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## Social Freedom and Critical Theory: The Tension Axel Honneth's Political Philosophy and his Critical Programme

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**Abstract.** Axel Honneth's work *Das Recht der Freiheit – Grundriss einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* (2011) is an original attempt at a synthesis: you can read it as a classical work on political philosophy and as a program of a renewal of a critical social theory. Since he wrote the book, he has held lectures about the philosophy of social freedom in connection with some basic ideas of the book. The investigation of these lectures makes it possible for us to focus more on the book's philosophical profile and analyze it in the context of the classical philosophical tradition. In my study, I give an outline of this political-philosophical profile when I reconstruct the thread of thought with which Honneth works out the theory of "social freedom." According to my presumption, we can see the emergence of a political philosopher who reconsiders the arguments of classical political philosophers in a very innovative way. At the same time, some weaknesses of Honneth's synthesis can be pointed out while reconstructing his theory. By approaching classical philosophical tradition, Honneth contradicts the program from which he hopes to gain the renewal of a critical theory based on "dialogue" and social analysis. In this study, I will compare Axel Honneth's critical social theory as it is outlined in this work with his critical assumptions as they unfold in his earlier works. I also critique, from the perspective of the unfolding thought process, Honneth's analysis of social pathologies in relation to the concept of "law" and the concept of "negative freedom".

**Keywords:** Hegelianism, politics, negative freedom, social freedom

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## Социальная свобода и критическая теория: напряженная связь между политической теорией Акселя Хоннета и его критической программы

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**Аннотация.** Работа Акселя Хоннета «Право на свободу: набросок демократической нравственности» (2011) представляет собой оригинальную попытку синтеза: ее можно рассматривать как классическую работу по политической философии и как программу обновления критической социальной теории. С тех пор как он написал эту книгу, он читал лекции о философии социальной свободы в связи с некоторыми основными идеями книги. Изучение этих лекций позволяет нам больше сосредоточиться на философском аспекте книги и проанализировать ее в контексте классической философской традиции. В своем исследовании я в общих чертах описываю этот политико-философский профиль, реконструируя ход мыслей, с помощью которого Хоннет разрабатывает теорию «социальной свободы». Согласно моему предположению, мы можем наблюдать появление политического философа, который переосмысливает аргументы классических политических философов в очень инновационном ключе. В то же время, реконструируя его теорию, можно отметить некоторые слабые стороны синтеза Хоннета. Обращаясь к классической философской традиции, Хоннет вступает в противоречие с программой, на основе которой он надеется добиться обновления критической теории, основанной на «диалоге» и социальном анализе. В этом исследовании я сравню критическую социальную теорию Акселя Хоннета в том виде, в каком она изложена в этой работе, с его критическими предположениями, изложенными в его более ранних работах. Я также подвергаю критике, с точки зрения развивающегося мыслительного процесса, проведенный Хоннетом анализ социальных патологий в связи с концепцией «закона» и концепцией «негативной свободы».

**Ключевые слова:** гегельянство, политика, негативная свобода, социальная свобода

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## **Social Freedom and Critical Theory. The Tension between Political Philosophy and a Critical Programme of Axel Honneth**

Axel Honneth's work *Das Recht der Freiheit* (2011) is an original attempt at a synthesis: you can read it as a classical work on political philosophy and as a program of a renewal of a critical social theory. Since the time he wrote the book, he has held lectures about the philosophy of social freedom<sup>1</sup> in connection with some basic ideas of the book. The investigation of these lectures makes it possible for us to focus more on the book's philosophical profile and analyze it in the context of the classical philosophical tradition. In my study, I provide an outline of this political-philosophical profile when I reconstruct the thread of thought with which Honneth works out the theory of "social freedom." According to my presumption, we can see the emergence of a political philosopher who reconsiders the arguments of classical political philosophers in a very innovative way. At the same time, some weaknesses of Honneth's synthesis can be pointed out while reconstructing his theory. By approaching classical philosophical tradition, Honneth contradicts the program from which he hopes to gain the renewal of a critical theory based on "dialogue" and social analysis.

### **The status of political philosophy**

The introduction of *Das Recht der Freiheit* holds against contemporary political philosophy in that it makes itself independent of the current historical-social conditions and focuses on purely normative viewpoints. Contrary to the tradition built on Kant, the introduction strives to develop a normative theory that does not regard the norms of social criticism in a perspective independent from society but links them to the constitutive values of the members of the given societies. According to the outlined theory, the reproduction of social institutions cannot be imagined without values shared commonly by the members of the society – values that make the current institutions seem worthy of identification. However, if it is possible to identify some unspoken, shared values and idealizations despite social conflicts, there is no point in binding social criticism to utopistic ideas [1. S. 81]. Instead, critics should rather confine themselves to the mapping of those common expectations that members of the society have towards themselves and

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<sup>1</sup> Honneth gave a lecture at the University of Chicago on November 12, 2014, titled "Three, Not Two Concepts of Freedom". (There is a video made of the lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wsIFRjaGyRQ>). The lecture was repeated in German with some changes at the Goethe Institute of Budapest on May 14, 2015. titled "Drei, nicht zwei Begriffe der Freiheit. Ein Vorschlag zur Erweiterung unseres moralischen Selbstverständnisses".

their institutions. Thus, the program based on a *normative social reconstruction* considers the philosophical intention to explore rational norms necessary for criticism as inseparable from the social-scientific examination of the tacitly accepted value orientation of action and of the norms that manifest in the existing social institutions.

After this methodological guideline, one might expect Honneth to follow a “realistic” justification strategy. For example, one expects that historical-social circumstances leading to the birth of a modern subject striving for its autonomy are explored within the framework of *normative social reconstruction*, that the so far less known institutional background of the theories of democracy and human rights is outlined, that the contradictions and pathological features of the institutional background are pointed out. Instead, Honneth breaks with the social and historical interpretation of the method of normative social reconstruction and emphasizes his viewpoint about freedom in the context of the history of philosophy.

The German legal philosopher Christoph Möllers considers the part of *Das Recht der Freiheit* dealing with the history of philosophy merely as a fascinating historical introduction, which, in essence, is separate from the argumentation of the book [2]. However, from the perspective of the lectures given in 2014/15, this theoretical and historical reasoning has to be considered the most important part of Honneth’s work. He basically develops his typology of freedom in the context of the history of philosophy and offers arguments for the priority of social freedom in this context. In my opinion, however, his dialogue with classical and modern philosophers is of special importance from the perspective of the method of *normative social reconstruction*. Honneth argues that the validity of the normative principles leading people is not independent of the social and cultural background where these principles developed. On the other hand, he interprets works of political philosophy as experiments mapping “the normative culture of modern societies.” From this perspective, the task of social philosophers is not to arrive at universally valid principles in logically coherent proceedings. As Habermas states, this can be interpreted as if it was impossible to engage in a context-free universal moral discourse [3. S. 200]. The philosopher always connects to discourses of self-interpretation. In these discourses, the philosopher selects and reinterprets those attempts of interpretations that are the most adequate expressions of the normative self-image of modern man, the basic principles of which can serve as the foundation for a social practice providing the greatest possible freedom and justice in real social-historical circumstances.

Honneth’s starting point is that the self-image of a modern man considering himself worthy of freedom is built on two contradictory viewpoints of freedom. The normative culture of modernity is dominated by the view that the key to freedom is a space free from interference where the individual can act per his goals and inclinations. There seems to be a contradiction to the common assumption that people have dignity because they act according to principles they consider right. This means they either act following the principles they created or have such

collective values or norms that help them lead an authentic life [4. S. 120]. This explains that Honneth turns to Isaiah Berlin's work for its definition when defining an adequate notion of freedom. He developed an accurate definition of these two types: the notions of *negative* and *positive freedom*.

Berlin characterized negative freedom as the freedom "from something." In Honneth's interpretation, this means that the individual can act free from any interference, or in a more radical interpretation, the possible control mechanisms concerning individual goals are eliminated. Positive freedom, freedom "for something," has a variety of forms where actors clarify and define their driving forces in a collective or reflexive procedure. As it is well known, Berlin's liberal argumentation tries to save the society structured around negative freedom from totalitarianism, nationalism, communism, and the dangers of illiberal democracy [5. P. 13]. In his opinion, the main source of danger is positive freedom, at least its distorted interpretation, under the cover of which power enters the private sphere and forces the members of society to commit destructive actions different from their original goals. According to Berlin, the issue that lies at the heart of the problem is the artificial, "metaphysical division" of the modern individual [6. P. 132–133]: oneself is an irrational, physical being acting by inclination, and the other, higher self, allegedly following its "real interests" and "rational considerations." Berlin states that this step allows the holders of power to divert the individual from their original intentions. If it is claimed that only certain actions can be "authentic" and "reasonable," it allows controlling and coordinating individual actions and originally pluralistic values.

The present article analyses Honneth's criticism of Berlin's concepts and the philosophical tradition deriving from it. Honneth's criticism can be grasped on three levels: (1) The analytical level demonstrates that the positive-negative dualistic division of freedom expresses the types of freedom obtainable in modern societies imperfectly. (2) At deeper levels of the analysis, he points out that social practice based on negative freedom leads to a society lacking it. Thus, negative freedom does not have a normative advantage over other notions of freedom, e.g., over "social freedom" preferred by Honneth. (3) Lastly, he tries to demonstrate that negative freedom is unsuitable for becoming the cornerstone of a comprehensive normative theory: the theorist who prioritizes negative freedom remains blind to more significant social pathologies.

### **Love and democracy**

As a first step, Honneth presents such types of social interactions that can be considered constitutive from the perspective of society as a whole. One of his examples is the participation in a "love relationship": balanced and mutually satisfactory friend, love, and family ties. The other example – easier to interpret from the perspective of political philosophy – is the participation in democratic will formation: a debate, a demonstration, a protest, etc. [4. S. 119] The first level of the

analysis shows these action types as the practice of freedom, but they cannot be defined as the practice of negative or positive freedom respectively.

From the perspective of classical political philosophy, it is interesting to correlate notions of intimate relationships to those of freedom. However, the examples regarding love relationships fit in Honneth's previously outlined view, namely, that the realization of freedom (or individual autonomy) does not necessarily manifest in the relationship to the state or to the sphere of politics in general. Freedom and autonomy can also be achieved when the individual reaches fulfillment in their self-knowledge, regardless of the sphere of politics [7. S. 65]. Honneth is right when saying that if a love relationship is indeed considered a manifestation of freedom, the traditional concept of freedom built on the distinction between positive and negative must be revised. The characteristic feature of individuals having love relationships is that they consider others' goals just as important as their own, and they cannot even express their intentions without references to others' wishes and demands. Living in a loving relationship or a family and having friendly and loving ties, they let other people into their private sphere. However, they experience interactions with others not as a restriction but as a fulfillment of themselves and their loved ones. Thus, the freedom of a person having love relationships is intimately experienced and cannot be characterized as the negative freedom of a person following his own goals and staying away from the "interference" of others.

It is seemingly easier to characterize Honneth's other example, participation in democratic will formation, from the perspective of Berlin's notions of freedom. The freedom of participating in a democratic debate, in a demonstration, or a leaflet distribution assumes the state's lack of interference and the voluntariness of these activities. Still, they cannot be considered as the practice of negative freedom, for one does not follow private goals during these activities. Moreover, performing these actions is not free because nobody meddles in "one's business." The basis of this experience of freedom is the achievement of collective goals without any forceful constraint.

According to Honneth, participation in democratic procedures involves the involvement of collective self-understanding procedures. In contrast to this idea, it can be said that individual actions are also indispensable elements of democracy, such as expressing one's opinion in a debate or having a secret ballot. Thus, it is a relevant question whether some important elements of democratic participation – for example, the expression of a private opinion – can be interpreted as the manifestation of negative freedom. In Honneth's view, however, collective values are held in high esteem by the individuals participating in a democratic procedure. They control and correct their opinion after looking back from this collective viewpoint. From this perspective, the expression of opinions or the secret ballot are all elements of an intersubjective will formation process in which members of the political society strive to arrive at a "common will" through their polarized opinions or in which the parties learn to adopt each other's perspective, thus, to create their

own opinion in the mirror of the opposing view. Therefore, it seems that democratic decision-making – even in its parts – cannot be modeled as a procedure of individuals following their own goals and striving for negative freedom.

### **The insufficiency of the notion of positive freedom**

According to Honneth, it is still hardly possible to perfectly understand the two mentioned examples of negative freedom if we interpret them from the perspective of “positive freedom.” Based on Berlin’s texts, he points out the following: the birth of the notion of positive freedom is due to the idea that guaranteeing the sphere of negative freedom does not lead to a freedom that can be authentically experienced. At this analytical level, entirely different concepts of positive freedom should be linked to the condition that an action must be carried out along norms that are “true to our human nature”. Honneth also points out that the examples of positive freedom often describe that freedom can be reached through the practice of individual skills: if the individual becomes capable of accommodating to norms or formulating his own authentic demands. Thus, the collective execution of an action is not an essential part of positive freedom, as it can be many times achieved by individual actions.

Therefore, at first sight, positive freedom can hardly be related to the freedom described in the abovementioned examples: democratic participation and the articulation of love relationships. In the case of free actions executed this way, it is not the aims “reflected” by the norms of rationality or authenticity but the inevitable moment of collective performance that distinguishes actions that are free from those that are not. However, it is still a very weak argument to overwrite Berlin’s popular differentiation of positive and negative freedom that, in the first case, the emphasis is on the result (“rational,” “reflected” goals, or other “ideals”) of the activity during the identification of “free” actions and in the second case it is on the identification of the executors (meaning that something is carried out not by the individual but a community). At this point of the analysis, we can argue that positive freedom – the way Berlin emphasizes it – can be performed individually and collectively. Thus, the cases of participation in democratic will formation or love relationships could be considered cases of positive freedom performed in a collective way [4. S. 115].

The basis of Honneth’s distinction can be demonstrated by Berlin’s idea, which states that “collective-positive freedom” can be modeled on individual action. This notion of “collective-positive freedom” implies that members of a homogenous community relying on the same abilities and virtues strive to achieve goals justified by an earlier reflexive procedure. Thus, the danger in positive freedom can be justified by the fact that members of the society following goals alienated from themselves can become organized into a homogenous collective subordinated to others’ intentions. Contrary to this, Honneth argues that a collective notion of freedom has to be defined according to which community members do not

subordinate themselves to a higher goal as a unity. However, they define and redefine goals and role expectations without forceful constraint [4. S. 116].

The different images of democracy can demonstrate the essence of such a difference. In the theory of democracy, the notion of “collective-positive freedom” can be identified with Rousseau’s idea of following a *general will*: the members of a political community give up their private freedom and subordinate themselves to a goal that seems reasonable on a higher level, the point of which later cannot be questioned individually. Despite his strong criticisms of Habermas [1. S. 81], Honneth’s perception of freedom at this point can be identified with the discursive theory of democracy. Here, the members of the community act in a non-uniform way, recognize each other, and by mutually adopting each other’s perspective, define and redefine their own goals and the tasks necessary to achieve those goals. Therefore, unlike Berlin’s theory, a triple structure of freedom folds out. Besides negative freedom, it is useful to introduce the distinction between *reflexive freedom*, where the individual or the community subordinates itself to a previously well-considered goal, and *social freedom*, where a well-integrated society is created by constantly questioning and redefining individual goals and individual roles.

### **Individual autonomy and social freedom**

At the second normative level of his analysis, Honneth demonstrates that the social type of freedom provides the adequate concept of freedom. For this, he uses well-known arguments provided by supporters of reflexive freedom against the notion of negative freedom. However, by reformulating the arguments, he also demonstrates the imperfections of reflexive freedom. According to the most important counter-argument against negative freedom, it connects the realization of freedom merely to the lack of outer boundaries and does not pay any attention to the intentions and motifs according to which the action is carried out. Thus, those who carry out actions regardless of all values and rational consideration and are subject to their whim or irrational passions must also be considered free. In this case, the alcoholic, the game, computer game, and television addicts have to be considered as free, as well as those who destroy their lives or spirits if they do not violate others’ rights to act by their own motivation. Therefore, opponents of negative freedom believe that an individual subject to one’s untamed passion or a prisoner of fads is no freer than an individual influenced by outer factors [4. S. 122].

In Honneth’s opinion, this problem was put at the center of the modern theory of freedom by Rousseau when he made a sharp distinction between a free activity in harmony with one’s will and activities that obey the forces of nature. He considered as heteronomous circumstances outer boundaires, egoism, irrational feeling, passion, and whim and contrasted them with autonomous action. By demonstrating this opposition, Rousseau emphasized the reasonable conditions of free action and the dimension of self-knowledge necessary for the performance of



authentic action. This is why his theory finally became the starting point of two contradicting traditions of social philosophy.

A significant representative of one version of reflexive freedom is Herder, who believes that an important element of the freedom of the subject is to recognize the norms necessary for an authentic way of living through the medium of traditions and language. From the perspective of Honneth's argument, it is perhaps more important to consider the other Kantian tradition of the autonomous subject. Kant argues that the individual can acquire the principles serving as a basis of one's authentic action if one tests the motivations of one's actions in a universalization process. If principles that other individuals might reasonably want are born from the motifs, the individual can define the principles of autonomous activity. During this process, an autonomous individual considers the other person as a "goal in itself" and considers the goals stated by the other as if they were their own [4. S. 126].

Honneth argues that the strength of these concepts of freedom lies in the fact that they can prove the imperfection of negative freedom by discovering the reflexive procedures: they demonstrate that the individual striving for self-fulfillment has to cross not only the outer but also the inner boundaries to practice one's autonomy. However, he redefines the criticism formulated by the theorists of reflexive freedom from a new perspective, from the point of view of "social life," and this way, he demonstrates the imperfection of the reflexive concept [8. P. 69–70]. As he sees it, during the "universalization process," the supporters of reflexive freedom completely ignore the social conditions of an action's realization. They presume that during the execution of an autonomous activity, one must only cross "inner and outer boundaries," but they lose sight of special forms of limitations due to a disadvantageous social environment. This process lacks the consideration of those social practices and institutional conditions that are crucial when performing a successful action. Without this "more complex reflection," the individual might be able to free himself from certain authoritative determination and the influence of emotions. However, the performance of action becomes unproductive, just like those determined by inclinations [1. S. 79]. This is why Honneth believes that mapping social and institutional conditions of moral goals and the goods available in a society is an indispensable condition of the self-identification process and the performance of autonomous actions. Thus, the Kantian concept of freedom needs a significant correction: we can only consider ourselves free and autonomous if our goals can be reasonably wanted in social reality [4. S. 128].

### **The "strong" Hegelian theory**

It has been demonstrated that Honneth aims to describe the more and more perfect forms of freedom. However, the difference seems to be greater between negative and reflexive freedom than reflexive and social types of freedom at this

point. This raises the problem of the (in)separability of reflexive and social freedom. On the one hand, it is a question of whether we can consider the idea of social freedom merely as a corrected version of reflexive freedom, according to which the coordination of actions and rationale will have to be complemented by examining the institutional background. It is also a question of whether mapping social reality truly forms a constitutive part of autonomy. In the sense of the Kantian model, we can say that autonomy is not diminished if a reasonable action fails in social reality. The action may not give the actor the experience of freedom. However, the dignity based on the possibility of free decision-making will not suffer because the action does not follow well-run social mechanisms. We can mostly think of some determined revolutionaries aware of well-considered principles or rights, but their revolutionary act fails in a society based on a non-democratic mechanism. The result is tragic. However, the individual executed the action autonomously by one's dignity, failing in a society built on non-democratic principles.

Still, Honneth argues that autonomy can be realized only with the creation of social freedom, and he rejects the idea that the involvement of social viewpoints contributes to the reflection about freedom only accidentally. The starting point of his argument is once again the idea of the theorists of reflexive freedom, according to which the concept of negative freedom can only be exceeded if the individual eliminates the heteronomous factors determining one's actions. This reflexive model of freedom interprets the social environment as a heteronomous factor clearly blocking autonomous action. This way, it remains hidden that social reality is a necessary precondition of executing an action. To experience freedom, the methods of common action have to be grounded as well. On the other hand, Honneth argues that autonomy based on reflection can only lead to action without forceful constraint and real freedom if outer reality is freed from the reign of heteronomy and coercion and we submit it to the "inner, autonomous laws" of freedom [1. S. 84; 8. P. 69–70].

Thus, Honneth links the possibility of autonomy to a society where actors recognize each other's goals as worthy of following and make common efforts to reach them. He argues that we can recognize the value of our goals through others' confirmation of our actions based on mutual recognition; therefore, society can be defined as an essential moment of autonomous action. Mutual understanding as a fundamental precondition of freedom that is reachable in society still allows for a variety of relevant concepts of freedom. Honneth's view is opposed chiefly to Robert Brandom's standpoint that Honneth identifies as one of the "weaker readings" of the Hegelian freedom theory and is contrasted with his "strong", more radical Hegel reading. Brandom basically accepts all the important premises that lead to the social concept of freedom so far outlined. In light of Hegel's philosophy of society, he states that the basic condition for individual freedom is to act in the context of the norms articulated at the level of society. The normative background that makes our actions meaningful is linked to the process of recognition in two

ways. The individual can perform one's actions if 'others recognize the values and the individual abilities underlying beneath the actions but the society and institutions as the frameworks of the actions also owe their existence to the actors' recognition of certain social authorities [9. P. 72–77]. For Brandom, there emerges a positive image of freedom (in Berlin's sense): an individual striving for freedom reflexively interprets social norms and performs a symbolic action that reinterprets the "cultural framework" of the context of the action and also expands the individual sphere of actions.

The freedom outlined by Brandom corresponds to Honneth's concept of social freedom insofar as the performance of the action is linked to evaluating the individual's actions from the "we" perspective and assessing the social and cultural significance of one's actions. Honneth, however, criticizes Brandom as freedom continues to be the result of an action that can be initiated individually and that the individual can unilaterally influence society through "expressive acts." According to Honneth, the most important criterion for the Hegelian concept of freedom is lost: the idea that individually reachable freedom is the result of a cooperative social practice. According to the "strong" Hegelian concept, social freedom is bound to stronger intersubjective prerequisites. When adopting the "we" perspective, the other actor must be recognized as complementary in the performance of the action. Free action is accomplished when the other's goal is recognized as valuable by using the common perspective from the very beginning. At the same time, we are aware that the other person will act according to our intentions and needs [4. S. 127]. "Dual intersubjectivity," in Honneth's view, is the true guarantee for the lack of forceful constraint, as it is only this way that we can reinforce ourselves in our own goals and are able to perform an action in which we can enjoy the unconditional support of others [1. S. 91]. This perspective explains why love relationships can be considered the principal type of free action. According to Hegel, we experience intensely in (passionate) love relationships that "we are with ourselves in the other"; so, others' actions aiming at us are prerequisites for achieving our own goals [10. S. 60].

But how can this way of action based on the "reconciliation" between individuals be expanded on society as a whole? According to Honneth, modern society is the public arena for individual liberties: the lack of freedom in society is the result of the failed or misinterpreted efforts of liberties. In such a society, the freedom that can be experienced individually is usually not a successful egoistic strife but not the result of actions based on reflexive principles, either. The freedom of the members of the society is more likely achieved by the socialization process in which individuals learn how to coordinate their actions and recognize the value of others' goals. The emphasis on the role of socialization and the institutions coordinating action, however, raises a number of questions. For example, it is a question to what extent members of society can adapt themselves to the norms shaped in the process of common socialization so that their actions can still be considered free [8. P. 70]. It is not necessary to return to the concept of Berlin's

negative freedom to ask Honneth what possibilities individual initiative has. For example, in the light of the comparison with Brandom, it is still a question of what sphere of action is provided by such a model of freedom based on close cooperation and liberal socialization for the individual so that one can shape the normative framework of society consciously with the help of personal, expressive actions.

### **The primacy of the theory of social freedom**

Honneth's argument, however, does not only intend to illustrate the practices of social liberty as an adequate form of freedom but to outline a comprehensive normative theory. He also points out that a concept of the theory of justice can be built on the idea of social liberty, which takes precedence over theories based on other concepts of freedom. Honneth argues that analyses of the history of ideas about specific types of freedom can also be seen as analyses of the social-ontological prerequisites of individual freedom. Thus, the representatives of the idea of negative freedom consider the legal environment guaranteeing the free decision-making of subjects as the social context required for free action. According to the representatives of reflexive freedom, however, individually free action requires the revision of motivations and is considered the consequence of dialogues between morally competent and intellectually prepared persons [1. S. 123]. On the other hand, the representatives of the idea of social liberty argue that the possibility of the unrestricted execution of individual free action depends on the development of different forms of recognition by others. Therefore, they give a much more complex picture of the social context of free action: they assume that individual free action is dependent on the upkeep and "maintenance" of an institutional environment where members can recognize each other as valuable and each other's goals worthy of following. At the same time, the establishment of an institutional environment allowing social recognition is also an indispensable condition for the more specific background conditions advocated by the other two types of freedom: both the emergence of a legal order allowing private freedom and the development of competencies necessary for reflection together with the possibility of dialogue presupposes an institutional background enabling mutual recognition. Honneth thus presents social freedom as a more general, widespread idea of individual freedom and identifies the idea of negative freedom or freedom based on moral reflection only as an ideal for a particular social environment.

On the other hand, on the basis of the above argumentation, both the ideas of negative and reflexive freedom can be valid in specific social and historical conditions or particular segments of society. For example, if a member of the society sees one's property in danger of harmful social trends, one may, by referring to the appropriate rules and the legal sense of the society, keep one's property safe and, at the same time, the inviolability of oneself as a legal person in a legal process. If we see that the social processes around us endanger the values that correspond to our identity or our moral convictions, we can reconsider our values in a monological

or a reflexive process, as well as examine how to stop the destructive processes. From this perspective, the legal system guarantees negative freedom, and the moral sphere of self-examination provides us with spaces of freedom where we can withdraw during our struggles with our social partners [5. P. 15].

However, some pathological phenomena may call attention to the fact that extending normative expectations of the two (negative and reflexive) liberties to the whole society can lead to a crisis of society and the distortion of personality.

Honneth relates to the diagnosis of Hegelian philosophy of right and to the identification of the pathological phenomena that arise from the overtension of the logic of “abstract law” and “morality”: Hegel mostly depicted “illnesses” of his own age as indeterminacy (Unbestimmtheit), loneliness (Einsamkeit), emptiness (Leerheit) or “labor (ing) under [...] [a] burden” (Gedrückttheit) [11. S. 52]. These pathological phenomena are presented due to the spread of inadequate concepts of reasonableness. Accordingly, Honneth thinks that pathologies appear when the members of society judge reality from a narrow perspective and can no longer understand the significance of the practices and norms necessary to maintain society. On the one hand, this distortion appears at the level of the individual who cannot form a realistic picture of oneself as an actor and whose actions continually fail when confronting reality. On the other hand, it appears at the level of society where the conditions responsible for the members’ discomfort and lack of orientation can last permanently [1. S. 157–158].

Honneth tries to explore the distortions that reveal the extension of the perspective of law and morality. He argues that it leads to the narrowing of individual perspectives if actors withdraw in their private spheres and refrain from the communicative solution of their conflicts. At the social level, however, it leads to the elimination of the pluralistic value system of society and politics and the total “juridification” (Verrechtlichung) of human relationships if the members of society mainly use the means of law instead of communication to solve their problems [1. S. 162]. At the level of the individual, one’s inflexible belief in the moral principles that define them can also lead to the loss of reality; if one considers oneself as a “moral lawmaker” not authorized by others, ignoring the pluralistic processes of the creation of values. These inflexible “moralists” may, in some spectacular cases, join fundamentalist or even terrorist groups to attack existing pluralistic societies [1. S. 207]. Therefore, exercising freedom based on the principles of rights and moral principles can create a condition severely lacking freedom, ignoring the appropriate social context.

Freedom, however, makes sense only if these barriers and their social problems can be overcome with a more comprehensive concept. According to Honneth, this is the concept of social freedom, which is created not by applying particular principles but rather by mapping the social conditions of recognition and the coordination of social cooperation. This argument suggests that the concept based on social freedom is the most comprehensive concept of liberty, which is the key to interpreting the rest of the restricted forms of freedom and eliminating pathological

tendencies. In Honneth's opinion, the theory of social freedom becomes the cornerstone of the comprehensive normative theory (in Honneth's sense, that of the critical theory of society), which connects the conditions of freedom to the prevailing conditions of recognition in society.

### **The rights and the possibility of emancipation**

Honneth strongly contrasts formal rights, morality, and the spheres of social relations and links the possibility of absolute freedom to the last one. The intuition of many, however, suggests that the system of rights and the communicative sphere in which we can express ourselves as moral decision-makers provide the ultimate resistance to the emergence of new autocratic aspirations. An additional assumption is that it is an integral part of the identity of modern Western citizens that they are legal persons, equal to others, or morally competent decision-makers. According to this idea, violations of the legal system or the questioning of moral competence may involve typical experiences of disdain and, in the long term, disruption in the functioning of society [12. P. 380; 13. P. 165]. Honneth's reflection, however, raises a serious question. Is our vision justified that different concepts based on human rights can be catalysts of emancipatory processes?

On the one hand, it is important to emphasize that Honneth thinks that if individuals cannot make efforts to operate channels and institutions in which they can consider their social status and roles as valued and, therefore, cannot face their values, they can never be free. For this reason, Honneth associates the achievement of freedom with the regular exercise of social practices in which the individual is recognized not only in a formal status (such as a legal entity) but where recognition is formed in a common activity [8. P. 70–71]. It is, therefore, of particular importance for Honneth to participate in democratic will-formation, love relationships, and market activity. Without these social practices, institutions that strengthen rights or moral competence can only face the atomized individuals deprived of their self-esteem as a formal system of rules or a rigid structure.

Thus, from the perspective of Honneth, the limitations of the doctrine of human rights can also be highlighted. The idea of human rights and the institutions built upon it can form a protective umbrella for the exiles or the marginalized. At the same time, an acute question arises of how they can contribute to the social inclusion of former foreign individuals, refugees, and other marginalized groups. A social organization based on the logic of rights can make interpersonal connections mechanic and formal: it can hinder the development of communication between members of society, the emergence of conflicts within society, the demonstration of cultural differences, and the development of their own identity. Therefore, this interpretation of rights can highlight the roots of some contemporary problems, such as if there appears to be discomfort or lack of solidarity, breaking the frameworks of society in a functioning constitutional state.

At the same time, Honneth's notion of rights can be considered too narrow in many respects. He describes rights – positive law or the rights declared in declarations – as basically formal: he links it to the idea of negative freedom and derives it from the property right [1. S. 133–134]. In most of his texts, Honneth describes the individual enforcing one's rights as defensive, as a person turning one's back on social relations and communication [1. S. 149]. Formal rights are utterly detached from moral decision-making, which is associated with reflexive freedom. For this reason, it seems as if rights had no moral content. While it is clear: "human rights" norms have very strong moral consequences and, in contrast to legal requirements, impose moral obligations of universal validity. Thus, it isn't easy to understand the normative content of human rights norms from the legal systems regulating private relations.

### **The viewpoint of normative criticism**

At this point, a more general problem arises: how can the normative basis of social criticism based on the described concept of social freedom be defined? It is very interesting that in the introduction to *Das Recht der Freiheit*, Honneth initially excluded the possibility that the critical theorist could represent a view independent of the norms that are reproduced in society. He argues that the legitimacy and self-preservation of social institutions, spheres, and sub-systems can only be explained if the existence of a commonly accepted system of ethical norms that is pervasive to all spheres is presumed and if the social critic, by the combination of the methods of empirical research, system theory, and philosophical reflection, strives for the mapping of this system of comprehensive norms and confronts the members of society with the destructive functioning of the institutions from the point of view of this system of norms.

In my opinion, the systematic use of such a method would have made it possible to present the program of critical theory in which the discovery of the typical forms of suffering in society could be combined with philosophical analysis (in line with the program of *Kampf um Anerkennung*). However, Honneth's classical political-philosophical arguments are far away from the program of interdisciplinary criticism based on the problematic reproduction of social norms or the empirical analysis of typical sufferings. Honneth, by critiquing the concepts of negative and reflexive freedom, involuntarily adopts the premise of their representatives that the archetype of the action leading to individual autonomy can be reconstructed in a monologic argumentation by simply removing the limitations and contradictions of other freedom concepts. This process, however, contradicts Honneth's original assumption that the norms underlying social criticism are never available to a utopist or an "armchair philosopher" independent from society.

Furthermore, it is a problem that Honneth, while describing the types of social pathologies, does not move from the systematic analysis of suffering towards the creation of conceptual theories [5. P. 17–18]. According to his argumentation, the

cause of social pathologies is that the members of a society do not act according to the adequate idea of freedom; thus, they arrive at a situation that lacks freedom and rationality. This way, the social critic appears as a theorist competent in establishing a social diagnosis even without an active dialogue with persons on the periphery of society and without the collective effort to understand social problems. Unlike the initial idea, an observer perspective is still available outside the society, from which all narrow-minded perspectives can be unveiled.

It is also a problem that he argues that merely the concept of freedom gained in an adequate, monologic way is an appropriate starting point for identifying the main social pathologies. From this philosophical perspective, however, the “social” world, contrasted with the world dominated by formal (legal or moral) rules, appears almost indiscriminately as a sphere of freedom. From this point of view, social pathologies can be identified as the “overtension” of the logic of rights and morals. If this is the case, it is very difficult to identify the inner pathologies of the “social”. The only emerging criterion for identifying a free human society, the identification of collective action without any forceful constraint, is still insufficient to provide a basis for the normative criteria of social criticism. In today’s societies, there are many movements whose representatives follow what Honneth requires from the observers of social freedom, but this leads to a practice that violates solidarity and rights in the long run. Members of anti-Islamist movements in Europe (such as Pegida, Germany) spontaneously experience a “freedom” based on cooperation with no forceful constraint: they act independently of the official state structure, and their actions are not carried out per the pre-established rationality standard. In their common actions, they adopt each other’s perspectives, recognize each other’s goals and characteristics as valuable, and receive feedback on the value of their identity-forming qualities. They work together to define their goals and tasks. However, these movements lead to rights and social practices that threaten dignity. These movements, however, lead to a social practice that threatens rights and dignity. Is it possible to notice the irrational variations of social cooperation based on recognition if the circle of legitimate norms is not defined by rational discourse or moral reflection (as in Habermas, for example) but merely by cooperation without any forceful constraint?

Still, on the whole, it is difficult to deny that Honneth contributed greatly to the renewal of contemporary political philosophical discourse with his analyzed works. His highlighting the inherent problems of Berlin’s dual freedom concept, his description of the source of freedom experiences that go beyond the positive / negative dichotomy are especially important. The strengthening of this political-philosophical program was possible by the partial abandonment of the program of critical theory based on social dialogue.

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