy that the concept of recognition and the idea of social freedom would, thanks to their very structure, be capable of overcoming: the one between egoism and altruism."[238] It is not entirely clear if Piromalli wants to endorse the social freedom model of *Freedom's Right,* or some modified version thereof. Her main point in relation to social freedom is that for "cooperation based on social freedom" to "exist and flourish" it is not necessary to ground it in fraternal dispositions and feelings; rather, she says, "subjects need only be aware that everyone's good is closely interlinked with everyone else's, so that they may cooperate towards common goals, without being selfish or selfless, from a perspective of mutual attentiveness to each other's needs".[239]

Piromalli's line of critique raises some serious worries not only for the feasibility of the *The Idea of Socialism* account as a model for 'renewed socialism', but also, and more fundamentally, for the question of the 'actuality' of freedom in Honneth's theory. Is Honneth saying that the only way that social freedom can obtain is if the subjects involved have fraternal feelings towards one-another? Although not a direct response to Piromalli, Honneth seems to have been aware of this line of critique when writing the 2017 article titled "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty: A Proposal to Enlarge Our Moral Self-Understanding". In it, I think we see him attempting to defuse worries (following *The Idea of Socialism*) that social freedom is too substantial, too affective, to really work as a concept

[235] Ibid, p. 6
[236] Ibid, p. 10
[237] Ibid, p. 12.
[238] Ibid.
[239] Ibid, p. 13.

of freedom at all; that perhaps he is just confusing the value of fraternity, community, or solidarity, with freedom.

6.2 Three Concepts of Liberty

"Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty" is a revised version of Honneth's 2014 Dewey Lecture, published in 2017. In the essay, Honneth uses Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1969) as the starting point to make his case for an expansion of our understanding of freedom, since the traditional bifurcation into negative and positive concepts does not allow us to understand freedom as a cooperative process. The essay is noteworthy both because it seeks to present the idea of social freedom in a more straightforward, free-standing, fashion (as compared to *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*, where it is bound up with genealogical arguments) and because it apparently seeks to defuse or pre-empt some of the criticisms raised against the fraternity conception of social freedom.

The argument in "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty" mirrors that of *Freedom's Right* to a large degree. Honneth begins by stating that neither the negative nor the positive conception of freedom is capable of fully capturing the intersubjective nature of individual freedom, since neither model adequately captures the fact that the intentions on which subjects are supposed to 'freely' act can only be formed "in reciprocal interaction between multiple subjects and thus can be realized without coercion only by acting together."[240] Following on this thesis statement, Honneth moves to illustrate this with the example of "our regular or only occasional participation in processes of democratic will-formation when we join political discussions, call for protests, sign petitions, or merely distribute leaflets at demonstrations".[241]

It is obvious, says Honneth, that we will not be able to describe the kinds of activities that are emblematic of our participation in the process of democratic will-formation purely in terms of negative freedom. When we consider what could be said to constitute the successful exercise of individual freedom in such cases it quickly becomes clear that we cannot say that it comes down to whether individuals are able to express their views without facing external coercion. Certainly, the idea of negative freedom plays a part, since freedom of speech, assembly etc. are vital enabling conditions for the successful exercise of individual freedom in democratic will-formation. But it is not sufficient, because in this case we cannot think of successful free action as an individual being able to freely express their private political opinion. Honneth emphasises that if an action is to be considered free, it must be able to be successfully carried out in the real world. Further, he makes the

[240] Honneth, "Three, not Two, Concepts of Liberty", p. 177.
[241] Ibid, p. 178.

point that when it comes to certain actions, such as the type of actions or activities associated with the sphere of democratic action, the successful execution of those actions or activities are not only dependent on an individual's being able to express their political opinions. Rather, says Honneth, democratic action is essentially cooperative and intersubjective:

> When the subject contributes to political discourse, she refers in her expression to a chain of earlier statements, which she attempts to correct or improve, such that she can only appropriately be understood as a member of a previously constituted, self-reflexively given, and already present "We." This means that the exercise of the "free" action cannot be regarded as complete with the mere proclamation of her belief. For what the individual proposal aims at, and where it finds completion, is in the reaction of the addressed "We," or of its individual representatives, who once again attempt to correct or improve upon the beliefs of other participants with their own.[242]

The problem with trying to use the concept of negative freedom to capture individual freedom in the sphere of democratic action is that negative freedom is wholly focused on the ability of the individual to freely assert their own individual preferences and life aims, without restrictions from without (*FR* 25). But this conceptual model does not work if the restrictions from without are essential components of the formation of an individual's preferences and life aims in the first place. We can read these claims in the context of the theory of the democratic sphere Honneth develops in Part III of *Freedom's Right*. There, Honneth makes the point that it would be a mistake to view democracy as being simply a way of balancing individual interests. Although the constitutional democratic state of modernity started to develop in the wake of claims made by reference to negative freedom – i.e., the right to free speech, assembly and the right to vote – as these claims started to be institutionalized it created a new sphere of action that was fundamentally social in nature. In the new institutional structure that emerged, writes Honneth, "an idea of freedom was institutionalized that no longer permitted a merely individualistic interpretation. Instead, individual citizens were to achieve their new freedom to influence political legislation by forming an intersubjectively examined opinion, in discursive exchange and dispute with other citizens, about the policies to be implemented by elected representatives of the people." (*FR* 260)

It's interesting to note that democratic action is the first example Honneth gives in "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty" of a sphere of social freedom, whereas in *Freedom's Right*

[242] Ibid, p. 179.

he mirrors Hegel in first presenting the sphere of personal relationships as the paradigmatic form of social freedom – the being-with-oneself-in-the-other – and building from there. In "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty", Honneth moves from the discussion of the democratic sphere to discuss the sphere of personal relationships, friendship and love, as a further example of spheres of action where the model of negative freedom does not suffice. In that case we have a sphere of action where the other person's wishes, needs, intentions etc. cannot be understood as limitations to free action – rather, he says, it is an essential feature of such relationships that two or more individuals share in the formation of common aspirations. Having thus made the case that the negative model fails to capture freedom in these spheres, Honneth next turns to argue that the positive model – from Berlin's bifurcation – likewise falls short.[243] The case here is the same as in *Freedom's Right*: If, on a 'positive' conception of freedom, it is still understood "only as an activity performed by an individual subject, in which it practices a given capability (such as norm orientation or the articulation of needs)" then it will fail to capture what free action in the spheres of democratic will-formation and in the sphere of personal relationships is. Honneth writes that the "distinctiveness" of action in these spheres "consists in the fact that multiple subjects must act for one another for each to experience her activity from her own individual perspective as a common practice of freedom". Positive conceptions of freedom fail to capture this, says Honneth, insofar as they are unable to understand 'the other' not as a limitation, but as "a requirement for the realization of my strivings" since (in the democratic and personal-relationship spheres at least) "my freedom is grounded on the unforced intermeshing of our activities".[244]

Having made the case that the positive and negative concepts fail to capture freedom in the spheres of democratic will formation and the sphere of personal relationships, Honneth then proceeds to outline the Hegelian origins of the third, social concept of freedom. Accordingly, Honneth presents his view on Hegel's idea of 'objective freedom' – an interpretation that he contrasts with the interpretation of the same idea offered by Brandom, Pippin and Neuhouser. Neuhouser (from whom Honneth adopts the label of 'social freedom') we are told, interpreted Hegel's idea of 'objective freedom' as one whereby "a complete concept of individual freedom must be composed of all the institutional requirements that allow the members of society to articulate their particular identities without coercion in the external form of social roles, and thus to accept

[243] On the positive model, writes Honneth, "the freedom of an action is understood in terms of its realization of higher ends or values – whether this should mean agreement with moral norms, as for Kant, or the actualization of one's own natural needs, as in the romantic tradition". Ibid, p. 182
[244] Ibid, p. 184.

institutionally established paths of self-realization".[245] Honneth agrees with Neuhouser in this, emphasizing in "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty" (as he does in *Freedom's Right*) that the major problem with both the negative and many of the positive conceptions of freedom is that they do not adequately take into account the necessary enabling condition of (the right kind) of institutional framework for individual freedom. However, Honneth thinks that this only captures part of the picture of social freedom.

According to Honneth, it is not enough to say that the exercise of freedom "proceeds from the taking-up of the perspective of the 'We,' which either makes possible the constitution of a community of recognition or a common commitment to freedom-guaranteeing institutions"[246] – since on such a view, we are still dealing with something like atomistic subjects that take up a 'We' perspective.[247] In contrast to this, Honneth says that the model he finds in Hegel is one where a "reciprocal process of unforced intertwining of ends" allows "the contribution of each […to be…] experienced as willed by the other."[248]; or else as a "doubled intersubjectivity" where "one can understand the actions of the other as requirements for the realization of one's own, self-determined intentions."[249]

In §4.3.1 I noted how Honneth relates Hegel's "strong, ontological requirement" that for freedom to obtain, "objective reality" must "accommodate individuals striving for freedom in the sense that it should want of its own accord, so to say, what subjects reflexively intend". [22] Honneth returns to this point in "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty", saying that "Hegel intended far more with his idea of 'objective' freedom than to identify for therapeutic purposes certain possibilities of unforced and thus free collaboration in modern society […] Ultimately he wanted to construe our entire relationship to the world in terms of the recognition of our own posited ends in the Other of objective reality, and thus also to underscore idealistically our freedom in relation with the natural environment." But having underscored that this was Hegel's original intention, Honneth then proceeds to say that for his part he thinks it "suffices" to "limit ourselves to the accomplishment of freedom in the social world".[250]

It seems to me that with this limitation, Honneth is trying to assuage fears of metaphysicalism or excessive idealism among readers who will be uncomfortable with the

[245] Ibid, p. 185.
[246] Ibid, p. 186.
[247] Even Pippin's interpretation of Hegel is lacking here, according to Honneth, since he "interprets Hegel's concept of freedom as referring primarily to the rational agency of the individual subject, though he acknowledges that such freedom is for Hegel only possible in the context of social institutions that provide individual agents with the appropriate recognitive status" Ibid, p. 186
[248] Ibid, p. 189.
[249] Ibid, p. 186.
[250] Ibid, p. 186.

strong ontological requirement that actual freedom requires some kind of control of reality. But it is also clear, I think, that Honneth is not actually moderating the substantial position much here, because the only space where freedom or individual autonomy can exist in any meaningful way is in social space; in social reality. Honneth understands freedom, autonomy, in the same general terms as the proponents of negative and positive freedom – i.e., as acting on freely chosen aims, intentions, valuings etc. But because he understands all the aims, intentions, valuings etc. that persons could possibly act on to be ones that are essentially intersubjectively constituted, persons are only actually or fully free when they are able to co-constitute that intersubjective space itself. I think it is better to describe this as co-authorship of social space; but it could also be described as having (a part of) 'objective reality' under our control.

Honneth rounds up his account of the historical development of the idea of social freedom in "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty" by noting briefly how it was carried forward in the early socialist tradition[251] and how others, e.g. Hannah Arendt have developed independent (non-Hegelian) versions of the same basic idea, before identifying John Dewey as the philosopher who, apart from Hegel himself, did most to develop the idea. "For Dewey as for Hegel" writes Honneth, "the true form for the exercise of individual freedom is represented in contributions to the distributed labor of realizing a common aim, because in such projects the realization of my "will" is also intended by others." In the last section of the essay he then moves to answer the anticipated objections of adherents to Berlin's bifurcation, who would object that the social freedom model a) confuses other values with that of freedom, and b) fails to take adequate account of value pluralism, and the possibility of conflict between values.[252]

For the first line of objections, Honneth formulates the question as one of why we should understand "individual actions that presuppose a community of cooperative subjects" as a particular and distinct class of freedom, or else, what makes it distinctive enough to warrant the use of a wholly new category apart from positive and negative freedom. Honneth says that we can find the answer to this if we put Hegel's and Dewey's writings together, and read them as pointing to "different aspects of the same phenomenon". Both Hegel and Dewey, says Honneth "are of the opinion that the distinctiveness of the reciprocal process of unforced intertwining of ends lies in the fact that the contribution of each is experienced as willed by the other" – and a key difference from both the positive or negative models

[251] Ibid, p. 187; Noting that in the writings of the early socialists Proudhon and Fourier we see freedom conceptualised as "a solidary activity of being-for-another […] manifest in the unforced cooperation between craftsmen" and how this was subsequently developed by Marx.
[252] Ibid, p. 188.

of freedom is that on the social freedom model, the idea is that "we can each assume the consent of the other and thus can carry out our own action with a consciousness of unforced responsiveness". Honneth goes on to say that:

> In more systematic terms, the uncoerced nature of a communicative action is here increased because both sides know of each other not only that they perform a freely chosen action but also that the carrying out of this action fulfils an autonomously generated intention of the other. Hegel emphasizes above all the cognitive side of the exercise of social freedom as it should exist in the reflexive structure of commonly shared knowledge. Dewey much more starkly stresses the affective side, in the enjoyment of experiencing how one's own actions are seen by others as preparing the way for completing their own ongoing actions.[253]

This passage is particularly noteworthy, because although Dewey figures heavily in *Freedom's Right*, it is mainly in conjunction with the discussion in Part III around the democratic public sphere – and this point about the 'affective side' of social freedom seems to be absent from the *Freedom's Right* account. The question, then, is whether we see a shift in Honneth's model of social freedom here; i.e., one that more strongly stresses that social freedom is bound up with a (psychologically?) more satisfying experience than the incomplete models of freedom. Certainly, Honneth thinks that it is more satisfying, and the reference to the paradigmatic form of Hegelian social freedom as the being "at home with oneself in the other"[254] always suggested this, but whether (or how) that means that we should understand the psychological experience as constitutive of the 'actuality of freedom' remains unclear. That is to say: do subjects have to have the subjective psychological experience of enjoyment in experiencing their actions being "seen by others as preparing the way for completing their own ongoing actions" for social freedom to obtain? Or is that psychological enjoyment merely a typical, but nonessential, by-product of social freedom? Honneth is not clear on this, but in the following discussion I think we can see an answer suggested.

In conjunction with this point about the 'cognitive' and affective' aspects of social freedom, Honneth moves to answer the second potential line of critique of his position, i.e., that the social freedom model fails to take adequate account of value pluralism, and the possibility of conflict between values. It is true, he says, that the exercise of social freedom requires commitment to common aims or values in some sense, and that (in contrast to the negative

[253] Ibid, p. 189.
[254] Ibid, p. 186.

model of freedom in particular) social freedom "does not designate a general, unconditional capacity of subjects, but rather one that is bound to the existence of certain social conditions, namely, belonging to a community of ethically concordant members."[255] But such membership in an ethical community, says Honneth, must not be construed as one where the individual is completely subsumed, and bereft of their independence. In a crucial – and somewhat problematic – passage, Honneth writes on this that

> we have learned that in the case of social freedom, one's own contributory actions must fulfil the autonomously generated wishes or intentions of one's fellow participants. This assumption can remain valid only so long as I concede to the other the opportunity to place the negotiated scheme of cooperative action into question when her individual needs, interests, or positions have changed. Because such a claim must be reciprocally acknowledged, so that all participants can understand their contributions as fulfilling the autonomous wishes of others, the exercise of social freedom must be bound to the assumption of the recognition of the claim of every other to codetermine the commonly practiced schema of cooperation. Though social freedom can be exercised only in the pursuit of common aims, the determinate content of these aims always remains open for revision and contestation by the members of the "We."[256]

The key part of the passage quoted above, I think, is "[t]his assumption can remain valid only so long as"[257] because the kind of validity we are talking about makes all the difference. As I see it, the only way to read this in a way that makes sense of it is to say that regardless of our psychological experiences of supposedly (socially) free actions, they are not actually free unless we really accord the right kind of co-authorship to those with whom we act (and they us). Such a reading, might, I think, also serve to answer the worry about compatibility with inegalitarianism that I raised in the previous chapter; because while the participants in the strict caste-society would potentially be able to have the psychological experiences of 'acting-for-one-another' they could not fulfill the requirement that each subject be afforded co-authorship of the norms that structure their social actions.

Moreover, if the validity of the assumption of free cooperation we're talking about here refers to a 'cognitive' – not to say 'rational' – demand on the exercise of freedom, and if that demand can be said to be more fundamental to the 'actuality of freedom', this would bring Honneth into closer alignment with Pippin. In "Hegel's Practical Philosophy",

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[255] Ibid, p. 190.
[256] Ibid.
[257] The German original is: "diese Voraussetzung bleibt nämlich nur so lange in Kraft"; cf. Axel Honneth, "Drei, nicht zwei Begriffe der Freiheit", *Internationales Jahrbuch für philosophische Anthropologie* Volume 5 issue 1 (2015), p. 127.

Pippin writes (in what seems to me to be partly in response to Honneth's more 'psychological' take on recognition) that the issue for Hegel with respect to mutual recognition is not what would be "psychologically satisfying"; the problem in Hegel's famous Master-Bondsman relationship example is simply that "each is striving to be free under conditions that will not allow the realization of freedom" because real freedom requires mutual recognition.[258]

To be sure, emphasizing the rational demand on the exercise of freedom here (and explicitly subordinating the affective aspect as secondary and nonessential) would be taking the theory in a somewhat more Kantian-cum-Habermasian direction, and Honneth seems to be wary of going too far in that direction. I would argue, however, that this is the best way forward if we want to square the circle of having a thoroughly historically grounded account of what social freedom demands while at the same time having an account of the transhistorical value of freedom. I will return to this point in chapter 7 in my reframing of Honneth's philosophy, but, briefly: I think the argument should be that a certain conception of the person (of the autonomous individual) has been institutionalised in and through (the implicit assumptions structuring the key social institutions of) the modern social order, and that rationally requires us to afford other autonomous persons equal standing, since such equal standing is what we take persons (including ourselves) to be owed in virtue of autonomous personhood.

I said above that "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty" contains something like a response to the kind of objection levied by e.g. Piromalli. I think we see this in Honneth's trying to explain why and how we can see both a 'cognitive' and an 'affective' side to social freedom. It is easy to read the discussion of social freedom in *Freedom's Right* as emphasising the 'cognitive' side more, and the discussion in *The Idea of Socialism* as emphasising the 'affective' side more. Additionally, Honneth ends "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty" with a point directed at those who thinks he's confusing a particular value of solidarity (or, as Piromalli expresses it; a hyper-ethicized, hyper-substantivized ideal of fraternity) with social freedom by saying that "[s]ocial freedom is related to solidarity as type to token: The various forms of solidarity are empirical manifestations of that which makes "acting-for-another" into a human good."[259] To me, this adds to the suggestion that the account in *The Idea of Socialism* should be read more as an illustration; a historical-philosophical case study

[258] Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy,* p. 202.
[259] Honneth, "Three, not Two, Concepts of Liberty", p. 192.

of what is identified as the most viable (*Lebensfähig*) attempts to bring the idea of actual freedom into social reality.[260]

6.3 Hermeneutic Struggles

Somewhat surprisingly, one of Honneth's most recent works (published in 2017 based on his 2016 Mark Sacks lecture) makes no mention at all of social freedom or individual autonomy. The work in question, titled "Is There an Emancipatory Interest? An Attempt to Answer Critical Theory's Most Fundamental Question."[261] has a different, more meta-theoretical, focus compared with the works preceding it. However, as I will demonstrate in this section, "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" does potentially have significant implications for how Honneth's social freedom philosophy could develop. I will argue that the two most important elements of this works are things that should be further emphasised, i.e., the use of 'hermeneutic struggles' as a key theoretical tool, paired with the reference to a quasi-transcendental human interest (with a nod to McDowell). I will be drawing on both in my reframing of the Honnethian theory in chapter 7.

The framing for "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" is Honneth's offering a critique and reworking of parts of Habermas's 1968 work *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Honneth tells us that in this work, Habermas attempted to do two things: on the one hand, it argues – against positivism – that "both the sciences and the humanities are 'functionally' or 'transcendentally' rooted in encompassing, anthropologically given practical aims whose pursuit determines the methodologies of those types of inquiry". On the other hand, it argues that in addition to the two universal epistemic interests that underlie the sciences and the humanities – "the interest in material reproduction through labor and the interest in symbolic reproduction through linguistic communication"[262] – there is a third, transcendentally given interest which underwrite social critique: a universal emancipatory epistemic interest. Habermas himself eventually moved away from this theory, but Honneth nonetheless takes it as his starting point.

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[260] Of course, it is entirely possible – even reasonable – to take Piromalli's point that the *The Idea of Socialism* account amounted to something of an overcorrection insofar as it over-emphasized the 'affective' element, and that subsequently Honneth is deemphasizing or backtracking from that position. Although Honneth says that Hegel and Dewey point to two different 'aspects of the same phenomenon' I think that we have to say that the 'affective' aspect is secondary to the 'cognitive' aspect of social freedom. The 'affective' side – the psychological enjoyment involved with the exercise of social freedom – is important, and we can use it as an indicator when we consider the institutions of social freedom we partake in; but it is not as essential that it be satisfied in the same way that the 'cognitive' aspect must be.

[261] Axel Honneth, "Is There an Emancipatory Interest? An Attempt to Answer Critical Theory's Most Fundamental Question." *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017): 908-20.

[262] Ibid, p. 909.

Honneth takes on-board Habermas's intention[263] to try to formulate the distinct epistemic interest which can serve as the foundation for critical theory, and he affirms the idea that this epistemic interest can be derived from a distinct mode of human activity. It is unclear whether, or to what extent, Honneth affirms the corresponding rationale of *Knowledge and Human Interest* according to which there are two distinct branches of inquiry for human beings; that the methodologies of these two distinct branches of inquiry are ultimately based on two different fundamental epistemic interests; and that these epistemic interests are fundamental and universal because they correspond to two forms of human activity that are necessary for the goal of perpetuating any given human society (i.e. "the goal of social reproduction") – namely "material reproduction through labor" and "symbolic reproduction through linguistic communication".[264]

The critique Honneth offers of Habermas's account in *Knowledge and Human Interest* comes down to the fact that, in Honneth's estimation at least, Habermas's contender for a third fundamental type of human activity is flawed since it is too individualistic. If the goal is to try to distinguish a third form of human activity that is both distinctive enough so as not to collapse into the other two activities, and of a kind that has a connected practical interest that can serve as the foundation for a systematic critique of society, then we must look to candidates that are fundamentally social activities; like labour and linguistic communication. I am not going to address Honneth's critique of Habermas's attempt to capture this third form of human activity here. For now, it will suffice to note that Honneth asserts that Habermas's attempt in this regard failed because he did not identify (some mechanism of) social conflict as the fundamental activity in question. By contrast, this is what Honneth claims to be able to do – and he sets himself the following programme:

> First, can we identify a uniform type of action or activity that is characteristic of our form of life and that, contrary to Habermas's conception, is in fact bound up with a "struggle" or conflict among groups? Second, can we say of this type of activity that it contains a distinct epistemic interest that might serve as the foundation of an autonomous group of sciences? [265]

Honneth proceeds to formulate a 'social ontology' which proceeds from two core claims. The first core claim is one about the essential properties of social norms. Social norms, we are told, are always in principle open to (re-)interpretation, simply in virtue of what social norms are: "norms enabling social integration result from a reciprocal empowerment on

[263] Habermas subsequently moved away from the transcendental anthropology approach he held in *Knowledge and Human Interest* in favour of his theory of communicative action.
[264] Ibid, p. 909.
[265] Ibid, p. 912.

the part of all individuals to be liable to others' criticism for misapplications of these norms" we are told, and Honneth adds that we "cannot understand what it even means for such norms to exist except by reference to a reciprocally granted right to object to deviations from them."[266]

The other core claim of Honneth's social ontology is an empirical claim, stating that "previously disadvantaged groups regularly and recurrently rely on the interpretative openness of social norms in attempts to win recognition for their own neglected interests by way of re-interpretation"[267]. This claim has two sides to it: on the one hand it is a claim about the dynamics of the human form of life in general. That claim is that i) disadvantaged groups regularly emerge in all social formations; that ii) where they do, they "sooner or later" develop a collective sense of dissatisfaction with the norms governing their life-situation and; iii) that when this leads them to formulate demands for change they do so by asserting different interpretations of the relevant norms, rather than by attempting to reject them outright.[268] These i) ii) and iii) are one side of the empirical claim, and it is a claim about a distinct form of human activity, i.e., social conflict, which is asserted to be a form of human activity distinct from material and symbolic reproduction, but one that is just as fundamental and invariant for all human societies as material and symbolic reproduction.

The other side of the empirical claim is the assertion that this fundamental and invariant form of human activity gives rise to a practical epistemic interest in much the same way that the interest in material and symbolic reproduction does. If I understand Honneth correctly, he is asserting that just as the invariable practical need to reproduce our form of life through material labour gives rise to the practical epistemic interest in understanding the mechanics of the physical world, and just as the invariant practical need to reproduce our language gives rise to the practical epistemic interest in understanding the mechanics of various forms of communication – so too does the invariant practical need of subordinate groups to assert their interests against dominant groups give rise to the practical epistemic interest to understand the mechanics of social norms.

However, as Honneth presents it, this practical epistemic interest also has two sides to it; first, the relevant group needs to become aware of the essential interpretive openness of social norms; this is the first step in asserting their epistemic authority to re-interpret it. In addition to being able to assert that the norms governing them aren't immutable, it is also

[266] Ibid, p. 914.
[267] Ibid, p. 915.
[268] Ibid, p.. 918; "oppressed or disadvantaged groups will periodically attempt to deepen or expand the semantic content of those norms through creative re-interpretation"

necessary for oppressed groups to be able to give reasons for why (their) re-interpretations should be embraced. This means, says Honneth, that in their struggle for epistemic authority, oppressed groups' "interest in understanding the interpretative openness of social norms thus goes hand in hand with an interest in the type of knowledge known as ideology critique" where ideology critique refers to the determination of "which interests underlie people's attachment to those dominant interpretations"[269]

The argument Honneth tries to make here is that oppressed social groups have a pragmatic motive to challenge social norms, and that this pragmatic motive goes hand in hand with a "prescientific epistemic interest" which critical social theory is then supposed to be a "continuation [of] by means of a controlled scientific methodology". The move from the 'prescientific epistemic interest' to the systematised inquiry into "emancipatory knowledge" that critical social theory is to provide proceeds in two stages. The first is the assertion that, in order for oppressed social groups to be able to engage in the process of hermeneutic struggle at all, i.e., to assert a different interpretation of the norms that govern their lives, they have a basic epistemic interest in piercing the "semblance of naturalness that in everyday life attaches to any established interpretation" of social norms. This much is, I think, relatively uncontroversial and compatible with a broad range of conceptualisations of the mechanics of social struggle (with the possible exception of e.g. hard-line materialist conceptions that have no role at all for elements of hermeneutic struggle).

The second stage is more problematic. On a closer reading we see that he is asserting that the basic interest in piercing the "semblance of naturalness" of social norms gives rise to a much more substantial epistemic interest, namely an interest in being able to explain how the hegemonic interpretations of norms are bound up with the "entrenched advantages and privileges" of dominant groups. This second stage of the 'prescientific epistemic interest' appears to rest on the assertion that a) in order for the hermeneutic struggle to be able to be carried out successfully, the oppressed groups need to be able to give positive reasons for why their (re-)interpretation of the relevant social norms should be recognized and embraced by the community, and b) these reasons have to be ones that show how the "current interpretative practice is bound up with an interest in domination".[270]

A potential problem with this story, I think, is that we can easily imagine cases of social struggle where a minority group manages to assert their preferred interpretations of social norms on wider society but where their ability to formulate their claims in terms of the "interest in domination" bound up with the previous interpretive practice plays little or no

[269] Ibid, p. 918.
[270] Ibid, p. 918.

role for their success. For example, there have been many cases where a minority religious sect manages to impose their interpretation on wider society not by appealing to the interest in domination bound up with previous interpretations but by appealing to something like the true Divine will. And, of course, there are all the cases where a minority simply imposed their preferred norms by force (e.g. communist and fascist revolutions) and compel wider society to accept their hermeneutic authority that way. Additionally, in some cases where the story seems to fit rather well (i.e., where a central aspect of the minority groups objection is that the current normative order favours a certain power structure) the protest movement can be deeply 'regressive'. Contemporary examples of this can be seen in the central talking points of nationalist and neo-fascist movements who argue that the current social order (including classic liberal rights) is bound up with the desire of a 'liberal elite' and 'globalists' to dominate.

Such counter-examples are a problem, but I think that if we understand where and why they occur, the "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" account can still be very useful for providing a more secure foundation to Honneth's larger philosophical project. Accordingly, I would note that the starting point for the account in "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" is (what Honneth takes to be) the starting point of critical theory in general. He begins the article by saying that

> [t]he idea that human beings have a deep-seated interest in overcoming dependencies and heteronomy has always been a hallmark of the tradition of critical social theory deriving from Marx. Some of the Left Hegelians already held that in the absence of such an emancipatory interest on the part of the entire species, the demand for social progress would remain a merely moral "ought," lacking any support in historical reality.[271]

This is a clear parallel to Honneth's discussion in *The Idea of Socialism*, where he discusses the value and subsequent failure of orthodox Marxism in terms of its ability to ground socialism in active social forces, such that it could be understood to be more than an idealistic political theory about how society ought to be.[272] Honneth obviously wants to

[271] Ibid, p. 908.

[272] Cf. Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, p. 41: "In the eyes of its early proponents, socialism was always more than one political theory among others, comparable to liberalism; it was regarded as a future-oriented theory which would help realize an interest already present in society by activating and correcting that interest with visions of social freedom. But if such a pre-theoretical interest could no longer be presupposed given the lack of even the weakest empirical evidence, then socialism necessarily faced the danger of losing its right to exist along with its ties to a social movement. Without any link to active social forces, socialism would become just one more normative theory about a reality which fails to live up to the theory's ideal. Therefore, the corrosion of the workers' movement was more than a mere hitch; as soon as the hope was dashed that the proletariat might embody at least a fragment of the interest in revolutionary change once ascribed to it, socialism was struck to the core, for it could no longer claim to be the theoretical expression of a living movement."

find a foundation for critical theory that allows him to say that it (or his critical theory at least) gives voice to something that is more than just a 'moral ought'. But the account of social conflict *qua* hermeneutic struggle outlined above does not, on its own, suffice to do this. It is not enough to point to a purely pragmatic (albeit universal) motive because that does not provide normative direction. The fact that Honneth's account in "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" at first glance seems to have a 'progressive' direction is due to the normative work that's being done by the terms 'oppressed groups', 'domination' and 'emancipatory'.

But now, if Honneth were to make the case he makes in "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" in explicit conjunction with an account of human agency and the actuality of freedom, along the lines discussed in §5.3, things would be different. In that case, he could say (something along the lines of) that emancipatory interest thesis rests on the idea that human beings i) have an invariant interest in developing their autonomous agency and that ii) they can only do so by co-determining the norms that structure the lifeworld.

Indeed, I think that the account in "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" does imply a more substantial thesis regarding human autonomy. This can be seen most clearly when Honneth explains the "essential interpretive openness" of social norms in part by reference to "the underlying expectation of mutual recognition". He is saying that norms are always interpretively open because that's simply what norms are – "We cannot understand what it even means for such norms to exist except by reference to a reciprocally granted right to object to deviations from them." This is in part a conceptual claim about the meaning of social norms, but it is tied up with the more general thesis that "social action is possible only on the basis of shared norms, it is always informed by agents' mutual expectations that they are recognized as members of a community in which everyone is licensed to criticize the normatively guided activity of others". [273] Significantly, Honneth refers in a footnote to McDowell and his own interpretation of McDowell's second nature thesis in conjunction with this claim about the nature of social action.[274] As I see it, the best move for Honneth (if he wants to use the "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" argument to ground his social freedom theory) would be to make the references to his interpretation of McDowell's second nature thesis more explicit and connect this to the claim about when the assumption of social freedom can remain valid.

[273] Honneth, "Is There an Emancipatory Interest?" p. 914.
[274] Ibid, p. 920.

Chapter 7: A Political Philosophy of Ethical Life

7.1 Honneth's Political Philosophy

In chapter 1 I said that it was very difficult to judge the success or failure of Honneth's project in *The Idea of Socialism*, since it was difficult to determine what it would mean for it to succeed. I suggested that the problem was partly due to the way Honneth framed the problem for socialism. In short, the case Honneth tried to make was that the core idea of socialism was always social freedom, but that this idea got stifled by a set of faulty Marxist doctrines, which subsequently led to the decline in "utopian energy"[275] around socialist visions of the future. But the argument in *The Idea of Socialism* suffers from Honneth's insufficiently explaining the idea of social freedom, choosing instead to centre his account there on a historical diagnosis which, as I showed, misses crucial parts of the story. I think that is right, but with the preceding discussion of Honneth's *oeuvre* in mind, I would now say that the larger problem with assessing the success or failure of *The Idea of Socialism* is that it is not what it seems to be. By now we can see that *The Idea of Socialism* is part of a much larger philosophical project – one that is aimed at much more than revitalizing 'socialism'. Accordingly, in this chapter I am going to present my view of how the overall philosophical project should be understood before I move to discuss how it can and cannot provide guidance for social democracy. Briefly: I think that we should understand Honneth's as a 'political philosophy' in an older sense – more akin to ancient and enlightenment political philosophy than to modern 'theories of justice' – one aimed at explicating how our *sittlich* form of life can be realized.

In Honneth's own words, *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism* are his attempt to "transform the Hegelian spirit into a theory of justice" – which, of course, seems to contradict my claim that he is not really offering a 'theory of justice'.[276] But Honneth is not offering a 'theory of justice' in the sense that philosophers tend to understand that term today. We find no principles of distribution, no account of legitimate vs. illegitimate power-exercise, no addressing issues of 'intergenerational justice', 'global justice', 'cosmopolitanism' etc.. If we ask what 'Honneth's theory of justice' says about e.g. what requirements need to be met for an institution to be called 'democratic', or how welfare (well-being) and individual liberty concerns should be balanced, or when (if) it is legitimate for a nation state to deny entry or citizenship – we do not find any precise answers.

[275] Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, p. 2.
[276] Axel Honneth "Recognition, Democracy and Social Liberty: A Reply." *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 45, no. 6 (2019): 694-708. p. 695.

On the other hand, *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism* do contain two elements that are staple features of classical political tracts (on the model of e.g. Hobbes, Mill, Rousseau, Kant etc.), namely a formulation of a supreme political value (social freedom as opposed to negative and positive freedom), and a political vision for what it might look like to realize the supreme political value (on the model of e.g. Proudhon, Marx, Bakunin, Bernstein etc.). Given that Honneth is explicitly trying to 'reactualize' Hegel's philosophical project, it should not surprise us that what we find in *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism* is broader than modern 'theories of justice' in e.g. the Rawlsian mould and instead harks back to an older mode of political theorizing.

Thus, because 'a theory of justice' has taken on certain connotations in contemporary philosophy – such as being expected to provide principles for e.g. distribution of goods, democratic legitimacy, global justice etc. – and because Honneth's is not a theory that tries to do this, I will refer to it as a 'political philosophy' in the older sense (e.g. Aristotle's or Kant's 'political philosophy'). Of course, Honneth does not subscribe to a strict division between political and moral philosophy, which is part of the reason he uses the term 'social philosophy' in *SfR*. But then, the 'political philosophies' of the ancient, early-modern, and enlightenment philosophers weren't exactly separate from their larger political projects either. Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Rousseau, and Mill did not try to offer broadly compatible principles of justice – rather, they presented formulations of what a good social order would be, in light of what their theories also said about what human nature (the human form of life) was, and what (in light of that) the good, or good life, was for human beings.

In conjunction with this characterisation of Honneth's project I would point to the response he offers, in a recently published text, to the claim made by David Rasmussen that Rawlsian political liberalism is the only realistic alternative if one assumes "with Hegel and against Marx that political liberties and individual rights deserve a place of their own within the design of a fair and free society".[277] Honneth concedes that he has not been clear enough in how his vision of socialism differs from Rawlsian political liberalism. The fundamental difference, he goes on to say, is that he rejects "the (modern) requirement of pluralism that forbids any 'comprehensive doctrine' to influence, inform or substantiate our visions of justice." Honneth then repeats the claim he made in *The Idea of Socialism* to the effect that 'socialism' must be grounded in active social forces if it is to be something other than just one normative theory among others. The socialist doctrine should not only

[277] This being Honneth's characterisation of Rasmussen's argument. Honneth, "Recognition, Democracy and Social Liberty," p. 707.

try to justify or articulate normative principles, but also, says Honneth, "initiate the right kind of praxis", and in order to do that, socialism is

> in need of a specific understanding of history: not a teleological one, not a deterministic one, but one capable of indicating that 'our' activities and efforts are supported by a tendency within the historical process – hence my attempts to complement the doctrine of socialism by a Deweyan vision of history as entailing the potentials of an increase of communication or interaction.[278]

I assume that Honneth is going to try to develop and clarify this more in future writings. For now, I see one of the biggest problems with both *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism* as being Honneth's unwillingness to explicitly embrace the kind of 'comprehensive doctrine' he suggests is necessary in his reply to Rasmussen. In the quote above we once again see Honneth's reticence to imply anything that comes too close to Hegel's teleological *Geistmetaphysik* – but at the same time clearly see that he needs something to fill that role.

In my view, Honneth's philosophy has always been – from *SfR* to today at least – a grand theory of the human, ethical, form of life. In the response to Rasmussen above, it is obvious that what gives Honneth's doctrine of socialism 'historical direction' is the same as what gives the account of social freedom normative force: it is a theory of the realization of true human nature *qua* autonomous agency. To show what I mean by this, I will present a gloss on Honneth's philosophical project *qua* grand theory of human ethical (*sittlich*) life in the following.

7.2 *Sittlich* life

In *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth refers to the political ideal of his renewed (Hegelian) socialism as 'a democratic form of life' (*demokratische Lebensform),* whereas in *Freedom's Right* he talks about 'democratic ethical life' (*demokratische Sittlichkeit*) as a social order marked by social freedom.[279] Setting aside other potential differences between the *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism* accounts for the moment, I would make the point that here 'form of life' (*Lebensform)* and 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*) refer to the same thing – which is both the form and content of Honneth's theory. On the one hand, they refer to Honneth's basic view of what the point of (his brand of) philosophy is. In this sense they refer to the programmatic conviction that is also expressed in *The Struggle for Recognition* and earlier works by the insistence that the subject must be 'social', rather than 'political' or 'moral'

[278] Ibid, p.708.
[279] From translator's note in *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. ix; "'ethical life' [*Sittlichkeit*], denotes a concrete, integrated social arrangement in which norms and values are embodied in the basic attitudes and ways of life of members of the community."

philosophy. This is in line with the critical theory tradition, but in *The Struggle for Recognition* it specifically means an affirmation of the core thesis he sees in Hegel to the effect that individuation and socialization are two sides of the same coin. In *The Struggle for Recognition*, 'ethical life' refers first a) to the general idea of a concrete social arrangement (explicated in terms of norms of recognition) through which individuals can develop, and later, b) to the idea of an ideal social arrangement that allows (all or nearly all) individuals to develop fully, i.e., the "formal conception of ethical life" which is "meant to include the entirety of intersubjective conditions that can be shown to serve as necessary preconditions for individual self-realization."[280] We might say that Honneth insists that we have to do 'social', rather than 'moral' or 'political', philosophy because the moral and political are inseparable, given that human beings are an ethical (*sittlich)* lifeform.

On the other hand, 'form of life' (*Lebensform)* and 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*) are the general category names for the upshot of such a social philosophy. I think we could say that if we follow Honneth's approach, we cannot really separate the substantial upshot – the ideal of a democratic form of ethical life – from the idea of what the philosophical programme is as such. That is to say, the ideal only really makes sense if we appreciate the understanding of the human form of life as the kind of intersubjective lifeform that can only be realized in and though the right kind of intersubjective lifeworld (i.e., with the appropriate social institutions).[281]

In *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth presents his sketch of a 'formal conception of ethical life' at the end of the work, after he has laid out his theory of intersubjective recognition's constitutive role in human agency. Honneth does not develop the 'formal conception of ethical life' in any detail in *The Struggle for Recognition*; though I would note that at one point he refers to it as the "idea of post-traditional, democratic ethical life".[282] The reason he gives for not developing this more is that according to his theory it is not possible to provide a detailed account of what constitutes a good and just social order at any given time in any given context; what constitutes recognition will depend on variable values and customs, determining how people tend to interact, and what they tend to think is worthwhile or good at any given time and place. Subsequently, *Freedom's Right* may be read as an attempt to present a non-formal account of the ethical life we find ourselves in now (in modernity) for the purposes of determining more precisely what relations of recognition we should strive to realise here and now in order to allow the human *sittlich* lifeform to be

[280] Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, p. 173.
[281] Critics in the liberal tradition would surely balk at this; but the immediate response then would be that the same thing holds true in their case; i.e., their ideal of autonomy only makes sense in conjunction with a certain conception of the person.
[282] Ibid, p. 175.

realized. This characterisation obviously ignores the theoretical developments from *The Struggle for Recognition* to *Freedom's Right* and the problems I discussed in previous chapters regarding Honneth's staying silent on his theory of agency in *Freedom's Right.* Nevertheless, I think it is worth bringing out the ways in which we can see *The Struggle for Recognition* and *Freedom's Right* as part of a continuous effort on Honneth's part to get to grips with our 'ethical' form of life.

As I noted in chapter 3, the starting point for Honneth's recognition project is given in his characterisation of the young Hegel's intentions. Accordingly, Honneth's project is defined by two fundaments: a) the theoretical framework provided by the intersubjectivist innovation (and rejection of individualist-atomism), and b) the normative intention of establishing an 'ethical totality' in the sense of a 'reconciled society'. In his youth, we are told, Hegel had the "intuition" – developed within an "aesthetic framework" he later abandoned – that "a reconciled society could be properly understood only as an ethically integrated community of free citizens".[283] Now, the basic idea that Honneth wants to cash out is that community and individual freedom are reciprocal. If it can be convincingly explained how "the world-historical course of the 'budding of ethical life' can be conceived as an interpenetration of socialization and individuation" then we can also "assume that the organic coherence of the resulting form of society lies in the intersubjective recognition of the particularity of all individuals." This, in my view, was and remains the basic intent of Honneth's philosophical project writ large.[284]

Honneth's ambition in *The Struggle for Recognition* is to explicate how our *sittlich* lifeform can achieve self-realization. The problem with this, however, is that whereas Honneth wants to pick up and develop this intention and ambition of the young Hegel, he refuses to embrace the premises that Hegel's project rests on. In Hegel's case, the impetus is provided by the theory of Spirit's self-realization. Honneth rejects this. Instead, Honneth goes for a medicalized (psychoanalytic, Meadean) understanding of self-realization, along the lines of the formation of a personal identity free from 'pathologies'.

The social freedom project in *Freedom's Right* and connected works represents a different approach to this basic problem. Honneth tries to sidestep the issue of personal identity formation entirely by attempting to ground his theory completely in a 'normative reconstruction' of the moral logic (objective spirit) of the age. But in doing this, Honneth is not in any way abandoning the core intention of his philosophical project. The impetus behind *Freedom's Right* can be seen as Honneth's taking Hegelian intersubjectivism even

[283] Ibid, p. 12.
[284] Ibid, p. 16.

further than he did before – and taking the Hegelian line of criticism of Kantianism even more seriously. Since we are a thoroughly 'ethical' lifeform, we must not fall into the trap of thinking that we can start our theorizing from a neutral point of view, free from the lifeworld norms that determine everything we can understand; there is no lever long enough, no fulcrum to be found.

But this approach goes too far. Hegel himself did not try to do without any fulcrum whatsoever – his *Geistmetaphysik* played that role; albeit in a convoluted way. Now, I have argued that Honneth's *Freedom's Right* approach does in fact contain essential reference to the kind of underpinning that his theory needs, since it contains an analysis of the 'actuality of freedom' (though it is less developed than it should be) and that analysis of the actuality of freedom is simultaneously an analysis of what kind of lifeform ours is. And that is the same kind of analysis that Honneth undertakes in *The Struggle for Recognition*; it is what he sees as the core of Hegelianism.

I do think his later writings show that Honneth has taken on-board some of the critique of normative reconstruction. From around the time of *The Struggle for Recognition* and the debate surrounding it (as I related in the Honneth-Fraser debate) we can see Honneth suggesting another approach to grounding his theory. This alternative grounding is the quasi-transcendental emancipatory interest idea, inspired by Habermas's *Between Facts and Norms* (that Honneth referred to in the debate with Fraser) paired with his take on McDowell's second nature thesis, which he pointed to as a potential reply to some lines of critique of *The Struggle for Recognition* in "Grounding Recognition". He puts this approach aside when developing *Freedom's Right*. But in "Is There An Emancipatory Interest?" in particular, I think we see him (re)turning to asserting a 'quasi-transcendental' foundation for his project.

That is where Honneth's theory stands right now, with it still being unclear which lines Honneth will attempt to develop, following the strong critique of his normative reconstruction approach. In the next section I will address the question of where this leaves Honneth's theory of socialism.

7.2.1 Sittlich life and the Idea of Socialism

If anyone were to ask what 'Honneth's socialism' is, even after we'd read *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism*, it would be difficult to give a clear answer. The difficulty here is not just due to the fact that 'socialism' is a notoriously broad term; it is also due to Honneth's 'socialism' not being a 'socialism' in the sense that most people would understand it. Honneth's socialism is not an ideological political programme, and moreover, he does not try to offer 'a' socialism. Honneth mostly refers to what he is talking

about as 'the idea of socialism', and occasionally as the 'project of socialism'. His aim, as I relate in chapter 1, is to recover or (re)formulate the core (moral) idea and intention of socialism, while avoiding what he sees as the cardinal mistakes of Marxism. As I have also argued, however, Honneth's analysis of the deficits of Marxist socialism bears very little relation to the practical problems of socialist movements today, given that few of them embrace the kind of Marxist doctrines Honneth critiques.

The Idea of Socialism is, to my mind, a particularly frustrating text. It tries to do a few things at the same time – and of those, what it says it is all about (i.e., a path for renewal of socialism) is really the least of its concerns. The primary concern of *The Idea of Socialism* seems to be to respond to those that perceived Honneth's *Freedom's Right* theory as too conservative or reactionary. Thus, we may read it as Honneth's trying to prove the critical potential of his social freedom theory by illustrating how it can help socialism – after all, if the theory can be useful for 'the socialist struggle', it can hardly be accused of being conservative and reactionary. But although this is part of the story, I would argue that the best way to capture what Honneth's *The Idea of Socialism* is really about is to say that it is Honneth's using the device of 'socialism' to make the case for his neo-Hegelian theory of *sittlich* life. Honneth is not primarily concerned to 'renew socialism'; he is primarily concerned with 'reactualizing' Hegel's political philosophy. To be clear, I'm not suggesting that Honneth is trying to deceive his readers. He certainly does think that the socialist tradition is the closest match to the Hegelian theory he has attempted to reactualize. This is understandable enough, since Honneth himself came to his Hegelianism via a broadly Marxian critical theory tradition. But Honneth's 'idea of socialism' just is the idea of social freedom, and the idea of social freedom just is the analysis of human autonomy in the context of a (neo-)Hegelian framework of intersubjective *sittlich* life.

Another way to understand what Honneth is doing with his 'idea of socialism' is to say that he is engaging in a hermeneutic struggle centred on the understanding of 'socialism'. He is drawing on the 'hermeneutic openness' (*Geltungsüberhang*) of the idea of socialism, and the idea of freedom, to win recognition of the *sittlich*-life-understanding of humanity. On his own analysis, this is how such a thing has to be done. That is to say, the hermeneutic struggle does not necessarily have to be fought on the battlefield of the 'real meaning of socialism', but to expand our understanding we do have to draw on ideas and understandings that are already grasped in some way in social reality. And Honneth has come to the conclusion that (in Western modernity at least) the idea of individual freedom is the general area where any struggle to expand our understanding of the human form of life has to be fought. And if this is taken as read, the next step will naturally be to identify a currently existing tradition of critique of the individualist-atomist conception of

autonomy, society and personhood. Subsequently, the task will be to undertake an internal hermeneutic effort to assert an understanding within that tradition of critique of what the project is really all about. After all, if Honneth simply proclaimed 'the modern world is built on a fundamentally flawed conception of personhood' (or worse, tried to make a popular appeal for neo-Hegelianism directly) few would be likely to take any notice. Thus, it makes sense to try to make the case in terms of a (new) understanding of what the core idea of socialism 'really is and/or really was'.

Of course, the picture I sketch here is not the one Honneth actually provides us in *The Idea of Socialism,* and as it remains unclear which path he will take in developing his philosophical framework overall, it is also uncertain how he will choose to develop his attempt to 'reactualize' the Hegelian approach to justice. What I have done here is to suggest a way that Honneth's overall theory, including his political philosophy, could be reframed, with it being made explicit that it is fundamentally a theory about the realization of the intersubjective human lifeform. In the remainder of this chapter I am going to move to discuss how this reframed Honnethian approach would yield a political-philosophical framework for social democracy.

7.3 A Political Philosophy of Social Democracy

Can the Honnethian framework I have outlined here be useful for contemporary social democracy? Although it cannot provide direct strategic guidance for political parties (as I said, that is not the kind of thing a political philosophy is aimed at doing), I think that it can provide guidance in the sense Honneth suggests that critical theory is supposed to, e.g., by providing clarification to "prescientific"[285] emancipatory interests, and generally allowing participants in a social struggle to better understand, and therefore focus, their efforts.

Accordingly, in the following I will present the social democratic political philosophy that I think can be drawn from my analysis of Honneth. This cannot be exhaustive, but I will focus on what I think are the main upshots or takeaways that we get from the Honnethian framework. The first is a clarification, or (re)conceptualization, of the core social democratic ideal in terms of the Honnethian *sittlich*-life idea. I will be referring to this as the Social Democratic Ideal (SDI). The second is a reconceptualised historical narrative of the social democratic movement in light of the SDI. I will present these in turn in §7.3.2 and §7.3.3, and then address potential questions and objections in section §7.3.4. Before

[285] Honneth, "Is there an emancipatory interest?" p. 919.

that, I will outline the theory of intersubjective agency that serves as the background and grounding for the SDI in the following section.

7.3.1 Background: Ethical Form of Life

The first claim of the Honnethian framework with fundamental relevance for the ideal of social democracy is that individual freedom is made possible by participating in an intersubjective space of reasons.

We experience ourselves as being somehow in charge, in control of our own agency. This is a phenomenological starting point of reflection, not a metaphysical one; it makes no claim about whether (or in what possible sense) we might actually be in charge of ourselves. The claim is that human beings generally have a sense that they are in control of (many of) their actions. We have a sense that we can set ourselves to do things; that if we 'make up our minds' to do something we can (try to) do whatever it is we have made up our minds to do. We could call this our 'sense of authorship'.

Drawing on McDowell's wording (related in chapter 5) we can say that this sense of authorship requires that we be able to (have the sense that we can) 'let our minds roam over possibilities of behaviour' other than what our instinctive inclination is in any given moment. In other words, the claim is that we could not maintain our sense of authorship unless we also had a sense that we could do something other than what brute natural promptings tells us to do. But we could not have the sense that we could do something other than what brute natural promptings tell us to do if we did not have a sense that our thinking is both somehow independent of and able to affect the brute natural reality we find ourselves in.

The claim here is that in order for us to have the sense of authorship we do have, we must experience our thinking as being under our control, and we must experience our thinking as being able to direct our activities. Only because we can take our thinking to be under our independent control can we take ourselves to be the authors of our activities. Then the question becomes: how can we take our thinking to be under our control? We could not take our thinking to be under our independent control if we took it to be just another phenomenon in conceptualized reality. If we experienced our own thinking as just another phenomenon in the flow of reality it would cease to (be able to) be taken as 'our' thinking, and thus our sense of authorship would not be possible.

The typical way of answering, or trying to answer, the question posed here involves the positing of some kind of feature or faculty. Historically – in the Western tradition at least – the faculty or feature have been called e.g. *anima, psyche*, *logos,* humanity, will, reason or

soul. This tendency to posit some kind of 'special' faculty that explains how it is that we have the kind of control over ourselves that we (have a sense that we) do is unfounded. The tendency to suppose that there is some kind of special feature that accounts for our sense of agency could be explained rather straightforwardly: Human beings conceptualize the world in general as consisting of objects with properties. Because we a) conceptualize our bodies as objects (with properties) in the world, and b) we identify ourselves with our bodies, but simultaneously (because of our experience of agency) c) take ourselves to be importantly different from other objects in the world, we naturally d) ascribe some special property to our embodied selves to account for the dual experience of being objects in the world and also being agents.[286]

The most fundamental of all the claims in the Honnethian framework (as it relates to the SDI) is this: human agency – call it self-conscious authorship – is not a binary state, and it is not a capacity or property that humans either have or do not have. The claim here is that self-conscious authorship is more like an activity, or a project, than it is like a property – it is something that happens to and is performed by human beings.[287] More specifically, the claim here is that the phenomenon that I am pointing to with the term 'self-conscious authorship' – and which I have indicated is tied up with ideas of 'essential humanity' – is something that exists because and insofar as human beings undertake activities in certain ways.

The idea that 'the essentially human' is to be understood as a kind of activity rather than as some kind of essential property is not new of course. It is in line with the tradition – running from Hegel via Marx to the critical theory tradition Honneth works in – which emphasizes the role of the media of "language, labor and mutual recognition" for human agency. In Habermas's words, one of Hegel's great contributions was to show how the unfortunate dualism of 'mind' and 'world' could be defused through an understanding of the "inherently practical nature of the transcendental subject"[288].

Following the 'self-conscious authorship-as-activity' claim, the activity in question is engagement with normativity, with the 'space of reasons'. In line with Honneth's gloss on

[286] Here I am supposing that the tendency to think that there is some kind of special feature that accounts for our (sense of) agency is analogous to our tendency to anthropomorphize both animals and inanimate objects. We have good reasons to think that the tendency to anthropomorphize has played a big role in the history of thought – possibly accounting for the origins of religion insofar as natural phenomena was anthropomorphized and deified – and we know that it is very much with us still.

[287] This claim may sound incongruous to some, and so we should remind readers that 'objects', 'properties', 'activities' and 'events' are only abstract categories that we use to try to make sense of reality. And there is absolutely nothing to say that because we have tended to think about something as a 'property' for a long time, we should not change to thinking about it as an 'event' or an 'activity' – if that allows us to make better sense of it.

[288] Jürgen Habermas, *Truth and Justification*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 2003) p. 185, ProQuest Ebook Central.

McDowell (discussed in chapter 5) the claim here is that (i) human beings are gradually socialized into an intersubjective space of e.g. reasons, meanings and values, and that it is in the engagement with normativity in this 'space' that humans continuously constitute their self-conscious authorship. This general idea is, I think, endorsed by many in or adjacent to Honneth's tradition. For example, a more Habermasian way of putting it might be to say that our self-conscious authorship is created through participation in a linguistically mediated realm of meaning.

Talk about the space of reasons as a linguistically mediated space of meanings should be understood in light of the Wittgensteinian argument against private language. Simply put: like language, the space of reasons is necessarily intersubjectively constituted. People can have highly individualized reasons and meanings of course, but they must be (in principle) communicable to be intelligible even to that person themselves. That does not mean that people cannot do things that do not make sense (even to themselves). What it does mean is that when people do things that do not make sense (even to themselves), it either has to be things that are sufficiently inconsequential (like wearing your lucky socks even though you do not believe in lucky socks[289]) or they will be considered mad or incapable.

In chapter 5 I related Honneth's interpretation of the deep-set relation between self-conscious authorship and intersubjective recognition, through his Hegel interpretation. The key point of that discussion is that the sense of self-conscious authorship is a product of the activity of reciprocal self-restriction, or 'decentering', which occurs when two or more subjects relate to each other as subjects. By 'relating to each other as subjects' here I mean that subjects interact with the other as someone that can give reasons for actions and beliefs, and for whom reasons for actions and beliefs ought to be given.[290] Accordingly, as Honneth puts it, "[i]n the encounter between two subjects, a new sphere of action is opened"[291] – which is what I have called the 'space of reasons', but which we could also call something like 'the ethical aspect of reality', if we wanted to use more Hegelian language.

Whichever label we prefer, the crucial point here is that it is an intersubjective space, and that the reasons, norms or meanings are ones that exist insofar as they are part of an intersubjective community. An intersubjective community can of course be very local and temporary, and very rudimentary. An imagined example to illustrate: two Paleolithic

[289] If you do believe in lucky socks, it obviously makes sense for you to wear lucky socks – though arguably only because other people understand that as an intelligible practice.
[290] Due to our anthropomorphizing tendency, people frequently relate to animals and objects that cannot successfully give reasons for actions or beliefs as if they could.
[291] Honneth, *The I in We*, p. 15.

hunter-gatherers encounter each other unexpectedly while out searching for food; through sounds and gestures they establish a provisional intersubjective community of meaning to avoid potential conflict, and they then go their separate ways, never to encounter each other again. In the reciprocal recognition of the other as a subject that could be communicated with (as someone who could give and receive reasons for action) the two subjects are co-creating their respective senses of self-conscious authorship. Describing the intersubjective community of meaning in terms of the activity of giving and receiving reasons here also highlights the connection with Robert Brandom. In *Making It Explicit*, Brandom writes that, in contrast to the "beasts of the field" (for whom reason, and reasons, "is as nothing") we are subject to the "peculiar force" of reasons when we place "ourselves and each other in the space of reasons, by giving and asking for reasons for our attitudes and performances".[292]

Convergences aside, the main point I want to emphasise here is that the fundamental human activity of engaging with the intersubjective space of reasons, or the ethical realm, yields (or is identical to) an essential human interest. That essential human interest is simply the interest in being able to take the norms, reasons, or meanings of the intersubjective space of reasons to be sufficiently 'one's own'. This interest is part of the activity itself, because it is what has to be striven for in order for the activity to be undertaken at all. Accordingly, the claim about there being an essential interest is not a psychological claim, but a philosophical one: In order to engage in the activity of norm- or reasons- directed agency, agents have to strive to uphold themselves as co-creators (co-legislators) of the normative space. Human agents do this by considering the reasons and norms that determine what they do day-to-day, moment-to-moment and over the course of their lives; affirming, rejecting or pushing to change them.

This model of the intersubjective constitution of human agency ties in with Honneth's discussion in "Is There an Emancipatory Interest" of social struggles as hermeneutic struggles. These two ideas are mutually reinforcing: if it is the case that human agency must be understood as deeply intersubjectively constituted in the sense that it requires entering into and upholding a space of reasons, then of course social struggles are fundamentally struggles about how such reasons should be understood. Put differently: if the human form of life is one where the activities of the individual members are importantly determined by what the community can recognize as reasons-for-action, then it is obviously the case that any struggle to change the structure of life must be struggles of and around what should

[292] Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment.* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994) p. 5.

be recognized as reasons-for-action. Moreover, the historical account of how the modern world has been shaped around the idea of individual autonomy which Honneth presents in *Freedom's Right*, also helps us understand these points – and vice versa.

7.3.2 The Social Democratic Ideal

From a Honnethian point of view, we should treat 'social democracy' as an ethical ideal, the meaning of which we have only just come to grasp properly. The ethical ideal of social democracy, the SDI, consists of two normative elements, contained in the two parts of the phrase 'social democratic': The 'democratic' part should be understood as an embrace of the liberal idea of the sovereign, autonomous individual, and the 'social' part should in turn be understood as the recognition, or assertion, that the sovereign autonomous individual does not exist, and cannot exist, except in the right kind of social community. In addition to these two normative elements there is also a third element which serves to anchor the ideal of social democracy in a historical context, namely the assertion that the social democratic ideal is a synthesis of socialism and liberalism. I will first make three general remarks/clarifications on these three elements before moving to discuss how I see this relating to the Honnethian theory of *sittlich* life.

First, in the context of the SDI, the term 'democracy' or 'democratic' should be understood in a distinctly ethical sense. The SDI affirms the liberal idea that a social order is legitimate to the extent and insofar as it is conducive to individual autonomy. More specifically, in the SDI, 'democracy' refers to the idea that any sovereign authority in a social order derives from the sovereign authority of its individual members, and that in order for that aggregate sovereign authority to be legitimate, the sovereign standing of each individual must be safeguarded. The embrace of this fundamental liberal ideal separate social democracy from fascism and other totalitarian forms of communitarianism insofar as those are willing to subsume individual sovereignty under the sovereignty of e.g. 'the *polis*', 'the nation' or 'the people'.

Second, in the SDI, the commitment to the 'social' means a recognition and embrace of intersubjective human nature. It is the understanding of this idea that separates social democracy from liberalism, since it is what allows it to see that the liberal autonomy principle (which it embraces in its commitment to 'democracy') is an illusion or an empty formality unless it is paired with a commitment to create and uphold the type of social environment that is needed for individuals to be able to be autonomous in the first place.

Third, the SDI is a synthesis of socialism and liberalism. It exists as a result of a refusal to relinquish the central insights of either. From liberalism, the SDI inherits the conviction that human individuals have the capacity to autonomously determine themselves, and it

gives primacy of value to this capacity. From socialism, the SDI inherits its embrace of intersubjective human agency. This idea is simultaneously normative and ontological. It says something about fundamental (human) reality and, in light of that, identifies some fundamental good/bad forms of social life – i.e., solidaric coexistence vs. alienation and social fragmentation.

7.3.3 Reconceptualised History of Social Democracy

In *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth proposes an underlying 'idea of socialism' which actual socialists (all the early socialists and subsequently Marx and his disciples) have almost but not quite managed to capture throughout the years. Honneth calls that idea 'social freedom' and then suggests that this abstract idea can be given the shape of a political ideal under the name 'a democratic form of life'. To make this historical narrative plausible, Honneth would have to embrace a couple of crucial changes.

Honneth's account rightly sees socialism emerging from a perceived need to reconcile fraternity with liberty, and portrays the early history of socialism in terms of a variety of attempts (both practical and theoretical) to resolve this tension. Subsequently, the influence of Marxism is recognised as both incredibly valuable insofar as it gave a systematic analysis of how and why material (economic) forces made fraternity (solidarity) impossible, and as incredibly damaging insofar as it squashed the attempts to grasp the underlying idea. To this it should be added that orthodox Marxism was abandoned around the time of the First World War, and the effort to arrive at an understanding of social freedom continued. Most notably, in the places where the effort was not subverted or crushed by fascism, it continued in the form of revolutionary communism and (democratic socialist) social democracy.

Both communism and social democracy were movements that continued to embrace the core socialist idea and ideal of a solidaric form of life (though their grasp on this idea was tenuous), and a conviction that liberal capitalism was incompatible with that ideal. However, the major communist traditions (e.g. Leninism and Maoism) also maintained orthodox Marxism's rejection of liberal democracy and the associated freedom rights. Social democracy on the other hand (as I showed in chapter 2) grew out of a long-standing unwillingness on parts of the broader socialist labour movement to reject liberal democracy. However, although the social democratic tradition that emerged in the post-war era (in the west) was marked by an embrace of both the democratic and the social elements of the social democratic ideal, it did not have a clear grasp on them; especially not the social aspect. In one sense, of course, no one did; but the particular problem for social democracy was that it was a tradition that emerged through practice rather than theory.

On the view I am proposing here, the history of the social democratic labour movement should be understood as a series of intensely practical efforts to reconcile its simultaneous commitment to liberal individual freedom and socialist solidarity. Where Honneth says that the socialist intellectuals almost but not quite managed to grasp the idea of social freedom, I say that the social democratic labour movement almost but not quite managed to grasp the idea of social democracy; the former mainly through intellectual efforts, and the latter mainly through practical efforts. But I will also say that the latter came closer, because I agree with Honneth that the major problem for the socialist tradition was the inability to reckon with the importance of (liberal) freedom and political rights. But as I showed in chapter 2, there was always part of the socialist workers movement that pushed against this. Partly this was seen where democratic socialist revisionists like Bernstein criticised the Marxist doctrines of the Second Internationale, but more important than those theoretical treatises was the long standing *de facto* rejection of orthodox Marxist determinism and economic fundamentalism seen in day-to-day organising and politicking. The social democratic tradition grew out of this practical approach more than any theoretical critique.

After the decisive communist-social democratic split around 1917, we see the social democratic tradition increasingly cede the Marxist heritage to the communists. There were both good practical and theoretical reasons to do so of course: Theoretically, Marxism was laden with the 'birth defects' Honneth discussed, and practically (since the communists did in some sense manage to claim the mantle of Marxism) it was imprudent for any social democratic party that pursued a cross-class 'people's party' electoral strategy to associate too much with it, given that they were already being accused of being a stalking horse of Soviet communism (cf. §2.3). However, the social democratic tradition's gradual move away from the Marxist tradition severed an important (albeit flawed) link to an intellectual tradition which questioned the fundamental assumptions of the liberal social order; not only the economic assumptions, but the metaphysical assumptions about individuality as well.

If ideology lives in the intersection between theory and praxis, the problem for the social democratic tradition was that praxis became over-emphasised by default. This failure may be decried, but those who do so must then acknowledge that the failure was on the part of the theorists more than the practitioners. The creeds of Marxist intellectuals rang increasingly hollow to the broad working and middle class movement that built the post-war order in the West, and if the latter decided to ignore an intellectual debate that did not seem to have much to do with their lived reality, the failure is not theirs. Thus, when the neoliberal counter-reaction finally hit, the social democratic tradition found itself insufficiently theoretically buttressed, and practice could not hold the line alone.

7.3.4 Questions and Objections

How promising is the Honnethian framework as the core of a social democratic political philosophy? In this final section, I'd like to address a number of potential worries.

First, why speak in terms of a social democratic ideal (SDI) at all? Why is this better than straightforwardly talking about 'social freedom' as an ideal? The first part of the answer to this is that in *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth argues that the core idea of socialism he is recovering is social freedom, but when he talks about how this abstract idea can be formulated as a political ideal he uses the phrase 'a democratic form of life' (*demokratischen Lebensform*). For Honneth, 'social freedom' is the underlying philosophical ideal which must then be cashed out in different ways depending on the context, and on the functionally differentiated social spheres.[293] Honneth's 'democratic form of life' (*demokratischen Lebensform*) in *The Idea of Socialism* is a suggestion for what might work as a formulation of an overarching political ideal, capturing the underlying idea that we should strive for a social order where the social freedom in functionally differentiated spheres of social action is mutually reinforcing. The second part of the answer is that, in my view, the ideal of 'social democracy' can do the job Honneth envisions for 'a democratic form of life' (*demokratischen Lebensform*) even better, since it is firmly based in an established tradition. It could potentially be a downside if 'social democracy' remains too closely associated with a particular political programme in a particular setting; but if the post-war social democratic programmes can be presented as examples (with flaws) of the movement's trying to realise its ideal, that allows the ideal to attach to something, and for people working to realise it now to understand themselves as being part of a historical process in the sense Honneth suggested in his reply to Rasmussen (cf. §7.1).

The next potential worry I want to address is whether, or to what extent, the SDI is actually a formulation of the Honnethian theory of *sittlich* life. The answer to this is that I take the *sittlich* life theory to be larger in scope than the SDI, and that the SDI is something like an attempt to capture that larger idea of the human form of life and explain how it is (at least partly) expressed in a political ideal. Nonetheless, I argue that the social democratic ideal does refer to the Honnethian version of intersubjectivity specifically, because the 'democratic' part constrains and directs the 'social' part. On the one hand, social democracy embraces and affirms the liberal conviction that human individuals have the capacity to autonomously determine themselves and gives primacy of value to this capacity. But it simultaneously recognises that humans are intersubjectively constituted; that the aims on

[293] Honneth is not saying that we can or should change the way we describe "unforced reciprocity in the satisfaction of needs, interests and aims" (*FR* 254) in different social spheres to be in terms of 'social freedom' when such language does not sit well with how we usually talk about reciprocal relationships there.

which human individuals may act can never be fully 'their own', but will always be shaped by their social lifeworld. This leads to an apparent contradiction where it seems as though either of the two convictions must be discarded. However, the apparent contradiction can be solved by a commitment to co-authorship of the social lifeworld; an individual can be free but only by cooperating with another free individual to co-create the intersubjective norms, values etc. which then direct their activities. This is how liberal autonomy and socialist intersubjectivity combine in the synthesis of social democracy. Indeed, here 'social democracy' becomes the form of the realisation of the human *sittlich* form of life.

This raises the following question: Do we need to specifically affirm the account of intersubjective agency I sketched in §7.3.1 for the SDI to make sense? The quick answer is no, since I assume that it is possible to formulate a different (certainly a more systematic) model of intersubjective agency compared with the one sketched in §7.3.1. However, I do think that it must be explained how the apparent contradiction between a commitment to autonomy and a recognition of fundamental social nature can be resolved, since the *raison d'être* of the social democratic ideal lies in this resolution. If it is correct that we do not have to reject either of these fundamental commitments, then we must be able to explain why. There has to be some underlying philosophical account of why and how freedom is possible for a social creature like us. If it turns out that this cannot be done, then the SDI is faulty and will have to be discarded. I am convinced that it can be done however, and that the best account will be in line with the one sketched in §7.3.1.

A possible objection to how I have formulated the SDI, and how I answered the question above would be that I cannot straightforwardly equate socialism with intersubjectivism. That is true, and I also cannot straightforwardly equate liberalism with a commitment to autonomy. When I say that social democracy inherits the idea of intersubjectivism from socialism I am affirming Honneth's account in *The Idea of Socialism* when he locates the seeds of the concept of social freedom in the early socialists' calls for *fraternité*. I have shown that by social freedom, Honneth means the realisation of our intersubjective form of life – but of course he does not mean that the socialist tradition understood it in these terms. Instead, he argues that now, in retrospect, we can see that the disparate socialist formulations and efforts to rectify the problems they saw with the modern social order point to the same underlying ideal: social freedom. I am affirming most of Honneth's argument there, but I don't think that the 'idea of socialism' is the synthesis. Insofar as it makes sense to talk about a core philosophical idea of socialism, I think it is a commitment to the truth and value of human sociality; similar to how the core philosophical idea of liberalism would be a commitment to the truth and value of individual autonomy. So in short, I think that we only get to Honneth's 'social freedom' when we have a commitment

to both of these. When we only have one we get either *laissez faire* capitalism or authoritarian communitarianism.

This raises another potential worry, viz. whether the Honnethian social democratic ideal is sufficiently pluralistic, and if it can deal with the reality of multicultural societies. As I noted in §7.1, Honneth explicitly rejects "the (modern) requirement of pluralism that forbids any 'comprehensive doctrine' to influence, inform or substantiate our visions of justice"; and I take it that the SDI (with the connected Honnethian account of intersubjective agency) is such a 'comprehensive doctrine'. In that sense, then, the SDI is anti-pluralistic. It claims to give expression to the "transhistorical validity"[294] of the social democratic ideal, in particular because it claims that that we (humans) really are a *sittlich* form of life.

Whether being anti-pluralist in this sense is a problem or not will, I think, depend on what the supposed virtue of pluralism is understood to be. For example: in her critique of *The Idea of Socialism*, Piromalli argued that Honneth's "Future Fraternal Society" model of socialism was unworkable and undesirable for "the subjects of complex, pluralistic societies".[295] It is not entirely clear what Piromalli means by pluralism, but she contrasts "social pluralism" with Honneth's supposed call for "uniformity of individual attitudes" of fraternity.[296] On this view. 'social pluralism' seems to refer to the fact that in modern, complex societies, people hold different moral views, lead different lives and take different things to be good and worthwhile. So, for a political philosophy to suggest that we should work to get everyone in society to value a specific thing (e.g. fraternal attitudes) would be unworkable and undesirable. But, as the commitment to the liberal principle of individual sovereignty should makes clear, this is not what the SDI calls for.

I noted in §6.2, we see Honneth responding to Piromalli in "Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty" by de-emphasising the affective aspect of social freedom – and in a more recent reply he addresses Piromalli more directly saying that he does not mean to say that in his view of a 'socialist' society, people would have to develop fraternal attitudes, since "solidarity can in principle be impersonal, so that it is not dependent on face-to-face interactions".[297] From that same reply, Honneth appears somewhat unsure of how to develop his positive account of a solidaric (socialist) society, but I think that he is leaning towards a more institutional view; i.e., a social order which allows or ensures "a recognition or […] an awareness of mutually dependence". That, I take it, is what the SDI points to; social (including economic) structures must be (re)organised to at minimum not obscure

[294] Honneth, "Grounding Recognition," p. 508.
[295] Piromalli, "Does Socialism Need Fraternity", p. 2.
[296] Ibid, p. 10.
[297] Honneth, "Recognition, Democracy and Social Liberty: A Reply," p. 702.

the real relations of mutual dependence/interconnection between people – and at best affirm them. This would not go against the type of social pluralism Piromalli talks about.

Still, the SDI view is anti-pluralistic in the sense that it rejects claims that might be made for something else to be the supreme political value/ideal. Thus, a potential worry is that the SDI can't work as a 'theory of justice' because we can expect it to be rejected by adherents of other 'comprehensive doctrines' e.g. holding a different view of human nature. In response to this I would point out that the SDI does not aim to be a kind of 'theory of justice' which produces broadly acceptable principles, as on e.g. the Rawlsian approach. The point of the Honnethian approach is to situate the struggle for a social democratic form of life in the context of an ongoing struggle to realize human freedom, to realize the human form of life. This type of approach, as Honneth notes in his reply to Rasmussen, "has necessarily to violate the normative requirement of abstaining from any comprehensive doctrine since the needed vision of history cannot be expected to be immediately accepted by every citizen."[298]

The aim of the SDI is to be able to function as an ideological device animating political movements, and I would argue that all comparable ideological devices[299] that do this claim (implicitly or explicitly) to capture/express something fundamentally important and true about the world, or human life, even though there are plenty of people who will not immediately accept those claims. So in this sense, the anti-pluralism of the Honnethian social democratic ideal would be quite standard, and certainly not a problem from the perspective of the social democratic/democratic socialist political left. It would, however, be a problem if it could plausibly be argued, as Amy Allen does against Honneth's *Freedom's Right* account, that the SDI is bound up with Eurocentrism and imperialism, and might continue to work as a subtle justificatory device for the current "postcolonial, neoliberal, capitalist" global order.[300] In answer to this worry I would first say that the main part of Allen's critique in *The End of Progress* is defused by grounding the SDI more explicitly in an account of our intersubjective form of life (as per §7.3.1).[301] However, I think it has to be recognised that the social democratic ideal is a product of Western modernity: There is no doubt that the liberal commitment to individual autonomy (which is identified as one of the two normative elements in social democracy) developed in a Western European

[298] Honneth, "Recognition, Democracy and Social Liberty: A Reply," p. 708.
[299] Though I do not think there are many coherent ones, obvious alternatives would be a liberal freedom principle and various religious conceptions of the divinely ordained order. I also think it can be argued that some fascist conceptions of the state as a quasi-metaphysical entity and value can play such a role in some instances.
[300] Allen, *The End of Progress*, p. 68.
[301] And I would say that Allen is simply mistaken in saying that any account of progress either has to be hopelessly parochial or appeal to some form of objectivism.

context and became the foundation for the modern social order[302] as a direct result of European imperialism and capitalism.[303] But this does not mean that the social democratic ideal affirms or is bound up with imperialism or capitalism. In fact, the social democratic ideal isn't even necessarily bound up with a Western conception of liberal democracy.

The SDI is firmly committed to the ideal of a social order which protects and affirms both the social and the democratic. On the one hand, this is always going to mean a commitment to establish and maintain an institutionalised order which safeguards a protected sphere of negative freedom which allows individuals the possibility to "retreat from the social lifeworld".[304] On the other hand, it is always going to mean a commitment to establish and maintain social institutions that actively affirm all persons as co-authors; not only of the democratic public sphere, but of the lifeworld in general. This addresses the worry about compatibility with inegalitarianism I discussed in chapter 5. But of course, there cannot be a set formula for how this is to be done, since what it means to participate as a fully recognized person depends on the particularities of any given society: what is valued, what is considered a good life, what roles are significant, etc. Moreover, I don't think that the SDI points to any specific legal framework for democracy; it does not say that the Western-style constitutional state is the only way to go (and indeed, it does not suggest that the current models of legal protection for individual autonomy in Western-style states are sufficient).

However, the SDI is certainly incompatible with any social organisation that is not committed to egalitarianism. Thus, it is incompatible with any kind of e.g. caste, nobility, racial, or gender supremacist society. The question of whether it is compatible with the existence of a class society is more complicated. In one sense it obviously is not, because if people in a society understand that it is a class society and that some people therefore 'count' less due to their class subordination, the requisite democratic culture will not be possible. But if a society is a *de facto* class society, but the members do not understand it as such, things become murkier. We might imagine a society where everyone thinks themselves equal and affording each other equal standing and respect, but there is a class of people that is in fact always favoured but neither they nor anyone else realises it. It is a theoretical possibility, but this would not apply to today's capitalist societies since, even though there are countless members of both the exploited under-classes and the over-classes that don't recognize their systematic subordination or privilege, there are plenty

[302] Both the international order of law, politics and commerce, and the prevailing model of polities and law generally.
[303] After all, if France had been an insignificant backwater, the French Revolution would hardly have had the ripple effects it did.
[304] Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, p. 66.

who do. In any case, I take it that the SDI expresses the same commitment to continuous critical evaluation of social structures, or "barriers to social communication", that Honneth points to in *The Idea of Socialism*, since, as he puts it:

> in the course of history and on the basis of varying social circumstances, new groups constantly seek to draw public attention to their own demands by attempting to tear down barriers to communication and thereby expand the space of social freedom. Such a "struggle" certainly characterizes the entirety of human history and continues even today; after all, in the course of the expansion of social interaction and the increase of political connections, new collectives are repeatedly faced with a lack of recognition for their concerns. In each case, the only possibility for attaining such recognition is to invoke already implicitly accepted norms and thereby to demand the right to have a say in the formulation of social rules, thus removing another barrier to social communication.[305]

There is no guarantee that a political movement committed to the emancipatory work of breaking down barriers will always be willing and able to see them all; especially not when new barriers will continuously be created as new social groupings and new economic structures emerge. But this practical problem is one the political left has had to deal with from the very beginning, and the tendency to complacency once one struggle has been won is not something that can be addressed through theory alone. Nonetheless, I do think that the SDI framework provides a good theoretical foundation for incorporating a praxis of continuous critical evaluation in a political movement – at least to the extent that it is understood that there will never be a set form in which human freedom is realized since our self-constituting intersubjective form of life requires it to be continuously recreated. Still, as Honneth suggests in *The Idea of Socialism*, it will be up to particular political actors (whether parties, unions, NGOs, informal activist networks etc.) to do this work and to assess what this perspective and ideal calls for in any given context.

[305] Honneth, *The Idea of Socialism*, p. 66

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The starting point for this thesis was my intention to examine whether, or to what extent, Honneth 'idea of socialism' in the book of that name could serve to rejuvenate the faltering social democratic tradition. The examination of *The Idea of Socialism* in chapter 1 suggested that although the idea of social freedom might hold some promise as a political-philosophical ideal, the historical/genealogical argument meant to buttress it in *The Idea of Socialism* failed to do so. In chapter 2 I set out both to illustrate how Honneth's historical/genealogical argument in *The Idea of Socialism* failed to take account of the development of socialism after the decline of orthodox Marxism, and to set the scene for a reframed discussion of Honneth's theory by introducing the social democratic tradition. Chapters 3 and 4 were then given over to a general examination of the development of Honneth's philosophical approach leading up to the social freedom centred theory found in *The Idea of Socialism*. In chapter 5 I focused on what I identified as the most pertinent critique of Honneth's social freedom centred theory, namely the shortcomings of the grounding through 'normative reconstruction'. I made the case, in line with Robert Pippin, that there must be an account of why (and how) human autonomy is socially constituted – an account that cannot be based entirely in normative reconstruction. Subsequently, I made the case for there being such an account present in Honneth's writings which could be brought to the fore. In chapter 6, I highlighted some of Honneth's more recent writings with a particular focus on where we could see the quasi-transcendental account of intersubjective agency (which I discussed in chapter 5) reappear, even though Honneth appears reluctant to fully embrace it. In chapter 7 I first brought together the different elements of Honneth's *oeuvre* I had discussed and made the case that we should understand both *Freedom's Right* and *The Idea of Socialism* as the latest iteration of his overall project which is to develop a theory of ethical (*sittlich*) life. I argued that Honneth's social freedom centred theory should be read as a political philosophy in an older sense rather than as a 'theory of justice' in the narrow sense that is often used in contemporary philosophy. Following this I then turned back to my original question and presented a sketch of the political theory that I think the Honnethian approach could offer to social democracy, if the issues I had identified were addressed.

In evaluating the merits of the Honnethian framework, it is important not to conflate philosophical merit with practical-political success, or vice versa. The ability of some idea to have political impact does not tell us anything about its philosophical, or moral, merits. If nothing else, the enduring power of the ethno-nationalist idea tells us that much. But Honneth is working in a philosophical tradition that aims to have practical political impact in some sense, and so part of the metric by which his ideas must be judged is whether (or

to what extent) they can be expected to have a positive impact in line with the emancipatory intent of critical theory. There is no clear way to evaluate this metric – other than, I suppose, hindsight – but I would offer some reflections on how and why I believe the Honnethian framework might be able to positively affect social democracy as it stands today.

In the short to medium timeframe, the Honnethian framework might help alleviate the decline of the social democratic tradition by allowing current and prospective members of the movement to view its past achievements and failures as part of an experimental learning processes rather than as definitional of social democracy. I noted that the social democratic tradition has always been defined more by practice than by theory, and that there never was any ideological perspective that held a place comparable to Marx or Lenin – the efforts of figures such as Bernstein and Wigforss notwithstanding. Although the social democrats were attacked from the left from the beginning, and accused by Marxists of abandoning socialism, the political victories and undeniable accomplishments of many post-war social democratic labour parties dampened down these worries. But the losses in the late 1970s and early 1980s to the neoliberal reaction undermined social democratic confidence severely. The early victories of the Third Way leaders might have papered over these doubts for a while – but today, in the wake of the collapse of the Third Way project and the decimation of social democratic parties and labour unions all over the Western world, doubts about what the movement really is are back in full force. Since the movement was mainly defined through practice, the fundamental questions that plague the social democratic labour movement today (and have since the 1980s at least) is whether the paradigmatic social democratic programmes are even possible anymore, given the realities of social and economic globalization. It is one thing to say that the social democratic project needs to adapt to contemporary conditions, but unless we can detach the ideal of social democracy from the paradigmatic post-war projects we will not know how to even begin doing so.

The Honnethian framework I outlined in the previous chapter would allow new social democrats to understand the post-war social democratic projects not as defining of the movement, but as historically situated experiments aimed at realising true human nature. This would make it easier to critically examine the shortcomings of those prior experiments (given that their relative merits will not be seen as definitional of the ideology) and be able to construct new ones for new circumstances. The claim to be aimed at realising true human nature will no doubt be met with scepticism by many, but in my view this is the most significant contribution the Honnethian framework could provide a renewed social democratic movement.

I think Honneth is right to say that the political left needs to recover its 'utopian energy', and I do think that if that is to happen, there must be a (renewed) sense of historical mission and purpose. This sense of historical purpose and mission cannot be built on some type of idealistic millennialism however, and Honneth is right to say that such a vision must be of a kind that recommends experimentalism and continuous re-evaluation of actually evolving social and economic realities. The key is to have the ideal be sufficiently formal so as not to become static and/or oppressive, while at the same time have it be sufficiently substantive to inspire a sense of historical purpose and utopian visions. The Honnethian framework would allow us to strike this balance, because while it would allow us to create utopian visions of forms of social life where barriers to reciprocal recognition are removed, those must always remain (to use Wigforss' term) provisional utopias, since such visions would draw their normative force from the idea of ethical life, i.e., of the human, intersubjectively self-constituting form of life – which is an ongoing and changeable activity.

As I said at the end of §7.2.1, it is uncertain at this point how Honneth will develop his theory in the future, and so the interpretation I advocated for in 7.3 might end up a 'road not taken'. I do think, however, that it would be a mistake for Honneth to emphasise the 'affective' element of social freedom too much. Talk of the "enjoyment of experiencing how one's own actions are seen by others as preparing the way for completing their own ongoing actions"[306] may be a good illustration of the phenomenon of co-creating intersubjective space, but on the level of political theory it is detrimental insofar as it leads people to think that what is being called for is the development of 'fraternal attitudes' (cf. §6.1 and the reply on that in §7.3.4). For this to be a viable political-philosophical framework, the institutional element needs to be centered at the political level; there we must talk about actualizing real freedom by (re)constructing social institutions that allow for the type of mutual recognition that is required for negative and reflexive freedom to be more than mere formalities. This might bring the Honnethian account closer in line with other theories which focus on the role of social institutions for real autonomy, but that kind of overlap is only positive in my view. And at the same time, the Honnethian framework would allow us to say that the political-philosophical formulation of an ideal of social freedom (or a social democracy) is only our best approximation of what the human form of life aims for. And I think it would be a particular strength to be able to point to the experiences we have of being our self in the other as an indication of what we're striving to realize.

[306] Honneth, "Three, not Two, Concepts of Liberty", p. 189.

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