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# ETHICAL LIFE, GROWTH, AND RELATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: INTERSUBJECTIVITY, FREEDOM, AND CRITIQUE

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## **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this paper is to argue that there are two important positive connections between Hegel and Dewey, and that these important positive connections form the basis of a critical theory in a broad sense: (i) social processes and modern institutions are *structured* for the purposes of fostering the development of subjectivities that help individuals achieve self-realization; and (ii) social processes and modern institutions are *assessed* in terms of how well (if at all) they enable the development of unique subjectivities that help individuals achieve self-realization. Following Axel Honneth, I argue that there is compelling reason to suppose Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit* and Dewey's notion of democracy have significant *critical* dimensions.<sup>1</sup>

## **KEYWORDS**

Hegel, Dewey, Honneth, Intersubjective Recognition, Critical Theory.

## **I. THE INTERSUBJECTIVIST CRITIQUE OF LIBERALISM: SITTLICHKEIT AND DEWEY**

Hegel conceives of the state a *whole*,<sup>2</sup> one whose structure is constituted by *mediated unity*. In contrast to Attic ethical life (typified by immediate unity), in modernity individuals no longer defines themselves as a functioning part of the *polis*; and in contrast to modern life, typified by difference, individuals do not regard their subjectivity as constituted independently of society. The transition from immediate unity through difference to mediated unity, the social freedom of *Sittlichkeit*,<sup>3</sup> is one in which the individual can regard the state as helping foster the

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the reviewer for their warm and helpful feedback which has helped improve the paper here.

<sup>2</sup> See EPR: §258Z, §260.

<sup>3</sup> Viz. EPR: §§157-158, 181.

development of their rational capacities and thereby their self-realization. As Hegel writes:

[The norms embedded in the ethical structures of the family/civil society/the state] are not something alien to the subject. On the contrary, his spirit bears witness to them as to its own essence, the essence in which he has a feeling of his selfhood, and in which he lives as in his own element which is not distinguished from himself. The subject is thus directly linked to the ethical order by a relation which is more like an identity than even the relation of faith or trust (EPR: §147)

From the perspective of mediated unity, the individual is not conceived of simply as an anonymous cog in the workings of a complex social machine, nor are individual and state independently constituted, nor are the interests of the individual seen as *antagonistic* to those of the state. Rather, the individual is conceived of as a *bona fide* self-determining and rationally self-reflexive agent who requires assistance from social institutions in an effort to realize their own autonomy. The state is required, as it is the *principal* institution of *Sittlichkeit*.<sup>4</sup> As Alan Patten argues:

A community containing the family, civil society, and the state is the minimum self-sufficient institutional structure in which agents can develop, maintain, and exercise the capacities and attitudes involved with subjective freedom ... The capacities for reflection, analysis, and self-discipline, the sense of oneself as a free and independent agent—can be reliably developed and sustained only in the context of certain social institutions and practices. In particular, in Hegel's view, institutions such as property and contract, that work to mediate the attraction and expression of mutual recognition, must be in place for these capacities to be fully developed and sustained.<sup>5</sup>

For Hegel, then, social institutions are good because they are necessary to realizing freedom.<sup>6</sup> Having articulated the central theme of Hegel's robust intersubjectivism, I now wish to turn to Dewey's particular articulation of intersubjective agency.

The way in which Dewey conceives of intersubjective agency is bound up with his critique of classical liberalism. Under classical liberalism:

- 1) Individuals have normative and ontological priority over institutions
- 2) Individuals have pre-political or natural rights
- 3) Individuals have their subjectivities and interests fully formed before engaging in any kind of deliberative discourse
- 4) Freedom consists in freedom from interference by others, including by the state.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. EPR: §257, §260Z, §535.

<sup>5</sup> Patten 1999: 37.

See also Pippin 1997: 73.

<sup>6</sup> For more on this subject, see Patten (1999) and Neuhaus (2000).

Dewey rejects classical liberalism on the grounds that individuals are not ontologically prior to society and that social institutions are not merely means for fulfilling the pre-social interests of individuals. In the same way that the early modern tradition conceived of the relation between mind and world as one of fundamental separation, Dewey claims that classical liberalism is a *practical* exemplification of “the most pervasive fallacy of philosophical thinking”,<sup>7</sup> namely dividing up and separating phenomena into strict dichotomies. As Alison Kadlec writes, “contemporary society has inherited from classical philosophy a set of dualisms that must be exposed and dismantled if we are to make real progress ...”.<sup>8</sup> *Contra* the picture of the isolated, egoistic, asocial individual, Dewey advocates a nuanced social holism that aims to avoid the ontological mistake of conceiving of individuals as radically distinct from social institutions:

[L]iberalism knows that an individual is nothing fixed, given ready-made. It is something achieved, and achieved not in isolation but with the aid and support of conditions, cultural and physical: - including in “cultural”, economic, legal and political institutions as well as science and art. (Dewey 1935: 291)

As with the dissolution of the mind/world dualism, the individual and society are no longer conceived in “the celebrated modern antithesis of the Individual and Social”.<sup>9</sup> According to Dewey’s political holism, freedom should be understood in terms of a positive capacity to realize oneself. Crucially, such individual self-realization can only be achieved by conceiving of individuality as necessarily *embedded* in a reflective and social environment. These ecological conditions, moreover, must be democratically arranged and constituted if they are to perform their normative function. As Dewey writes in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*:

Government, business, art, religion, all social institutions have a meaning, a purpose. That purpose is to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status. And this is all one with saying that the test of their value is the extent to which they educate every individual into the full stature of his possibility. Democracy has many meanings, but if it has a moral meaning, it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society. (Dewey 1920: 186)

I therefore agree with Neuhouser that, as with Hegel, for Dewey, “having identity-constituting attachments to one’s community is made compatible with conceiving of oneself as an *individual* – that is, as a *person* with rights and interests separate from those of the community, and as a *moral subject* who is both able and entitled to

<sup>7</sup> Dewey 1930: 5.

<sup>8</sup> Kadlec 2006: 530.

<sup>9</sup> Dewey 1927: 87.

pass judgment on the goodness of social practices”.<sup>10</sup> As such, central to this social model is a clear commitment to individuals whose subjectivities are not lost or denigrated in mediated unity. To quote Dewey here:

The individual interest no longer has to be sacrificed to the general law as an accidental or even unworthy element. The particular self-interest is identified with the law, and the law is no longer an abstraction which ought to be, but lives in individuals as the very essence and substance of their own life and interests ... The will finds complete expression only when it gets realized in actual institutions and when these institutions are so bound up with the very life purposes of the individual that they supply him his concrete motives ... These institutions, since they are actual existences, furnish the definite and specific conditions under which action must take place ... [S]ince the individual is a member of these institutions, and can live his own life only in and through these institutions, they are one with himself, they are his true good. It is in performing his own function, taking his own position with reference to these institutions that he truly becomes himself and gets the full activity of which he is capable. It is this union, then, of the subjective and objective sides, of the particular will and the universal, of self-interest and law, which constitutes the essential character of the ethical world. (Dewey 1897: 155-156)

As I have articulated it, the Hegelian model of *Sittlichkeit* sees the state as playing the principal role of realizing freedom by serving as the primary ethical sphere. Hegel makes it clear that individual autonomy cannot be achieved unless there is a supportive background environment structured in accordance with norms of symmetrical recognition, comprising relevant social institutions and values, which provide individuals with material and epistemic resources to realize their own normative aims.

Reflexive freedom or positive liberty – to use Isaiah Berlin’s expression – *must* presuppose *but* does not adequately articulate the necessary progressive socio-ecological conditions. Specifically, an individual’s goals cannot become a means of self-realization if these goals are not embedded in an accommodating context,<sup>11</sup> since this context provides the social space as well as the resources necessary for realizing autonomy. To this extent, then, social institutions and practices are not external to individuals’ autonomy – they are *constitutive* of autonomy itself.

From what I have been arguing, there seems to be a tension between (i) the model of the state which Hegel *himself* preferred, namely constitutional monarchy,<sup>12</sup> (ii) Hegel’s own reflections on how *conscience* exhibits preference for “withdrawal from the social world rather than critique or social activism”,<sup>13</sup> and (iii) the ironically significantly broader proto-democratic socialist features of his own speculative conceptual resources that Hegel either was reluctant to make explicit

<sup>10</sup> Neuhaus 2008: 209.

<sup>11</sup> Patten (1999) calls such a communitarian position ‘civic humanism’.

<sup>12</sup> Viz. EPR: §§272-73; 283-329.

<sup>13</sup> Neuhaus 2008: 226n.

Viz. EPR: §138Z.

out of political expediency or was himself incapable of recognising.<sup>14</sup> As Michael Hardimon alludes, “[i]t is possible, however, that Hegel failed to grasp or fully appreciate the implications of his own view”:<sup>15</sup> it is not immediately clear why exactly a constitutional monarchy would *best* fulfil the normative function of realizing autonomy, especially because such systems of power and authority are necessarily hierarchical, involving practices of ideological recognition underpinning broader patterns of domination and exploitation. Indeed, Adorno (viewing Hegel with equal adoration and contempt) insists that “Hegel’s philosophy is indeed essentially negative: critique”.<sup>16</sup>

Emphasising the inherently critical nature of Hegel’s discursive resources, furthermore, enables one to recognise *meta*-discursive shortcomings of the liberal construal of Hegelianism,<sup>17</sup> as helpfully expressed by Kevin Thompson:

... [it] fundamentally fails to grapple with the deeper question: Does Hegel’s mature thought enable, even require, a critical role for reason, a foundation upon which it can set forth a political agenda and critique the social institutions and practices of its day?<sup>18</sup>

However, I would argue that there is enough in *left-Hegelian social philosophic resources* to reasonably claim that the state which actualises autonomy is not *any* kind of constitutional monarchy, *contra* Hegel, and certainly *not* the now neoliberal capitalist socio-economic system: neither system embodies the level of rationality required for freedom that the *rational state* would exemplify. For, the framework of neoliberal capitalism hinders the growth of individual freedom and places barriers on the development of autonomy, since the kind of practices the neoliberal capitalist framework encourages are not *rational* practices. In order to effect the realisation of reason embedded in the structure of *Sittlichkeit*, one would need to sublimate, rather than tweak, the current socio-economic paradigm. As such, for a practical relation-to-self to be healthy and in order to be properly autonomous, progressive intersubjective relations must be in place and operating without coercion.

Social processes and institutions are, therefore, assessed in terms of how well (if at all) they foster communicability and the development of subjectivities which help

<sup>14</sup> I also wish to note that this is not to say that Right-Hegelian positions are *completely incoherent*, but rather that they make a serious error in failing to sufficiently recognise the left-wing entailments of Hegel’s discursive resources.

See Rose (2009), Ross (2008, 2015), Thompson (2015), Ferro (2019), Giladi (2020a), Farneth (2017), and McGowan (2019) for further on this point.

<sup>15</sup> Hardimon 1994: 246.

<sup>16</sup> TSH: 30.

<sup>17</sup> See Knowles (2002), Herzog (2013, 2015), Winfield (2015), and – to an extent – Bernstein (2017).

<sup>18</sup> Thompson 2019: 85-86.

individuals achieve self-realization,<sup>19</sup> since, to quote Habermas, “[a] postconventional ego-identity can only stabilise itself in the anticipation of symmetrical relations of unforced reciprocal recognition”.<sup>20</sup> To put this another way, *Sittlichkeit* can be legitimately construed as a politicization of G. H. Mead’s sociality thesis:<sup>21</sup> *human beings are so immersed in social life that there is no development of full freedom outside the social sphere.*<sup>22</sup> As Axel Honneth writes in a way which demonstrates the legacy of the central Hegelian insights:

For modern subjects, it is obvious that our individual freedom depends upon the responsiveness of the spheres of action in which we are involved to our own aims and intentions. The more that we feel that our purposes are supported and even upheld by these spheres, the more we will be able to perceive our surroundings as a space for the development of our own personality. (Honneth 2014: 60)

Importantly, though, if one construes *Sittlichkeit* systematically rather than construe ethical life *qua* Hegel’s particular socio-political context, then the vocabulary of *Sittlichkeit*, with its commitment to mutual recognition as communicative action guided by communicative rational practices for the purpose of realising one’s practical relation-to-self can be reasonably said to find kinship with Deweyan democracy:<sup>23</sup>

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey 1916: 93)

Dewey makes it clear that democracy should not be understood as a *purely political concept*. What democracy involves is more basic than either a type of constitution empowering voters or a type of government, one typified by majority rule.<sup>24</sup> Democracy, rather, is a set of values comprising a particular form of

<sup>19</sup> However, Molly Farneth rightly draws a distinction between the *politics of recognition* and Hegel’s account of recognition: “Hegel’s idea of recognition is not about the recognition of fixed *identities* but, rather, about the recognition of *subjectivities*” (Farneth 2017: 118). I would contend that there is scope for Farneth to be *more* critical about the politics of recognition and the claim that it is invariably committed to *reified* identities.

<sup>20</sup> Habermas 1992: 188.

<sup>21</sup> See Mead 2015: 132-133.

<sup>22</sup> See Habermas 1992: 183.

<sup>23</sup> For more on Dewey’s relationship with Hegel, see Good (2005).

Importantly, though, one should not lose sight of how, for all of the democratic *potentialities* in Hegel’s model of *Sittlichkeit* that bring him closer to Dewey, Dewey is critical of Hegel’s commitment to constitutional monarchy (Dewey 1897: §124, 159-160).

<sup>24</sup> Viz. “The idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state even at its best” (Dewey 1927: 143).

associating with others. Democracy is, in short, *a way of living*. As Kadlec correctly notes, “democracy, then, cannot be reduced to a set of institutional functions or abstract visions of the state”.<sup>25</sup> Crucially, a democratic way of life is the life of inquiry, where inquiry, à la Peirce, is open, non-dogmatic, inclusive, fallibilist, ceaseless, critical problem-solving experimentation. To this extent, the democratic life and the inquiring life are *mutually supportive*, insofar as democratic environments promote and sustain inquiry, and inquiry promotes and sustains democracy.

Understood in such a way, there are two important positive connections between Hegel and Dewey here: first, as I argued earlier, for Hegel, social processes and modern institutions are *structured* for the purposes of fostering the development of unique subjectivities that help individuals achieve self-realization. For Dewey, social processes and institutions are structured for the purpose of fostering *growth* and nurture “the critical, inquiring spirit”.<sup>26</sup> As James Good writes, “[o]nce more, for Dewey, the actualization of ideals is the key to Hegel’s thought. The actualisation of freedom is possible only in a society whose institutions are rational and in which the individual can feel at home”.<sup>27</sup> Both philosophers, therefore, are committed to the view that democratic social institutions must be structured in a way that realizes autonomy. As Christopher Zurn elegantly phrases it, “free actions require an accommodating social environment from which those actions derive their sense and purpose, and within which those actions fit into a cooperative scheme of social activity”.<sup>28</sup> Conceived in such a manner, Hegel and Dewey anticipate what Honneth, following Talcott Parsons, calls a ‘relational institution’:

[Relational institutional] systems of action must be termed “relational” because the activities of individual members within them complement each other; they can be regarded as “ethical” because they invoke a form of obligation that does not have the contrariness of a mere “ought,” without, however, lacking moral considerateness. The behavioural expectations that subjects have of each other within such ‘relational’ institutions are institutionalised in the shape of social roles that normally ensure the smooth interlocking of their respective activities. When subjects fulfil their respective roles, they complement each other’s incomplete actions in such a way that they can only act in a collective or unified fashion. The reciprocally expectable behaviour bundled in these social roles therefore has the character of a subtle duty, because the subjects involved regard it as a condition for the successful realization of their common practices.<sup>29</sup>

Relational institutions, for Honneth, are required for social freedom: an agent realizes their own individual purposes in and through social institutions in which they engage in mutual recognitive practices. The roles and expectations of relational

<sup>25</sup> Kadlec 2006: 537.

<sup>26</sup> Dewey 1920: 16.

<sup>27</sup> Good 2010: 86.

<sup>28</sup> Zurn 2015: 161.

<sup>29</sup> Honneth 2014: 125.



institutions gain their power and validity from the kind of recognitive relations they promote and enable. As such, for a social institution to be a *relational* one, it must be wholly constituted by practices of communicative action, and it must promote and enable intersubjective recognition.

For example, consider the case of a queer Latinx, Esmeralda, whose participation in relational institutional environments enables her to identify that her self-realization is best achieved through becoming an academic: in order to achieve a healthy practical relation-to-self through this career choice, Esmeralda's activities must take place in (a) institutional environments whose norms of gender, race, and sexuality are free from coercive ideology; in (b) institutional environments with educational opportunities; in (c) institutional environments with high levels of epistemic capital, such as significant expertise and discursive sophistication; and in (d) institutional environments which offer direct access to labour markets. For Honneth, the environment fostering and constituting relational institutions is distinctive, since

[a]s beings who are dependent on interacting with our own kind, the experience of such a free interplay with our intersubjective environment represents the pattern of all individual freedom: The schema of free activity, prior to any tendencies to retreat into individuality, consists in the fact that others do not oppose our intentions, but enable and promote them.<sup>30</sup>

The sphere of *personal relations* (friendship, sexual intimacy, and family) is relational insofar as it allows individuals to develop and pursue their needs, hopes, and dreams, through their intersubjective confirmation by friends, lovers, and family members. The *market sphere* is relational insofar as it enables the realization of individuals' own aims by institutionalizing cooperation in the activity of meeting needs (consumption) and by institutionalizing cooperation in the activity of recognizing achievement (labour markets). The *modern Rechtsstaat* is relational insofar as it is structured to constitute a form of social freedom through its promotion and embodiment of democratic values, such as inclusion, equality, individuation, cooperation, consensus, and deliberation. To quote Zurn, "[t]hose institutional spheres must then embody practices of reciprocity and institutions of mutual recognition. And they must provide the social context necessary for individuals to realize the diversity of their individual ends 'in the experience of commonality'".<sup>31</sup>

If we interpret Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* and Deweyan democracy within the framework of relational institutions, then one can establish the second – and arguably more significant – socio-philosophical connection between Hegel and Dewey. For Hegel, social processes and modern institutions are *assessed* in terms

<sup>30</sup> Honneth 2014: 60.

<sup>31</sup> Zurn 2015: 164.

of how well (if at all) they enable the development of unique subjectivities that help individuals achieve self-realization. For Dewey, social processes and institutions are *assessed* in terms of how well (if at all) they enable growth. The normative dimensions of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* and Deweyan democracy are, crucially, *critical*, in that they play an important role in revealing how current social institutions fail to be relational institutions, since they fail to promote practices of symmetrical recognition necessary for growth.

## II. INTERSUBJECTIVITY, FREEDOM, AND CRITIQUE

I think an especially pertinent question now is whether in further developing the Western Marxist tradition of critical social theory, one *should* draw upon the conceptual resources of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* (and those of Deweyan pragmatist democracy) as prisms through which the (a) deficiencies of current social reality can be accurately described and (b) transformative visions of emancipation can be articulated. If one thinks one should do so, then one comes face-to-face with a significant barrier to such a project: the revolutionary kind of critical theory which questions whether Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* (and, crucially, Honneth's critical social theory in *Freedom's Right*)<sup>32</sup> can be regarded as a *genuine* critical social theory.<sup>33</sup> In what follows, and in order to keep the paper as focused as possible, I will mostly focus on Hegel, as opposed to Dewey as well.

Under Adornian critical theory, all existing institutions and current discursive formations are fundamentally bad and ideologically perverted through-and-through. Their 'rational' structures are inherently pathological and totalising, rendering them ostensible barriers to autonomy. As Fabian Freyenhagen and Karen Ng respectively write:<sup>34</sup>

... on the basis of the ideology critique so important to the (first generation of the) Critical Theory tradition, [i]t does not follow from the mere fact that institutions guarantee some freedoms and people actively reproduce them, that these people think that the institutions are the best there ever have been; nor, indeed, that the institutions deserve the active support they receive. False consciousness can make us actively support what we would not so support, but instead oppose, if we were free

<sup>32</sup> Viz. Freyenhagen 2015: 143.

<sup>33</sup> Though I do not have the space to discuss the following issue in any real depth, it is crucial to note that any defender of Hegelianism as critically-oriented must face up to the additional, and arguably more complicated, charges that Eurocentrism and racism are structurally embedded throughout every level of Hegelian philosophical commitments. See, for example, Tibebe (2011), Ciccariello-Maher (2016), Parks (2013), and Habib (2017) for further on this subject.

<sup>34</sup> Schaub (2015) is arguably even more hostile to Honneth.

from this false consciousness. The mere fact that a society guarantees some freedom does not suffice to show that it does not generate false consciousness.<sup>35</sup>

When institutions fail to realise existing norms, these are viewed as deviations or misdevelopments from the ideal, but never as a sign that an institution is itself contradictory or unfit for the realisation of existing norms (let alone new norms or the reinterpretation of old ones) ... This seems to go against key tenets of critical theory, and I would also note, nonideal theory, insofar as it disables the thought that the transformation of ideals and reality go hand in hand.<sup>36</sup>

Both Freyenhagen and Ng correctly point out that there *are* substantive differences between first-generation Critical Theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer, and third-generation Critical Theorists such as Honneth, who, given his Hegelian-Deweyan discursive orientation, “betrays a fatal tendency towards mere reformism”<sup>37</sup> in the eyes of Freyenhagen especially.

When one puts Adorno and Horkheimer in conversation with Hegelian-Deweyan theory, the substantive area of disagreement concerns whether the social pathologies endemic in modern capitalist society are essentially rooted in the logical structure of modern institutions. In other words, the question is: ‘Does modernity *become* subjecting, or has modernity *always been* subjecting?’

On the one hand, following Adorno, if modernity has always been subjecting, then modernity itself is *inherently* pathological, and its pathological qualities are due to its ideological genetic make-up rather than the background social forces at play distorting the norms of modern institutions thereby preventing those institutions from realising freedom.

On the other hand, if modernity becomes subjecting, then social pathologies are *contingent* features of non-progressive socio-political-economic arrangements, which are *temporary* (but nonetheless substantial) distortions of modern institutions normatively structured to realise freedom. This means social pathologies and misdevelopments can be agonistically overcome within those very institutions of modernity, because there is – to use Honneth’s term – an untouched ‘normative surplus’ in modernity, “... the non-coercive power to assert a normative surplus exercises a permanent pressure that will sooner or later destroy any remains of traditional practices”.<sup>38</sup> According to Freyenhagen, Jörg Schaub, and Ng, it is the commitment to some type of immanent critique that renders Honneth’s neo-Hegelian concept of normative reconstruction as, at best, mere reformism, or, at worst, in league with ideology.

On this subject, for Ernst Tugendhat, the idea of viewing Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* as having genuinely critical orientation is mistaken, because “[the theory of *Sittlichkeit*

<sup>35</sup> Freyenhagen 2015: 141.

<sup>36</sup> Ng 2019: 801.

<sup>37</sup> Honneth 2015: 213.

<sup>38</sup> Honneth 2014: 164.

lacks the conceptual resources to recognise] the freedom to be able ... rationally to take a position in *opposition* to existing norms”.<sup>39</sup> At no point in the *Philosophy of Right*, does Hegel argue that citizens need to be able to engage in rational-critical debate in a quasi-Habermasian discourse-legitimation of the state, where citizens have the space and resources to publicly and agonistically test norms for legitimacy and validity. Hegel, moreover, unlike Kant’s explicit critique of logical egoism in the *Anthropology*,<sup>40</sup> does not advocate freedom of the press (in part) as a vehicle for communicative action.

As such, for Tugendhat, since the theory of *Sittlichkeit* fails to question the whole horizon of modernity, by viewing all modern institutions as good and leaving little or no room for the development of a radically critical subjectivity, Hegelianism cannot be a critical social theory. Indeed, returning to the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel’s insistence in the following passage, as Kevin Thompson puts it, seems to mark “the eclipse of precisely this kind of project ..., and we would search the entire expanse of his philosophical system in vain, it would seem, for a space for the classical evaluative function of reason. Is there any sense, then, in which we can speak of Hegel’s own critical theory?”:<sup>41</sup>

... philosophy is *its own time grasped in thoughts*. It is just as foolish to imagine that any philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as that an individual can overleap his own time or leap over Rhodes. (EPR: 21-22)

Equally, Schaub has levelled serious objections to Honneth’s neo-Hegelian position in *Freedom’s Right* such that Honneth has found himself forced to consider his status as a critical social theorist *simpliciter*, and to consider whether or not the neo-Hegelian framework of normative reconstruction has anything of *meaningful* import for Critical Theory:

I find myself perceived all of a sudden as a staunch defender of the contemporary social order, having previously been understood as a radical reformer ... It is probably those objections of Jörg Schaub which initially gave me the strongest cause to doubt whether I could still understand myself as furthering the tradition of Critical Theory ... He is convinced that my method of “normative reconstruction” makes it in principle impossible for me to continue to take up the perspective of “radical criticism” at all, as that perspective is constitutive not only for the original intention of Critical Theory, but for any use to which one would want to put Critical Theory.<sup>42</sup>

Hegel and Honneth, of course, do not question the formal background of modernity, namely the idea that modern social institutions, *in their actual states*, help realise (social) freedom. Given this, however, I would contend that Hegelian

<sup>39</sup> Tugendhat 1986: 311.

<sup>40</sup> Viz. APPV: 128-29. Cf. LL: §57, 563.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson 2019: 84.

<sup>42</sup> Honneth 2015: 205-06.

*Sittlichkeit* is opposed, not to radical critique as such, but to *revolutionary* critique,<sup>43</sup> since, *contra* revolutionary critique, the *basic* form of the three freedom-enabling institutions of modernity is inherently *rational*.<sup>44</sup> As such, I believe the following by Neuhouser needs to be amended: “[i]t is easy to see how adopting a **revolutionary** [as opposed to ‘radically’] critical stance toward existing institutions is in conflict with the realisation of social freedom as Hegel conceives it, since doing so is incompatible with finding one’s identity within one’s social roles in the sense in which his theory requires”.<sup>45</sup> For Hegel (and Honneth), one cannot establish a meaningful or healthy practical relation-to-self independently of those recognitive practices provided by being in a family, having economic relationships, and being a citizen.

This is not because one is reducible to a family member or to an economic kind or to a state-bureaucratic kind, but because the formal structure of modern institutions provides one with the symbolic and material resources to develop and articulate one’s identity. In this way, Hegel and Hegelianism obviously rules out the desirability of Robespierre-type revolutionary critique, insofar as revolutionary critique eliminates *all existing institutions*, leaving no trace of the *ancien régime*. Crucially, however, Hegelianism (if not also Hegel *himself*) does not obviously rule out *radical critique as such*.

To help clarify my proposed distinction between radical critique as such and revolutionary critique, which Tugendhat does not recognise at all, but to which Schaub may at least display some sympathy, I would like to consider the following example: the logic underlying the *radical feminist* (as opposed to the liberal feminist) critique of the patriarchal family is not predicated on any revolutionary loathing of *the basic, non-ideological idea of a family*. Rather, the radical feminist critique of the patriarchal family is predicated on the basis that the patriarchal, ideological structuring of family relations and the private sphere renders the family sphere as an iron cage of women’s oppression, mutating it from the family-*qua*-family’s *basic* lifeworld form as an intimate relational institution, *built on and sustained by love*, empowering all members and helping realise their (Honnethian) self-confidence and practical relation-to-selves.

<sup>43</sup> See the following by Schaub on the idea of revolutionary critique/revolutionary progress: “Revolutionary progress has to be distinguished from gradual progress because in the former case we are not dealing with processes that lead to a more adequate interpretation and comprehensive realisation of norms already underlying existing, reproductively relevant social institutions. Rather, norms that are operative in reproductively relevant social institutions are abandoned in a normative revolution and different norm-institution complexes, that is, new institutions with new underlying norms, are established in the void left behind. Progress here is not gradual” (Schaub 2015: 114).

Cf. Wellmer (2014).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Neuhouser 2000: 268.

<sup>45</sup> Neuhouser 2000: 265.

Construed in this way, I think Ng's interpretation of the radical feminist critique is problematically phrased in her claim that "... the rational and optimal functioning of families was perfectly compatible with, and arguably even productive of, the subordination of women".<sup>46</sup> The rational and optimal functioning of *patriarchal* families was (and still very much is) perfectly compatible with, and productive of, the subordination of women; whereas, the rational and optimal functioning of families-qua-families is incompatible with the subordination of women.

In this respect, then, Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* has the discursive resources to support radical (but not) revolutionary critique, to the extent that currently existing modern social institutions can be consistently substantively challenged (rather than merely and insipidly *resisted* or tweaked) to embody actuality. By embodying actuality, those institutions realise their normative function. To quote Michael Thompson, "Hegel's thought is clear that ... critique also helps us think about alternative ways of shaping social institutions and norms so that they can approximate the universal and objectify social freedom".<sup>47</sup> And, as Karin De Boer helpfully articulates as well:

If these structures were embodied adequately in an actual state, citizens would have no reason to oppose the government and would of their own accord identify with the interests of the society as a whole ... Modern states might be defective with regard to the actual implementation of the structures and institutions that follow from the idea of the state, but not with regard to this idea itself.<sup>48</sup>

However, to complicate matters for my distinction between revolutionary critique and radical critique, in Honneth's rejoinder to Schaub's critique of normative reconstruction, Honneth notes the following about his neo-Hegelian framework:

... it became clear to me how wrong (in the light of my own considerations) it was that I had not allowed in my normative reconstruction more institutional malleability in the gradual realisation of sphere-specific norms. If I had done this, it would have left open the possibility of dealing with cases of "institutional revolution." This consists in the possibility that the underlying norm of a particular sphere of action can only be realised in a more appropriate and comprehensive way, through a fundamental change of the institution that had previously been served to realise it ... However, in the course of the struggle of some groups, it may be made apparent that a more comprehensive application of those norms could only be achieved if the institutional forms of the relevant spheres were fundamentally changed.<sup>49</sup>

What Honneth writes here, *prima facie*, suggests that his construal of *Sittlichkeit* is open to *revolutionary* critique. In response, though, I think Honneth's point is more subtle than this, since he qualifies the sense of 'revolution' here, by

<sup>46</sup> Ng 2019: 809.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson 2015: 129.

<sup>48</sup> De Boer 2018: 148-49.

<sup>49</sup> Honneth 2015: 208.

emphasising that it is *institutional*, as opposed to *total*. I take such qualification to suggest that the critical aspects of *Sittlichkeit* are closer to *radical critique* than to Robespierre-style revolutionary critique. This is because the idea of an *institutional* revolution concerns forcing existing modern institutions to embody their normative promise, and in doing so become *relational* institutions. Such a move fundamentally changes the existing normatively integrated sphere(s) of recognition practices, so that modern institutions are forced to become properly relational, and thereby enable the possibility of social freedom.

I previously claimed that, on the one hand, following Adorno, if modernity has always been subjecting, then modernity itself is inherently pathological, and its pathological qualities are due to its ideological genetic make-up rather than the background social forces at play distorting the norms of modern institutions thereby preventing those institutions from realising freedom. On the other hand, if modernity becomes subjecting, then social pathologies are contingent features of non-progressive socio-political-economic arrangements, which are temporary (but nonetheless substantial) distortions of modern institutions normatively structured to realise freedom.

Under the revolutionary critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, all existing institutions and current discursive formations are fundamentally bad and ideologically perverted through-and-through. Questioning the whole horizon of modernity, therefore, necessarily leads to one construing that horizon as essentially incapable of social transformation and that total revolution is the only viable option for the social critic. *Any* commitment to the basic institutional structure of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* will *always* be viewed by the revolutionary critical theorist as in collusion with oppressive ideology. To put this another way, a defender of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, such as Honneth, may offer the most careful and well-supported reading of concrete universality/mediated unity as not supporting either directly or indirectly ideological oppression, but the reply will claim that, *regardless of the intentions or competency of the arguments offered*, the defender of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* will be deluding themselves if they think they can provide a vocabulary for discourse about modernity which does *not* perpetuate social domination of individuals, given how much language is saturated and pathologically infected by ideology.

However, why should the first generation of the Frankfurt School be seen as defining the terms of the tradition of Critical Theory? If the first generation of the Frankfurt School defines the terms of the tradition of Critical Theory, what this means for the category ‘critical theorist’ is, for at least two principal reasons, rather concerning *on critical theoretic grounds*.

- (i) Critics become reified, transformed into ‘natural’, hermetically sealed, fanatical cult-like group kinds. Such reification fosters eerie pressures towards homogeneous identity-conformity and a purging of supposedly

impure members should those members be critical of the revolutionary notion that *all existing institutions and current discursive formations are irredeemably ideological*. I am, therefore, sympathetic to Honneth's respective caustic critiques of Schaub and Freyenhagen.<sup>50</sup>

(ii) Under revolutionary critical theory, the project of being at home in the world by revealing reason in the world is disastrously misunderstood as either endorsing social democracy, which renders the project normatively impotent, or speculatively justifying ideological and socio-economic subjection, which renders the project normatively blind and even reactionary.

Regarding (i), Arvi Särkelä and Justo Serrano Zamora correctly point out the *general* ideals of critical social theories:

Critical social theories are generally understood to be distinct from other normative theories by their explicit orientation toward emancipation: they not only present normative criteria for assessing the legitimacy or justification of social institutions or merely inquire into the actualised freedom of a given form of social life but claim to point toward a “freedom in view”—an end that might aid those participating in social struggles to overcome the pathological, alienated, or ideological social order of the present. John Dewey's social theory clearly cherishes this ideal of social criticism. It contributes to a critical social inquiry in a variety of ways, some of which, so we believe, are still to be discovered.<sup>51</sup>

Rather than retreat to any silos à la Freyenhagen, or limit discourse, in such a way that critical theorists compete with one another for the mantle of ‘Most Critical Critical Theorist’, Särkelä and Zamora correctly point out that the significant difference between critical and traditional (in this case, liberal) theorists lies in how the critical theorist *sans phrase*, unlike the liberal theorist, is concerned about understanding the nature of *oppression* and aims to articulate a *transformative and emancipatory narrative*. To this end, then, I think there is compelling reason to also suppose that the following passage in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* illustrates critical dimensions to Dewey's Hegelian social theory:

[T]he process of growth, of improvement and progress, rather than the static outcome and result, becomes the significant thing. Not health as an end fixed once and for all, but the needed improvement in health – a continual process – is the end and good. The end is no longer a terminus or limit to be reached. *It is the active process of transforming the existent situation*. Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfecting, maturing, refining is the aim in living. Honesty, industry, temperance, justice, like health, wealth and learning, are not goods to be possessed as they would be if they expressed fixed ends to be attained. They are

<sup>50</sup> Viz. Honneth 2015: 210-11; 213.

<sup>51</sup> Särkelä & Zamora 2017: 213.



directions of change in the quality of experience. Growth itself is the only moral “end.”  
(Dewey 1920: 177, emphasis added)

What Dewey writes about “the active process of transforming the existent situation” would hardly be out of place in any critical social theory – whether feminist, critical race theory, queer theory, Horkheimer and Adorno’s neo-Marxism,<sup>52</sup> Gramsci’s philosophy of *praxis*, Habermas’s colonization thesis, or Honneth’s worries about systemic patterns of individual and social misrecognition and nonrecognition.

With regard to (ii), the normative dimensions of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, as well as Deweyan democracy, shed important diagnostic light on a plurality of contemporary social pathologies and misdevelopments brought about by capitalism: this is because the normative dimensions of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* (and Deweyan democracy) are, crucially, of *critical* use, in that they can play an important role in revealing how current social institutions fail to be relational institutions, since they fail to promote practices of symmetrical recognition necessary for growth. Hegel (and Dewey) are not *as* critical of modernity as Adorno and Horkheimer, but, importantly, this does not *eo ipso* disqualify their conceptual resources from either involving commitments to radical, progressive social transformation or being legitimately deployed in such a way to articulate emancipatory narratives. Furthermore, I think both would also endorse the following scathing critique of neoliberalism by Honneth:

There can be no doubt that the current economic system in the developed countries of the West in no way represents a “relational” institution and is thus not a sphere of social freedom. It lacks all the necessary characteristics of such a sphere: It is not anchored in role obligations to which all could agree, and which interweave with each other in a way that allows subjects to view each other’s freedom as the condition of their own freedom; it therefore lacks an antecedent relation of mutual recognition from which the corresponding role obligations could draw any validity or persuasive power.<sup>53</sup>

*Sittlichkeit*’s intimate relationship with relational institutions reveals concern about currently deficient social reality, namely that antidemocratic trends gradually undermine the realisation of, what Horkheimer calls, an ‘*expressive totality*’.<sup>54</sup> Unlike false totalities, expressive totalities involve a conception of a social whole in which heterogeneous (but not inconsistent) needs and interests of members of society are expressed and also fully developed and realised at no cost to social stability; if anything, the expression, development and realisation of heterogeneous (but not inconsistent) needs and interests is required to avoid anomie.

<sup>52</sup> However, I grant that despite this expression by Dewey, the optimism and incremental overtones of his writings hardly seem to fit with the pessimism and negativism of Horkheimer and Adorno.

<sup>53</sup> Honneth 2014: 176.

<sup>54</sup> See also Jay (1984).

The consequence of a situation in which there is no expressive whole, but only a crystallisation into well-ordered homogeneous complexes under the steering mechanism of instrumental practices and unfettered market forces, is that the plight of individuality is almost hopeless. This is because the subjective and objective conditions for exercising freedom and achieving solidarity risk being eroded by increasing patterns of reification and social hegemonisation. These intersecting social pathologies are barriers to intersubjective recognition and the development of healthy subjectivities; in Deweyan terms, these intersecting social pathologies stunt *growth* and stultify self-development.

For Habermas and Honneth – in differing ways – the social pathologies and misdevelopments in advanced Western social democracies responsible for crisis situations are not embedded in the basic idea of modernity itself. The pathologies, misdevelopments, and relevant crises are due to either colonising encroachment of the communicative territory of the lifeworld by the steering power of instrumental practices, or by moral grammars which do not promote and sustain environments for intersubjective recognition. For Honneth in particular, since I have focused on his idea of a relational institution, the diagnosis is as follows: social pathologies and misdevelopments of capitalism are largely produced in and sustained by non-relational institutional environments which produce and sustain intersectional injustices.

In some respects, my Hegelian socialist position questions the whole horizon of modernity that Honneth takes for granted. This is for two reasons. Firstly, I am not completely convinced Honneth's idea of 'gradual realisation / gradual social improvement', to which he is committed in *Freedom's Right*, marks clear enough critical distance from the Whiggish articulation of the development of modern institutional frameworks. This is despite his desperation to not see his commitment to progress construed in exactly that manner. Secondly, unlike Honneth, who does not obviously appear to fully detail those *epistemic* practices which contribute and help sustain relations of misrecognition and nonrecognition,<sup>55</sup> I would stress that modern Western societies, quite simply, have disgraceful and appalling habits of epistemic misrecognition and nonrecognition.<sup>56</sup> This reveals how, in modernity, there is widespread, normalised virulent contempt for non-privileged groups: modern social institutions have substantive internal structural weaknesses; and modern social institutions often fail to encourage the quest for self-realisation and thereby leave people who are epistemically oppressed and marginalised in a constant state of alienation.

However, what separates my critical theoretic approach from that of Freyenhagen's, Schaub's, and Ng's Adornian preference for revolution is that I

<sup>55</sup> Honneth (2001), however, hints at the epistemic aspects of recognition here.

<sup>56</sup> See Dotson (2011, 2012, 2014a, 2014b), Giladi (2020b), Jackson (2018), Maitra (2009), and Mills (2007).

think there is compelling reason to suppose that questioning the whole horizon of modernity does not *necessarily* lead to one construing that all modern social institutions are essentially incapable of social transformation and that total revolution is the only viable option for the social critic: for, the very development of a plurality of 20<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century progressive movements to reactionary dispositions is part and parcel of critical modernist practices, wherein modernity is subjected to radical immanent critique to emerge out of a pathological state. To put this another way, the advantage of subjecting modernity to radical immanent critique is that I think there are enough resources in the project of modernity to correct itself, since pathologies and misdevelopments in modern social spheres are contingent: intersectional injustices can be overcome not only by total revolution, but also through the development of a radical form of deliberative democracy, in which power is rooted in the communicative power of the lifeworld, especially a well-functioning public sphere. In this way, one can start to understand that “the realisation of reason in the world is not a fact but a task”.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Marcuse 1955: 26.

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