"The Task of Critique is to Question the Ontological Premises of our Identity". An Interview with Axel Honneth

"Il compito della critica è mettere in discussione le premesse ontologiche della nostra identità". Intervista a Axel Honneth

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Abstract. Axel Honneth is internationally renowned for being one of the leading political and social philosophers of our time, and is highly regarded for his work on recognition and the struggles for recognition. In this interview, he discusses his work over the past four decades, starting from the rise of his intellectual vocation to his most recent book on the sovereignty of work. The text is a transcript, revised by the author, of the dialogue Honneth had with his interviewers and the audience at the masterclass held on 24 May 2023 at the University of Trento, as part of the first series of lectures "Voices from Contemporary Philosophy".

Keywords: Axel Honneth, recognition, power, nature, freedom, work.

Riassunto. Tra le maggiori voci del dibattito filosofico contemporaneo internazionale, Axel Honneth è conosciuto soprattutto per i lavori che ha consacrato alle lotte per il riconoscimento. In questa intervista il filosofo tedesco ripercorre il suo itinerario filosofico partendo dalle origini della sua vocazione intellettuale per giungere fino al suo libro più recente sulla sovranità del lavoro. Il testo è la trascrizione, rivista dall'autore, del dialogo intavolato da Honneth con i suoi interlocutori e il pubblico alla masterclass tenutasi il 24 maggio 2023 all'Università di Trento all'interno del primo ciclo "Voices from Contemporary Philosophy".

Parole chiave: Axel Honneth, riconoscimento, potere, natura, libertà, lavoro.

1. "Wozu noch Philosophie?" – does philosophy still have a purpose, a point – is a cyclical question for people who have devoted their lives to the least specialized of all intellectual activities in the century of the accomplished specialization of knowledge. In the tradition of Critical Theory, the answer to this question has generally revolved around the question of the critical role of knowledge. This has meant, for example, questioning the regressive character of "idealism" or the archaism of any "philosophia prima" and stressing the importance of interdisciplinarity – of "speaking many languages" – in the study of human reality. May we ask you what role this question played at the beginning of your career and whether your answers to it have changed over time?

"Wozu noch Philosophie?" is the famous title of an essay by T.W. Adorno.[1] He wrote this article, I think, in the early 1960s. So, let us go back to the early years of my own studies at the University. I have to start with a confession. I was not an extremely good student at the Gymnasium, at high schools. I even failed one class. I had to repeat it, I mean, and my parents were very upset about it. Everyone expected me to become what everyone in my family was or was supposed to become, namely a doctor, a physician. All of a sudden, I told them that I would prefer to study philosophy and nobody had any idea why I came to that conclusion, because I did not show any sign in the Gymnasium of an increased interest in more or less philosophical questions.

Instead, outside of school, I was what you might call a big reader. I was reading hundreds of novels at night, but this reading had no influence whatsoever on my behavior at school, where I was simply a disaster. So, when the question of what to study came closer, my initial answer was that I wanted to study "Theatre". This had to do with the fact that, at that time, the late 1960s (I made my *Abitur* in 1969), the time of the student movement, I think that it is different today, theatre and film were the central places for debating social questions. Especially theatre. I had read many theatre plays at school and, again, without any influence on my performances, but when it came to decide what to study, I thought: "This is it. This is what I want to do in order to cope with social problems". I took my decision under the influence of American (Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, John Steinbeck) and French playwrights – less the English and not so much German theatre writers.

Thus, I decided to study Theatre. I went to the University of Cologne, but I was told that to perform was an essential part of studying it. That

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[1] Adorno, "Wozu noch Philosophie?"

was the end of it, because – as a matter of fact – I did not want to perform. I simply wanted to study theatre as an intellectual achievement: what it means to do theatre; what it means to debate existential or social questions via theatre plays. If I had known better, I would not have gone to Cologne, but to Berlin, because there was indeed the possibility to study theatre without performing in Berlin at the time. It was a Germany Literature Department but with a specialization in dramas. That would have been an excellent place and, if only I had known, I would never have become a philosopher, but a specialist in German Literature.

Since I did not know of this possibility, the question arose of what to study instead. Then I thought to myself that the only other place where I could debate social problems in a broad sense might be philosophy. My parents were shocked by my decision, I have to say. But, still, I chose to study philosophy. Not at the University of Cologne, but in Bonn. This was, again, a wrong decision, because Bonn, back then, was an extremely boring place to study philosophy. It was a place dominated by Neo-Kantianism. The people who got there were people who wanted to study philosophers like Nikolai Hartmann, a very stiff and precise thinker who once had a long debate with Martin Heidegger that made him famous. So, I started studying philosophy in Bonn and I felt extremely bored apart from a growing interest in Kant's and Wittgenstein's thought. There was a Wittgenstein disciple there who had even personally met him, and he was fascinating to listen to. So, I quickly decided to move to another place, Bochum, which is close to my home town, Essen, an overly industrial city of the Ruhr. There you had the Hegel Archives. I have no idea why they are in Bochum, because Hegel had no relationship whatsoever with the city, but they are still there today. I studied at the University of Bochum for six semesters. I did my MA there. And, still, it would have been too early to ask myself the question: why, for what reasons, for what purpose, to do philosophy? Philosophy was simply the place to be in order to deal with the more general questions of societal order, societal integration, societal crisis. The fact that I was interested in the broad understanding of societal crisis also brought with it the question what society is, on what basis societies are founded, what the mechanism of social integration is, how to expand conflict. All these questions implied that I had to study also sociology, i.e., that I needed to study philosophy and sociology in pairs.

Only slowly, I came close to an answer to the question "why philosophy?" and it had to do with the influence of Critical Theory, that was huge at the time (I am speaking of 1972-1974). I mean, there was the student movement and the biggest philosophical influence on the student movement came either from Western Marxism (Lukàcs, or people like him) or the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, and others). That raised in me

the conviction that it is the task of philosophy to somehow deal critically with the existing self- and world-understanding of a society, of people. Thus, I came to see the role of philosophy also within the social sciences as being the reflexive stance where you could embark on questioning the existing self-understanding. I mean, on what premises are the self-understandings of a society based? And is this basis reliable? Is it good enough? In that sense, I found out certain, albeit weak, answers to the question of why to study philosophy. For me, philosophy was from that moment on the special reflexive undertaking needed to raise within all the humanities the question of the conceptual foundations of self-understanding.

That was relatively close to Critical Theory. I mean, one of the core premises of Critical Theory – one of the premises all members of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, up to Habermas) agreed upon – was to see Critical Theory mainly as a critique of existing positivism: to claim that positivism is the leading self-understanding both in the sciences and in society itself. That changed over time and now I would say that the leading worldview or self- and world-understanding is naturalism, which is close to positivism, but it is slightly different from it. So, the task of the philosophy, which I would like to represent, is to critically examine the naturalistic and probably even ontological premises of our own existing self- and world-understanding. As you can see, it took me a lot of time to discover the answer to the question of why to still do philosophy today.

2. Your first book Social Action and Human Nature, *co-written with Hans Joas, had human nature as its focus.[2] Did your concern arise from the need to tie theory to the concreteness of human existence or rather from the need to articulate a theoretical strand such as philosophical anthropology that had remained on the margins of Marxist social theories for too long? And how much of this initial interest in philosophical anthropology merged with your later research?*

Again, I have to go back in time, namely to the time when I was studying philosophy and sociology at the University of Berlin. To get there, I had to leave Bochum. My MA thesis, if I remember correctly, was on Marx and Lukàcs and my decision to move to Berlin was linked to the huge interest I had developed in a philosophical tradition that was very specific, even unique to Germany, which was called *Philosophische Anthropologie*. It was extremely powerful in the 1920s and 1930s. It was more or less a countermovement, I think, to Heidegger's growing influence in German philosophy and an attempt to make philosophy more concrete, even

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[2] Honneth and Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*.

more empirical. The idea behind that tradition was that you have to start with studying the specificity of human nature: what makes the human nature specific. The traditional answer was "intellect" or "reasoning" or whatever, but philosophical anthropology found a more productive answer to this question. It started from the idea that, differently from all other animals, the human species is first of all characterized by a certain deficit in world orientation. That was the premise of all philosophical anthropology. The most famous authors were Arnold Gehlen, Helmut Plessner, and Max Scheler, who is probably the most renowned today. Their premise was that human nature is badly equipped to cope with the natural environment and much worse equipped to deal with it than all the other animals. Humans are animals, but defective animals, worse equipped. And everything which is specific for human beings is a compensation for that deficit. That was their starting point.

In Berlin, at that time, you had a group of professors who were raised in that tradition. In the mid 1970s, Habermas, too, was strongly engaged with philosophical anthropology. So, to build a bridge to your earlier question, I developed this interest in philosophical anthropology because I thought that, without such self-understanding of the possibilities and deficits of human nature, you probably cannot figure out the failures of our own self- and world-understanding now. That was, I think the decisive way to go. In that sense, I started to become interested in philosophical anthropology, together with my friend Hans Joas. We were still students trying to connect our own social theory, which was fueled by Marxism or a certain kind of western Marxism, with anthropology. That was not completely new. Some people, I think, in Italy and some others in former Yugoslavia went along the same path, namely to connect the tradition of philosophical anthropology with a critical social theory. Charles Taylor, later, became interested in the same kind of enterprise.

To sum up, for me, back then, philosophical anthropology was the attempt to study the specificity of human nature understood as a compensation for certain deficits that we, as humans, have. As I said above, the classical answers were: language or reasoning as one of the compensating instruments. For me, instead, the key was intersubjectivity. You already find the same idea in some of the works of the original philosophical anthropology, but for me it became central. That was relatively close to Habermas, I have to say. I mean, Habermas, being also interested in philosophical anthropology, developed in the same years his own theory of communicative action in close dialogue with that tradition. He then switched over to the philosophy of language. I myself thought it more productive to stay within the broader horizon of philosophical anthropology. So, the difference between Habermas and myself – that was not clear

to me at the time – was that I studied intersubjectivity or the structures of intersubjectivity from the viewpoint of human nature, whereas Habermas studied them from another standpoint, that of the role of language in them. I think that this partially explains why I became more interested in recognition and disrespect. For this is one of the insights you gain when you start from the thesis that intersubjectivity is a huge need for humans, which begins with the early baby (since, without the loving care of their mother or father, the baby would not be able to survive), but it is true for the human being as such, for we would not be able to live without the attachment, recognition, and care by others.

This insight became the core of my own philosophical anthropology. My project was indeed deeply linked to philosophical anthropology at that stage of my career. It was the baseline of my own philosophical orientation. Habermas, on the other hand, concentrated on the way we communicate linguistically. He wanted to figure out what language means for our form of existence. I, on the contrary, wanted to understand how specific forms of intersubjectivity matter for our self-understanding and existence. This suffices to explain why the tradition of philosophical anthropology is still quite present in my studies of recognition. For the whole point of a theory of recognition is the idea that we, as social beings, are in need of different forms of recognition. This is an anthropological fact, if you want. We would not be able to survive or live a meaningful life without these structures and given forms of recognition. This also became the background for my own form of critique of self- and world-understanding, because the existing world- and self-understanding is deeply naturalistic and utterly atomistic or individualistic. I mean, it is based on certain atomistic or individualistic premises. In fact, I take the abstraction from the way we are embedded in forms of communication and recognition to be the hugest mistake of our self- and world-understanding.

So, the need for concreteness is a sort of thread connecting my original interest in theatre and my later concern for recognition as an essential human need. And if I think about it, one of the theatre plays that impressed me most when I was young was Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, that became very popular thanks to a movie with Dustin Hoffman much later. *Death of a Salesman* is a stage play where a father who lost his job becomes completely invisible in the public because of this loss, which he does not dare to tell his family members – his sons and his wife. This has a lot to do, I think, with the idea of recognition. Because Willy, the salesman, is completely disrespected, unrecognized, he is full of shame for this simple social fact and he wants to hide it from his family members. If you take that theatre play, you already have the whole morality of recognition on the table. But I noticed that only much later. With the ben-

efit of hindsight, we can conjecture that there may be a link between the impression made on me by some theatre plays early on and my later interest in the anthropology of recognition.

3. Was your choice to put side by side two at first glance antithetical thinkers such as Habermas and Foucault in your book on power[3] merely a symptom of the philosophical upheaval taking place in the years when it was designed (early 1980s) or did it hint at a theoretical path, that you would pursue in the years to come? If so, would you describe it to us briefly?

The book on power was my dissertation. Looking backwards, it is very hard to say whether I already had a clear theoretical intention when I started it. My original plan was to intervene in the debate on Critical Theory by proposing something like the idea that you have to go through the history of Critical Theory in order to explain its present situation and format. It was obvious that I had to start with Adorno and Horkheimer. And it was equally evident that the next generation in the development of Critical Theory was represented by Habermas. But I was also very much impressed by the huge and growing reception of Foucault at the time, who presented himself, from a certain moment on, as a critical theorist. There is a famous quotation by Foucault where he is claiming that he belonged in a tradition of Critical Theory, which was a little surprising for his readers.

I thought, then, that the best way to figure out the present tasks of a Critical Theory is by reconstructing these three stages within Critical Theory. The book's German subtitle (*Reflexionsstufen einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie*) was, I think, most indicative in claiming that the development of Critical Theory consists of these three steps. However, there was not only a historical interest behind my thematic choice, and I think that your question points to that. There was more than history in the book. There was at least a certain idea that something systematic might lie beneath this development. My systematic point proceeded along the following line.

In the early stage of Critical Theory (Adorno and Hokheimer's stage) you have a relatively stable picture of society, i.e., that our present society is whatever its political and economic structures are. In brief, these modern societies are tending towards totalitarianism. They are highly integrated. Subjects have lost their autonomy and they are somehow manipulated by the big culture industry, by the State, and so on. Their picture was that modern societies are completely integrated. I saw in that what I called in my book a sociological deficit because they were not sufficiently

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[3] Honneth, *The Critique of Power*.

aware of the conflictual powers of countermovements, subcultures, and social movements like the labor movement. They simply ignored that there are critical discourses of different kinds in all societies. There is no society without a conflictual under- or other-side.

That was my objection against the first generation of Critical Theory. For me, Habermas was a huge progress in the history of Critical Theory, because he made us aware of the fact that at least modern societies are based on relatively unconstrained forms of communication. They are depending on what he later called a life-world, which is formed out of a variety of communicative practices, where the social integration functions via norms, which people more or less agree upon. I saw that as a progress compared to the older tradition of Critical Theory because it makes us aware of, not only the communicative side of society, but of the fact that all integration is based on something like communicative consent. It is not simply coming from above. I mean, if a society is deeply integrated, it means that the structures of communication are such that people somewhat agree with one another. You have that already in Gramsci with his idea of hegemony.

Thus, I saw progress in Habermas's account, but I also saw a certain deficit in it, because he was not sufficiently aware of the conflictual side within communication. For me, Foucault made clear to his readers that societal orders are never fixed, but permanently in movement. And that is because subjects are, let us say (even if these are not his own words), conflictual animals. They do not simply agree with the norms that are established and institutionalized in society, but they have a certain tendency to rebel against some institutionalized norms and values. Foucault, however, was not particularly interested in capitalistic forms of domination in the labor market or companies and his conceptual instruments are not very helpful to understand what is going on in firms and labor. His main concern was disciplinary power, which has other sources. (That might have something to do with Heidegger's influence on French thought, especially his preoccupation with technology, which became a strong concern about technologies of power and domination in Foucault.)

So, systematically speaking, the three steps I had in mind were the following: (1) The early Critical Theory suffering from a sociological deficit; (2) Habermas much better emphasizing the communicative basis of society; (3) Foucault understood as stressing the conflictual side of communication. I am not sure that I had this as a full plan in mind when I started to write the dissertation, but it was surely the result of it.

4. Shifting to the present situation, do you think that the structures and logics of power have substantially changed since the publication of your book on power? And if this is the case, how did they change?

This is a difficult question. I did not mention power so far, even though the title of the book I was just talking about was *Kritik der Macht – The Critique of Power*. The title had to do with Foucault, of course. For he was able to emphasize and elucidate to us that communicative structures can be determined or influenced by power structures. So, when I was writing the dissertation, my task was already clear: I needed to understand what power means. Foucault, and that was one of the results of the book, was using two very different notions of power, which, I think, we should consistently distinguish. Both play an important role in understanding our kind of society. Foucault, I believe, is sometimes undecided about what notion of power he is using.

Speaking in general terms, one concept of power understands power as the capacity of certain systems of thinking, speaking, practices, to influence the behavior of human subjects. This is a specific notion of power, but it is a notion of power that we very often use. We typically claim that a capitalist system has the power to influence the behavior of its own subjects by making them interested in egoistic profit seeking. When we talk like that, we are using power as a notion that designates the capacity of systems, of holistic entities. This is a distinctive notion of power and Foucault very often capitalizes on it. It is the power of a certain discursive regime or a regime of punishment to determine or influence the activities of individual subjects.

The other notion of power stems from another tradition, a completely different tradition, namely from the Weberian tradition. Foucault is also using this second notion of power. Here power is the capacity of actors to determine the will of others – a totally different idea of power that is going more in the direction of domination. In this second sense, power is always a capacity of an actor or a group of actors to impose their own will on the will of others.

There are different instruments you can use in order to determine the will of others. Either you have money at your disposal to influence the behavior of others by making them dependent on your own money, or you have political power, or other kinds of power. I mean, it is always about the instruments or means an actor or a group of actors have at their disposal to make others dependent on them and influence their wills. The first notion of power is completely different.

Now, your question concerns today's situation and asks in what sense power in the two meanings has changed. My answer, accordingly, is heavily dependent on which notion of power you are using. When we are using the first notion of power (holistic regimes of practices, discourses, etc.), we definitely have to deal with electronic media. Electronic media seems to be a completely new regime of power in the first sense. It has developed a new system of specific forms of communication and discourse that obvi-

ously makes something with us. So, the question here is what this new regime of electronic media makes with us. It would be wrong to say that I have a clear answer to this question. Today, we debate the issue whether the impacts that this system has on us are for the better or for the worse. Depending on your own vision, you give a more optimistic or a more pessimistic answer to it. It may free people from location – time and place – in their communicative life, but it also may influence people in the direction of manufacturing themselves in the internet. And this may have disastrous effects on political communication, because it makes the difference between facts and non-facts difficult to make.

The other question concerns the second notion of power. Did the power in the sense of structures of domination shift over the last forty years? I would say that there has indeed been a shift, which is not easy to identify, but it seems to me to go in the following direction. The agents of domination are increasingly becoming invisible. So, speaking in general, the tendency is the invisibilization of domination. And that has to do with changes in the productive sphere as well as with changes in the political sphere. It is more and more difficult to identify who has the power to determine our wills. If you work in one of the new service complexes today (Google, Apple, Amazon, etc.), what is usually called the "gig economy", you have no idea who is representing the company. You never come into contact with the management. You have no idea where the management is sitting, even whether the management is still represented by human persons, because the order comes from electronic devices; the control that you are subject to is invisible. It normally stems from a machine.

So, to sum up, there is a certain invisibilization of domination these days, I would say, with regard to the second form of power. That is also true for politics. It is very hard to identify where the authority to make decision is coming from in political matters. Is it via lobbyism? Is it via the impact of huge companies? Is it in the Parliament? With regard to the first notion of power, again, I would say more or less that the main question seems to be what the electronic media regime makes with us, whereas, with the second notion of power, to repeat my point, there is a certain shift in the direction of an invisibilization of domination.

5. From the very beginning of your research, you have taken social movements to be a source of insight: was the significance of the phenomenon of recognition at least partly, as it were, imposed on you by observing the surrounding political reality?

The direct answer to this question would be no. When I developed the idea of the impact of recognition or of the need for recognition or of the

struggle for recognition, identity politics in the sense in which it is understood today was not yet existing, apart from minor subcultures. Probably, it was mostly visible in gay movements at that time. So, the experience of these movements was not the driving force behind the idea to make recognition a basic category for a critical theory of society. With the benefit of hindsight, I think it was more the labor or workers movement that mattered. And the more direct connection was with certain historical investigations or research. Here again, Gramsci was on the forefront, I have to say.

Back then, there was a growing tendency within history to study the labor movement freshly and differently, namely to understand it as a movement against disrespect, let us put it that way. Labor as such was seen as disrespected by the bourgeois society. So, behind the labor movement, there appeared to be the attempt to fight for a renegotiation of the structures of social recognition within capitalist societies. The writings, which I was heavily depending upon, were by social historians whose names are probably unfamiliar today: Barrington Moore Jr., a close friend of Herbert Marcuse and the author of a fantastic book on the social bases of obedience and revolt;[4] or E.P. Thompson, author of the very influential *The Making of the English Working Class*, who showed that the early struggles of the labor movement against the capitalist society actually were struggles against new forms of regulation and new forms of disciplinary power, hence against certain forms of disrespect towards the life-world of the workers.[5] I put that all together and it shaped my book heavily. Only then I realized that the struggle for recognition or, to put it differently, the struggle against disrespect might also be a key for understanding other social movements. For example, the civil rights movement by the African-Americans in the United States. Also the feminist movement might be best understood as a struggle against disrespect and for recognition. And then, as I have already mentioned, the gay movement, which was at an early development stage, different from today's queer movement, struggled for being recognized in the public as the expression of a legitimate form of life. It was a struggle for legal reform; a struggle for public recognition, appreciation, public visibility, etc.

So, only after I had found out the logics of the revolt or the protest by the labor movement, I realized that there might be a more general key for understanding social movements as such. On the other side, I never wanted to make my own approach too dependent on existing movements. Simply because movements are fast changing. So, to make a critical theory dependent on one social movement or to understand a critical theory of

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[4] Moore Jr., *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*.
[5] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*.

society as the expression of the aims and purposes of one social movement brings with it the danger of losing the critical distance that you need as a theorist. A theory, I guess, always needs distance to movements as it needs distance from a specific political party. Therefore, I never wanted to understand my own theory or Critical Theory as such as the expression of one movement. Marx did that. In his early writings, Marx is claiming that his own theory is the articulated expression of the will of the proletariat. This is slightly dangerous, I think, because it makes your own theory dependent on the actual will of the members of the movement. Thus, if the movement is losing its revolutionary will, suddenly your theory is in a bad shape.

To sum up, a critical distance is needed. You also need a critical oversight on the claims and ambitions of social movements. My own self-recommendation was always to keep some distance to actual social movements.

6. Again on recognition. How much room is left in your perspective for asymmetrical forms of recognition, for example toward nonhuman animals or ecosystems, which are vindicated by some environmentalist groups?

This is a very difficult question, I must say. In the beginning, I understood recognition as a specific form of human relationship. I differentiated several forms of recognition depending on how you are recognized and for what you are recognized. I differentiated between love as a form of recognition, respect as a form of recognition of the autonomy of the other, and social esteem as a form of recognition. In the beginning, it was clear that all this categorical framework only applies to the infrastructure of human societies. I am aware that this choice brings you to a very difficult situation if your own account does not apply to the now very demanding, even oppressing questions concerning our relationship to animals or, more broadly, our relation to nature as such.

Let us put it this way. I do not see any categorical problem to extend recognition towards animals of any kind, probably in degrees. Thus, I think that it is possible to extend the framework of recognition over, let us say, the boundaries of our form of life. It probably is the result of a certain learning process that we come to see in the course of time, out of whatever reasons, animals as living organisms that we have to respect in degrees. We have several opportunities for recognizing animals and several forms of recognition depending on our relationship to them. I mean, everybody who has a dog or a cat at their home already has a kind of careful relation to that individual animal. We have been using animals for work for centuries respecting them. And it is obvious that we have to learn to respect them as contributing to our technological advances. All these animals – horses, cows, etc. – did a lot to making our standards of life such as they

are today. We can more and more extend the realm of recognition towards the world of animals. I mean, we can understand that we are in company with animals, and that, consequently, we need an extension of our recognitive attitudes towards animals, as I said, in different degrees depending on our relationship to them.

The other question is whether nature as such can be thought of as something, which we must recognize in that sense. This I do not see. I mean, it is obvious that we have to learn that nature is something that we have to cultivate. It is clear that we have to take an attitude to nature, which is more caring. So, I am ready to admit that we have to drastically change our attitude to nature. But I hesitate to use for this new attitude, which we have to develop, the notion of recognition. I do not know if it makes sense to employ this vocabulary. I see that we can use it with regard to animals of different kinds, but the notion loses its impact and its philosophical substance if you apply it too loosely.

In order to explain the ecological movement, what you need is to understand the demand behind it: the climate catastrophe. You have to understand that its members are fighting for a radically different, more caring, more cultivating relationship towards nature. And we probably can understand a lot from other cultures in order to improve our attitude towards nature. So, we have to get rid of our exploitative relationship towards nature. But, again, I would prefer to restrict the vocabulary of recognition in its different forms to beings that share with us organic life; I mean, to entities that share with us basic capacities like responsiveness to sufferance. Yet, to extend recognition towards a tree seems to me strange, even though we know today how valuable trees are for our way of life.

7. To speak of a "recognitive turn" originated by your 1992 book is not an exaggeration. With the benefit of hindsight, do you think that the proliferation of the recognition debate – that is, the success of your book – mostly helped or hindered you in the gradual development of your thinking? I mean, did the diatribe, for example, on the supposed clash between distributive conflicts and struggles over recognition or the discussions on the "dark side" of recognition (i.e., the intertwining of power and recognition) make it easier or harder for you?

It makes it partly harder, because you see that many questions have remained partly unanswered. On the other side, you also realize that there is a misuse of your own concept. This is what troubles me most. The patent misuse is when you see that companies are employing the concept of recognition as a means for the integration of the employees. Recognition became famous in firms. Although it had not much to do with my book,

you can say that it was probably in the air, many firms started to establish "respect or recognition programs". We recognize our employees… That was merely manipulation, I think. Manipulation for better integration and so improving the work force. The huge uncritical misuse of the idea of recognition troubled me a lot.

Apart from this, what made me uncomfortable was to realize that recognition might have – and I still hesitate to say it out loud, since I am not completely sure about it – what you called a "dark side". But let us be more precise.

The debate with Nancy Fraser – namely the question of the supposed priority of distribution over recognition[6] – never really troubled me. For my view is that any struggle for redistribution also is a struggle over recognition. Both are struggles on how your own contribution to society is valued and how it should be compensated. In that sense, I think, it was all a misunderstanding from the beginning. There is no meaningful difference here. I mean, there is no real opposition between these two kinds of struggle. As I said, a struggle for redistribution, if it articulates itself in normative terms, has to use the notions of recognition. Otherwise, what could be the reason for claiming for redistribution? Only if you think that certain performances, certain kinds of work are not sufficiently respected and financially recognized, you will raise your voice. So, all struggles for recognition are in the end struggles for redistribution.

The other question is about the dark side of recognition. Although the debate with people like Judith Butler has been going on for years, I still have reservations about the whole idea.[7] It obviously depends on how you understand recognition. To emphasize its dark side means the following (and this is Judith Butler's understanding of the issue at stake). To recognize a person means to identify a person as a social being and that may have the effect of integrating this person into the existing ontological order. The typical case stems from Althusser. Butler uses the example very often. When a police officer is shouting: "hey, you over there! Who are you?", then this policeman is identifying you. In a certain sense, he is recognizing you as a social being and with this recognition he is attributing a certain identity to you. Thus, recognition in that negative sense is the forced attribution of a certain identity. In my view, this sounds true only when you have a very loose understanding of recognition. For recognition, if you take the idea, as I do, from Hegel, means something else. It means recognizing somebody for something by limiting your own attitude. Hence, recognition does not come without a certain moral restric-

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[6] Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*
[7] Ikäheimo, Lepold, and Stahl, *Recognition and Ambivalence*.

tion on your side. The police officer who is identifying somebody on the street is not restricting his own attitude towards this person. But recognition in the true sense always means something different.

Let us say that I recognize someone for a certain performance or work. Or let us imagine that I recognize someone for his or her autonomy. This recognition primarily means something for me. It means, for example, that I *have* to do something. Recognition does not come without some form of restriction on your side. It is the same with all evaluations. If you evaluate a painting, you take a sort of attitude towards the painting. If you want, you are respecting the painting. You would not do anything with the painting. For example, you would not destroy the painting. You would not paint over it. You would not simply sell it on the market, because you evaluate the painting. The same is true for recognition. Recognition means that you will behave in a certain way towards the one you recognize. It partly depends on the form of recognition, but recognition is always an attitude that is limiting your own selfishness.

Thus, in that sense, I would claim that recognition has no dark side, although it is clear that there are forms of recognition that may take an ideological form. But I do not see them as true forms of recognition, which is why I call them "ideological". So, I may say: "You are a wonderful housewife". And that is a very tricky way of addressing a person. For, on the one hand, it means that you fixate that person into the role of the housewife. You give that person, normally a woman, the identity of a housewife and that might imply certain problematic consequences for recognition. Still, I would reply, if you are using this language today, you are not fully aware of the grammar of recognition as it is established in our time. You are somehow backwards leaning and, therefore, indulging in an ideological form of recognition.

To sum up, I would make a distinction between ideological forms of recognition and true forms of recognition.

8. Do you sense something like a "horror of determination" behind this hypersensitivity to the identifying power of the gaze of the other?

"Horror of determination", by the way, is a nice expression. The whole idea of being afraid of determination probably comes from an anthropological illusion: the illusion to be ever completely undetermined. Wherever you start in philosophy, one of the first insights is what Heidegger called *Geworfenheit*: throwness, being thrown into the lifeworld.

We are always determined. It is something we cannot escape. The first fact, which we have to deal with, is that we are thrown into life. This means that we are born as sons or daughters of concrete parents. We are

children of a certain time, of a certain society. And all this makes a lot with us, has a big impact on us. So, the only way to become an autonomous person, I think, is to deal with all these determinations and go through them in order to gain some independent voice. The idea of being wholly without determination seems to me to be an illusion. The illusion of being ever completely independent of how people see you and how people recognize you. That is either an illusion or a form of Stoic morality, which I do not believe in, because we are too dependent on others in order to become autonomous persons.

9. Since the publication of Kampf um Anerkennung, *you have emphasized the importance of creating bridges, starting from semantic bridges, between experiences of misrecognition and oppression. In light of the increasing intersectionality of today's social movements (e.g., gender, ecological, and labor movements), what categories are needed for social theory and social movements to develop common identities for social transformation?*

I do not know if I have a clear answer to this question. Again, I would like to start with a preliminary reservation. It is not directly the task of a critical theory of society, I think, to produce certain subjects or identities. In my view, the task of a critical theory is to question identities. Especially if such critique is understood in philosophical terms, one of its major tasks is to question the ontological premises of certain identities. Accordingly, as I pointed out already, I think that the relationship between theory and practice, critical theory and social movements, should be indirect and much more distant than your question seems to imply. In the current moment, the task of a critical theory would then be to cast doubt on certain premises of identity politics. Starting from what is in my view a crucial misunderstanding, namely the idea that individuals have only one social identity.

A background belief of identity politics is the conviction that individuals are characterized, say, by your gender or by the color of your skin or by your sexual orientation. This, I think, is a very basic misunderstanding, because we are never characterized by only one of our social commitments. We always have multiple identities, multifaceted personalities. We are a composition of many commitments and relationships. We are involved in friendships; we are involved in significant social relationships; we are members of a political community; we have a special connection with geographical places; we are indeed characterized by the color of our skin; by our sexual orientation. Bu these are all elements of a *compositum*.

So, identity is always social identity: it is a combination of a wide range of different commitments. If you believe that you are characterized by only one identity shaping all your personality, then you are probably

making a mistake. In my view, you are prone to a certain self-misunderstanding. Sometimes, within identity politics, it sounds as if persons are basically constructed out of one identity, be it sexual or racial or religious.

My first response was instrumental to answering the question of what is the role of a critical theory with regard to certain social struggles and movements. In short, my answer would sound more or less like this. A critical theory always has to take a negative view on certain misunderstandings within social movements. If it has a task in relation to social unrest, this task also has to be critical and not simply affirmative. It would not be a critical theory if it would merely have an affirmative relationship to any social movement, be it the labor movement, the feminist movement, etc. It is the task of theory to clarify certain understandings and misunderstandings within a social movement.

10. This means that we are intersectional by default, so to speak.

Yes, indeed.

11. So you do not think that today's social movements are lacking a philosophical background and that is the reason why they fail to reach the majority of population, do you?

Yes, I do not think that today's social movements can be criticized for lacking philosophical understanding. This would be a sociological misunderstanding of social movements, I guess. You can criticize social movements for illusion, conceptual unclarity, but not for lacking philosophical substance. That would be absurd. To give you an example: the 1968 student movement was extremely successful, although it might be reasonably claimed that their members did not even understand themselves. I mean, they were very successful with regard to certain processes of liberation: feminism, emphasis on the political sphere, democratization. In all these respects, 1968 was an enormously successful social movement. But the protesters' own self-understanding was completely different. They wanted to destroy the capitalist system. And they did not succeed, obviously. So, I think that, at least at that time, the movement, or significant parts of the movement, had a wrong self-understanding. They were thinking that they can represent the revolutionary proletariat, which, though, was no longer existing.

This would be my attitude towards social movements: the only theoretical contribution to social movements I can think of is to help them clarify their own self-understanding. Coming to the present day, we see some movements that are fighting for overcoming the capitalist system.

While I can completely understand the demand, their problem is that they are often operating with a certain illusion, namely that overcoming the capitalist system would mean overcoming the markets, all market economies. That is a misunderstanding, I think. The misconstruction lies in identifying capitalism with markets. That is a basic misunderstanding, because it forces you to think of the alternative to capitalism only in terms of a planned economy. But when you are operating with the opposition between market economies and planned economies, you are stuck with a false dichotomy.

So, what a critical theory could do with regard to social movements, which are operating with such a rough idea of overcoming capitalism, is to help them think about markets differently. I mean, markets are not automatically capitalist markets. Markets as such are simply steering mechanisms. A capitalist market is characterized by private ownership and not by markets, and markets themselves are more neutral than some member of these anticapitalist movements believe. What I want to suggest, in short, is that the problem with capitalism might lie more in private ownership than in markets, etc. This would be a fruitful way for a critical theory to be in cooperation or in dialogue with social movements.

12. As for the relationship between recognition and moral agency, you said once that one of the aims of your moral theory is to reconcile Aristotle and Kant.[8] From what you argued above, the Aristotelian/Hegelian side is quite clear. But what about the Kantian side, I mean our recognitive obligations towards others? How recognizing other persons specifically contributes to our flourishing? And does the obligation to non-ideologically recognize them lead to a different kind of struggle for recognition: a struggle for being capable to recognize instead of a struggle for being able to be recognized? Could you elaborate on your insight a little further?

Let me try to answer first the opening question and then move to the other one, which is less clear to me. When I spoke of "marrying" Aristotle and Kant in the article that you mentioned, I had the following idea in mind. To think in terms of Aristotle means to think in terms of *eudaimonia*: the good life. A theory of recognition, in fact, has a certain vision of how to conceive of the human life form and of what it means for humans to be capable of living a good life and it gives a specific answer to it: we are in need of certain forms of recognition in order to live a good life. It is not far from what Aristotle claims. He would say: to live a good life, we need friendships of a certain kind; or we have to enjoy citizenship in

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[8] Cf. Honneth, "Recognition and Moral Obligation."

a polis (so we need appearance in public, public attendance and communication, etc.). Aristotle does not yet have an understanding of economy, including work, and of its role in shaping people's life. So, he does not see it as a part of the good life. For him, it is exactly the opposite: work is part of the "natural", it is necessary but not good.

Now, this is the Aristotelian background of the theory of recognition. The Kantian insight is more or less the following. In order to be able to live such a good life, we cannot do without taking on certain obligations to others. Friendship is a clear case. We can only be good friends if we accept an obligation towards our friend. To take a certain obligation here means, following Kant, "taking it in a transcendental way", i.e., to limit selfishness (although, do not get me wrong, I am not buying the whole transcendental stuff). To have an obligation, I think, means to restrict your own self-interest and do things your self-interest probably would not prompt you to do. In my view, Aristotle is not yet operating with an idea of obligation. So, the merging of Kant and Aristotle means to combine the idea of a good life with an idea of a morality of a certain kind. Hegel, as you suggested, is likely to be the solution here. One could probably maintain that Hegel, in *The Philosophy of Right*, is producing a fusion of Kant and Aristotle and that the notion of obligation, which Hegel is operating with, is a notion of role obligation.

This means, I would claim, that to be a moral person, a moral agent, is a part of the good life, because if you were not limiting your selfishness, you would not be living such a good life. You would not be able to have friends, if you were not be willing to limit your self-interest and obey some moral duties. Unlike Kant, I make a link between morality and *eudaimonia*: in order to live a good life, you have to be a moral person. And "moral person" here means that you have to understand yourself as somebody under obligations, under duties.

Here, the notion of duty is differently constructed than in Kant, obviously. These are not duties stemming from the moral law. They emerge from social roles and occupations that you have to accept in order to live a good life.

As for the different kind of struggle for recognition that may derive from such intrinsic linkage between good life and duty, I must confess that I never saw the question under this light. If I would have, things would be different from what I am saying, namely that the struggle for recognition is essentially a struggle for being recognized. Can it also be the other way round? Should we struggle for being able to recognize other people out of our obligation to them? If I can only be the person that I want to be by fighting against circumstances, which prevent me from recognizing other people as they deserve, am I engaged in a struggle for

recognition? This looks to me like a struggle for self-respect, which means that it is not a struggle for being recognized for something. It is a struggle for being able to recognize yourself as the agent that you want to be. I have a sense – but I must think about it – that this struggle for self-respect might hold a special political energy. It changes the viewpoint, although the horizon stays the same. The standpoint is no longer that of the person who is suffering from disrespect or missing recognition, but it focuses on who is missing the opportunity to do what the recognition relation demands. I have to admit that I have never thought about it from this angle before.

13. What impact might the supposed crisis of globalization have on today's global struggles for recognition?

This is an extremely broad and complex question. I think that it is better if I proceed in steps. First, I do not believe that globalization started in the last decades. The problems, which we are dealing with today, began in the nineteenth century, if not earlier, because globalization has been a fact for five hundred years. In this sense, there was already a globe in the sixteenth century and western countries and states started to explore it and colonize it. So, in my view, colonization was the first form of globalization. Back then, it was taken to be something morally justifiable out of different premises. One premise was the idea that the West is more cultivated and other peoples were in need of education and civilization. That justified exploitation. This went on for centuries and came to an end only seventy or eighty years ago with the legal ending of colonies. What we are starting to realize now is that the official end of colonization was not the end of the effects of colonization. On the contrary, they continue until today. What follows from it is that western countries are under a certain obligation to compensate for all the advantages they took from their colonies in the past.

So, the question would be about what some people call "restorative justice" nowadays. What are our responsibilities? And what do they legitimately demand from us? But I would not describe these responsibilities as "global". For these are particular responsibilities that members of specific western countries have towards the descendants of colonized people. Since these obligations are very far reaching, a deep moral reflection is needed to bring them into focus and see how far they reach.

One basic element of these obligations, which we are under, regards the asylum policies. What we have to realize is that forced migration is a late effect of colonialism. That is why we do not have a right simply to refuse people at our borders. What we have is an obligation to study and probe whether the conditions for granting asylum are given. And we have

to debate permanently the grounds and justifications for granting asylum. And I think that we should include in the grounds for granting asylum also economic dangers and disasters for the reasons that we have discussed so far.

But this is just a small fragment of the answer that this very big question would demand. The key point is that I do not see why we should speak of "global responsibility" in this context, as if everybody in the world had total responsibility towards others. My view is that there are different obligations. Parts of the world (some western states) have specific obligations towards parts of the world (the global South). It is not a matter of global responsibility.

14. The question of freedom is clearly the fundamental ethical-political issue in Western modernity. The relevant debate has long been polarized between advocates of negative and positive freedom. Did you want to shift the axis of the discussion by introducing the concept of "social" freedom? Could you explain what it adds to our understanding of the phenomenon and why the very vitality of the socialist ideal depends on the affirmation of this specific type of freedom?

Yes, the idea of social freedom indeed became basic to me, lately. This importance probably has something to do with a better understanding of the morality of recognition, because the morality of recognition concerns a specific form of freedom. It is a freedom that we can only enjoy by being part of a "We". Social freedom, I think, is that freedom that we can only enjoy together with the plurality of others. There are indeed several freedoms and many characterizations of freedom (positive, negative, reflexive, etc.). These are freedoms that are normally seen as livable as individual subjects. It is a fundamental idea of Hegel that there are forms of freedom, which are more demanding because they presuppose a "We".

There are different "WEs", of course. The "We" of the democratic community implies a certain kind of social freedom that you simply cannot enjoy on your own as an individual. You can enjoy democratic freedom only as a member of a political community – this is, again, an Aristotelian insight – by communication with others. The specific form that freedom takes in a democratic community is not a freedom that you can experience when being an isolated "I" or subject. You can enjoy that freedom only when you understand yourself as a member of a community. The same is famously true for love. You cannot experience the specific freedom that comes with love when you understand yourself as a single atomistic subject. This is the basic idea for social freedom: it is what can be experienced when we mutually recognize each other in different forms.

15. Thinking about the nexus between labor, I mean the many hours that each of us spend working, and the democratic good of self-rule that you investigate in your last book,[9] we would like to conclude our conversation by asking you whether, on balance, "Arbeit" may be the concept that best sums up the fundamental impulse of your intellectual trajectory. And, finally, do you have a sense today that you have been rowing against the current for a long time to eventually retrieve the true source of your political-scientific vocation?

What you say is interesting. I only came to think about it recently. And I almost automatically noticed that social and political philosophy over the last fifty or sixty years has vastly ignored the sphere of work. It is an enormous omission. When you look into Foucault's oeuvre – just to mention a thinker that I have already spoken about, but the same is true for many leading political and social theorists of our time – it is evident that the philosophy of work does not play a prominent role there. For me, on the contrary, work was a central interest from early on. This had a bit to do with recognition as well. For the intuition that I originally had precisely concerned the misrecognition of certain kinds of work in our society.

In my beginnings, coming from an industrial area in Germany where work (and specific kinds of hard work: coal mining, steelworks, etc.) was, at least at that time, a central component of social life, *die Arbeit* was something automatically present and to a certain degree valued in my self-understanding. It was also still somewhat present in mainstream social theory either due to Marx's influence or through philosophical anthropology, where work played an important role as a specific kind of human activity. And then it suddenly lost relevance, import, in social and political philosophy. For me, bringing it back on the table now means, in a sense, to come back to my roots. I mean, it is to come back to a certain intuition that I had from the start.

See, to study the labor movement means to investigate the forms of recognition, which capitalist societies deny to people. And also it means to show to what degree this is completely unjustified and unjustifiable. This may be my short answer to your final question.

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