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## **Bridging the gap between Critical Theory and Critique of Power? Honneth’s approach to ‘social negativity’.**

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### **Abstract.**

In this paper, I will analyze Axel Honneth’s theory against the background of some of the criticisms that Amy Allen levelled against it. His endeavor seems to partially compromise his ability to identify the domineering forms of power that the subject does not acknowledge consciously and affectively. I will argue that, despite some significant limitations, Honneth’s theory has become increasingly able to analyze social negativity since *The struggle for recognition*. Also, in both defending Honneth’s methodology and delimiting its scope, I aim to contribute to the debate between two understandings of power: power as “domination” and power as “constitution”.

### **Keywords.**

Axel Honneth, Amy Allen, Power, Recognition, Critical theory.

## 1. Introduction:

From the perspective of critical social theory, it seems important to distinguish between two concepts of power: power as domination and power as constitution. A recent article by Martin Saar (2010) put the point clearly. His conception is particularly well-framed for me to enter upon my argumentation, thanks to not only its clarity but also its closeness to Honneth's interpretation of the historical and methodological framework of social philosophy, which may facilitate comparison between different understandings of what an efficient critical social theory should look like. For Saar (2010, p. 7), social philosophy emerged in early European modernity, when the inquiry so far conducted into the connection between society and the self (the inquiry into the position of the self in society and in the world, whose origin can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophy), ceased to be related to principles or orders located beyond society (e.g. religion, metaphysics). Social philosophy became a self-standing discipline when society began to understand itself as a self-creating process where individuals are the ground of their own rights and freedom. Within this context, the subject matter of social philosophy and its inquiry stem from the largely acknowledged fact that the transition or connection between the individual and the social (or political) order is not 'harmonic' or 'organic', but comes with a 'cost' for the individual. Thus, the main question of social philosophy – from Hobbes and Rousseau to the Frankfurt school – is about the costs of modern socialization (Saar, 2010, p. 8)

For both Honneth (1995, part 1, 2007a) and Saar (2010), social and political philosophy were born to account for problems related to the incongruence between the objective and the subjective, the social or political order and the individual who constitutes it and is constituted by it. Social philosophy deals with this incongruence as a moment of 'negativity' that identifies a social malaise or suffering (Saar, 2010, p. 8). Where Saar differs from Honneth is where he explicitly thematizes the moment of negativity as a power relation. As he sees it, philosophers have accounted for the relation between the individual and the universal (i.e., social negativity) in various ways in the last two centuries, but always considering it a relation of power.

Interpreting social negativity as the expression of power relations makes it possible to differentiate critical social theory according to whether

- It develops critique by using a concept of power as domination, i.e. the individual or systemic obstruction to freedom or self-realization.
- It develops critique by using a concept of power as constitution i.e. something that constitutes, enables and empowers subjects or unleashes their potentialities.

The difference between these two kinds of power is crucial (Saar 2010, pp. 9-16). If power as domination designates the external obstruction to, or inhibition of, the freedom of the individual, power as constitution designates what constitutes and enables individuals by ontologically determining them. In other words, there is no outside of power: empowerment and subjection are coextensive, and subjects become individuals with their abilities and capacities (power) by being subjected to these same abilities and capacities. On the one hand – power as ‘domination’ (From Hobbes and Weber to Marx, Nietzsche and the Frankfurt school) – freedom or self-realization is the opposite of power. Domination means deprivation of freedom, and emancipation is the process of getting rid of domination in order to achieve (relative) autonomy and self-realization. On the other hand – power as ‘constitution’ (Spinoza, Nietzsche and Arendt; with particular focus on the entanglement between subordinating and enabling sides of power, especially Foucault and Butler) – constitution means development of capacities through subjection, and there is no proper freedom or emancipation in classical terms (as liberation from oppression or ability to act without external impediment).

Although rough, this short definition of the two models of power is sufficient to see that naming them power as ‘domination’ and power as ‘constitution’ could be misleading<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, power as domination becomes understandable only in opposition to a form of enabling power, in which subjects are constituted as free, emancipating and self-realizing beings (Saar 2010, p. 17). Similarly, power as constitution does not need to abandon the notion of emancipation, but only to define it differently, for the fact that ‘there is no outside of power’ does not mean that individuals are necessarily (or completely) subordinated through power relations. Here, ‘emancipation’ could designate the possibility to move networks of power, to make them flexible and mobile, to experiment new ways of radical change and being in the world, to work at dismantling normative structures, and so forth.

From the viewpoint of a critical social theory, then, what truly and structurally differentiates these two models of power is the way in which it is taken to inform society and shape individuals. On the one hand, power is considered basically rational and legitimate insofar as it allows for autonomy and self-realization, whereas it is not judged thus insofar as it obstructs them. These two modalities of power are here mutually exclusive, that is, in opposition to one another: either power is rational and legitimate, or it is not. On the other hand, we have an ontology of power, in which power and reason are thoroughly entangled. Here, it makes little sense to distinguish between rational and irrational

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed comparison, see the article of Saar (2010).

forms of power. Rather, the important distinction is between power structures that are fixed and rigid and power structures that are not.

As we know, both sides have their own weaknesses: either we have criteria allowing us to draw the lines of a normative progress, in that we can measure the obstruction of domination to the ability to achieve freedom and self-realization, or we are able to trace out a richer phenomenology of the subordinating side of power, in that we can apply critique to the very same norms constituting the individual. What makes a theory of domination able to retrace the history of normative progress (or regressions) is exactly what differentiates it from the opposite model, namely that, even though rational and irrational forms of power can be strictly intertwined, it is always possible to separate the enabling, rational side of power from its domineering, irrational one. The basic, rational side falls outside the scope of critique. Symmetrically, the reason why a theory of constituting power can provide a richer explanatory-diagnostic analysis of the present is that norms never come in a purely positive (rational) form and all fall within the scope of critique. For the same reason, for this kind of theories it could be difficult to provide a normative ground for critique, and thus precise criteria to draw the lines of historical progress or regression, except perhaps by narrowing analysis to an extremely contextualist framework (Allen 2016, pp. 32-33)

I do not aim to sublate the state of affairs outlined in this introduction (the different methodologies of these two approaches does not allow for this), but rather to bring some nuances into play. Despite the structural differences, I think we can outline a convergence between them. As Saar argued, critical social theory needs to work towards a more complex articulation of the various facets of social negativity. I endeavor to do this from the viewpoint of the Frankfurt school, although of course the same issue can be approached from the opposite viewpoint, as for instance some Foucauldian social theorists like Allen and Saar would do. I aim to inquire as to how far we can go in tracing out a richer phenomenology of power within a model working with the classical concept of power as domination. Specifically, I will be focusing on Axel Honneth's critical theory, and I will argue that it has become increasingly useful in analyzing social negativity since *The struggle for recognition*. There are limitations, though, for his endeavor to identify an emancipatory potential within social practices, able to delineate a normative progress, seems to partially compromise the capacity of his theory, first, to identify the domineering forms of power that the subject itself does not acknowledge consciously and affectively and, second, to widen the scope of critique beyond the limit of the normative framework of modernity.

## 2. Honneth's concept of power

Honneth's theory clearly belongs to the model of power as domination<sup>2</sup>. Honneth always focused on the capacity of processes of social pathology to obstruct human abilities. In *Freedom's Right* (2014), the pathologies of the legal, moral and social spheres of freedom hinder the possibility of truly realizing it. Before this work, in several articles Honneth elaborated upon the manifold pathologies of recognition (invisibility [2001], reification [2008] and so forth), which hinder autonomy and self-realization. In his 1992 (1995) book, *The Struggle for Recognition*, again, the question was that of an inhibition of action due to disrespect or denial of recognition. In this case, too, power is understood as the domination of one social group over another and the struggle for power is a struggle between social groups fighting for greater recognition.

Critique of social pathologies of this kind presupposes an account of power where power constitutes and enables individuals in a purely positive and rational form. From the very outset, Honneth's endeavor can be interpreted as the attempt to bridge the gap between the Foucauldian model of power and the tradition of the Frankfurt school (Honneth, [1985] 1991, Allen 2010, p. 23). *Critique of Power* (Honneth, [1985] 1991, pp. 105-202) contains a lengthy critique of Foucault, which mainly highlights the instrumentalist or functionalist aspects of his concept of power: power is the product of a permanent *strategic* struggle between social actors. Honneth was interested in making power – and more precisely, conflict for power – the core of social evolution by integrating it within an intersubjective, communicative and normative account of critical theory – that is, by making it the 'negative moment' of an overall process of consensus formation (Honneth, [1985] 1991, p. xxii). For different reasons, both Habermas and Adorno denied the practical and political importance of social conflict. The basic idea of Honneth is that conflict is indeed essential for social evolution, precisely because it is not fundamentally strategic as in Foucault, but moral (i.e. normatively oriented).

This objective was achieved by Honneth (1995) through the concept of recognition. In his work, recognition is the rational form of power that constitutes individuals and makes evolution possible on both the subjective and the objective (societal) level. It indicates that the conflict for power is a normative conflict aiming to establish the social and economic conditions allowing for development of a 'positive self-relation' for every member of society. Honneth's hypothesis is that this 'intact' self-relation – i.e. 'the capacity, made possible by recognition, to reflexively assure' oneself of one's 'competences and rights' (Fraser-Honneth 2003, p. 138) – is an indispensable prerequisite for our

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive critique of Honneth's concept of power from a Foucauldian perspective, in which power is not considered as domination but as constitution, see Petherbridge, 2011

individual and social life: individuals are driven to struggle to re-establish it, should it be obstructed by others (Honneth 1995, pp. 134-144).

The work of G. H. Mead has played a major role in justifying the process of social integration underlying this project (Honneth 1995, pp. 71-91). However, Honneth's intention to transform the strategic conflict for power into a normative one ended up by colliding with Mead's mainly cognitivist theory which, although approachable from a normative viewpoint, does not provide a sufficiently robust basis for his purposes (Honneth 2002, pp. 502-503) and is perhaps better suited for interpretation from a strategic perspective<sup>3</sup>. As if he wanted to find a remedy to what he perceived from very early as a shortcoming, Honneth stressed that constitution of the identity of the human individual is not only grounded on the cognitive ability to interiorize social norms, as it is in Mead (1934), but also upon the affective interaction entailed in strong primary relationships (such as parental, amical and love relationships).

In order to develop this point, Honneth used Winnicott's hypothesis of an early symbiotic state between the baby and her or his caregiver. In *The struggle for recognition* (1995, pp. 95-107), this hypothesis is used as the ground to explain the self-confidence of the individual. By being affectively and emotionally recognized by the partner of interaction, individuals develop the self-confidence they need so as to be capable of freely participating in the formation of the 'political' or 'discursive' will and reproduction of society (1995, p. 38, 117, 122). In other words, the self-confidence formed in the sphere of primary relationships (love) is, in Honneth's early theory, the ground to develop the other two spheres of recognition, namely those of rights and solidarity.

Thus, both in its affective and cognitive dimension, recognition *enables* individuals, it allows for autonomy and self-realization. But recognition (power) is neither equally distributed, nor ontologically structured as a stable order in society. Power relations within society tend to repress or obstruct the individual capacity for self-realization. Obstruction may trigger a conflict for power which can lead to attaining autonomy and self-realization at a higher level (Honneth 1995, 131-139).

However, in *The struggle for recognition* we do not have any good reason to identify the domineering side of power as something immanent to society. In other words, we have the picture of a society that could eventually become fully rational, a society in which the moment of irrationality would be completely eradicated<sup>4</sup>. To be sure, Honneth gives us a certain explanation of individual

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Mead (1925). Identity is shaped through a form of social control, from which only the idiosyncratic spontaneity of the individual (what Mead named the 'I') fosters a differentiation (Mead 1934).

<sup>4</sup> Underestimation of social irrationality was also the critique that Whitebook (2001) leveled at both Habermas and Honneth. However, as I will argue below, this applies mainly to *The struggle for recognition*, and not to the further

rebelliousness to power by drawing upon the Hegelian hypothesis that subjects never stop demanding more recognition, so that they always end up seeing social norms as bearing a domineering side (Honneth 1995, p. 17). If this were true, society would never be fully rational. But what made this attempt problematic is Honneth's endeavor to update the Hegelian hypothesis only by referring once again to the Meadian account, in which the psychic drive for rebelliousness (what Mead called the 'I') seems to be completely empty in psychological terms and insufficient to ground Honneth's attempt upon (Whitebook 2001, pp. 771-783).

After *The struggle for recognition*, Honneth goes further in developing a more nuanced concept of power – a concept in which power as enabling and constituting force (i.e. recognition allowing for positive self-relationship), and power as domination (i.e. denial of this kind of recognition) are more closely connected. This closer connection is related to the progressive centralization of psychoanalysis in his theory (in the form of object relation theories). From being the mere precondition of self-confidence, affective attachment becomes the genetic and conceptual precondition of social life, to the extent that people could not 'maintain social relationships' without it (Honneth 2008, p. 49). Awakening of cognitive abilities as well as the ability to understand the partner of interaction is now based on an empathic capacity whose realization is traced back to the early phases of the child's development (Honneth, 2008, pp. 40-52) and to successful growing out from the symbiotic state, as Winnicott (1971) has it. Honneth (2012) interprets symbiosis as the initial state of mutual recognition (the symmetrical and positive *Nullpunkt* – or point zero – of recognition). It is only because recognition is ultimately positive and symmetrical (rational, non-domineering), because it allows for establishment of a good self-relationship that is not at the same time a sort of subordinating force, that Honneth can take the norms orienting individual action as the result of a process of liberation and not as the result of an intrinsically subordinating/repressing process.

To be sure, both in society and in the caregiver-baby symbiosis, recognition is not symmetrical in the sense of equal power or ability to influence the other. Honneth is not denying that the caregiver has the power to influence the baby<sup>5</sup>. Rather, following Winnicott (1971), he argued that they experience moments in which they are *reciprocally and spontaneously* oriented towards one another – which does not exclude the possibility that the caregiver may be unable or unwilling to actively adapt 'almost

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elaboration of his theory. Although I think that we could – and should – make irrationality even more central to the analysis of social negativity than Honneth does, after *The struggle for recognition*, he does not neglect this aspect.

<sup>5</sup> For criticisms, see Young (2007, pp. 206-212) and Allen (2010, pp. 23-25). As I see it, however, the problem is not the claim that the baby-caregiver relationship *also* entails moments of symbiosis implying a certain kind of symmetry, but rather the preponderant and exclusive weight that this 'social' element takes on at the expense of the isolatedness of the self (omnipotence) and its consequences: controlling the other, reducing his or her otherness to one's sameness. What is problematic is not the symmetry *per se*, but its hypostatization.

100 per cent' to the needs of the newborn baby (Winnicott 1971, pp. 13, 15) , which is necessary to the successful establishment of the symbiotic state. Similarly, society is an instable and porous field of asymmetrical power relations, but a field to which individuals have given their consent and that thereby allows for the positive constitution of their identity and for the partial achievement of their shared objectives.

This kind of approach, in which individuals ascribe a basic consensus to social norms, is the reason why Honneth needs a robust concept of progress: only this allows him to avoid conformism. I will shortly return to this point. For now, I am, rather, interested in Winnicott's hypothesis, which is now becoming a more essential component of Honneth's theory of recognition than hitherto. In *Playing and Reality* (1971, pp. 1-19), the growing out from the initial symbiosis denotes the delicate stage in which the 'good-enough mother' helps the newborn child to reconcile her or himself with the ever more frequent and necessary periods in which she or he is left alone. The ability of the baby to play denotes the acquisition of one of the most important prerequisites of the formation of the subject by establishing a transitional and intermediate zone in which the baby is neither completely alone or separated, nor still symbiotically fused with the caregiver (Winnicott 1971 pp. 63-65). Establishing the further capacity to interact with an object as something having an 'independent existence' (instead of being the creation of a subjective projection) entails a struggle (Winnicott 1971, pp. 119-121). The baby tries to destroy the caregiver and can later love her or him and recognize her or his independence only if the caregiver resists the attacks without withdrawing her or his love.

However important these early stages might be for the establishment of a mature interaction with reality, this will never be a definitive acquisition. The 'reality-acceptance is never completed'. On the contrary, for every individual this is an endless task, which entails the continuous 'strain of relating inner and outer reality'. Only the 'intermediate area of experience' constituted by phenomena that are 'in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is "lost" in play' (such as for example the spheres of art and religion), can provide 'relief' from this strain (Winnicott 1971, p. 18).

Starting from this hypothesis on the importance of transitional phenomena in adult life (Winnicott 1971, pp. 128-148), Honneth stressed that being able to play, to fall back into the playful moments reproducing – although less intensely – the first moments of the original symbiosis is not a peaceful and painless endeavor alone. Playing also means exerting power over the object of interaction, and to 'rebel again and again against the experience of not having the other at our disposal' (Honneth 2002, p. 504). Thanks to this step in his argument, Honneth is able to distinguish a closer connection – a dialectical interlacement – between the two sides of power (enabling and domineering): only by



falling back from time to time into a dimension *implying* the tendency of dominating the partner of interaction are we able to recognize our independence and be truly autonomous.

Of course, this new approach does not imply that formation of the subject's identity amounts to subordination. Recognition maintains its positive and domineering-free ground (the original symbiosis). Nor do I mean to contend that with it Honneth settled all the issues related to the emptiness of the psychic drive for social rebelliousness. On the contrary, in some respects he re-proposed them (*Reference hidden for blind review*). However, by dialectically interlacing play and power, he succeeded in grounding the struggle at a deeper level. His idea is to genetically anchor disrespect – which was what could trigger the struggle for recognition in the book of 1992 (1995) – upon the necessity, for every individual, to deny the independence of the other (Honneth 2002, pp. 503-504). The dynamics of recognition would then be thus:

- People need recognition to have an 'intact self-relation' and to actively participate in the reproduction of their society,
- Recognition presupposes independence,
- Independence is never a stable acquisition, for to be autonomous we are always driven to deny it to the other,
- An element of domination is introduced within the social patterns of recognition, which can trigger a struggle.

In the previous version of the theory, individuals were in principle compelled to react to disrespect (denial of recognition), but there was no (well-justified) internal necessity for disrespect to come about. Now its dynamics is immanently rooted in the need every individual has to recover the energy for autonomy.

A final point, before moving on to the next section. Development of the affective and emotional notion of recognition by which Honneth establishes this deeper connection between the domineering and the emancipatory sides of social practices also provides the ground for a richer analysis of power relations. The increased richness of the explanatory-diagnostic dimension of Honneth's theory is witnessed by the manifold models of social pathology that he provided. Elaboration on the concepts of reification, invisibility, negative symbiotic regressions, ideology, etc. has been made possible by introducing the affective and emotional strata of 'elementary' or primordial recognition (Honneth, 2008). They would have not been possible within the cognitivist framework of *The Struggle for*

*Recognition*, which was only able to propose a single model of social pathology, that of the inhibition of (normative) action by disrespect.

### **3. Allen and Honneth: a critique.**

#### ***Affective attachment and power.***

Despite its ability to create a convergence between the two models of power by delineating a progressively richer phenomenology of present power relations, Honneth's theory shows some limitations at the level of deeper analysis of social negativity. Indeed, his theory does not seem to be able to identify *all* power relations (Allen, 2010). I would like to focus on this issue by considering the critical remarks that Amy Allen addressed to him. Allen provided an example which makes clear the point at issue. 'Imagine a young girl, aged five, named Elizabeth'. Her parents have loved her truly since her birth, and they 'demonstrate their love' in several ways: 'by talking with her frequently about her day, showing her lots of physical affection, buying her stuffed animals and American Girl dolls, encouraging her efforts as a fledgling ballerina, and so on' (Allen, 2010, pp. 25-26). They are giving her true love and recognition while involuntarily transmitting her subordinating models (in this case, gender models). Until she grows up, she does not have the autonomy needed to reflect upon them critically. However, when she grows up, she may well have the opportunity to develop a critical capacity, yet remaining affectively attached to these models to such an extent that she cannot really reject them. She cannot even think of them as something problematic.

The child must accept and internalize these authority relations regardless of whether they are legitimate, and before she is in a position to judge or critically assess their legitimacy. Indeed, she must capitulate to this power in order to become autonomous, thus, in order to be in a position to assess critically its legitimacy (Allen, 2010, p. 26).

The idea behind this example is that recognition is *not* positive, 'legitimate', or 'rational' in nature. Rather, it develops and establishes itself without the explicit consent of the individual, thus producing subordination. Subsequently, the struggle for recognition might not emerge, for recognition creates so strong an affective attachment that even though one may later on develop cognitive rejection of it, she or he is not able to overcome it affectively. Therefore, Honneth's theory of recognition is not able to identify all power relations. It cannot identify those power relations that *do not trigger a struggle*. These kinds of power relations are simply not recognized as subordinating, but as normal and positive, or rational.

Subordinating norms, practices, and modes of identity can be – and, in the case of gender norms, often are – passed along from parent to child with little or no struggle. And it is this fact, so crucial for understanding the maintenance, reproduction, and stubborn persistence of gender subordination in contemporary Western societies that is obscured by Honneth’s conflation of power relations with the concept of struggle (Allen, 2010, p. 28).

Thus, the explanatory-diagnostic scope of Honneth’s theory – its ability to trace out a phenomenology of power relations – is somewhat limited (Allen, 2010, p. 25).

Allen proposes a different diagnosis of power relations in society, starting from Judith Butler. For Butler (1997), subjects depend on recognition for their psychic survival; they depend on it to form their identity and to live well. But at the same time recognition is also a form of subordination which is imposed on the subject from the very outset. Since it is this kind of recognition that brings subjects to life (i.e. that builds and maintains their identities), they are driven to ‘deny’ its subordinating nature. Thus, they end up desiring and re-enacting during their entire life the same recognition that allowed them to live through subordination (Butler 1997, pp. 6-10).

However, according to Allen, Butler over-hastily – and incorrectly – identifies ‘dependency with power and power with subordination’. On the contrary, Allen (2010, pp. 26-27) contends that we need to define dependence in term of *vulnerability*: subjects depend on love and recognition, but dependence does not necessarily coincide with or end up in subordination. Consequently, there is in fact a certain place for freedom and emancipation. But emancipation does not mean the classical liberation from a state of domination or from an obstruction to positively defined freedom and self-realization. Rather, it designates the ability to restore flexibility to configurations of power that had been previously fixed and sedimented through their continuous repetition and institutionalization (Allen, 2015a). Emancipating subjects are subjects that are transforming a situation in which power has become ‘second nature’ into a situation in which they are able to remodel and re-discuss power relations.

This negativistic and minimalistic concept of emancipation rejects the form emancipation takes on in the elaboration of Honneth (and Habermas), namely that of a historic learning process through which individuals interactively increase their degree of autonomy and self-realization (or freedom, following the latest re-elaboration of Honneth’s theory [2014]). Thanks to this rejection Allen (2016) is able to give a possible answer to what she identified as an additional weakness in the contemporary Frankfurt school, namely its incapacity to achieve critical insight into new forms of colonialism. For Allen, commitment to normative learning processes condemns critical theory to being either uncritical (unable to engage in debate about post- and neo-colonialism) or even ideological (to impose

surreptitiously the supremacy of the Western thought). This issue has no easy solution<sup>6</sup>, for we end up in a further version of the contradiction we already met. Enhancing the explanatory-diagnostic side of critical theory seems to imply either abandoning theory to a relativistic approach or lacking precise criteria to identify what is positive (not-domineering) in power relations, while developing theory through western categories and concepts always exposes it to the critique of imposing western thought.

### ***Honneth's theory of power: a critical assessment.***

So far I have outlined Honneth's view on power, arguing that, despite his successful endeavor to deepen analysis of power relations his theory remains open to serious criticism. The opposing stances between Amy Allen and Axel Honneth should not conceal the fact that they are both working toward the complexification of the analysis of social negativity. If the former, starting from the radical critique made possible by defining power as a form of constitution, endeavored to save a contextualist concept of 'emancipation' by eliminating from it a robust notion of normative progress, the latter attempted to radicalize critique without abandoning an anti-foundationalist (i.e., not transcendently founded, but grounded within social reality), non-relativistic version of the classic concept of emancipation as liberation from domineering forms of power. In what follows, I will elaborate on Honneth's theory while taking into account some of Allen's criticisms. In so doing, I do not intend to contest her endeavor, nor to provide a detailed analysis of her theory, but rather to shed clearer light on the limits – and the potentialities – of Honneth's critical theory<sup>7</sup>. I will confine analysis to the first of the two above-mentioned critiques, i.e. the question related to becoming conscious of affectively embedded power relations, letting the second question, i.e. the ability of the theory to deal with post- and neo-colonial situations, for another occasion.

Let us begin by calling into question two related points of Allen's critique: firstly, the general remark that individuals cannot reject power relations or even critically revise them when they are based on affective attachments and, secondly, that power and struggle coincide in Honneth's theory, thus limiting its critical capacity.

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<sup>6</sup> Allen (2016) endeavors to address this quandary by proposing a modest and humble notion of progress based on a 'metanormative' contextualism which, she claims, can avoid relativism.

<sup>7</sup> By highlighting and acknowledging some of its limitations, in this paper I endeavor to defend Honneth's methodology against criticisms that sometimes do not seem to recognize the positive achievements of his theory. This does not mean that we should not give due consideration to those limitations in order to strengthen critique where necessary. I made some steps in this direction in (*Reference hidden for blind review*)

As for the first point, I do not see it as being decisive. Indeed, if it is true that it is extremely difficult to shake off affective attachments with all that they imply (positively and negatively), it is also true that it is sometimes possible to begin a self-reflecting process leading to partially shaking them off or at least re-elaborating them. This was also the idea of Habermas' first theoretical elaboration (1972). Both Allen and Honneth agree in considering psychoanalysis an indispensable tool for critical theory (Allen 2015b, Honneth 2006). But psychoanalysis – in its theoretical basis and in its practice – not only points out that individuals are not able to decide in a perfectly rational way and that there exist parts of the self that are so deeply rooted in the affective dimension that they cannot be moved, translated, re-elaborated or appropriated. It also points out that we can sometimes overcome psychic blockages and obstructions and that we can succeed in achieving a higher degree of (relative) rationality<sup>8</sup>.

Through their own self-reflection and the stimuli produced by interaction with the external world (individuals, cultures, environment[s]) *individuals may little by little begin to question themselves, to become conscious of relations of power that were previously perceived as rational and legitimate, and to work towards their transformation*<sup>9</sup>, though I am not claiming that description of this process should necessarily take the form of what Honneth has in mind when developing his conception of the struggle for recognition, or that Honneth has given a sufficiently robust justification of this process so far. But I think that psychoanalysis can help in providing a concept of critical theory in which conflict as the center of a self-reflecting process may foster a more radical critique of the present and, at the same time, a less pessimistic view on individuals' capacity to open new spaces of rationality, to develop new ways of being and to creatively transform their social and political reality (Whitebook 1995)<sup>10</sup>.

From this viewpoint, the main critique that one might level at Honneth's theory would be whether and if so to what extent *his* usage of psychoanalysis is sufficiently strong to account for efficient conflictual and self-reflecting processes at the theoretical level (Whitebook 2001, 2003)<sup>11</sup>. In this respect, I am as skeptical as Allen (2010 p. 25). Furthermore, I am convinced that working in this

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<sup>8</sup> Even in classical psychoanalysis these two dimensions coexist without contradiction. If *The ego and the Id* (Freud 1990a) show the weaknesses of an ego which is subjected to the id (drives, superego), *Inhibition, Symptoms and anguish*, (Freud 1990b) stresses its ability to coordinate and mediate between the different psychic forces and the external reality.

<sup>9</sup> See Honneth (1995, 131-139). From a different perspective, see Whitebook (1995, pp. 217-263).

<sup>10</sup> According to Allen (2010, pp. 25; 30-31), Whitebook's critique of Honneth does not hit the point: the problem of Honneth's recognition was not that it is not conflictual enough, but that it cannot identify power if power does not give rise to conflict. Nonetheless, I believe that Whitebook's point, i.e. increasing the conflict-oriented dimension of critical theory by avoiding hypostatization of intersubjectivist thought, is of great importance for critical theory.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent update of the Honneth-Whitebook dialogue see (Honneth & Whitebook 2016). Allen (2015b) endeavors to integrate psychoanalysis by referring to Melanie Klein.

direction – i.e. reinforcing the conflict-oriented, a-social dimension of the subject in the direction indicated by Whitebook – may eventually create serious problems for Honneth’s own project.

However, – and with this question I am switching to the second point – how does Honneth’s theory of recognition account for these conflictual and self-reflecting processes? Becoming conscious of domineering relations of power in society – that is, in this case, calling into question previously rational and legitimate relations of power – may well presuppose conflict at the individual level (intrapsychic), but it does not imply necessarily the development of a social struggle. We can become conscious of power relations without struggle (take, for instance, the social scientist doing her or his research, or simply the individual ability to reflect upon one’s experiences and upon social reality). Let us then represent the becoming-aware of power relations as follows: we might have,

- First, a situation in which absence of struggle is accompanied by absence of awareness of power relations,
- Second, a situation in which absence of struggle comes with acute consciousness of power relations (domination), and
- Finally, a situation in which the development of struggle from previously unproblematic power relations supports and fosters the dawning awareness of their domineering side.

Honneth’s theory, which is bound by its own methodology to identify ‘emancipatory’ drives within ongoing social practices, deals mainly with the third point, namely that of *becoming conscious* of previously rational power relations through social struggle, where the possibility of social struggle is grounded genetically on the individual’s struggle (carried out in the form of the effort to maintain a good balance between autonomy and symbiosis). The structure of the struggle for recognition is, then, (Honneth, 1995, pp.131-139):

- Disrespect (denial of recognition),
- Negative feeling of the disrespected (shame, anger),
- These feelings are in principle (theoretically) able to reveal the relations of power grounding them, but revelation *is not an empirical necessity*.
- If in fact they reveal these relations of power to the consciousness of the subject, this might, or might not, spur development of a struggle for recognition, depending on the empirical, social and political circumstances.

It is worth stressing that feelings of shame following disrespect may *help* in making individuals aware of domination. But neither the certainty of the development of struggle nor the awareness of the power relations in society depend exclusively on them (Honneth 1995, p. 138-139).

This may partially save Honneth's theory of recognition from Allen's critique, for we do not necessarily need a struggle to identify power relations (Honneth *et al.* 2010, pp. 163-164). But it also reduces its strength insofar as its main object, namely social conflict, is subsiding, for one may ask whether the struggle for recognition is really a suitable concept for critical social theory today (*Reference hidden for blind review*). Development of the concept of struggle for recognition allowed Honneth to update one of the methodological premises of the Frankfurt school critical theory, namely the connection between theory and praxis (Horkheimer, [1937] 1972), without completely separating the issue of normativity from that of power, as Habermas did (Honneth [1985] 1991, pp. 203-303). If this achievement – despite the progresses I mentioned – is also at the same time what limits the ability to *go further* in tracing out a richer phenomenology of power, is it worth accepting restriction in the event that these 'emancipatory' practices are dwindling? Subsequently, from the perspective of Honneth's theory it is paramount to investigate the social and psychological conditions which hinder the development of struggle or restrict it.

Be that as it may, for Honneth power becomes problematic, or better, an enabling and constitutive form of power may become oppressive or ideological, and thus regressive, only when at least a few people in society see it as a problem and feel it as denial of recognition or freedom. In this case, the more or less conflictual interaction between individuals and social groups may trigger a process of self-reflection that could stimulate awareness of affectively anchored structures of power and call them into question. By contrast, we cannot identify a form of power as domineering if it is not at all understood as such within social practice itself.

Take women in the early 19th century (Honneth *et al.* 2010, pp. 166-167). Insofar as (and if) they *all* felt positively recognized in models of life that today we consider as domineering models of socialization, Honneth rules out the possibility that these models were a kind of domination *for* them at *that* time. To put it bluntly: if nobody at a precise time thinks that a certain relation of power is a kind of domination, we can call it domination only from the perspective of the present time insofar as it is considered morally superior to the past. In the past, what we consider today as an ideological or domineering form of power may well have been an enabling one.

Thus, things start getting difficult only when 'instances of rebelliousness' emerge, or in other words when at least some individuals or groups see as subordinating power relations what the majority in society still see as positive and rational relations. In fact, it is precisely at this point (and not before)

that the central issue of the criteria to judge the rational or irrational nature of power emerges. How are we to orient ourselves in this regard? What kind of criteria do we need to decide what norms or values we should maintain or change? How are we to avoid ideological forms of recognition that could promise illusory progress while in fact establishing new forms of domination? Honneth endeavors to solve these problems by developing two complementary strategies. On the one hand, he (2009a, 2014) delineates a teleological approach aiming at reconstructing the immanent normative framework orienting social transformation in modernity, which he identifies with the ideal of individual freedom. On the other hand, he outlines different models that should allow for identification of ‘pathological’ regressions from, or distortions of, the normative potential immanent to social practices that he has reconstructed (see for example Honneth 2007b, 2009c, 2014).

The teleological framework provides the background against which we can measure the regressions identified by the models of social pathology. Certain relations of power will be (or become) domineering (and not enabling and rational) if they allow for ‘*de facto* practices’ diminishing or contradicting the degree of freedom and recognition already achieved (Honneth 2002, p. 516-518). On the other hand, when people begin feeling oppressed by relations of power that were previously enabling forms of power, the question that could orient discussion of it is whether or not changing them will increase the degree of individual freedom and of the mutual recognition which grounds and substantiates it (Fraser-Honneth 2003, pp. 184-185).

#### **4. Outline of Honneth’s model of progress.**

As I have previously remarked, the model of critical theory outlined above presupposes the rationality and legitimacy of the *enabling and constituting* side of power. This has been Honneth’s idea ever since *Critique of Power* and marks the entire divide between the two approaches to power we are dealing with. It is only because subjects participate in the formation of power relations to which they give a ‘normatively based consent’ (Honneth [1985] 1991, p. 161, 2014, p. 17) – and for this reason are able to positively orient their life – that they can question these power relations should they fail to keep their promise, i.e. concrete, mutual realization of freedom. In other words, Honneth must presuppose the basic legitimacy of the ‘modern social order’ to be able to criticise it (Fraser-Honneth 2003, p. 184; Honneth 2014, pp. 305-308). This clearly does not constitute a revolutionary but, rather, a reformist account of critical social theory, in which progressive social transformation is based on a ‘constantly revisable consensus’ (Honneth 2014, pp. 305).



Now, how does Honneth explain progress? Let us briefly dwell upon this issue before concluding. Honneth draws from Hegel the hypothesis of a ‘surplus of validity’ or ‘normative surplus’ [*Geltungsuebergang*] (Fraser-Honneth 2003, pp. 186-187). In modernity, norms entail from the outset a validity exceeding their *de facto* realization. In other words, there is for Honneth (2002, p. 517, 2007a) always a gap between potentialities in terms of rationality and their effective implementation, a gap that is progressively filled through social struggle. But why should this gap never be completely filled? Why is progress open-ended? Or is it? Indeed, Honneth contends that through social struggles the ‘validity surplus initially inherent in every ethical norm is gradually stripped away’, in such a way that the more struggles proceed, ‘the more restricted is the dialectical space that remains available for novel objections and grievances’. How are we to explain the open-ended nature of historical progress, then? Here again, Honneth draws on Hegel in maintaining that ‘each conflict over the application of a norm brings about changes in the very desires and inclinations that first gave rise to that conflict’. So, on the one hand, the potential surplus of validity is effectively fulfilled through conflict, but on the other hand, by leading to a better understanding of the motives grounding it, conflict may lead to the replacement of the contested norm – which has now become unintelligible – with ‘a norm whose ethical purpose is sufficiently broad to present a foothold for newly emerging goals and ends’ (Honneth 2014b, p. 8).

Thus, conflict leads not only to a further ‘generalization’ and ‘differentiation’ of already existing norms, but also to a progressive, conflict-oriented substitution of norms that are losing their ability to implement shared societal aims with norms that are supposed to be ‘more open and more universalizable’ (Honneth 2014b, pp. 6-8). I would like to stress two points here. First, Honneth’s theory does not entail a ‘progressive purification of reason from power relations’, as Allen (2016, pp. 88, 219) contends. As we have seen, grounding autonomy on the necessity to rebel ‘again and again against’ the experience of the ‘independence’ of the other, inevitably binds it to the domineering side of power. Second, although both the idea of the validity surplus and the idea that struggles introduce new desires and inclinations deserve, I think, further development and justification (why should norms entail a surplus of validity? How come that struggle produces new desires and inclinations? Why should new norms necessarily be more ‘universalizable?’), Honneth’s methodology does not prevent theorizing a radical transformation of society<sup>12</sup>. Realization of the normative ideal of freedom may require what he calls an ‘institutional revolution’, a radical change in the institutional framework which is supposed to allow for freedom. For example, realization of ‘social freedom’ – as Honneth

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<sup>12</sup> For criticisms, see Freyenhagen (2015) and Schaub (2015). See Honneth (2015) for a reply.

presented it in *Freedom's Right* (2014, pp. 131-335) – would probably require a radical institutional change towards a socialist organization of the market to be fulfilled (Honneth 2015, pp. 207-213).

But for Honneth (2015, p. 208) ‘institutional’ revolutions appeal ‘to the same ideals of freedom’ grounding modernity, and do not imply a ‘normative revolution’, i.e. a revolution that would eliminate individual freedom as normative horizon. On the contrary, ‘while we cannot *rule out* such fundamental changes taking place, any such revolution would have no capacity for moral progress, and hence nothing to recommend it’ (Honneth 2015, p. 210). Any social change, whether radical or not, must develop within the modern ideal of freedom, which is considered not only superior to the past (both to the past of the modern epoch and to the past pre-modern epochs), but also of a morally ‘insuperable nature [*Unueberschreitbarkeit*]’ (Honneth 2015, p. 211). In this regard, while the concrete realization of individual freedom is open to interpretation depending on different contexts and sensibilities (2014b, p. 8), we cannot imagine a normative order beyond its framework which is not at the same time a form of moral regression (2014, p. 17).

## **5. Conclusion.**

Having distinguished between two main understandings of power relations, power as constitution and power as domination, I examined the latter in the particular form it has taken in one of the most important figures of the contemporary Frankfurt school, Axel Honneth. Examination was carried out taking into account some of Amy Allen’s criticisms of it. Thus I was able to highlight certain limits to Honneth endeavor, but it also gave me the opportunity to concisely suggest 1) that a psychoanalytical approach to critical theory could provide – although not necessarily in the form elaborated by Honneth – a theoretical framework to identify the possibility of shaking off domineering affective attachments, and 2) that Honneth’s methodology is able to work towards the complexification of the notion of power, thus enriching diagnosis of social negativity without foregoing the classical idea of emancipation nor political precision in identifying normative regressions and progress. In the final step, 3) I briefly outlined the concept of progress grounding Honneth’s theory and pointed out that it neither leads to the disappearance of the domineering side of power, nor excludes theorizing radical transformation of society.

In concluding – and leaving aside the issue of Honneth’s ability to take a critical stance on post- and neo-colonialisms (Allen 2016), which I did not discuss in this article – let me briefly mention two last points. To increase the capacity of his theory to delineate a detailed phenomenology of power relations, Honneth 1) (2009b) integrated a genealogical approach, which allowed him to indicate

whether or not emancipating power relations in society are being silently distorted over time (i.e., whether they are being silently transformed into domineering power relations)<sup>13</sup>. He also, 2) attempted to establish criteria to differentiate between authentic and non-authentic or ideological forms of power (2007b)<sup>14</sup>. Only promises of a higher level of recognition (or freedom) that are followed by the institutional and material measures needed to implement them effectively are not ideological (2007b, pp. 342-347). Institutional and material modification take time, and we have to wait and see if the promised recognition is really implemented. During this time, we do not have instruments to assess whether or not the new form of recognition will be ideological. Were the institutional and material measures not to be established, we would have to face a new form of domination without having been able to criticize it from the outset. At the same time, however, Honneth's model has the advantage of preventing overhasty identification of what could be a freeing and empowering form of recognition with a domineering one (Honneth 2007b, pp. 341, 346-347) and maintains the ability of clearly differentiating between domineering and non-domineering forms of power.

Of course, these further steps toward the complexification of the analysis of social negativity will not bridge the gap between critical theory and critique of power. Methodologically, these two positions on power are clearly incompatible. However, since they both offer important analyses of society, I think it is essential to draw them to converge towards a richer critique of the present. My intention with this article is to contribute to this endeavor by clarifying some of the friction points of Honneth's theory in this regard.

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<sup>13</sup> For a critique, see Allen (2016, p. 106-107)

<sup>14</sup> For a critique of this aspect from a Foucauldian viewpoint (in which recognition is ideological from the outset), see Allen (2010, pp. 28-31) and Owen (2010, pp. 103-106)

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