

## Book Review

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**Axel Honneth:** *Freedom's Right. The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*. Translated by Joseph Ganahl. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014, 448 pp.

Reviewed by *Hans Arentshorst*

One of the central aims of Axel Honneth's work has been to make Hegel's intuitions about the importance of recognition for individual self-realization fruitful for a contemporary critical social theory. Because Hegel based these intuitions on metaphysical ideas about history and nature that are hard to defend nowadays, Honneth has been trying to develop a theory of recognition that is based on a post-metaphysical, empirical foundation. In *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth 1995) this resulted in a largely anthropological account about how individuals need different forms of recognition – namely love, respect, and social esteem – to develop a healthy self-relation. Here, Honneth still followed the Hegel-interpretation of Jürgen Habermas, who argued that Hegel only developed an intersubjective theory of recognition in his early Jena-period, which he then abandoned in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* for a monological theory about the self-development of Spirit.

However, Honneth soon became convinced that also Hegel's later work can be read as a theory of recognition, which resulted in the reformulation of his theory by following the structure of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, at first tentatively in his Spinoza-lectures (Honneth 2000) and now as an ambitious project in *Freedom's Right*. In taking this new path, Honneth's theory has undergone at least three important changes: he has largely abandoned his anthropological approach for a more sociological and historical one; the mediating role of institutions has become much more central in his account; and, perhaps most interestingly, he now presents his philosophy as a theory of justice that pretends to be a more fruitful alternative to the Kantian 'constructivist' theories of justice initiated by John Rawls.

In the short and dense introduction of *Freedom's Right*, Honneth presents the methodological premises of his 'Hegelian' theory of justice. His starting point is that a theory of justice should be developed on the basis of a social analysis. Instead of constructing free-standing moral principles that are then applied to

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existing society – as it is common in Kantian theories of justice – Honneth argues that a society can only reproduce itself through shared values and ideals, and that a theory of justice should start by analyzing those shared ideals that are already at work in society, including the practices and institutions that make the realization of these ideals possible. Since Honneth is convinced that individual freedom has been the central ideal at work in modern societies, he proposes to ‘normatively reconstruct’ the way in which this ideal has played a role in the reproduction of modern societies, and to identify those practices, institutions, and social developments that have contributed to its realization.

In the first part of the book, Honneth addresses the problematic fact that there has been no consensus at all in modern times on what the social-ontological preconditions of individual freedom are. Honneth distinguishes three conceptions of freedom that have been central in modernity – negative, reflexive, and social freedom – each with their own account of what a just society requires. Negative freedom refers to the absence of outside constraints and the freedom to pursue one’s unreflected interests without being hindered by others, which Honneth sees as central in Hobbes’ political philosophy and, more recently, in Sartre’s existentialism and Nozick’s theory of justice. Reflexive freedom demands that the individual pursues goals that are autonomous, which requires the reflection on one’s desires and wishes. Honneth shows that this ideal originated in Rousseau and then split up in the Kantian ideal of moral autonomy and the Romantic ideal of authentic self-realization, which today are represented by theories of justice that either develop a procedural model for self-determination, or articulate the cultural preconditions of self-realization. Social freedom refers to the Hegelian understanding of freedom as ‘being-with-oneself-in-the-other’. Whereas in the models of negative and reflexive freedom the existing social reality remains external to the ideal of freedom itself, Hegel’s intersubjective understanding of freedom makes the quality of social relations in existing practices and institutions an essential precondition for the realization of freedom. Only when individuals can realize forms of reciprocal recognition within the central practices that are necessary for the reproduction of society – namely the family, the economy, and democratic politics – can individual freedom be realized for all, and can a society be called just.

According to Honneth, each of these three models of freedom is legitimate in their own way. In the second part of the book, Honneth argues that negative and reflexive freedom – and their institutionalization in legal and moral practices – are both necessary and one-sided. This means that they are necessary preconditions for the realization of freedom, but when they are absolutized and taken as the whole of freedom then social pathologies will arise. This is because they are only *possibilities* of freedom: they give the individual the freedom to step

outside of existing practices and either retreat in one's legally protected private sphere or reflexively question the moral legitimacy of existing practices; but the actual *realization* of freedom is dependent on the quality of the intersubjective relations within the family, the economy, and democratic politics. Therefore, in the third and main part of the book, Honneth gives a historical and sociological reconstruction of these three spheres of social freedom, and tries to identify which practices, institutions, and social developments have contributed to the realization of social freedom and which misdevelopments have undermined it. It is especially this third part of the book that is recommended to those interested in the social ontology of freedom, since it provides an original account of the social and institutional preconditions of individual freedom.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of *Freedom's Right* is Honneth's method of 'normative reconstruction' and how to understand its critical force. As Honneth makes clear, in formulating a theory of justice based on a reconstructive social analysis, he does not want to provide an apology for existing society, and he distances himself from hermeneutical theories of justice (e.g. Walzer, Miller, MacIntyre) which only question to what extent a society has realized its own underlying values and ideals. Following the left-Hegelian method of the 'Frankfurt School', Honneth wants to both reconstruct the ideals at work in society, but at the same time have a context-transcending perspective in order to evaluate which social developments are emancipating and which are pathological.

It is the elaboration and justification of this context-transcending perspective that remains underdeveloped in *Freedom's Right*. It appears that Honneth takes the principles of individualization and social inclusion (cf. Fraser and Honneth 2003, p. 184–185) as his guiding principles to normatively reconstruct the spheres of the family, the economy and democratic politics. For example, in reconstructing the economy, Honneth takes the developments concerning discursive mechanisms and legal reforms as his guide (Honneth 2014, p. 198), which can be understood as the two institutional mechanisms that foster individualization and social inclusion, but this is nowhere clearly explained or justified. What adds to the confusion is that Honneth presents his approach as a 'reconstructive' alternative to the 'constructivist' method of Rawls, which can make it appear as if Honneth pretends to have no constructive moment in his method at all (cf. Claassen 2014). This is of course true in the sense that his method is free from any Kantian constructivism, but nonetheless his left-Hegelian approach contains a context-transcending moment based on a certain understanding of moral progress and how reason is at work in society (cf. Honneth 2009). Since this is the crucial aspect that distinguishes his method from both 'external' Kantian constructivism and 'internal' hermeneutical criticism, it should have had a more central place in the book.

In the preface to the book, Honneth warns that his theory of justice is still incomplete and needs more historical and sociological evidence to become fully plausible, but already one can say that *Freedom's Right* is an ambitious contemporary attempt to re-actualize the political philosophy of Hegel. Hopefully, this English translation will stimulate a larger debate in social and political philosophy about what criticism could mean today.

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