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Theory of Recognition in Historical Perspective

AXEL HONNETH, *Anerkennung. Eine europäische Ideengeschichte*, Suhrkamp Verlag 2018, p. 238.

Axel Honneth made a name for himself when he reinvigorated the tradition of Critical Theory by resuscitating Hegel's notion of recognition. Since the early 1990s Honneth has developed an idiosyncratic version of social philosophy, conceived first and foremost as an instrument for diagnosing social pathologies, a tool of rational critique of contemporary society. Honneth's latest book is a fruit of his lecture delivered at the Cambridge Centre for Political Thought in 2017. This time around Honneth utilizes his philosophical panache to delve deeper into historical context and unearth the origins of the theory of recognition. This instantly should make his book noteworthy for all those interested in the history of ideas, since no historical monography has been written on this topic so far (with the exception of monographs on German idealism).

Honneth tracks the origins of the discourse on recognition in France, Great Britain and Germany. His decision is reflected in the structure of the book, as each country is analyzed separately in one chapter. In France recognition found its expression in the concept of *amour propre*, discussed by La Rochefoucauld in his *Maxims*. *Amour propre* refers to the socially mediated desire to present oneself to others in positive light, to the process of auto-creation which becomes our second nature, as noted by Rochefoucauld in his famous maxim 119 ("We become so accustomed to disguise ourselves to others that at last we are disguised to ourselves"). This insight was developed and refined by Rousseau. In his scathing critique of urban civilization, man becomes a victim of social forces compelling him or her to solicit recognition from fellow citizens. It entails imminent danger: intensification of the interplay of appearances and theatricalization of life leads to an "inauthentic"

mode of existence and self-loss (*Selbstverlust*). Transformation from natural *amour de soi* of a primitive man to the unnatural *amour propre* of a civilized man could be mitigated by intervention in the very fabric of social life, i.e., by social contract. Social contract, manifestation of *volonté générale*, represents a platform of true recognition between equal citizens, effectively extirpating the root of evil, hitherto chaining people to the nightmarish existence of infinite pretense. The French tradition has been haunted by this “negative anthropology”, as evidenced in Sartre’s famous “Hell is other people” or Althusser’s and Lacan’s interest in generalized gaze of others as the subject’s primary source of imaginary identification, vehicle of socialization process and ideological introjection (p. 73).

The English thought starts from different premises. Man is conceptualized as a social being and the theory of recognition, developed by Scottish moral philosophers, sensualists and proponents of utilitarianism, emphasizes the importance of “sympathy”. It denotes both an affection and emotional resonance which ties an individual to a given community or society at large. By being “sympathetic” we are succumbing to the logic of mirroring the sentiments of others, projecting feelings of others on ourselves. Smith and Mill built upon the notion of “sympathy”, and, unlike in France, where the social context was stigmatized by feudal relations (its prototype being the famous golden cage of Versailles, where noblemen incessantly attempted to win the grace of the king), it leads them to the conclusion that the necessary condition of social recognition is a community of sentient and empathetic human beings, driven by compassion, pity and “propriety” (correct moral behavior), marks of a true gentleman. Recognition is thus thematised through the lenses of the theory of moral sentiments, and culminates in the idea of an internalized impartial spectator (*des unparteilichen Beobachters*, p. 112), which effectively exercises moral self-control over an individual. The “Internal judge” (*der innere Richter*) enables us to realize that, in order to avoid social conflicts, we have to take into consideration the interests of other people, who are willing to be part of a (liberal) public sphere. In France the theory of recognition, stemming from feudal relations of subjugation and domination, leads to widespread resentment and neuroticization of the process of recognition: to put it simply, recognition amounts to alienating objectification, to entrapment within the gaze of others. On the other hand, in England, where patterns of social relations typical for capitalism were already flourishing, the theory of recognition led to the apology of free market and doctrine of *laissez-faire*, to unwavering faith in equalizing power of free exchange between free subjects. The English perspective regarding recognition is more practical, concerned with the state of economy and stability of


the political order, whereas the French tradition is heavily skewed towards epistemology and ontology.

In German philosophy it was neither “sympathy” nor *amour propre* but “respect” (*Achtung*) that played the pivotal role and led to the concepts of self-determination and self-limitation. In Kant, “respect” serves as a mediatory link between our physical nature of an empirical individual and pure rationality of a transcendental subject. “Respect” is thus the only feeling self-wrought by a rational concept of moral law. We recognize that we should restrict and limit ourselves for the common good of our fellow citizens, respecting their autonomy and dignity; we become moral subjects only if we abide by the transcendental moral law and recognize others as morally equal, as implied by the first and the second formulation of the categorical imperative. Fichte, in his *Grundlage des Naturrechts nach Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre*, makes a decisive step further and introduces, for the first time, the concept of recognition in order to deduce the origins of subjective self-awareness (I can become a conscious, free and autonomous human being if and only if I am recognized as such by the other, whom I likewise simultaneously recognize). According to Honneth, Fichte subjects the possibility of experiencing oneself as a rational, active and free individual to a condition of entering into the communicative interaction with a fellow human being (p. 163). Not surprisingly, Honneth maintains that Hegel represents the most accomplished theoretical elaboration of this concept due to its historicization and sociologization (p. 179). In the last chapter constructed as a resume, Honneth ambitiously endeavors to connect all the threads and national idioms in order to come up with some kind of synthesis, with Hegel again being a pivotal figure.

What drew my attention to Honneth’s work was its focus on the history of ideas. Regrettably, he doesn’t devote too much space to discuss the theoretical underpinning of his book. Some remarks on methodology, albeit scant, are to be found in the preface and the first chapter. Honneth distances himself from the nominal history of idea, which, roughly speaking, reconstructs intellectual biographies of particular thinkers and investigates their cross-fertilization (he frankly admits that he probably would not even be able to conduct such research in the first place). Neither follows the path taken by Koselleck nor that taken by Foucault, eschewing both the historical examination of concepts/metaphors and the analysis of discursive *a priori*. If I were to compare his approach to any identifiable tradition, I would have to point at the Warsaw School of the History of Ideas and its historical-structural analysis. The Warsaw School investigated, first and foremost, the worldviews, assuming that there exists a correlation between the supra-individual struc-

tures of thought and imagination on the one hand, and a social system and the ensuing patterns of social interactions on the other. Similarly, Honneth's interpretation is neither a blatant reductionism nor an abstract analysis of past ideas disconnected from their historical context (as in Meinecke or Cassirer). Philosophical reflection represents a template of a given cultural tradition, influenced, augmented or suppressed by specific "objective" factors, such as dominant patterns of social relations, state of economy, religious context, specificity of the legal and political culture, etc. La Rochefoucauld, Rousseau and Sartre in France, Hume, Smith and Mill in Great Britain and Kant, Fichte and Hegel in Germany serve as *quasi*-Weberian models of this ideational structure. This rather traditional approach has both its advantages and downsides. Honneth offers a historical synthesis with clear narrative focus which, in my opinion, transcends the limitations of the nominal history of ideas or the Cambridge School of intellectual history (Skinner, Dunn, Tully, Geuss). On the other hand, his approach may be questioned as being still indebted to the conceptual resources of the worn-out repertoire of post-Hegelian historicism (abound with such discredited concepts as "the spirit of nation" or "a national character"). With its strong insistence on language- or nation-related differences, Honneth's narration at times lends credence to such objections. Some of his remarks are objectionable, even for someone who would consent to and accept his residually expounded methodology. To excoriate his book by pointing at historical inaccuracies or questionable hypotheses would be to miss the point entirely, though. In my opinion such criticism would be inappropriate, since Honneth's book, for all its simplifications, represents a genuinely valuable attempt to make historical origins of the concept of recognition more accessible.

It is not an accident that Honneth decided to focus primarily on France, Great Britain and Germany. He insisted that it was mostly there that recognition found its conceptual moorings, actively penetrating and shaping the respective social, political and cultural *milieus*. However, I could not help noticing that his effort is, in fact, yet another chapter in the long history of the modernization theory and a clandestine eulogy of Europe and the European Union. The title already provides us with a hint: Honneth's recognition is clearly a European phenomenon and has become its *differentia specifica*. It is anchored in European philosophical, legal and political discourses, manifests itself in the uniqueness of the Western society, in its institutions, in adherence to the ideas of democratic state, universal rights of men and the common market. Therefore, his book may be read as an apology of Western European heritage, an exhortation to recognize the unity underlying the plurality of worldviews, irrespective of the existing differences and distinct

historical trajectories. For all its Western-centrism, some shortcomings and petty flaws, Honneth's latest release is, all in all, a readable, penetrative, and highly recommendable intellectual achievement. 

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