EMANCIPATION FROM WHAT AND FOR WHOM? A materialist critique of recognition

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Abstract

This paper makes a materialist critique of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. It explores Honneth's relationship to Marxism as a foil for developing his Hegelian-informed, pragmatist way of thinking about human emancipation as a struggle for recognition, as well as the role of critical theory in that struggle. The paper then argues that this "Marxian foil" distorts the issue of emancipation from and relative to structural injustices, which leads recognition theory to equivocate on the kind of emancipatory knowledge that critical theory seeks to produce. Finally, it argues that contemporary iterations of historical materialism are congenial to many of pragmatism's insights. It also has a normative horizon that the recognition paradigm does not – namely, thematizing the problem of constraints on self-determination in broader struggles for emancipation, and indeed, recognition.

Keywords: Marxism, Pragmatism, Emancipation, Structural Injustice.

1. *Introduction*

In the early 2000s, Iris Marion Young began drawing attention to the concept of structural injustice. Young argued that there are processes that structure our lives through objective constraints on our actions, within which we are differentially positioned, which then shape how we respond to our circumstances. For Young, structural injustice includes a single mother who is not able to find affordable housing because she has an unstable job, bad credit, and cannot outperform other housing applicants. Thus, an impersonal form of class and gender-based vulnerability ensues (Young 2011, pp. 43-74). Young's example suggests that she saw unique theoretical value in analyzing the socio-economic conditions for structural injustice. They tell us something normatively salient about the structural or

institutional obstacles we face in changing the world. Indeed, Young defines the normative category of domination as "institutional constraints on self-determination," which means that the concept of constraint can enrich our thinking about human interests in emancipation and what is standing in the way of realizing those interests.

In this paper, I critique Axel Honneth's theory of recognition in Young's spirit. I argue that Honneth's way of thinking about human emancipation as a struggle for recognition fails to provide the normative content that Young considered so important in the idea of constraints. In brief, Honneth's view is that human beings have an intractable interest in emancipating themselves from domination, which is reflected in the ongoing practice of re-interpreting dominant norms to challenge them and make them more inclusive. The task of critical theory is to articulate this process of norm re-interpretation to generate emancipatory knowledge. Marxism is a key foil for this view as an example of a theory that construes this process as narrowly as possible, in contrast to the broad normative horizons (and therefore the greater emancipatory potential) of a Hegelian-informed pragmatism. My materialist critique is of how this "Marxian foil" distorts the issue of emancipation from and relative to structural injustice.

In one way, my critique is familiar insofar as it recalls Honneth's well-known debate with Nancy Fraser, in which she argues that it is implausible to portray all social conflicts as singularly motivated by a desire for recognition (Honneth and Fraser 2003). It differs in another way, however, because it explores how Honneth sacrifices clarity about why critical theorists' ought to care about structural injustice. I am interested in the problem of constraint and whether its normative salience can be adequately taken on board from within a theory of recognition, specifically one that uses Marxism as its cautionary tale. First, I explain how Honneth leverages a contrast with Marxism to develop his concept of emancipatory interests and the role of critical theory in articulating what they are. Second, I argue that this Marxian foil leads Honneth to equivocate on the kind of emancipatory knowledge that critical theory seeks to produce by failing to distinguish structural injustices from other kinds. Finally, I point out that Marxism and pragmatism are not as dissimilar as Honneth thinks. In fact, contemporary historical materialism is congenial to many of pragmatism's insights. It also has a normative horizon that the recognition paradigm does not – namely, identifying sources of constraint on attempts to realize emancipatory interests, and indeed, recognition.

2. *Honneth's Marxian Foil*

I argue that Marxism is singularly important for Honneth's critical theory. It is instrumental both for creating the warrant for his theory of recognition and to justify his way of thinking about critical theory's relationship to social conflict, freedom, and emancipation. In brief, Honneth uses Marxism to distinguish his broad-minded, recognition-seeking perspective from a narrow-minded, economistic one. Marxism also circumscribes the way in which critical theory should understand itself and its practice. On this meta-theoretical level, too, Marxism's narrow-minded focus on class antagonism inspires Honneth's alternative. It is important to Honneth that critical theory's own practice be folded into a more general theory of social reproduction than what Marxism has to offer, alongside the many emancipatory struggles with which it is engaged.

One of Honneth's central goals in developing his critical theory of recognition is "part of a larger project of moving critical theory away from its Marxian roots" (Thompson 2014, p. 782). According to Honneth, Marxism is problematic because it uses an untenable structuralist-functionalist logic and has a utilitarian impulse. It considers norms and values only to the extent that they serve the interests of capital accumulation. It is also utilitarian because it sees class struggle as a battle over structurally conditioned competition driven by interests and not about disrespect (Honneth 1995, pp. 145-152). The outcome is not a good one because Marxism limits the scope of struggle as well as the grounds for critiquing forms of domination that are not economic in nature. Marx caused us "to lose sight of the intersubjective structure of freedom" (Honneth 2011, p. 51). The unfortunate consequence is failing to envision human flourishing with an idea of the good life beyond the downfall of class societies. One can hardly speak of justice in a robust sense on these terms.

Honneth's counter-vailing theory of recognition is well-known. In brief, Honneth argues for a kind of "normative monism" to understand the moral aspirations of all social movements (Fraser, Honneth 2003, p. 4). At their core, they are all engaged in a struggle for social respect. Feelings of disrespect and humiliation are the fundamental drive of all social conflicts. Indeed, social conflict is fundamentally a process of re-interpreting dominant norms to make them more inclusive. Honneth uses Hegel's lord and bondage scenario to illustrate the tendency for dominant groups (the lord) to see norms as natural things in themselves, whereas oppressed groups (servants) relate to norms with a different, transformative attitude that challenges exclusive practices (Honneth 2017, p. 917). Honneth writes that,

"the source of recurrent social struggles is thought to lie in the fact that any disadvantaged social group will attempt to appeal to norms that are already institutionalized but that are being interpreted or applied in hegemonic ways, and to turn those norms against the dominant groups be relying on them for a moral justification of their own marginalized needs and interests" (Honneth 2017, p. 917). Marxism fails because it claims that human conflicts are only motivated by economic interests. As he argues, "The Marxian doctrine of class struggle fails above all because it views all conflict among groups or classes as economically motivated, whereas historical reality suggests that experiences of injustice and of frustrated hopes have far greater motivating power" (Honneth 2017, p. 917). Thus, Marxism's narrowness prevents it from appreciating the diminished role that class divisions play in motivating struggle in today's society and acknowledging other motivations. Honneth's theory of recognition claims a more expansive normative horizon.

In the first place, then, Marxism is a foil for Honneth because it represents a narrow-minded, restrictive normative perspective in contrast to Honneth's broad-minded, inclusive one. That Marxism is narrow-minded and economistic is a widely accepted interpretation of that tradition, so one might think that Marxism would simply retreat from Honneth's view after having superseded its limited normative horizon. But Marxism does not retreat from view. Honneth continues to use it as a foil to explain the role that he sees critical theory playing in the struggle for recognition. In "Is there an emancipatory interest?" Honneth picks up a thread of Habermas' argument in *Knowledge and Human Interests* that there is a connection between constructing critical theories and social reproduction. Honneth thinks that Habermas fails to correctly articulate this connection because, in this instance, Habermas's social theory fails where Marxism succeeds. Thus, circumventing Marxism is again important not only for understanding the scope of our emancipatory interests, but for the self-understanding of critical theory regarding how it is relevant for articulating them.

Habermas argues that there is a constitutive connection between constructing theories and social reproduction. Habermas says human beings develop historically situated forms of knowledge through various mediums that are central to reproducing the societies in which they live. Each of the mediums that Habermas describes plays out at the level of what we do in the human sciences. Habermas identifies three central mediums through which people acquire knowledge by reflecting on and communicating their experiences. The first medium is work, the second is language, and the third is power. As for the first medium, labor, Habermas claims that people

have an instrumental interest in developing causal explanations for why labor is organized in the way that it is. This interest is instrumental due to the imperative of maintaining one's material reproduction through labor. In terms of the human sciences, the labor medium leads to technical knowledge in the realm of empirical research – perhaps sociology, history, economics, and the like. In terms of the second medium, Habermas argues that people have a practical interest in symbolic reproduction through linguistic communication because they must acquire understanding of how to interpret the world around them. He argues that this practical interest is reflected in the human sciences that are "interpretive" (literature, arts, history, etc.). The third medium, power, reflects an emancipatory interest. Habermas identifies "struggle" as an activity that is as invariant to human social reproduction as labor or symbolic reproduction. In the human sciences, struggle is reflected by critical theory, which combats and questions existing social orders insofar as they are relations of domination (Honneth 2017, p. 909).

Honneth is unconvinced by Habermas' last thesis on the tie between emancipatory interest and critical theory. In Habermas' trio of social reproduction activities (labor, symbolism, struggle), Habermas justifies including labor and symbolism into a list of invariant human activities, but not struggle. Indeed, it would be hard to deny that human societies need to reproduce life through material and symbolic means. But why do societies need conflict and struggle? If we cannot answer this question, then we cannot grant ourselves the warrant to claim that critical theory reflects an invariant emancipatory interest. Habermas cannot give a satisfactory answer because he relies too much on psychoanalysis as a model of social reproduction. In the psychoanalytic framework, individual human beings struggle to liberate themselves from the internal heteronomy of their desires. The story of the oedipal complex, for example, is a story of infantile dependencies on desires that must be overcome for social cohesion to endure. Individuals struggle to liberate themselves from being dependent on their mothers in different ways, depending on one's gender socialization. By transposing this model onto whole societies, Habermas characterizes struggle in terms of "a type of cognitive striving without any apparent motivational basis in worldly goals or activities" (Honneth 2017, p. 910). For Habermas, struggle began to seem more and more like a self-referential, collective mental process, rather than one that is rooted in conflicts between social groups.

Honneth argues that it is a mistake to transpose the model of the individual onto society, since such a model must assume that the collective

psyche has a pre-existing interest in unity, just as in the individual psyche does (Honneth 2017, p. 911). If there is a pre-existing interest in unity, then conflict and struggle are unlike labor and symbolism in the sense that one can anticipate some resolution of struggle but invariance of the latter two. In this picture, critical theory is not a necessary human science, but an historically contingent one. Importantly, this mistake on Habermas' part is a Marxian mistake, despite the fact that Marxism is notorious for having the opposite problem. Marxism is a theory of conflict between social groups, namely social classes, so it is not guilty of viewing society as a macrocosm of the individual psyche. And yet it, too, imagines some resolution to struggle. Its economism prevents it from thinking of emancipation beyond the collapse of class society, so it fails to offer a "properly" ontological basis for thinking about emancipatory interest *sui generis,* as an invariant part of social reproduction. In other words, Marxism fails to see struggle as intrinsic to what human societies, or human beings, are (Honneth 2017, p. 914).

The problem for Honneth is that Marxism is the only serious contender as an alternative social theory to various sorts of individualism, including the psychoanalytic view used by Habermas, which locates motives for resistance in the dispositions of individuals. Honneth also considers and rejects what he calls the "Kant-Rousseau" view found in liberal and republican theories. According to Honneth, the Kant-Rousseau view is that individual agents revolt against domination to assert their superiority as well as to demonstrate their own virtues and abilities (Honneth 2017, p. 913). Human beings strive to better themselves in comparison to their peers because they desire acknowledgment of their individuality. By these lights, the Kant-Rousseau view does not do better in integrating a notion of collective strife into its model of social reproduction. By contrast, Marx thought that workers experience domination, which would lead them to organize themselves to confront capital and thus generate emancipatory knowledge. Marx's view is one of education-by-struggle. Thus, Marxism plays a special role as a foil in Honneth's critical theory as compared to Kant, Rousseau, and Freud because it is the only social theory that fundamentally challenges the individualist or psychoanalytic paradigms by taking social groups and collective strife seriously.

A solution must avoid economistic Marxism but keep the collective in mind. Honneth claims that pragmatism has this virtue. From a pragmatist point of view, agents within oppressed groups internalize dominant norms, re-interpret them, and then use the mutual expectations of those norms throughout society to give themselves institutional leverage. Mutual expectations are an enabling condition for emancipatory practices because

they provide a common basis for challenging one-sided interpretations so as to make them more inclusive. Thus, institutions can change to accommodate new interpretations in a social learning process that is inherently conflictual. Such a process is a necessarily recurring practice vis-à-vis the dominant norms in society "in the face of a stubborn tendency toward their naturalization" (Honneth 2017, p. 918). In other words, Hegel and John Dewey unite in a neo-pragmatist theory of recognition.

Honneth's pragmatist turn culminates in the claim that critical theory plays an epistemic role in the total social reproduction of society. What critical theory does is articulate and interpret the struggle for recognition, which is a process without end that continually re-configures the scope of social freedom. Institutionally, critical theory reflects this process within the human sciences. In addition to the contributions of those sciences that produce technical and practical knowledge, critical theory produces emancipatory knowledge. Importantly, critical theory's relevance to social conflict, struggle, and emancipation depends on the distance that it places between itself and Marxism. The latter claim follows from the view that Marxism cannot accommodate "critique" and theory construction into its theory of social reproduction because it collapses the normative horizon of freedom prematurely. In sum, Marxism remains as a foil despite long since having fallen into disrepute because (1) it helps to justify a normative theory and (2) it helps to justify that theory's usefulness to social and political conflict.

3. *What kind of emancipation are we talking about?*

In a nutshell, the point of Honneth's Marxian foil is to show that Marxism is neither as critical nor as radical as it seems because it is limited in scope. What is just as important is that the foil serves to show that Honneth's critical theory has a comparatively broader horizon for human emancipation. I now tie together several critiques of Honneth's view that have been raised over the years, all of which have to do with Honneth's treatment of labor, class, and capitalism. I pursue the debate about these topics specifically as a response to the architecture of Honneth's argument; Honneth uses Marxism's preoccupation with class to highlight its limits, so I follow suite to highlight his own. I argue that, in sum, the Marxian foil distorts Honneth's attitude toward structural injustice. It motivates an overly capacious notion of norms and institutions that eclipses questions of feasibility and realizability under current, systemic constraints on self-determination. What

Honneth envisions as the process of interpreting and re-interpreting dominant norms cannot be exactly the same thing as the process of figuring out what to do about those constraints. One reaches the limits of "recognition" as a meta-critical theory at the point where one begins to equivocate on the type of emancipation that is at stake at these different normative registers.

To review, Honneth argues that one must focus on normative desires, aspirations, and justifications that ground struggles for freedom to get the widest critique of modern societies possible. His own narration of the economic side to these struggles is that capitalism (the distinctly modern economic system) is only relevant to this project insofar as it is a value-laden system that works by enacting certain norms that we should criticize. If capitalism restricts freedom, it does so because it disrespects and humiliates people, which is a claim that Marxism itself could not justify due to its focus on material conditions and interests. There are several criticisms of this point of view that I want to pull together in the service of highlighting how the Marxian foil generates an analytical distortion of structural injustice.

Nancy Fraser's intervention remains important. In *Redistribution or Recognition?,* Fraser argues that Honneth reduces political sociology to a moral psychology of pre-political suffering, by which she means that Honneth's normative monism derives its concepts from the sufferings, motivations, and expectations of social subjects, claims to reconstruct them, and then purports to uncover the basic moral structure of all discontent. She claims that this point of view is *prima facie* implausible and that "a less tendentious reading of a broader range of research sources would doubtless reveal a multiplicity of motives – including resentment of unearned privilege, abhorrence of cruelty, aversion to arbitrary power, revulsion of gross disparities of income and wealth, antipathy to exploitation, dislike of supervision, and indignation at being marginalized or excluded" (Fraser, Honneth 2003, p. 203). If these various motivations could all be collapsed into one idea, it might be something much more general than recognition of one's identity, like fairness. Thus, Honneth stretches the notion of recognition to its breaking point, beyond all recognition.

Likewise, Michael Thompson has noted the "curious simplicity" of Honneth's view. The theory of recognition presents itself as "a formal theory that lacks historical and sociological content" (Thompson 2014, p. 785). Further, David Borman notes that the scope of the theory is so broad that one can literally fit any demands for justice into it, but such a broad scope may be empty of content because, even if one agrees that recognition will ultimately resolve our problems, it tells us little about what we need to do

to achieve it (Borman 2009, p. 949). These criticisms point out an ironic twist: What makes Honneth's theory of recognition distinct from Marxism is its broad normative horizon, but it is also prescriptively vacuous when it comes to articulating what system mechanisms need to change and what would make them change for the better.

In my view, these critics converge upon the problem of using pre-political experience as a normative reference point for understanding injustice. In particular, the problem of lack of content results from failing to theorize domination as a structural injustice that is distinct from other kinds of conflicts. Theorizing structural injustice requires asking a series of intermediate questions between misrecognition and recognition. These questions involve identifying key structural and institutional obstacles that struggles for emancipation face. Even if one grants that recognition simply is what freedom entails in the most ultimate sense, then it still does not follow that such desires lead anyone to reflect adequately on the obstacles to achieving it. For Honneth, resolving any and all conflicts in our social life involves re-interpreting dominant norms. No doubt it does, but this claim is minimal, not asking several basic political questions: If people are conscious of experiencing disrespect in basic social institutions, then what prevents desires for recognition from becoming effective political demands?

Consider capitalism as a structure. As Fraser argues, recognition monism is congenitally blind to system mechanisms within capitalist markets that cannot be reduced to cultural schemas of evaluation (Fraser, Honneth 2003, pp. 215-6). The true premise that markets are always embedded in specific cultures (or recognition orders) cannot *ipso facto* generate the conclusion that their behavior is wholly governed by the dynamics of recognition. For instance, it is plausible to argue that capitalist markets generate normative expectations for merit in achievement, but such norms do not determine wage rates across dissimilar market sectors. Other causes involve more impersonal mechanisms, like supply and demand for labor, the marginal cost of production, the level of labor productivity, inflation, and so on.

What I add is that recognition monism is not only congenitally blind to such mechanisms. It equivocates between what Young identified as "domination" and "oppression." Young defines domination as an institutional constraint on self-determination, and oppression as an institutional constraint on self-realization. Of course, my point is similar to Fraser's in the sense that I am adding an economically oriented "redistribution" category to the discussion, but my emphasis differs. In my view, "redistribution" as an analytical perspective does not capture the relevant equivocation either,

which has to do with the normative register that critical theory uses to talk about the system mechanisms involved in understanding capitalism's political economy. By contrast, the content of the concept of domination is "constraint," which trains one's attention on the obstacles that political agents face in making demands for redistribution.

In my view, the analytical disadvantage to conflating domination and oppression in an all-encompassing theory of recognition is that one simply loses relevant distinctions between the types of freedom that are at stake at these different normative registers. For instance, Honneth argues that the class struggle thesis must be false because pre-capitalist societies had economies that were thoroughly embedded in particular cultures (or recognition orders). Therefore, purely economic motivations for struggle cannot hold trans-historically. But Marxists often point out that the separation of the economic and political spheres develops uniquely in capitalist society. The reason that Marxists point out the separation of spheres is to show that struggles for justice have a particular set of institutional obstacles under capitalism. In contrast, pre-capitalist societies had a different institutional configuration that did less work to obscure the relevance of economic struggles to other kinds of demands for justice. The latter claim is obviously premised on the understanding that there is quite a lot of social struggle that goes on that does not conform to an economic logic, like struggles for democracy and political rights that influence the now separate, modern state. The central idea here is not to presume what motivates each and every social conflict, but rather to say that the relative attainability of political goods under capitalism can obscure the workings of class domination and consequently devalue those goods (Wood 2016, pp. 19-48, 204-237). Marxism's judgment here is that there is domination, not that there is only one reason to fight it based on economic interest.

It might be with good reason that Honneth and Marxism are talking about different problems. Honneth may be right that Marxism does not offer an ontological basis for understanding social conflicts, so it has not historically seen fit to imagine that conflict is an invariable part of social reproduction. But why would it? Structural injustices are Marxism's focus – *contra* Honneth, this focus makes sense to me if one is not willing to accept the invariance of structural injustices to social reproduction. One would not want to make an ontological claim that roots structural injustice in the type of beings that humans are. There is no attractive reason to do so that would not reify the injustices that critical theory should want to undermine. The consequence of making such an ontological claim would be accepting domination as something that will continue in our social life, and there is

nothing inherently critical or emancipation-seeking about that. The same cannot be said for an interest in eradicating all social struggle and conflict *tout court*. Conflicts are not necessarily symptomatic of injustice in the sense that the conflict arises from relations of domination or that one side of the conflict is oppressed. One might instead claim that many conflicts that challenge hegemonic, naturalized norms are healthy for functioning democracies to promote social inclusion. In such a case, struggle is indeed necessary for social reproduction.

One might think that the possible difference between social conflict more generally and conflicts arising from structural forms of domination would give us reason to differentiate the kinds of concerns that Marxism has with the ones that Honneth has. Instead, Honneth uses disagreements with Marxism to warrant focusing on social conflict in general, which equivocates on the kind of emancipation that is at stake. Naturally, critical theory is interested in all kinds. But surely some of its interest lies in disambiguating between conflicts that might always exist and structural injustices that one hopes will not always exist. One could use the category of domination to show how, for instance, capitalist labor markets undercut the capacities of people to participate in re-interpreting dominant norms. Indeed, it is capitalism's ambiguous nexus of freedom and constraint that makes it normatively interesting.

Instead of differentiating among these various concerns, Honneth chooses to interpret the labor movement's successes over and against capitalism's system logic to be a feature of that logic by sublating class conflict to a meta-logic of recognition. He argues that capitalist markets only work when they are responsive to those values of participants that hold outside the terrain of market exchange. Markets experience disruption if they do not respond to our norms and values, so their persistence must be due to intrinsic normative features of markets that make them responsive: Markets make an implicit promise of social freedom that entails seeing oneself as an equal within market exchange (Honneth 2011, pp. 189-192). Put differently, one can interpret the struggles against capitalism to its credit, since markets need such struggles to achieve social integration. This optimistic (and teleological?) view of market freedom is tendentious, paying attention to legal reforms at the expense of considering the markets' role in reproducing social pathologies that are not strictly "economic" in their normative content. Indeed, one must ask, would Honneth also tell those who are subject to racism, xenophobia, and sexism that these oppressions hold the promise of freedom because they provide the opportunity to fight against them? Of course, he would

not, but then it's not clear what to conclude, if one allows that market mechanisms may reinforce and re-produce these other oppressions in a distinctively capitalist form (Jütten 2015, pp. 195-199).

The argument is also tendentious because it one-sidedly focuses on the recognition demands of marginalized or oppressed people as what drives social conflict, rather than those of the non-oppressed or non-marginalized. However, a more sober analysis of class conflict might indicate that it is implausible to talk about capitalist social reproduction without talking about the structural incentives for capital to defend specific property relations in fundamental ways (Gourevitch 2015, pp. 103-116). It is not as though capitalists, bankers, and their highest-level managers are engaging in class conflict because they are at loss for social respect! Indeed, their struggles are part and parcel to the constraints that the poor and working classes of capitalist societies face in making their demands for justice effective in the workplace, the family, and the public sphere. The latter is a point that one easily misses if one uses the theory of class struggle as a foil for what counts as narrow in scope.

The crux of the issue is that Honneth overgeneralizes claims about what motivates social struggle onto claims about remedies and aims, which leads to obscuring domination and thus equivocating on what one means by freedom or emancipation (Borman 2009, pp. 944-949). In sum, recognition theory, in its anti-Marxist variation, misses the normative salience of an important link in the chain, which is what dominated people are up against – constraints. In my view, it is not sufficient to say that oppressed groups have an interest in re-interpreting hegemonic norms and therefore they will produce emancipatory knowledge that gets reflected at the level of critical theory. Clearly, there is something(s) getting in the way of doing just that. Succinctly, the persistence of domination demands that critical theory engage with social science, not just moral psychology. Attempts to reconstruct the ongoing dynamics of societal norm-interpretation will otherwise tell one little about how to change the things that one can no longer accept, given that one knows that they are unjust.

4. *Marxism and Pragmatism: We're not so different, you and I*

One way of putting my argument thus far is that a debate between Honneth and Marxism (or simply historical materialism) is not principally about human motivation or normative desires. Rather, it is about how to think about changing the world in the face of structural injustice. In my

view, contemporary historical materialism makes a much more modest and politically salient claim than what Honneth attributes to it, which is that it is necessary to eliminate class domination to achieve the wider goal of human emancipation. Honneth, for his part, does not see why a structural injustice of the class division kind requires thinking in a different way about our interests in emancipation. He thinks that all of these questions can be subsumed within the idea of re-interpreting dominant norms, as if constraints only lie in what people think and feel rather than in the adverse incentives and constraints that accompany domination. My materialist critique of recognition is simple and as old as capitalism itself, and yet it bears repeating. But why must one repeat it?

To correct for an overcorrection. Marxism shoulders some responsibility for insufficiently tending to moral, spiritual, and normative development within the earlier stages of critical theory. I say *some* responsibility because it is my view that just how economistic Marxism really is depends to an extent on the political sympathies of the critic. As a sympathetic critic, I find it difficult to read the middle-period Marx's musings on the value of art, the insistence of Otto Neurath about the incommensurability of human values, the yearnings of Alexandra Kollontai for love and intimacy, or Frantz Fanon's diagnoses of socially generated psychological pathologies as "economism" in any normal usage of that word. Nonetheless, the New Left identified real shortcomings and attacked them with vigor and at length. It has subsequently fallen to idealist tendencies within critical theory to rectify this deficit. Now, critical theory can and should reconstruct the moral development of modern societies while preserving the materialist perspective that is required to disambiguate among different normative registers of critique. Indeed, I argue that contemporary Marxian social science is not so far off from pragmatism, as Honneth imagines it to be.

First, it is possible to develop a materialist pragmatism. Rahel Jaeggi has argued for preserving the "materialist moment" of normative critique by combining the idea of social practice together with the idea of problem-solving. First, Jaeggi's definition of a social practice is an informal, repeated, and rule-governed behavior that is the condition of possibility of certain institutions without being reducible to them (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 56-58). Practices are normatively structured, habitual behaviors with rules that are tacitly understood by those who participate in them. Those who participate in a practice tacitly understand what they must do to make a practice successful as the type of practice that it is. That a practice is successful or not depends on how one evaluates it based on certain norms that are implicit, yet inherent to it. Norms explicitly and implicitly prohibit

certain behaviors and permit other behaviors by defining and establishing "the conceivable modes of behavior within a form of life by normatively structuring the space of possibilities of action itself" (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 95). For instance, one would call a doctor who did not really want to help their patients and only wants to make money a bad doctor because being a good doctor means caring about patients' health. In fact, one would argue that only by caring about patients' health can one succeed in the task of being a doctor at all. One can expect that the normative deficiency of not caring about patients will lead to errors that then lead to a failure to provide adequate care.

Social practices produce problems along with normative resources for resolving problems. Problems are objective and subjective, at once given and made. People create problems through contextual, historically situated practices, but they also react to the conditions produced by previous attempts to solve problems. In other words, problem-solving does not occur in a vacuum and has material conditions. At the same time, the implicit, normative structuring of a practice is what provides the resources for identifying that there is a problem that must be resolved. The norms embedded in a practice enable or disable one from perceiving that there is a problem or what the nature of that problem is, which sets the terms for how one goes about resolving it. Neither the norm nor the practice is contingent. Rather, they stand in necessary relation to one another (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 205). For Jaeggi, attempts to solve problems give rise to developmental patterns that one can describe as "learning processes" in which the agents who participate in practices engage in problem-solving, put forward solutions, and attempt to solve further problems (Jaeggi 2018, pp. 134-144). Importantly, the "learners" involved are responding to the conditions that are given by previous attempts.

In my view, Jaeggi's effort to preserve the materialist moment goes a long way to minimizing the idealist tendency toward a tendentious interpretation of normative development. Dominant norms exist, but they exist in response to constraints that hinder their re-interpretation. It follows that people have various reactions to economic constraints that run the gamut from ideological consent to resignation to deep-seated resentment of inequality. Indeed, Jaeggi has defined the economy as a social practice (Deutscher, Lafont 2017, pp. 160-180). She argues that even the standard economic categories, like labor, exchange, and property, have normative conditions for success *and* are only partially intentional in how people reproduce them. This point has been obscured in critical theory because philosophers have arbitrarily differentiated between action-theoretical and

system-theoretical analyses of the economy. In the former, intentionality and normative expectations reign, whereas in the latter, impersonal mechanisms and norm-free incentives drive social reproduction. By contrast, a practice-theoretical approach to the economy can open the "black box" of the economy itself, as agents live it and as it congeals into developmental patterns and institutions. In such a view, the economy would take on a wider significance than it currently does in critical theory because it would disable clean distinctions between the "economic" and "non-economic" that ultimately make the former into a black box once the theorist deems it normatively thin, narrow, and thus uninteresting (Rothe, Ronge 2016, pp. 3-22). Put differently, Jaeggi turns a problem with Marxian economism into a more general failing of critical theory to conceptualize the economy in a normatively robust and "wider" way.

Second, one can postulate a pragmatist historical materialism (Renault 2013, pp. 138-157). Indeed, I think that such a view is implicit in much post-1970s analytical Marxist social science that attempts to illuminate what Marx called the "silent compulsion of economic relations" (Marx 1990, p. 899). For instance, the historian Robert Brenner has been widely influential in promoting a class struggle, or conflict-centered, research program in contrast to the earlier "productive forces Marxism" that postulated the technological determinist, teleological theory of history that Honneth always seems to have in mind when he critiques this tradition. In my view, Brenner offers an early, and yet implicit, practice-theoretical view of the economy that begins to open the "black box" that Jaeggi rightly identifies and begins to conceptualize it in a way that is both historically specific and less arbitrarily sequestered from other aspects of social life. Brenner writes, noting,

> [T]he specific forms of socio-economic behavior that individuals and families will find to make sense and will choose will depend on the society-wide network of social relationships – society-wide constraints and opportunities – in which they find themselves. These constraints present themselves to individual economic agents as unchangeable givens, because they are sustained by collective socio-political action. The upshot is that every historically evolved type of society – what Marx called mode of production – has its own microeconomics (Wickham et al. 2007, pp. 57-58).

Brenner argues further that in every society there are relations among direct producers, relations among exploiters, and relations among direct producers and exploiters that, taken together, make possible the regular access that people have to land, labor, tools, or other resources that are

necessary to reproduce social life. The nexus of practices that constitute these relationships determine one's access to a society's social product depending on one's position within them. Thus, such practices also define the basic constraints on individual economic action. Brenner calls these practices "social property relations" to clarify that they do not only define the resources at individuals' disposal, but the manner in which individuals gain access to resources and their income more generally (Wickham et al. 2007, p. 58). Put simply, social property relations condition how one acts, not just what one has; one's position determines what one has to do to get what one wants (Wright 1997). As a result, one can expect individuals and families to systematically adopt a particular, corresponding set of economic strategies in light of their constraints. Brenner dubs these strategies "rules for reproduction" (Wickham et al. 2007, p. 59). Brenner also claims that when rules for reproduction are enacted in aggregate, they give rise to corresponding and historically specific developmental patterns. For instance, producers under capitalism are subject to the competitive constraint, whereas in peasant-producing societies there are reasons to avoid subsuming production to market demand. Substantively, the necessary conditions of capitalist social property relations are (1) that economic agents are separated from the means of subsistence and (2) that they lack the means of coercion that would allow them to reproduce themselves by systematically appropriating by force what they need from producers. By contrast, "feudal" social property relations were dominated by peasant possession of land that was not market dependent, direct access to the factors of production, and surplus extraction by the economic coercion of "lords" who owned politically constituted property. In peasant-producing societies, direct producers produced for subsistence, not for exchange. They could engage in market exchange, but they did not *need to* because there were not under pressures to produce competitively. Lack of market dependency generated "safety-first" avoidances of becoming heavily dependent on market exchange.

The normative dimension to this pragmatist historical materialism is undeveloped thus far, but it is not difficult to see how it might be. Like all practices, rules for reproduction and their corresponding social property relations have norms by which participants perceive that they fail or succeed, according to the purposes and goals that are posited and reproduced along with the structure itself. One can see how certain norms would emerge that are directed toward societal reproduction in this historically specific sense (like that hard work should merit a high reward), which form the basis upon which people articulate demands for justice. As Jaeggi puts it, the

normative and the material are entangled within historical patterns of development, which is why, as Hegel says, class conflict rarely erupts in capitalist societies simply because the "rabble" are starving but also because they are outraged. Lack of resources is a reality that is perceived through normative expectations that are simultaneously culturally rooted but (and this is key) adapt to the competitive constraints that capitalism places on every individual, regardless of their cultural dispositions (Fraser, Jaeggi 2018, p. 142). Some of these norms will hinder or help social learning, or an adequate reflection on the conditions that give rise to them, and it is up to political agents to frame social problems in a way that facilitates learning about those conditions.

What makes historical materialism distinct from pragmatism, however, is that this tradition is strongly committed to analyzing historically specific conditions of political economy in the service of illuminating equally specific constraints on self-determination, or domination. There is, in my view, a strong republican ethos to this research program. It thinks that there is something empirically distinct about the kind of constraints that the rules for reproduction of the political economy places on people such that they can be said to dominate them. My sense is that there is a meaningful difference between the practices that make up such rules for reproduction and practices in a more general sense. Consider a medical practice in contrast to capitalist competition. Both a doctor and a capitalist possess certain resources that patients and workers do not have access to. A doctor has specialized knowledge and a capitalist owns the means of production and thus access to the means of earning a salary or wage. Both patients and workers gain access to these resources by engaging in a relationship with doctors or capitalists, and there is a difference in social position between the two based on one's need and the other's possession of resources that might satisfy that need. Despite the similarities, the difference between a doctor engaging in a medical practice and a capitalist engaging in market competition is that a capitalist, by virtue of their social position, has interests in competing with other capitalists to avoid losing their position as a capitalist. The latter entails a set of behaviors toward workers, namely that workers' wages and consequent well-being become a cost that a capitalist must negotiate – minimize if they can. Not so with a doctor. Doctors can work in all kinds of contexts and the possessing of their resource does not immediately entail the manner in which they treat their patients. A doctor can work in a public clinic, a private practice, for a single patron, and many other alternatives. A doctor need not treat their patients in any particular way to keep hold of their resources and remain a doctor. The idea here

is that a practice like market competition has a stronger connection with social positioning and objective constraint. It is, in other words, a distinctively structural practice.

What historical materialism insists upon (and what pragmatism does not) is this structural way of talking about practices, or the practical moment of engagement that agents have with objective constraints and their social position. As Young argues, "The first observation to make about social structures [is] that they appear as objective, given, and constraining" (Young 2011, p. 55). Social structures constrain individuals indirectly and cumulatively by blocking off certain possibilities for action, by placing individuals in positions in which not all avenues for action are equally available or likely to succeed in bringing about the results that one desires. However, individuals continue to act to attempt to bring about desired results, which refracts back onto the structure itself. New constraints arise from attempts to influence the old. Structures, then, are recursive in nature and self-made, much like the problem-solving dynamics that Jaeggi identifies in all practices, which means that they also have an important normative structure. If Marxists have not always articulated this normative structure in a satisfying way, the conclusion, in my view, should be to try to articulate it better, not to use Marxism as a foil in a way that precludes appreciating the distinctive nature of the structural practices that Marxism rightly emphasizes as placing constraints on self-determination.

A retreat from the Marxian foil might reveal that historical materialism can also illuminate normative complexity in a way that an all-encompassing theory of recognition cannot. Honneth's perspective is that "the given form of social reproduction in society is determined by shared universal values and ideals" (Honneth 2014, p. 10). From a pragmatic historical materialist perspective, this position overestimates the extent to which societies are held together by deeply shared values, like a democratic conception of freedom. Recognition theory finds it difficult to imagine how a social world could be held together without such shared values, whereas pragmatic historical materialism has no trouble imagining such a world. Historical materialism emphasizes how people engage norms to confront constraints, especially those who are subject to domination. People with few choices often navigate them with the justifications that are available, which is not equivalent to sharing values and ideals. Of course, the fact that some values are more generalizable than others implies that the notion of shared values and ideals has some bearing on reality. But historical materialism permits the theorist to indulge in skepticism, for instance, that many members of the capitalist class actually

share an ideal of democratic freedom. Perhaps they justify their behavior in its name, or their concessions to democracy are more conjunctural than they are fixed. To simply turn Honneth's original concern about Marxism's narrow economism back around on recognition theory: Historical materialism maintains that the normative development of social structures is not reducible to a struggle for recognition. One will miss much of the normative texture of social conflicts – contradiction, constraint, domination – if one performs that reduction.

5. *Critical Theory as a Practice*

I conclude by way of agreement. I think Honneth is right to argue that critical theory should understand itself as playing a role in social reproduction. As Robin Celikates (2018) argues, critique itself is a social practice, which reflects on as much as it facilitates the social practices around it. The "critique" part orients itself toward human emancipation and makes our strivings for it clear to ourselves. My point is not that political actors themselves do not understand their strivings – I believe strongly that they do – it is rather to justify them and, if need be, critique them when their strategies or normative formulas are not effective, not persuasive, and so on. Critical theorists do not have privileged access to knowledge about injustice, but they do have access to the means of intellectual labor by which they aggregate and systematize ideas. Thus, critical theory is indeed involved in social reproduction, and perhaps endemically so, as Honneth suggests.

What I find important to add is that critical theory should also ask the "strategic questions" at a high level of abstraction. I have argued that the simple elegance of Honneth's view of re-interpreting dominant norms and what motivates social struggle is suspicious because it refuses to acknowledge the importance of critiquing structural injustice on terms that differ from social conflicts in general. To my mind, structural injustices place unique constraints on those fighting for justice, forcing critical theory to interrogate the normative and material development of these constraints in the service of figuring out what to do about them. They require, in other words, a theory of transformation (Wright 2009, pp. 273-307). Without asking these questions, it is unclear to me what Honneth's process of norm-interpretation amounts to in the end. It is too vague, and I do not see what it has to do with basic goods and the obstacles to attaining them under conditions of domination.

My argument here is not new. Contrary to the dominant view of the New Left that the Old Left reduced all matters of recognition to economic interest, I think the Old Left's fundamental insight was *not at all* that one can reduce human emancipation to classlessness. Their insight was rather that one must go through the obstacles that the class structure imposes on emancipatory struggles in order to achieve emancipation. To my mind, this insight has an uncanny theoretical status in contemporary critical theory since it is simultaneously self-evident and yet it is persistently elusive. Honneth's project contributes to making it so, which I suspect is why Honneth continues to use Marxism as a foil: If you beat the beast long enough, maybe it will die. But as long as capitalism exists, Marxism is not going anywhere, whether it flourishes in the human sciences or not.

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