

JEAN-PHILIPPE DERANTY. *Beyond Communication: A Critical Study of Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy*. Leiden: Brill, 2009. Pp. 500. ISBN: 978-90-04-17577-8.

It is fair to say that anthropology's relationship to the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory has been slight. With the exception of a period of serious engagement of Habermas' early work on the public sphere during the 1990s and the early years of the current century—and setting aside the on-again off-again anthropological reception of Benjamin, someone whose work cannot in any case wholly be located within this line of critical theory—the work of scholars in this tradition has never been central to anthropology, and it has never been taken up in a sustained way by a major anthropological figure.

Perhaps this is as it should be. Whether they take a pessimistic attitude toward modernity (Horkheimer, Adorno, and other first generation critical theorists), or a more positive one (Habermas), modernity is always their key concern. And their goal is to find within modernity presupposed norms the violation of which can be used to transform it beyond the instrumental, market-driven goals that have dominated it to this point. As is well known, the first generation followed Marx in looking to the practice of labor as a site from which to develop a normative basis of critique. Habermas' decisive shift was to move beyond labor to look at communication more generally as an inescapably central social practice that presupposes universal norms that, when violated, normatively justify struggles for social change. But in all cases the concern was with modernity and the normative grounds of its transformation—there was little interest in the virtues of social comparison, or in the possibility of generating normative critique by mining resources from non-modern societies. The critical theoretical foreclosure of interest in the non-modern and in comparison certainly limits the attraction of this tradition as a dialogue partner for anthropology.

But given that critical theory is that branch of philosophy that takes social research most seriously, perhaps it behooves anthropologists at least to attend to what those who practice it are up to, and perhaps more than this to suggest to them what the comparative perspective and attention to the non-modern might bring to efforts to decenter modernity's ideological self-understandings. In this regard, a good place to start is perhaps with the work of Axel Honneth. Often taken to be the leader of what is sometimes called the third generation of critical theory, and generally seen as the inheritor of Habermas, who led the second generation, Honneth has developed a version of critical theory that moves beyond the first generation's focus on labor, and Habermas' focus on communication, to focus on the interpersonal struggle for recognition as the key kind of social relation in which modern individuals create themselves, and from which analysts can derive normative foundations for critique. Drawing of course on Hegel (though on the Hegel of the Jena manuscripts, not of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—p. 185), but also on George Herbert Mead and on the object-relations school of psychoanalysis, Honneth argues that human beings only become selves through intersubjective interactions in which others recognize their needs, rights, and contributions to social life. Since the achievement of selfhood depends on these interactions, people have a normative claim on their provision, and a right to struggle to create a society in which these claims are met.

It must be said that in all of his primary commitments Honneth remains very much within the Frankfurt School tradition: he is, as Deranty makes very clear, interested only in modernity, and he sees only modernity as providing the material from which immanent critique can normatively ground social transformation. Moreover, as Deranty also brings out, his ultimate goal is to create a society in which people can achieve very individualistic-looking forms of self-realization. For anthropologists, then, in many ways Honneth's work displays the same limitations as other work in critical theory.

But this is not quite the whole story when it comes to Honneth. For his very rich sense of both the stakes and nature of social interaction—his focus on the way in which selves are created and also sometimes damaged through interpersonal exchange—means that he often analyzes aspects of social life that anthropologists also care very much about. If first generation critical theoretical ideas about labor appeared wholly tied to Western capitalist modernity, and Habermas' ideal notions of communication proved impossible to use to study places where communication is not decisively shaped by modern language ideologies, the idea that people seek recognition in interaction, and are inclined to assert they have been treated unjustly when they do not get it, is likely much more portable.

For one thing, it helps us make sense of the intense practical and emotional investment in practices of exchange anthropologists find in so many of the societies they study. For another, Honneth's idea that different kinds of interaction produce different kinds of recognition (summarized in the trio of the recognition of needs, rights, and social contributions), helps account for the way anthropologists everywhere find that people sort relations into different major kinds (e.g. between kin, affines, enemies, etc.). It is worth exploring whether these locally understood differences between types of social relations, wherever they appear, might at base be built around differences in the kinds of recognition they generate, even if these kinds of recognition do not neatly map the categories of needs, rights, and social contributions that Honneth uses to typologize the kinds of recognition modern social interactions produce.

In a brief review, I cannot go on to say more about why anthropologists might want to consider Honneth's work, even if it does not escape completely the limitations that have made previous versions of critical theory relatively unimportant for them. Should they want to consider him, it is worth noting that Honneth develops his approach most fully in his single most important work to date, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 1996). By critical theoretical standards, this book is quite approachable, and one should read it first, before reading other works by Honneth or any of the secondary literature. But that said, Deranty's *Beyond Communication* is an enormously useful book for those who, after reading *The Struggle for Recognition*, are interested in exploring Honneth further.

With great clarity and patience, Deranty first situates Honneth's work in relation to critical theory (including Habermas' version), recent Hegel scholarship, and German traditions of philosophical anthropology—bodies of work which provide its most important background. He also explores in detail Honneth's engagement with Mead. From there, he goes on to trace the development of Honneth's ideas, and to examine their contributions and the debates they have engendered in moral theory and political philosophy. One comes away from the book with a greatly broadened appreciation of Honneth's relation both to the intellectual traditions he draws on and to contemporary

critical thought. For this reason it is an indispensable text for those not thoroughly versed in these matters who want to engage Honneth's work.

It should also be said that while most of Deranty's book is focused on laying out Honneth's arguments and exploring the works that provide their context, he also consistently if sporadically develops a set of critical observations that point to limits in Honneth's thinking. His critical comments are particularly relevant for anthropologists, because they are largely in line with the concerns of many in the discipline at the moment. Thus, Deranty regularly takes Honneth to task for limiting his model of interaction to interpersonal relations between human beings. What of human interactions with objects, with animals, with 'nature'? To fully appreciate such interactions, Deranty asserts, Honneth would have to consider the role of the body in human engagement with the world (including the world of other people). In this respect, Deranty's most oft-repeated complaint is that Honneth has never seriously integrated an encounter with Merleau-Ponty into his work.

Moreover, and in a criticism that all anthropologists would need to take seriously, Deranty faults Honneth for attending so narrowly to intersubjective interaction between human beings—to the 'horizontal' dimension of social life—that he neglects to study the 'vertical' relations in which persons relate to institutions (p. 205). A social theory that counts as fully rounded in anthropological terms would have to correct this. And perhaps we can. In the short last chapter of the book, Deranty sums up most of the lines of critical commentary he has brought forth in the previous chapters. Toward the end of this discussion, he mentions 'Latour's 'actor-network theory' and 'the social anthropology of the "gift"' as two among a small set of developments on the 'contemporary intellectual landscape' that Honneth might turn to in addressing some of the weaknesses of his approach (p. 475). Anthropologists might take this as an open invitation to join Honneth and the tradition he represents in pushing social thought forward in new ways.

REFERENCES

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