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Getting Back to Socialist Principles: Honneth's Recipe

Axel Honneth writes a lot. A very great deal, in fact. He is now considered the leading figure in the third generation of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory. Over the last two and half decades, Honneth has stirred up a few storms when he opened up new areas of inquiry in Critical Theory and Marxian studies. Critical theory now understands that contemporary (and historical) social movements and conflicts cannot be comprehended in terms of either material interests or self-preservation alone. Workers' movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were infused with a moral concern for the dignity of human beings.

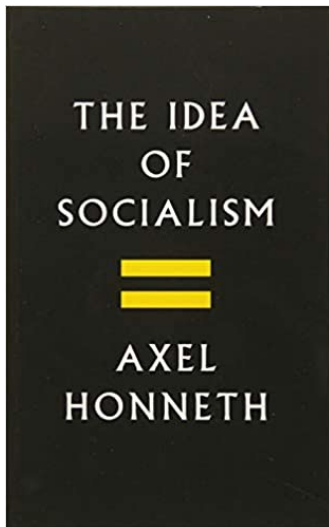
Workers certainly wanted better working conditions. But they also did not want to be humiliated. Injustice has two faces—the denial of material resources (redistributive issues) and the denial of recognition (mutual respect issues). Like Hegel, G.H. Mead, Habermas himself, and many other thinkers, Honneth stresses the importance of interpersonal relations in the unfolding of a person's identity.

In his breakthrough text, The Struggle for Recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts (1995), Honneth added what he thought was a missing dimension of Habermas's thinking on the lifeworld and political engagement. Honneth thought that Habermas was locked into a procedural approach to deliberation and his approach was overly cognitive. To participate equally in practical discourse, individuals must respect themselves and be socially recognized as competent public actors.

This analysis adds a vital psychological dimension to the analysis of civil society as pre-eminent social learning domain. The human capacity for recognizing and being recognized (at the heart of today's anti-racist struggles) must be nurtured, carefully and attentively, within the family and community surround. To reduce participation in political will-formation to following a democratic procedure over-formalizes the process of engagement. The courageous Honneth was carving out from the dense bush a new direction for Critical Theory with his "recognition theory" (which itself has generated a mountain of commentary).

Decidedly, Honneth (and Habermas too) knew well that foundational assumptions of Marxian scholarship had collapsed. Marx had thought that revolution was inevitable, built into the internal movement of history. Then, perhaps most seriously of all, the designated agent of the transformation of capitalism into socialism—the working-class—had failed rather miserably to fulfil its divine task. Had socialism lost both agent and its locus for the organization of enlightenment and collective action to usher in the better world? It seemed so. Only yesterday Bernie Sanders' "socialism" was the talk of the town. And Jeremy Corbyn's winning the Labour Party's leadership was hailed by some as evidence that socialism was still alive. Whoops.

One hundred and twenty years down the capitalist road the world had grown more complex, including the way work was organized under Neo-liberal conditions of instability and misery. But while Honneth was right to open up a new understanding of what he called "social freedom" (Freedom's Right: the social foundations of democratic life (2014), he retained an ambivalent hold on the workplace as a liberated space. How does he reject the restriction of socialism's emancipatory locus to the market realm and find a way to not leave work shrouded in dread and darkness? Honneth makes his case in the provocative earlier text, The I in the We: studies in the theory of recognition (2012). Here he argues for "meaningful work" as an "entitlement anchored within the normative conditions of the capitalistic economic system." That statement would have startled the early socialists and many Marxists these days. But



Honneth claims that he has simply shifted the spotlight from Habermas's system realm to the lifeworld's requirements. And the lifeworld is constituted on mutual recognition and social integration. Applied to workplaces, the absence of justice in production and participation speaks loudly of misrecognition and lack of respect for human dignity.

Whatever one might think of Honneth's thinking (there is lots of it), one cannot doubt he has shaken us out of complacency and some confusion. In the recent relatively short book, The Idea of Socialism (2017), Honneth sets out on a gutsy trip back in the past to figure out what can be preserved (or rescued) from socialist thought. The "deficiencies of the socialist intellectual framework" must be transcended if socialism will speak relevantly to the latent aspirations for a better and just world of humanity.

This is a tough task: to make socialism appealing to humanity as emancipatory project within a viable theoretical framework in our exhausted and fragmented worlds of praxis. One reviewer, Volker Heins of the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany, observes that Honneth makes a triple movement of retrojection, rejection and retrieval in his attempt to rescue the "idea of socialism" for our time. Retrojection reads a contemporary notion back into the past, rejection simply sets aside specific notions and retrieval recovers a "liberatory moment" from earlier historical struggles.

Honneth packs his provocative text with many lightning strikes. He reminds us that the "socialist movement" was birthed in the wake of the French Revolution of the late 18th century. Leading early socialist thinkers (like Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Pierre Proudhon, Louis Blanc and Henri Comte de St.-Simon) wanted to unite liberty, equality and freedom. They didn't get "freedom" and "solidarity" correlated: instead, they got the radical individualism of the monied classes and an industrial society of massive

discrepancies in wealth distribution. Honneth retrojects the idea of “social freedom” as socialism’s core idea. Basically, what he means is that individuals do not merely care to meet their own needs; they simultaneously care about others’ realization of their own aims.

The “utopian socialist” cooperator, Robert Owen (1771-1858), illustrates well the early socialist impulse to create the conditions of social freedom. He reduced worker’s hours to ten and a half, employed no children under 10 years old, introduced free primary education. Owen also attended to matters of hygienic work conditions (described as hideous by the young Engels in *The Condition of the English Working Class* (1844) and substituted persuasion instead of the rod to eliminate drunkenness and theft.

But it was not easy for the early socialists to break free from “industrial assumptions” or overcome the capitalist economy (we can’t seem to break free either, can we?). Honneth believes that the early socialists did not understand that the differentiation of social spheres were, in fact, domains for social freedom expression. Thus, social freedom is not only to be realized (maybe) in the sphere of work and economy, but in two other spheres of recognition: 1) interpersonal relations (friendship, couple and familial relationships); 2) political participation and the formation of the democratic will.

Freedom’s Right: the social democratic foundations of democratic life [2014) makes a compelling case for this expansive vision. Jean-Phillippe Deranty comments: “The spheres of recognition translate in the language of social theory the basic idea that modern society corresponds to the emergence of new rights (civic, political, social) and freedoms (negative and positive), which gradually pervade lifeworlds. Become enshrined in legal codes, institutions and political processes, and furnish the fundamental vocabulary of modern struggles against injustice and domination.”

Honneth urges us to develop a Dewey-inspired experimental approach to the new emancipatory project of expanding social freedom. He states: “A revised socialism, therefore, should assemble an internal archive of past attempts at economic collectivization as a kind of memory bank detailing the advantages and disadvantages of specific measures” (*The Idea of Socialism*, p. 71). I like this idea a great deal. We are now in a historical time where so much is chaotic and whirling in the wind that we must steady ourselves and sit with each for awhile to develop our archive for the way forward. One of the big conversational topics most assuredly is just how central the “capitalist algorithm” is to understand Neo-liberal globalism. Honneth is rather wobbly and vague

regarding taking on Neo-liberal global capitalism. The old communist idea of “central planning” is certainly out of the question. He urges us to consider various experiments such as council communism, co-operative movements like Mondragon, or German initiatives in worker participation in corporate enterprises. Still, I am left with the nagging suspicion that the innovative argument for the centrality of transformation of work in *The I in We: studies in the theory of recognition* (2012) has now slithered to the sidelines.

Honneth has discarded much of the Marxian intellectual infrastructure. Who, then, will carry socialism? “If socialism understands itself as part of a historical process of liberation from dependencies and barriers to communication, attempting to continue this process under the advanced conditions of modern societies, then it must refrain from regarding the social movement which currently represent the strongest and clearest articulation of the desire for freedom as being the sole embodiment of the basic idea of socialism” (p. 72). Old socialist movements assumed that a socialist political party could be the expression of various resistance forces. It could win power, and then begin to introduce reforms that serve all citizens. This idea has vanished like the sabre-toothed tiger. Has anyone out there heard the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” lately?

But Honneth still recognizes that we need to “find an institution or authority that could manage the relation between all three independent spheres. This would be the ‘collective’ which socialists today could attempt to convince of their vision of a democratic way of life in order to motivate these actors to undertake experimental exploration” (p. 96). Honneth believes that the public sphere “of democratic action stands out among the other functionally complementary spheres of freedom; it is *prima inter pares*, because it is the only place in which publics from every corner of social life can be articulated for all ears and be presented as a task to be solved in cooperation” (p. 97).

In this public sphere, then, Honneth imagines that a “renewed socialism” issues calls to “carry on the struggle to expand our social freedoms by means of experimental explorations” (ibid.). From this free public space issue “complaints over grievances, discrimination and the use of power, all of which point to symptomatic restrictions within the various spheres of society” (p. 98).

I wonder: Honneth’s renewed socialism (now renamed “social freedom”) seems rather diffuse and radically de-centralized. What would Honneth’s “collective” (or mobilizing centre) actually be? We are left without guidance. One cannot really escape rethinking the notion of agency. How will the diffuse complaints emerging from the civil society

learning infrastructure crystallize into policy demands that need legal codification and institutional change?

At the moment, with party politics almost completely detached from the civil society learning infrastructure, we appear to be left, at this crisis historical moment, without Honneth's mobilizing centre evident anywhere. We see only random protests flaring up here and there while the Neo-liberal global capitalist machine tries to grind us all down. People's needs are many; they are not being met; and people want a say in the world emerging post-Covid-19 pandemic. Workers of the world, unite! All you have to do is lose your chains! Whoops.

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