

Chapter 11

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Recognition, Culture and Economy: Honneth's Debate with Fraser

Introduction

In their co-authored introduction to *Redistribution or Recognition?* Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth state that “at its deepest level” their book is concerned with the relationship between the economic order of contemporary capitalism and the patterns of cultural valuation that prevail in capitalist society.¹ The motivation behind their inquiry is to correct the flawed conceptions of economy and culture that, in their view, debilitate the tradition of critical social theory, and to renew that tradition around non-reductive, more differentiated conceptions. Fraser presents her contribution as pointing the way beyond “economism” and “culturalism”, two pernicious forms of reductionism that account for all social change, including the kind of change brought about by progressive politics, in either economic or cultural terms alone.² Honneth, for his part, targets the “anti-normative” bias in the way the Critical Theory tradition conceives the capitalist economic system, but he is just as opposed to notions of culture as an undifferentiated source of norms and values.³ Honneth and Fraser share the

conviction that critical social theory must develop a conception of capitalist society that articulates the relation between its economic structure and cultural norms in a more satisfactory manner than do currently available models.

For the critical social theorist, three types of consideration are relevant to determine whether an articulation of this sort is satisfactory or not. First, there is the question of its descriptive and explanatory adequacy. The standard against which the theory's descriptive and explanatory adequacy is to be measured is social reality itself. Second, there is the issue of determining the normative significance of this reality. An articulation that is satisfactory in this respect will render perspicuous the fit (or lack of it) between what is and what ought to be. Such articulations, when successful, at once clarify the grounds of social criticism (the standards against which the worth of social reality should be judged) and make the need for social criticism more palpable. A third kind of consideration concerns the grounds for hope that existing normative deficits, or the gap between standard and reality, can be overcome. A critical social theory that provides no grounds for such hope is as unsatisfactory as a physical theory that delivers no recipes for intervening effectively in the physical environment. In striving to articulate the proper relation between economy and culture, critical social theorists must keep in mind all three kinds of consideration: the

descriptive/explanatory, the normative and the emancipatory/transformational.

This desideratum is crucial for both Honneth and Fraser and it shapes the course of their debate, which criss-crosses over issues in social theory, theories of justice, diagnoses of the times and strategies for progressive politics.

I have no wish to question the idea that the commitments implicit in one's beliefs about society, one's moral judgements and social hopes should be expressible in a unified philosophical vocabulary. On the contrary, Critical Theory owes its power precisely to its stubborn adherence to the project of integrating these commitments, or as it used to be called, of reconciling 'theory' and 'practice'. But in the discussion that follows I want to bracket the larger question of what practical orientation Critical Theory provides in order to focus on the descriptive function of the categories disputed in the Honneth-Fraser exchange. In particular I want to address how the concept of the 'economic' features in their debate since this, as we have seen, goes to the heart of the matter for both Fraser and Honneth.

Although the contrast between 'economy' and 'culture' that structures the Fraser-Honneth debate derives ultimately from Weber, it has a more proximate ancestry in Habermas' work. So I shall begin by glancing back at Habermas' formulation,

not just because its background role in shaping the current debate has not been properly acknowledged (though I believe that is the case), but because Fraser and Honneth's original responses to it provide a nice segue into their current positions.⁴ After briefly reviewing what those responses were, I then offer a critical analysis of the conceptions of economy and culture they now propose.

Habermas' Original Proposal

Let me start with a reminder that the distinction between redistribution and recognition, in the form it is debated by Fraser and Honneth, is inherited from the account Habermas gave of changing patterns of social conflict in the concluding sections of the *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981).⁵ By this time Habermas was already able to draw on empirical studies documenting the emergence of a "new politics" geared towards "quality of life", "equal rights", "participation" and "individual self-realisation" from an "old politics" focused on economic and security issues. Developments such as these, in Habermas' view, reflected a fundamental shift in the way advanced capitalist societies generated and managed social conflict. On the one hand, what Habermas called "problems of distribution" that arose in "domains of material reproduction" generated a potential for conflict that could be allayed, if not fully resolved, through the redistributive mechanisms of the welfare state. Put otherwise, and

drawing on Habermas' earlier terminology, the welfarist politics of redistribution is a crucial means by which advanced capitalist societies solve (or at least neutralise) one particular kind of "legitimation" problem. However, this kind of politics is inappropriate for dealing with conflicts that now arose in what Habermas called "domains of cultural reproduction". These conflicts were not sparked by problems of distribution but rather concern – in Habermas' lapidary if somewhat enigmatic formulation – "the grammar of forms of life". While Habermas did not use the expression 'politics of recognition' here, he did say that this kind of politics was oriented towards "defending and restoring endangered ways of life". This sort of politics involved a form of conflict qualitatively distinct from that arising in the sphere of material reproduction geared towards redistribution, and it could be used to characterise the new social movements that shot up in the 1960s and 70s.

But the contrast between conflicts over distribution and those concerning the grammar of forms of life was not just an interpretation of changing patterns of politics and social movements. More fundamentally, its applicability to these phenomena provided a kind of corroboration of the 'thesis of internal colonisation' at the heart of the theory of communicative action. *If* the lifeworld *had* become colonised by the system, there *would* (given other factors) be conflict

constellating around the grammar of forms of life as well as problems of distribution. There would be heterogeneous modes of conflict generated at the interface of lifeworld and system as well as traditional class-based conflicts (however institutionalised and pacified through welfare state) over the distribution of resources generated by a relatively autonomous market economy. Of course there would be other consequences too, including forms of social pathology not directly tied to a potential for protest, and one of the chief advantages claimed of Habermas' theory was its broader diagnostic sweep relative to its rivals. However, what needs to be emphasised here is that Habermas' talk of conflicts over distribution and the grammar of forms of life was bound up with a framework for identifying and explaining the more or less sustainable mutations of modern society. The availability of material resources to redistribute requires the differentiation of system-regulated contexts of action (market-driven contexts oriented towards accumulation), placing limits on how much social life can be regulated by the norms of communicative action. On the other hand, the expanded scope for instrumentally rational action in modern societies is itself limited by the normative action-orientations that prevail in the modern lifeworld. The cultural or 'symbolic' resources of the lifeworld, the grammar of modern forms of life, cannot be instrumentalised indefinitely without triggering social conflicts and a degree of social disintegration.

According to Habermas' theory, we need to posit limits to such instrumentalisation, or incursions of the system into the lifeworld, to make sense of the characteristic social pathologies and conflicts of the times.

Now it is not insignificant that both Fraser and Honneth, whom we should recall were two of the most prominent figures in the critical reception of the *Theory of Communicative Action* in the mid 1980s, focused their critique on the social-theoretical framework of Habermas' wide-ranging work. In her influential 1985 article "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender" Fraser criticised Habermas for failing to account properly for gender-based patterns of social conflict, which in turn led to blind spots in his theory concerning the grievances that motivated the women's movement and its emancipatory potential.⁶ These oversights, Fraser argued, were not simply due to limitations of scope: they were not just gaps that could be filled in leaving the rest of the theoretical framework untouched. Rather, they arose because Habermas was (at least sometimes) confusedly committed to a conception of his basic categories as 'natural kind' terms that designated distinct domains of reality. The thesis of internal colonisation seemed to imply that there were ontologically distinct spheres of cultural or symbolic reproduction (the lifeworld) on the one hand, and material reproduction (the economic system) on the other.

And it seemed to presuppose a difference in kind between contexts of action integrated by social norms, cultural values and consensus, and those coordinated through the media of money and power to the exclusion of norms and cultural values. However, as soon as one considers where gender-conflicts are located, it becomes clear that there are no ontologically distinct spheres of symbolic and material reproduction, and no absolute difference between 'system-regulated' and 'norm-guided' contexts of action. Societies reproduce themselves materially as well as symbolically through family life, which is the site of strategic action as well as action oriented by moral norms and ethical values, just as economic activity is identified and rewarded according to cultural norms, not least of course regarding gender.

However, Fraser's argument was not just that Habermas' distinctions between material and cultural reproduction, and between systemically and socially integrated contexts of action were empirically false when construed as involving natural kinds terms or as being 'absolute'. Her further point was that they reinforce the *ideological* appearance that there is such a thing as 'the economy', which is distinct from the family. The appearance is ideological because it masks the unpaid work of childrearing that women contribute to the economy, while making it seem that the spheres of childrearing, family life and paid work are

'naturally' different and ought to be kept separate. At the same time, Fraser argued that the empirical inadequacy and ideological potential of Habermas' distinctions arose from the *ontological purport* they were presumed to possess. So long as the distinction between material and cultural reproduction was regarded merely as a tool for social analysis, as invoking distinct standpoints from which to think about social processes, it could in principle serve a useful purpose. Likewise, it made sense to distinguish between contexts in which strategic action was predominant from those in which actions were integrated on the basis of shared values, so long as the role of both types of action in all action-contexts is acknowledged. Once the family is seen as a *mélange* of strategic, consensual and norm-oriented action, viewable from the perspective of both symbolic and material reproduction, its resemblance to the economy becomes apparent, and the ideological appearance of their real difference vanishes. Families can thus usefully be analysed as economic systems in their own right that exploit female labour. And the capitalist economy, for its part, can be analysed in terms of the particular 'moral-cultural dimension' it possesses: specifically, a masculinist one that diminishes and demeans the contribution of women. Admittedly, it is not clear from Fraser's 1985 article that Habermas' distinctions between material and symbolic reproduction and between socially and systemically integrated action contexts *are* especially useful for critical social theory. The point is that they are

baleful only when regarded as possessing ontological purport, and this does not rule out a more positive pragmatic value when regarded as standpoints for analysis in other contexts.⁷ As we shall see below, Fraser actively embraces these distinctions as analytical tools in her later debate with Honneth over redistribution and recognition.

Before turning to that, let us briefly consider Honneth's response to Habermas in the *Critique of Power*, also published in 1985.⁸ Although Honneth's focus was more on the research program that linked Habermas to the first generation of the Frankfurt School, and less on Habermas' success in clarifying "the struggles and wishes of the age", Honneth shared Fraser's fundamental concern with determining the 'critical' character of Habermas' social theory.⁹ And although Honneth reached his conclusions by way of an immanent critique of Habermas' thought, rather than by applying Habermas' theory to the case of gender, the substance of the conclusions he arrived at was much the same as Fraser's. Like Fraser, Honneth criticised the dualistic image of modern society projected from Habermas' writings. According to Honneth, Habermas at first construed the object-domain of critical social theory in terms of distinct but unevenly developed spheres of norm-free purposive action oriented to technical control and normatively regulated communicative action oriented to reaching

understanding. However, this implausibly implied that in spheres of purposive action 'technical' rules somehow applied themselves, and it falsely made it seem as if there were no purposively rational organisation of everyday life prior to the emergence of capitalism – nor normative conditions (embodied for example in law) for that emergence. To correct these distortions, Honneth observed, Habermas reconceived the object-domain of his mature social theory as distinct but unevenly exploited modes of action-coordination: that by which the symbolic resources of the lifeworld were reproduced rationally (communicative action), and that that was responsible for the efficient reproduction of material resources (the 'steering media' of money and power). However, this hardly fared better, Honneth objected, since it implied the existence of norm-free mechanisms of action-coordination on the one hand, and power-free paths of dialogical interaction on the other. While Fraser attributed these dualistic fictions to Habermas' tendency to ontologise his categories, Honneth's explanation was that they reflected Habermas' misguided preoccupation with a founding idea of critical social theory: the disturbance in the self-formation of the species/subject wrought by the technical domination of nature. The central feature of this idea is that some *norm-free* or norm-transcending mechanism is ultimately responsible for the characteristic social pathologies of the times. For Honneth, diagnoses of the times in terms of the domination of instrumental reason, identity-thinking,

disenchantment, technocracy, the colonisation of the lifeworld by system, and for that matter 'power' and 'capital' are but avatars of this fundamental but mistaken notion.

By different means, then, Honneth and Fraser reached a similar conclusion about the thesis of internal colonisation. For both, it involved an implausibly dualistic conception of society that artificially separated spheres of material and cultural reproduction and social and systemic modes of action integration. Furthermore, like Fraser, Honneth challenged the model of social conflict foregrounded in the theory of communicative action. Just as Fraser criticised Habermas' theory for overlooking the fact that contemporary conflicts around gender concerned not whether lifeworld norms should prevail but which norms should hold sway, so Honneth objected that Habermas' diagnosis screened out conflicts that arose within the sphere of the social. However, Honneth's point was not so much about the inadequacy of Habermas' analysis of contemporary social conflicts, such as those into which the new social movements were drawn, as about the dynamics of social change in general. Thus while Honneth and Fraser shared the conviction that Habermas had misdiagnosed conflicts that arose over the meaning of norms as disturbances at the seam of lifeworld and system, Honneth saw this as exemplifying a deeper conceptual flaw in Habermas' whole approach

to the evolution of society in the *Theory of Communicative Action*. However, Honneth also detected traces of an alternative approach in some of Habermas' earlier work, one that promised to put critical social theory on a sounder footing, and which Honneth would single-mindedly seek to develop in his own work. This alternative model construed social interaction as "a *struggle* between social groups for the *organisational form* of purposive rational action" from which new social forms emerged.¹⁰ Thus "under conditions characterised by an unequal division of burdens and privileges", practical conflicts would arise over "the legitimacy of existing social norms and the introduction of new ones".¹¹ If the newly negotiated institutionalised norm still prescribes "an unequal distribution of burdens and advantages", the struggle for social recognition is set in motion again.¹² In this model of the moral dynamic found in the struggle between social classes a new basis for the critique of power suggested itself, one that would avoid the reifying dualisms of Habermas' mature theory. Such struggles for recognition, which Honneth later dubbed "the moral grammar of social conflicts",¹³ encompassed what Habermas had conceived first as separated spheres of communicative and purposive action and then as 'uncoupled' modes of action integration, responsible for reproducing the rationalised modern lifeworld and the capitalist economy respectively. It would thus make no sense to construe conflicts over the grammar of forms of life, conceived now as

struggles for recognition, as fundamentally different in kind from conflicts generated by problems of distribution.

Looking back at Honneth and Fraser's original responses to Habermas, one is struck above all by the convergence of their positions. Let us now consider how the problem of articulating the economic and cultural orders of contemporary capitalist society, formulated under the rubric of 'redistribution or recognition', pulls them apart.

Fraser's Perspectival Dualism

As I mentioned at the beginning, Fraser aims to construct a framework for critical social theory that moves conclusively beyond the false reductionisms of 'economism' and 'culturalism'. Economism is the tendency to look at social developments and events as if they were wholly shaped by economic imperatives, imperatives that underlie and ultimately account for whatever cultural values hold sway in society. Injustices that seem to arise from prevailing patterns of cultural valuation – for example, institutionalised racism and sexism, or culturally entrenched forms of disrespect shown towards blacks or women – are then said to be really due to economic or 'class' relations. Economism then advocates 'class politics' as the only really effective strategy for correcting all

kinds of injustice. Vulgar Marxism, the view that economic motives explain everything and that the class structure is the root of all wrongs, is the paradigm of this form of reductionism. Culturalism makes the opposite error to economism: it views the economic order of a society as wholly determined by cultural values, and it construes injustice solely in terms of social discrimination, injured identity and denied cultural recognition. The culturalist outlook is thus blind to the independent workings of the capitalist economy and the unjust distribution of resources it generates among classes. Fraser thinks that Honneth (and Taylor) is guilty of culturalism, indeed this is the central reason why Fraser opposes his position. Even from what we have just seen about Honneth's argument in the *Critique of Power*, this looks like a tendentious characterisation, and it has to be said it sets their whole debate off on the wrong foot.

Nevertheless, it is clearly a good thing to leave economism and culturalism behind, and Fraser is surely right to insist that the notions of recognition and class, at least, are indispensable to critical social theory. The problem facing Fraser is to show exactly how the notions of recognition and class are to be articulated in a non-economistic, non-culturalist critical social theory.

The thrust of Fraser's solution is to propose that class and identity be understood as referring to two analytically distinct aspects of a social order: the 'economy'

and 'culture'. The social order is correspondingly criticisable from two analytically distinct points of view: how resources are distributed or maldistributed, and how cultural differences (or status positions) are recognised or misrecognised. Reductionism is avoided because class as opposed to status, the distribution of resources within the economy as opposed to the institutionalised patterns of recognition in the culture, are not conceived to be *substantively* distinct. Class and status, distribution and recognition, do not refer to different things, or to ontologically separate spheres of society such as a norm-free market or a market-free culture. They are analytic, not substantive distinctions. They provide alternative perspectives or standpoints from which to describe and normatively assess any aspect of a given society. Such perspectival dualism treats "every practice as simultaneously economic and cultural, albeit not necessarily in equal proportions" so as to "assess each of them from two different perspectives".¹⁴ It can thus draw attention to the 'mutual imbrication' of class and status, economy and culture, the distribution order and the recognition order. Moreover, it is also capable, Fraser claims, of identifying the "causal interactions" between them, a task that she maintains is as important for critical social theory as philosophically well-grounded normative critique.¹⁵ Fraser's approach is capable of undertaking the latter task because of its reliance on a deontological principle of participatory parity (rather than a substantive

conception of the good). That is to say, it traces back the wrongness of maldistribution and misrecognition to social arrangements that prevent members of society from interacting with each other as peers.¹⁶ Thus while class injustice (injustices of distribution) and cultural injustice (injustices of misrecognition) are analytically distinct, they can be (and in the contemporary world, always are) present in one and the same social practice, and they share the same objectively criticisable normative deficit.

As Honneth remarks in his reply to Fraser, all distinctions, even merely analytical ones, have to be grounded in something.¹⁷ What are the grounds of Fraser's distinctions? For the most part, they are pragmatic. That is, they are useful for both directing and keeping fluid the practice of normative criticism. In particular, her model opens the way for a critique of gender and race relations that can deal with both the economic and cultural injustices they involve, as well as status or identity issues that arise as part of class-based claims for redistribution. At the same time, however, Fraser appeals to social-theoretic considerations not directly tied to pragmatic criteria to back up the particular distinctions she employs. This becomes clear when we consider what Fraser means by 'the economy'. Fraser's official view, as we just saw, is that every practice has an economic aspect, and that the economy is how the social order

looks from a particular perspective, which brings only one of its aspects to light. However, this view sits alongside another, which seems hard to reconcile with it. According to this other view, economic institutions are those that “prioritise strategic action” rather than “value-regulated interaction”.¹⁸ In modern market economies, these institutions gain an unprecedented degree of independence from those regulated by cultural norms and values. Markets have thus come to “constitute the core institutions of a specialised zone of economic relation, legally differentiated from other zones”.¹⁹ In this “marketised zone” social interaction is regulated by “the functional interlacing of strategic imperatives, as individuals act to maximise self-interest”.²⁰ Modern capitalist societies are distinctive in that they have an economy that is impersonal and “quasi-autonomous”, possessing “a logic of its own” that interacts with the cultural order.²¹ The view being expressed here appears to be that the economy is that concentrated zone of strategic action, manifest predominantly in markets, which in capitalist societies comes to be regulated in impersonal, indirect ways in accordance with its own functional requirements, but that nevertheless causally interacts with other, non-economic, non-marketised zones in which patterns of cultural and moral value still hold sway.

This is a quite different conception to the one dual-perspectivism, Fraser's official position, countenances. And it is striking how Fraser oscillates between a view that sets up the economy as a separate social sub-system – one in which strategic action predominates and actions are coordinated according to the autonomous logic of the money-medium – and one that views any social sphere as readable from an economic (or cultural) perspective. Honneth himself picks up on Fraser's oscillation between these two views, but how are we to explain it?²² A way opens up if we think back to Fraser's original response to Habermas. The failure of the thesis of internal colonisation to account for gender-based social conflict convinced Fraser that the distinctions between system and lifeworld, social and system integration, and domains of cultural and material reproduction could not have any ontological purport. At best they represented standpoints available to the critical social theorist, whose worth depended on the use the theorist could extract from them. However, it was not clear from Fraser's critique of Habermas what use they could be. As we have seen, Honneth was just as sceptical about the value of these distinctions in his reading of Habermas. However, in the debate with Honneth, whose theory of recognition Fraser regards as irremediably culturalist, these distinctions are brought back into play. They serve to draw attention to the independent workings of the economic system, in which material (not just cultural) resources are reproduced through contexts of action integrated

by the 'functional interlacing of strategic imperatives' (rather than cultural norms). Furthermore, they seem to provide a theoretical framework within which the causal interaction between media-regulated economy and norm-regulated culture can be determined. This correction of Honneth's putative culturalism, however, reintroduces categories with an inescapable ontological purport: action-contexts, or mechanisms of action-coordination, can only separate from each other, develop according to independent 'logics', and then causally interact if they are different in nature. These real differences are in fact what *ground* the differences in standpoint. However, this then leaves us back with 'substantive dualism' and all its attendant problems, which in turn trigger a reassertion of the merely 'analytical' or 'perspectival' status of the key social-theoretic categories. And so the oscillation continues. It is as if functionalism and hermeneutics, divorced after their unhappy marriage in the mid 1980s, have reunited but still can't work it out.²³

Leaving to one side the ambiguity regarding the ontological purport of Fraser's distinction between economy and culture, there are still problems arising from the content attributed to these categories. Economic activity, in Fraser's view, is strategic action the consequences of which are integrated according to the functional logic of system-preservation. It includes not only the typical behaviour

of the marketplace but the *productive labour* that creates the things circulated there. Now there is of course much more to be said about this conception, but just from this basic characterisation it is evident that Fraser has inherited from Habermas a highly questionable conception of labour as instrumental action. This is also reflected in Fraser's fundamental view that it is the *distributive* mechanisms in society that have normative significance, not the activity of production or productive labour as such. The latter counts normatively only as an aspect of the former, with the division of labour and property relations, for example, significant insofar as they are governed by the norms of distributive justice. This idea is implausible though from both a normative and a social-theoretic point of view. To explain why, let me briefly consider a thought-experiment Fraser uses to illustrate the 'ideal-type' of class differentiation. Fraser writes:

In this conception class differentiation is rooted in the economic structure of capitalist society. The working class is the body of persons who must sell their labor power under arrangements that authorize the capitalist to appropriate surplus productivity for its private benefit. The core injustice of these arrangements is exploitation, an especially deep form of maldistribution in which the proletariat's own energies are turned against it, usurped to sustain a system that benefits others ... The remedy for the injustice, accordingly, is redistribution, not recognition. Overcoming class exploitation requires restructuring the political economy so as to alter the class distribution of burdens and benefits ... The last thing it (the proletariat) needs is recognition of its difference.²⁴

Fraser does not use this thought-experiment to describe the injustice to which the working class *actually* is (or was) subject. It is not meant to suggest, for instance, that the members of the proletariat did not have their own distinct cultural identity and values the recognition of which they struggled for. And it is not meant to suggest that members of the working class do not also suffer from status subordination and demeaning cultural attitudes. The ideal type, on its own, masks a 'complex reality'. This is just why a dual-perspective or two-dimensional approach is needed: malrecognition and maldistribution are mutually imbricated even in this folk-paradigm case of class injustice.

Nevertheless, this 'ideal type' of class differentiation does supposedly illustrate the *analytical* distinction between distributive injustice and injustices of misrecognition. While, in the course of her argumentation, Fraser will refine the 'folk-conception' of class and economic injustice illustrated in the thought-experiment, she holds fast to the idea that maldistribution, and the class-politics aimed at correcting it, is conceptually distinct from misrecognition and struggles against it.

I have two broad reasons for doubting the merits of this articulation of the relation between an economic, distributive order, with its complementary notion of class, and a cultural, recognitive order. First, it fails to address the crucial

question of what it is exactly that the economic order distributes. To speak abstractly about the 'benefits and burdens' of society is not sufficiently precise. To speak more precisely we need to have a more determinate, fine-grained idea of what a society actually produces. However, this can only be done by considering what the individuals in a society actually *do*, and how they do it in relation *to each other*. As soon as we ask that question – what are the social relations between individuals that work? – we are in the realm of recognition. Once we draw out what is implicit in the notion of distribution, we are forced into thinking about social relations mediated by recognition (or its withdrawal). If so, this casts doubt on the usefulness of the distinction between recognition and redistribution even as a tool of analysis, before we even get to the question of the perspectival or substantive basis of the distinction.

The second reason for scepticism is that the distinction as it stands fails to address adequately the question of what is recognised. On the one hand, it is not clear why recognition is restricted to one's place in the 'cultural order' or to 'status'. Fraser admonishes some recognition theorists for talking as if the cultural goods of recognition are just as subject to distribution and redistribution as economic benefits.²⁵ For Fraser, such talk is at best metaphorical and is likely to create confusion. Certainly, she is right to want to avoid an economic

reduction of the goods of recognition, as if they could be distributed and redistributed like loaves or money. However, that misconception can be avoided without having to rely on a contrast between material and symbolic goods, which once in place does indeed make the idea of an economic recognition order seem absurd. More to my current point, it is not clear why recognition should exclude – even at the notional or ideal-typical level – what one does as a member of a class, and in particular what one does, in relation to others, in one’s work. It is true that the moral injuries of class include low pay (maldistribution) and status subordination. And as Fraser notes, these can be analysed into a lack of participatory parity; but they include more than that. They include the experiences of humiliation, fragilisation, atomisation and shame: experiences of disrespect and the withdrawal of recognition that are not even notionally separable from the sufferer’s place in the economic order.²⁶ And lack of participatory parity – the norm by which we measure the moral meaning of economic and cultural disorder in Fraser’s account – can seem insignificant by comparison.

It may be that Fraser would find nothing to disagree with here: one’s location within the economic order makes one vulnerable to particular kinds of misrecognition as well as maldistribution. Fraser does say explicitly that, “a

politics of class recognition may be needed both in itself and to help get a politics of redistribution off the ground".²⁷ Nonetheless, Fraser's whole account turns on the notion that the independence of the economic order of capitalist societies from their patterns of cultural valuation generates two analytically distinct types of injustice: *economic* injustices that can be remedied by the redistribution of resources (the matter of old-style politics), and *cultural* injustices that can be rectified by granting proper recognition to a discriminated-against group (giving due recognition to different forms of life). However, the points just adumbrated seem to lend support to the claim Honneth insists on that the distinction between redistribution and recognition, grounded this way, is unwarranted. They suggest that so-called economic injustice, injustice arising from the work one does or one's class position, is inseparably tied up with the 'logic of asymmetrical recognition'. This undermines Fraser's thesis that the 'moral grammar of social conflicts' to borrow Honneth's expression, involves distribution struggles and struggles for recognition that are analytically and *in principle* empirically distinct.

With the dialectic swinging in Honneth's favour, let us now look at how the cultural and economic orders are articulated within his theory of recognition.

Honneth's Anti Anti-normativism

We saw when considering Honneth's response to Habermas' thesis of internal colonisation that even within the social-theoretical framework tentatively advanced in the *Critique of Power*, it makes no sense to oppose struggles for recognition with conflicts over the asymmetrical distribution of the material privileges and burdens of social life. Hence there is as little point in choosing between a 'politics of redistribution' and a 'politics of recognition' from where Honneth stands as from Fraser's vantage point. It is clear from the outset that for Honneth, the 'grammar of forms of life' includes the way societies distribute resources, and that a politics of redistribution, where this is an appropriate response to injustice, is itself a matter of correcting asymmetrical patterns of recognition. It is also clear that Honneth is as strongly of the view as Fraser that radical redistributive measures are needed to correct the injustices of contemporary capitalist societies. Honneth makes these points himself in his response to Fraser and there is no need to take them further. However, if Honneth does not face the problem of articulating the relation between the politics of recognition and redistribution as such (since he does not use this distinction in the way Fraser does), there is still the question of how capitalism's 'economic order' is to be conceptualised within the theoretical framework he

proposes. Of course Fraser has this problem too, and it is their differing approaches that interest me here.

The main problem Honneth has with Fraser's position is that it asserts the independence of economic activity and economic institutions from normative expectations and structures. He questions both the intelligibility of a social sphere – the 'economy' – in which actions are coordinated automatically through the medium of money, and *a fortiori*, the specific application of that notion to capitalist society. The very distinction between a norm-free zone of system integration and a normatively regulated sphere of social integration, Honneth suggests, rests on the problematic assumption that social reproduction can take place independently of constraints imposed by the standards of acceptable human conduct prevalent in a society. After all, he points out, the functional efficacy of money as a 'steering medium' is contingent on its acceptance as a legitimate form of coordinating behaviour. A point like this holds of all societies, but in Honneth's view it is particularly important to bear in mind for the analysis of contemporary capitalism. Capitalist society generates the appearance of a norm-free zone – the economy – in which profit-maximisation is the only guiding principle, as if it were the sole determinant of economic activity. However, this ignores the "social limits on markets" that are imposed by patterns of cultural

evaluation and most importantly by law.²⁸ For Honneth, then, the capitalist economic order has to be understood as “not only normatively but also factually ‘embedded’ in the normatively structured social order”.²⁹

For Honneth, as we have seen, the key to this normative social order is recognition. He identifies two ways in which the specifically capitalist economic order is constrained by such norms, that is, by institutionally embedded expectations and demands for social recognition. First, there is the principle of individual achievement (*Leistungsprinzip*), according to which one is socially esteemed not on the basis of one’s inherited place in the social hierarchy (as in feudal society), but on account of what one makes of one’s own life as an individual. This principle provides a justification for the unequal distribution of wealth in capitalist society, but it is also called on to criticise inequalities (undeserved wealth). The second principle is that of equal respect. This principle was used to legitimate the expropriation of disadvantaged groups (as it regards all as formally equal, each with the same subjective right to property, including the right, for example, to own labour power), but it was also later used to support the more or less egalitarian redistributive measures of the welfare state (to provide minimum standards of welfare for all). Now Honneth stresses that both these legitimations of the distribution of goods and resources in capitalist

society have always functioned ideologically. He agrees, for instance, with Fraser's point that they have traditionally been interpreted in a way that hides the contribution of women to society, and he goes as far as to say that the "superimpositions" and "distortions" inherent in it make it all but unrecognisable as "a normative principle of mutual recognition" at all.³⁰ At the same time though, women and other groups can appeal to the achievement principle in their struggles for recognition of the work they do, that is, in articulating their feelings of injustice at not being properly esteemed. The principle of equal respect can be drawn on for making legal challenges to distributions the achievement principle might otherwise countenance. Such struggles for recognition, Honneth insists, are integral to the capitalist economy. They played a crucial role in its coming into being, and they continue to shape its development.

For these reasons, Honneth is convinced that the economic order is actually constituted through institutionalised "interpretations of the achievement principle, which give it a particular shape in the form of a division of labour and a distribution of status".³¹ It is thus both conceptually and empirically mistaken to regard the capitalist economy as isolated from patterns of cultural valuation, as following a norm-free, autonomous logic of its own. The "efficiency

considerations” that systems theory takes to be the sole motor of economic development are “inextricably fused with cultural views of the social world”.³² Such views also provide the motivation for engaging in distributive struggles. Hence the capitalist economy is, to return to the formulation we began with, “bound up, from the very outset, with asymmetrical forms of recognition”.³³

What stands out above all in Honneth’s treatment of these matters is his concern to avoid the baleful anti-normativist bent of critical social theory. So much so, it would not be inaccurate to describe Honneth’s position as fundamentally ‘anti anti-normativist’. We have already seen how the rejection of anti-normativism provided the *leitmotif* of the *Critique of Power*: for all their critical insights, the key figures of the Frankfurt School (and, for that matter, Foucault) were ultimately led astray, so Honneth argued, by a social-theoretic blindness regarding the binding force and action-driving, history-shaping power of norms. This recovery of the socio-ontological provenance of the normative remains Honneth’s overriding objective in his debate with Fraser. From his rejection of Fraser’s claim regarding the norm-transcending logic of systemically integrated zones of interaction (‘the economy’), to his insistent repudiation of the “utilitarian anthropology” and “fixation on the concept of interest” that typically underwrites Marxist critiques of capitalism, Honneth’s anti anti-normativism is

clear.³⁴ However, in the context of this single-minded undertaking to redress conclusively critical social theory's atavistic anti-normativism, the danger of over-correction arises. The task of exorcising the spectre of *homo oeconomicus*, and with it the eradication of the anthropological basis of anti-normativism allegedly bequeathed to critical social theory by Marx, requires Honneth to *accentuate* the normative. By doing so, Honneth naturally makes himself vulnerable to charges of 'normativism', 'culturalism' and 'idealism'. Fraser does not hold back in making such charges in her reply to Honneth, and I shall conclude by briefly considering what substance there is to them.

One version of the culturalist charge concerns the role of cultural values in bringing out historical change. According to Fraser, Honneth ends up with the view that the development of capitalist society is to be explained solely in terms of the "cultural schemas of evaluation" that regulate it.³⁵ This view looks less absurd if it is taken into account that struggles for recognition concern the *institutionalisation* of norms or 'cultural schemas', in this case of the achievement principle and the principle of equal respect, but even then Honneth distances himself from this position. He denies that his reconstruction of the recognition order of capitalist societies was tied to "explanatory aims".³⁶ However, this rearguard position is difficult to stick to, and there are occasions when, driven by

the impulse to correct Critical Theory's atavistic anti-normativism, he does seem to overstate the case regarding the history-shaping role of norms. As we have seen, for Honneth the achievement principle and the principle of equal respect serve both as legitimations of extant social relations and, owing to their "surplus of validity", as rallying points for progressive social change.³⁷ Radical inequalities in the distribution of social goods that the achievement principle seemed to justify could be challenged by appeal to the implicit content of the principle of equal treatment, and from this point of view, Honneth suggests, the establishment of basic social welfare provisions for all, irrespective of achievement, looks imperative. As Honneth says, the "assertion that members of society can only make use of their legally guaranteed autonomy if they are assured a minimum of economic resources" is "hardly disputable".³⁸ However, Honneth continues by speaking as if the unassailable force of this normative argument were an irresistible historical force: "Here we have an especially vivid example," he writes, "of how historical changes can be brought about by innovations whose origins lie in nothing other than the persuasive power – or better, the incontrovertibility – of moral reasons".³⁹ Leaving aside the obvious objection that the incontrovertibility of these reasons has not prevented the erosion of basic social rights and universal welfare state provisions across advanced capitalist societies (which implies of course that more than moral

reasons were behind those innovations: the reasons are as incontrovertible now as then), the central problem here is that Honneth makes this claim without considering alternative explanations of the historical emergence of the welfare state. This makes it seem as if he is relying on the unlikely assumption that the interpretation of normative principles is a *sui generis* source of historical change. Hence, while Honneth wisely disavows the explanatory purport of his account of the achievement and equal treatment principles, where explanations do surface – as they inevitably do – it is hard to avoid the impression that they give too much weight to the role of norms. In this way, his anti anti-normativism, which is valid in its own right, over-extends itself into an invalid form of normativism.

A second version of the culturalism charge Fraser lays at Honneth concerns the nature of market mechanisms and their role in determining the economic order of capitalist society. The charge here is twofold: that Honneth's theory is incapable of providing any account of such mechanisms, and that it denies they even exist. Either way, Honneth's theory of recognition is said to be "congenitally blind" to them.⁴⁰ For Fraser, this is culturalism at its worst since it blocks off any understanding of the sources of the massive distributive injustices capitalism creates. It is harsh to assert that Honneth must deny the reality of market mechanisms that operate without regard for things like achievement or

the equal moral status of persons. To be sure, Honneth sometimes writes as if the economic order *just is* a recognition order, that is, an institutionalised pattern of cultural valuation organised primarily by the achievement principle and the principle of equal treatment. However, this does not commit Honneth to the view that the cultural norms by which market-driven distributions are judged, and on which they ultimately depend, are identical to those market-driven processes themselves. Honneth can accept the non-cultural determinants of markets without having to give an independent account of what they are. And it is clear that Honneth does not see it as his business to provide such an account.⁴¹ Here Honneth seems simply to be conceding Fraser's point that the theory of recognition is not conceptually equipped for grasping the dynamics of capitalism insofar as they are determined by market processes. And given that the distribution of goods and resources, the division of labour and so forth according to market forces clearly have very little if anything to do with recognition – with who deserves what on the basis of their achievements or who has a right to what – this self-limiting move regarding the provenance of the theory of recognition looks right.⁴²

This is not the end of the matter, however. Honneth also claims that “social limits on markets”, of the kind expressed in the institutionally embodied principles of

achievement and equal respect, must also “play the role of independent variables when trying to explain processes of economic development”.⁴³ Time and again Honneth speaks of the moral “constraints” exerted on economic processes by the norms of recognition.⁴⁴ Without wanting to take this language too literally, it does strongly suggest that these processes, *left to themselves*, are *at odds* with the norms of recognition. The issue now is not the indifference of market mechanisms to norms of mutual recognition, but their tendency to subvert those norms. And this should lead us to ask whether there is something *intrinsic* to markets, however embedded in institutionalised patterns of cultural valuation, that ties them to ‘asymmetrical forms of recognition’. The question to be posed at this point, in other words, is not whether there are zones of norm-free, economic action completely unmediated by norms – the problem posed by Fraser and that shapes the whole debate with Honneth – but rather whether the self-subversive tendency of such recognitively patterned economic activity is a *necessary* or *accidental* feature of it. This way of presenting the issue should make clear that it is not one that in good faith can be left to political economists. It does not leave one having to “pronounce upon the determinants of the market process”.⁴⁵ It is rather a question of social ontology, one that critical social theory, and therefore the theory of recognition, must be ready to address. That Honneth does not seem ready to address it, seems to me another unfortunate consequence of his anti

anti-normativism. His polemic with the anti-normativism of critical social theory from Marx to Habermas and Fraser makes it difficult to focus on the problem of what exactly it is about capitalist market economies that brings them into conflict with the norms of recognition.

Conclusion

In debating the relation between redistribution and recognition, Fraser and Honneth advance a wide range of competing claims about social justice and identity politics, the rational grounds of normative criticism, the basis of critical social theory, and other things, most of which I have not touched on in this essay. Instead I have tried to focus on their strategies for articulating the relation between economy and culture in capitalist society, and even here I have only scratched the surface. What does emerge a little more clearly is the extent to which the fundamental problems at issue in their debate are framed, behind the scene as it were, by Habermas, and in particular his appropriation of the categorial apparatus of systems theory. Were it not for Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, it is hard to see why the concepts of recognition and redistribution, as ways of thinking about the normative evaluation of the cultural and economic orders, would find their social-theoretical underpinning in the

notions of social and system integration. And it is Fraser's adherence to this idea that, above all, puts her at odds with Honneth as far as social theory goes.

We also saw that Fraser first arrived at a pragmatic, perspectival understanding of the terms of Critical Theory in response to Habermas' thesis of internal colonisation and the interpretation of new social movements it supported. In the debate with Honneth, Fraser maintains that the merely 'analytic' distinctions between culture and economy, recognition and redistribution, and status and class are justified pragmatically insofar as they keep the full range of injustices and responses to injustice in view: they circumvent the false reductionisms of culturalism and economism. This is a desirable outcome, but in order to show why we *must* adopt Fraser's model *if* we are to reach it, some other grounding to the distinctions must be given. Fraser wants more from her theory than the mere identification of analytically distinct, rationally well-grounded normative standpoints from which to assess contemporary capitalism. She also wants the theory to be able to explain the causal interaction between the economic order and the rest of social life. However, the only means she has available for meeting this desideratum is the discredited social ontology of zones of material and cultural reproduction, system and lifeworld. Recoiling from this, Fraser denies she is committed to any social ontology, leaving the explanatory ground of her

social theory quite unaccounted for. I then argued that even the pragmatic advantage of sharply distinguishing distribution and recognition was dubious in view of the recognitively structured social relations implicit in belonging to a class.

Honneth does not have to deal with such problems. He defends a thoroughgoing social ontology disentangled from the notion of system integration and its imputation of an autonomous, norm-free zone of economic activity. For good reasons, Honneth wants to avoid at all costs the anti-normativism of this model. Taken out of context, Honneth's anti anti-normativism can look like a plea for rampant normativism, which is how it looks to Fraser. While that is not how it is, Fraser's objections regarding the excessive culturalism of Honneth's approach are not completely unwarranted, if not quite for the reasons Fraser gives. While Honneth's debate with Fraser may end at an impasse, the theory of recognition can move on from it by attending further to its explanatory schema and by reassessing the *modality* in which asymmetrical forms of recognition unfold in capitalist society.

Notes

¹ N. Fraser & A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. J. Golb, J. Ingram & C. Wilke, London, Verso, 2003, p. 5. They write:

Should capitalism, as it exists today, be understood as a social system that differentiates an economic order that is not directly regulated by institutionalized patterns of cultural value from other social orders that are? Or should the capitalist economic order be understood rather as a consequence of a mode of cultural valuation that is bound up, from the very outset, with asymmetrical forms of recognition? At its deepest level, this book attempts to pose this question theoretically and to develop a common framework for assessing our divergent answers.

This highly condensed passage is hard to follow because while it hints at two competing solutions to a single problem, it actually poses two distinct problems the logical relationship between which is unclear. One could answer both questions in the affirmative without contradiction: there is no obvious inconsistency in asserting both that the capitalist economy is not directly regulated by 'institutionalised patterns of cultural value' and that it is in some sense a 'consequence of a mode of cultural valuation'. Conversely, one could answer both questions in the negative with equal justification: it is conceivable, of course, that contemporary capitalism should be understood in neither of the ways suggested.

² *ibid.*, pp. 50–53.

³ *ibid.*, pp. 128–129, 134.

⁴ The extent to which the debate between Fraser and Honneth is steeped in problems inherited from Habermas' project has been all but passed over in the literature. See, for example, A. Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, ch. 2; J. Swanston, "Recognition and Redistribution: Rethinking Culture and the Economic," *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2005, pp. 87–118; M. Yar, "Beyond Nancy Fraser's 'Perspectival Dualism'," *Economy and Society*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2001, pp. 288–303; C.F. Zurn, "Identity or Status? Struggles over 'Recognition' in Fraser, Honneth, and Taylor," *Constellations*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2003, pp. 519–537; and C.F. Zurn, "Recognition, Redistribution, and Democracy: Dilemmas of Honneth's Critical Social Theory," *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 13, no. 1, April 2005, pp. 89–126.

⁵ See J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, trans. T. McCarthy, 1987, pp. 392–396. The quotations that follow in this paragraph are taken from page 392.

⁶ N. Fraser, "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender," reprinted in N. Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 113–143.

⁷ The one distinction Fraser clearly does want to take on board in this article is that between ‘normatively secured’ and ‘communicatively established’ action contexts. But this distinction, Fraser argues, tends to be eclipsed by the potentially ideological ones about social reproduction and action integration. See N. Fraser, *Unruly Practices*, p. 138.

⁸ See A. Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trans. K. Baynes, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1991 (1985). For a fuller discussion of Honneth’s book, see “Social Power and the Domination of Nature,” *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 6 no. 3, 1993, pp. 101–110.

⁹ Fraser begins her article on Habermas by invoking Marx’s 1843 definition of Critical Theory as “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.” See *Unruly Practices*, p. 113.

¹⁰ Honneth, *Critique of Power*, p. 269.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 270.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 272.

¹³ This is of course the subtitle of Honneth’s next major work, *The Struggle for Recognition*, trans. J. Anderson, Cambridge, Polity, 1995 (1992).

¹⁴ Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 63.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 48, 214, 217.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 52.

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 214.

²² *ibid.*, p. 253. Honneth gives his own explanation, which traces Fraser’s dilemma back to a misplaced desire to emphasise more than Honneth the “empirical weight of economic mechanisms” (*ibid.*).

²³ See H. Joas, “The Unhappy Marriage of Hermeneutics and Functionalism” in *Communicative Action*, eds. A. Honneth & H. Joas, trans. J. Gaines & D.L. Jones, Cambridge, Polity, 1991 (1985).

²⁴ Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 17.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁶ For an overview of the important recent literature on the experience of injustice at work from a recognition-theoretic perspective, see A. Petersen & R. Willig, “Work and Recognition,” *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 47, no. 4, December 2004, pp. 338–350.

²⁷ Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 24.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 256.

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 148.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 155–156.

³² *ibid.*, p. 156.

³³ See note 1.

³⁴ Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, pp. 127, 137.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 249.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 186.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p. 149.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 215.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴² On the folly of supposing that distribution through markets reflects norms of recognition see A. Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

⁴³ Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, p. 256.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 249, 252.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 248.