

CHAPTER ONE

SITUATING AXEL HONNETH IN THE FRANKFURT
SCHOOL TRADITION

Joel Anderson

I have never had the intention of continuing the tradition of a school ... The line of thought that gets attributed, in retrospect, to the Frankfurt School was a response to historically specific experiences with fascism and Stalinism, but above all to the incomprehensible Holocaust. A tradition of thought remains vital by proving its essential intuitions in the light of new experiences; that doesn't happen without giving up those parts of theories that are no longer adequate.

Jürgen Habermas¹

Historical mantles are rarely worn comfortably. The associated expectations can be quite a burden. So it is not surprising that, like Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth refrains from identifying himself as a 'Frankfurt School' theorist. In his case, however, there is really no denying the lineage. Not only is he the successor to Habermas' chair in social philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, but as research director of the Institute for Social Research there, he sits in the office that was once Theodor Adorno's. At Honneth's insistence, however, the old furniture has all been replaced.

Insofar as the Frankfurt School tradition represents a contemporary phenomenon at all, it is a diverse approach that has been constantly developing and changing over its eighty-year history. My aim here is not to provide a definitive account of this lineage – nor to sort out which members of subsequent generations have 'betrayed' the tradition – but rather to situate Honneth's own work historically, so as to highlight certain distinctive features of his approach and provide

¹ J. Habermas, "Bemerkungen zu Beginn einer Vorlesung" in *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1985, p. 209 (quote translated by J. Anderson).

additional points of entry for the diverse range of readers drawn to his work.

I begin by providing a thumbnail sketch of some of the central themes in the first generation of the Frankfurt School. I then look in some detail at how Jürgen Habermas and members of his generation transformed critical social theory, taking it in several new directions. I then take up Honneth's approach, arguing that it involves a retrieval of some original Frankfurt School themes, but against the irreversible background of the Habermasian landscape and in a political and intellectual climate that gives his approach its specifically *third-generational* character.

1. *The Original Frankfurt School*

The first generation of the Frankfurt School is relatively simple to identify since they almost all worked for their namesake: the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) in Frankfurt am Main. After an initial period under Carl Grünberg (1923–28), the Institute gained its recognisable character under the directorship of Max Horkheimer and included Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, Otto Kirchheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann and Friedrich Pollock.²

The Frankfurt School's distinctive approach to social inquiry sought to bring about emancipation from ideological blinders by bringing to

² For an interesting discussion of the comparison between the 'inner circle' of the first generation, and the particularly interesting outer circle (which includes, for example, Walter Benjamin), see A. Honneth, "Critical Theory" in *Social Theory Today*, eds. A. Giddens & J. Turner, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1987, pp. 347 ff. For an overview of the Frankfurt School's history, see M. Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984; R. Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance*, trans. M. Robertson, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1994; R. Wiggershaus, *Jürgen Habermas*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 2005; H. Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory*, trans. B. Gregg, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1985; Z. Tar, *The Frankfurt School: The Critical Theories of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno*, New York, John Wiley and Sons, 1977; H. Dubiel, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*, 3rd ed., Weinheim, Juventa, 2001; and L. von Friedeburg, "Geschichte des Instituts für Sozialforschung" <http://www.ifs.uni-frankfurt.de/institut/geschichte.htm> (last consulted on 12 February 2007). It should perhaps be added that my perspective here undoubtedly reflects my own 'knowledge interests' and my own experiences as a student of Habermas and Honneth (in 1987–88 and 1992–93), as a regular visitor to Frankfurt since then, a translator of their work, and a co-author with Honneth.

awareness the material conditions of our own knowledge of the world, a theme inherited from Georg Lukács (and ultimately from German Idealism, if one understands that as the broad tradition extending from Kant through to Marx). In the formulation worked out by Horkheimer,³ the thesis is that the social world can be adequately grasped only if it is recognised that the cognitive activity that comprises the social world is itself conditioned by material conditions that are, in turn, the products of the natural history of the human species. The social world thus lacks the ‘given’ character of the physical world and must be seen as our construction. The very political implication of this is that the social world *could be otherwise*. This is something that traditional ‘bourgeois’ social science tends to obscure, thereby perpetuating the status quo under capitalism. The task of ‘Critical Theory’, then, involved a form of reflective social science that was able to provide an account of its own origins. Understanding thought – including social criticism – as a product of social processes provides insight into what shapes our thought, a form of insightful self-understanding that opens up a particular form of freedom. And since it is impossible to sustain a reductionistic or positivistic attitude in this reflexive social inquiry, Critical Theory is also always geared toward revealing traces of reason in the materially conditioned social world. And the key to doing this, it was felt, is to have reflexive social inquiry start out from the subjective experiences of participants in the social world, particularly in the domain of labour. This was the methodological conviction guiding the original group in the interdisciplinary projects they pursued, working together as a more or less coordinated team.⁴ This core focus was complemented by related work in the aesthetics of experience (Benjamin and Adorno) and work in political theory and political economy (Neumann and Kirchheimer). But the guiding concern of the original Frankfurt School was with emancipation through reflective social science, as a matter of articulating the structures of consciousness underlying the experience of the working class in particular.

³ See especially M. Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory” in *Critical Theory*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1972 (originally 1937), pp. 188 ff.

⁴ The results of this interdisciplinary research were published in the house journal, *Die Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (“Journal for Social Research”) until the Nazis closed the Institute.

After the Institute was shut down by the Nazis in 1933, the exiled circle remained relatively intact, especially during the initial period in New York, where they were housed at Columbia University (not, as is often thought, at the New School for Social Research, which was staffed by other Jewish, Marxist émigrés from Europe). Horkheimer, Adorno and the others pursued the defining themes of the first generation – Freudian Marxist analyses of the roots of totalitarianism in mass culture – themes that became the basis for work carried out in Frankfurt, after the Institute for Social Research was reestablished under the directorship of Horkheimer (later rector of the University of Frankfurt). During this second heyday of the Institute (1950–70), the term ‘Frankfurt School’ came to stand for a social-theoretic approach employing methods of qualitative social science to expose the ideological structures responsible for various ‘societal pathologies’.⁵

Regarding the pathologies on which these analyses focused, one can retrospectively discern two broad forms that they assumed, each of which gets taken up differently by the second and third generations of the Frankfurt School. On the one hand, the Frankfurt School was concerned with pathologies that come into view through the lens of critical sociology, particularly social and political institutions. Here the focus is on, for example, the ways in which universities, the media, political party machines, corporations and so on come to serve various oppressive interests. The other approach pursued by first-generation figures focused on subjective experiences of alienation, disorientation and reification, and of tracing these perversions of human interiority to ‘late-capitalist’ modernity. (As we shall see, one way to think of the subsequent history of the Frankfurt School is that Habermas focused on this second line, while Honneth’s aim has been, together with others from his generation, to rehabilitate the more subject-related dimension.)

2. *Overlapping Generations: Habermas at the Institute for Social Research*

It was at the Institute for Social Research that Jürgen Habermas got his first research job (in 1956), after a couple of post-doctoral years as a

⁵ That said, we also already find in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (from the exile period) early indications of the first generation’s turn away from social theory toward

features writer for newspapers. But the widespread perception of the baton of Critical Theory being handed from the first generation to Habermas is decidedly misleading, and a brief historical digression seems appropriate in this regard. The empirical projects on which Habermas worked during those early years have defined much of his reputation: the critical potential of the social movements, the threat of public discussion being instrumentalised by the media, and the Marxian idea that guaranteeing material welfare is a precondition for social justice. But the direction he was taking actually fitted uncomfortably within the Institute, which under Horkheimer's directorship had become something quite different from the early days, to the point that Horkheimer kept the copies of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* locked in the cellar of the Institute.⁶ As Habermas summed it up in a 1979 interview:

... I do not share the basic premise of Critical Theory, as it took shape during the early 1940s, the premise that instrumental reason has gained such dominance that there is really no way out of a total system of delusion [*Verblendungszusammenhang*], in which insight is achieved only in flashes by isolated individuals.⁷

Whether this is a fair representation of 1940s Critical Theory, it is clear that Habermas was geared more toward the possibilities of democratic politics and toward the simultaneously theoretical and emancipatory task of revealing the distortions of contemporary politics, and this led to clashes with Horkheimer. What particularly irritated Horkheimer was the implicit activism he perceived in, for example, Habermas' introduction to the Institute's study of university students and in the long overview article on Marxism commissioned (and extremely well received) by Hans-Georg Gadamer.⁸ The tensions grew and in a move

the more resigned stance found in Horkheimer's late writings on religion and Adorno's aphoristic aesthetics.

⁶ See Habermas' interview with Honneth et al., "Dialectics of Rationalization" in *Autonomy and Solidarity: Interviews with Jürgen Habermas*, ed. P. Dews, London, Verso Press, 1986, p. 95.

⁷ Habermas, "Political Experience and the Renewal of Marxist Theory" (interview with Detlef Horster and Willem van Reijen) in Dews, *Autonomy and Solidarity*, p. 78.

⁸ The two texts here are: *Student und Politik* and "Literaturbericht zur philosophischen Diskussion um Marx und den Marxismus", *Philosophischer Rundschau* 5, 1957, pp. 165–235. For a discussion of Horkheimer's attitudes toward Habermas – and Gadamer's active support of Habermas' career – see Wiggershaus, *Jürgen Habermas*, pp. 41–51.

that represents the rough equivalent of denying tenure (as well as a snubbing of Habermas' main backer, Adorno), Horkheimer refused to approve Habermas' plan for a *Habilitationschrift* on the public sphere and instead directed him to begin work on a new three-year project for the Institute. Habermas responded by resigning and, with the support of Wolfgang Abendroth (the sole West German Marxist professor of philosophy at the time), Habermas was able to complete his 'habilitation' – on the basis of the groundbreaking *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* – and take up a position in philosophy at the University of Heidelberg. Habermas returned to Frankfurt two years later (in 1964) as professor of sociology and philosophy, and from the work published in the 1960s, one can see even more clearly how he was pulling away from his mentors at the Institute. What began to emerge as Habermas' distinctive approach to critical social theory was a focus on specifying the conditions under which human interaction would be free from domination. Whereas the first generation had (at least initially) looked to various forms of economic, political, cultural or psychoanalytic 'crisis' as sites of emancipatory impulses, Habermas focused on free interpersonal interaction as it was found in ordinary life and, specifically, in the pragmatics of *coming to an understanding with someone about something*, to serve as the key source of emancipatory impulses.

The end of the first generation's era came around 1970, with the deaths of Adorno (1969), Pollock (1970) and Horkheimer (1973), who had already retired to Switzerland much earlier. At the same time, von Friedeburg left the Institute to become Hessian Minister of Education in 1970 (and see through a controversially progressive democratisation of the German education system), and Habermas left for Starnberg in 1971. In addition, after the founding of the Social Sciences Department in 1971, the Institute no longer offered courses and thereby became dependent on soft money for funds. As a result, although it remained in operation, the Institute receded as the institutional home of critical social theory in Germany, although that has arguably now changed.⁹

⁹ For information on the current activity of the Institute, see the excellent website: <http://www.ifs.uni-frankfurt.de>.

3. *Habermas, the Second Generation, and the Emphasis on Normative Foundations*

The second generation of critical social theory came of age during the 1970s. By the early 1980s, they had published major works, secured university professorships, and were attracting PhD students. In addition to Habermas, one can think here of Alfred Schmidt, Karl-Otto Apel, Albrecht Wellmer, Claus Offe and Oskar Negt. Habermas himself spent 1971–81 in Starnberg (near Munich) as co-director of the Max Planck Institute for Research into the Conditions of Life in the Scientific-Technical World, where he was able to hire fifteen researchers to pursue research that integrated empirical and theoretical work addressing topics such as societal pathologies, processes of rationalisation, legal evolution, ego-identity, communicative competence, moral development, and more.¹⁰ In addition, this was a time when Habermas (along with Ernst Tugendhat and Wellmer, who were both associated with the Starnberg group) was studying analytic philosophy of language as part of developing his universal pragmatics of communication.¹¹ And especially given that this period gave rise to the defining work of the second generation of the Frankfurt School, Habermas' 1300-page *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), it might well look as if this was the second generation's Institute for Social Research, but this time with multi-million-Deutschmark funding and no Nazis at the door. Again, however, the reality is more complicated. Indeed, Habermas recently said in an interview, "For me, it was the worst of times. It was simply a mistake to [go to Starnberg]".¹² It seems that,

¹⁰ Particularly important for this new direction were the influence of developmental psychologists Rainer Döbert and Gertrud Nunner-Winkler, the social evolutionist Klaus Eder, the sociologists Helmut Dubiel and Ulrich Rödel, and the Heideggerian *cum* analytic philosopher Ernst Tugendhat.

¹¹ Many of the writings from the Starnberg period can be found in *Vorstudien und Ergänzungen zur Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1984, partially translated in *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. B. Fultner, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2000.

¹² The quote comes from an interview conducted by Rolf Wiggershaus with Jürgen Habermas on 27 January 2003 at his home in Starnberg, as part of the preparation of Wiggershaus' book, *Jürgen Habermas*, and is quoted on pages 111–112 therein. See also, Habermas, "Das Starnberger Debakel. Ein Rücktritt und eine persönliche Erklärung. Warum ich die Max-Planck-Gesellschaft verlasse", *Die Zeit*, 8 May 1981.

despite the diversity and quality of the work being done in Starnberg, Habermas much preferred the smaller-scale and looser group he organised later, around the 1985–1990 Leibniz project that led to the 1992 publication of *Between Facts and Norms*.¹³ In any event, after he announced his resignation in 1981 and, after a brief appointment at the University of California, Berkeley, he returned to Frankfurt to become professor of philosophy (with Honneth as his first *Assistent*). And remarkably, although the philosophy department was housed during those years literally *around the corner* from the Institute for Social Research, Habermas never had much to do with the Institute. Second-generation sociologist Helmut Dubiel wrote in 1988:

After Adorno's death it was decided that the Institute for Social Research would focus – in contrast to Adorno's philosophical and aesthetic interests – on empirical sociology of industry and labour unions. As a result, the current inhabitants of the Institute are much less in a position than Habermas to claim that they stand in the tradition of Critical Theory.¹⁴

These were years in which Habermas focused his energies very little on empirical work and almost exclusively on the defence of reason as a philosophical project, what he terms the “discourse theory of truth and morality”.¹⁵

That approach – along with the various related social-theoretic approaches of the second generation – was motivated largely by a sense that the first generation of the Frankfurt School had failed to address adequately the issue of normative foundations. Drawing on Lukács' radicalising synthesis of Marx's concept of alienation and Weber's thesis of the ‘iron cage’ of Western rationalisation processes, Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, Fromm, Benjamin and others opposed ‘reification’ of the human spirit by capitalist and bureaucratic forces, but its wrongness was taken to have a kind of self-evidence. Insofar as they thought their standards of criticism needed analysis, they offered a quasi-metaphysical account rather than a normative justification.

¹³ See Habermas' remark on how much better the Leibniz group worked: “Compared with my time in Starnberg, I have to say: that's the way to do it” (quoted in Wiggershaus, *Jürgen Habermas*, p. 126). The Leibniz group included Ingeborg Maus, Rainer Forst, Günter Frankenberg, Klaus Günther, Lutz Wingert and the late Bernhard Peters.

¹⁴ Dubiel, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*, p. 13. Interestingly, Dubiel became director of the Institute from 1989 to 1997, although not much really changed until 2001.

¹⁵ See especially the essays collected in *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (German, 1988) and *Truth and Justification* (German, 1999).

Moreover, despite their aspiration to provide a grounding of their critique in a self-reflective form of social science, Horkheimer and the others could not explain how they could presume to occupy a privileged standpoint from which to expose ideology. In other words, in Habermas' view, they failed to apply their standard of critical reflexivity to their own theory.

Habermas' own work in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (originally published in 1968) shared some of these weaknesses – something he later acknowledges in his self-critical “Afterword”.¹⁶ It thus became the task of *The Theory of Communicative Action* to set a new course, one that could provide an adequate underpinning for the analysis of social reproduction, social pathologies, and directions for emancipatory transformation. In Habermas' own words, his aim was to develop “a social theory concerned to validate its own critical standard”.¹⁷ Thus Habermas is concerned with ‘critique’ in two senses: in the Leftist sense of pointing out injustices and in Kant's sense of an examination of the conditions for the possibility for something, in this case, of the basis for critique in the first sense.

For Habermas, the normative foundations for critical social theory are to be found in the proper understanding of communicative action, in particular, of the ‘idealising presuppositions’ that must be undertaken by anyone trying to come to an understanding with someone about something. This approach combines a norm-based theory of how coordinated social action is possible with a ‘discourse theory’ of how claims are justified. According to Habermas' discourse theory, every communicative act carries with it claims to validity (truth, rightness and sincerity), where the validity being claimed is a matter of being able to stand up to criticism under ‘conditions of discourse’, namely, a context of justification that the participants view as beyond reproach (for which he now no longer uses the oft-misunderstood phrase “ideal speech situation”). This ‘discourse theory’ is at the centre of his work on moral theory, democratic theory, rationality and truth.¹⁸

¹⁶ Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. Shapiro, Boston, Beacon Press, 1971.

¹⁷ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, trans. T. McCarthy, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984, p. xli.

¹⁸ See especially the essays in the excellent collection *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. M. Cooke, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1998 and *Truth and Justification*, trans. B. Fultner, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2003.

According to Habermas' 'communication-theoretic' account of social action, what makes it possible to coordinate action is our ability to come to an understanding with each other about something, where this process of coming to an understanding is again tied to open-ended processes of discursive justification. Indeed, it is our need for social coordination, according to Habermas' social pragmatism, that generates *from within* pressures toward reaching agreement, thereby unleashing "the rational potential of communicative action".

In addition to providing a 'discourse-theoretic' account of normative foundations, Habermas' analysis of processes of communication is *itself* a direct contribution to critical social theory, particularly in his culture-critical analyses of domination in terms of systematically distorted communication. This is a theme that recurs in a wide variety of contexts, from his attacks on technocratic politics, to his defence of radical democracy, to his reinterpretation of reification in terms of the "colonisation of the lifeworld". The key idea is that what is most pernicious in various trends in highly industrialised societies – bureaucratisation, militarism, technocracy, *laissez-faire* economics, privatisation, media-tisation, ideologically driven approaches to immigration and social policy, and so on – is the fact that entrenched interests are able to neutralise and squelch the sort of public political debate that would reveal the injustices of the *status quo*. The point – often overlooked by commentators on Habermas – is not the teleological claim that talk is always good but rather that silencing and muzzling are bad.¹⁹

Habermas' focus on reaching communicative rationality and on progressive learning processes is very much in the Frankfurt School tradition of intertwining the explanation of societal transformations with a critical, normative perspective. But in contrast to the first generation's focus on structures of consciousness and crises of capitalist accumulation, Habermas focuses on general, universal features of communicative action, arguing that these provide a more defensible basis for social critique than the claims about consciousness central to the first generation's approach. This move is not, of course, uncontroversial. Indeed, internationally, Habermas' focus on the universality

¹⁹ See, for example, Habermas' critique of Rawls as allowing 'gag rules' in the interest of social stability: Habermas, "Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls' Political Liberalism", *The Journal of Philosophy*, 92, 1995, pp.109–131.

and unity of reason has led many contemporary critical theorists to look not to him but to Adorno, Benjamin and other members of the first generation for allies in developing their critical analyses.

4. *The Second Generation: Radical Democracy and Modernist Reason*

The modernist impulse so central to Habermas' work is echoed in that of the other members of the second generation, albeit to different degrees. Albrecht Wellmer, for example, has sought to develop a version of modernity that retains the aspiration to truth while accommodating the aesthetic and postmodern insight that transparency of meaning, completeness of understanding, and certainty of knowledge are necessarily beyond our reach.²⁰ Karl-Otto Apel first introduced the idea of 'discourse theory' before it was picked up by Habermas, and he has been the driving force behind the attempt to put discourse theory on more transcendental foundations. For Negt, von Friedeberg, Offe and others, the focus has been on trying to make sense of how, in complex societies, the impersonal imperatives of economics and politics can be tamed and kept from taking over more dimensions of social integration in complex societies than is necessary.²¹

None of these theoretical developments occurred in a vacuum, of course. Habermas in particular is a famously engaged intellectual, intervening in debates over the student movement and university reform, the reluctance of Germans (and Heidegger in particular) to come to terms with their Nazi past, the deficits of pacifism in the face of human rights violations, the hijacking of German unification by nationalist fervour and corporate greed, and Germany's new post-national identity as a country of immigrants bound by European and international law.²² But in all these cases, the motivating concern is the same: to restore, defend and radicalise the universalistic imperatives

²⁰ A. Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity: Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism*, trans. D. Midgley, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1991. See also, Axel Honneth's laudatio, "Artist of Dissonance: Albrecht Wellmer and Critical Theory", *Constellations* 14 (2007): 305–314.

²¹ See, for example, C. Offe, *Contradictions of the Welfare State*, ed. J. Keane, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1984 and O. Negt & A. Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. P. Labanyi, J. Daniel & A. Oksiloff, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

²² For an overview, see Robert C. Holub, *Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere*, New York, Routledge, 1991.

of procedural rationality, modernist culture and genuine democracy. This universalistic focus has been the target of numerous attacks, but it is motivated by a profound distrust for German tradition, stemming from the defining experience of this generation's coming of age. Habermas has described how, on learning as a sixteen-year-old the full scope of the atrocities committed by Germans during the war:

I knew that, despite everything, we would live on in the anxiety of regression, that we would have to carry on in that anxiety. Since then I have cast about, sometimes here, sometimes there, for traces of a reason that unites without effacing separation, that binds without denying difference, that points out the common and the shared among strangers, without depriving the other of otherness.²³

For Habermas' generation, the reliance on common sense so prevalent in progressive Anglo-American thought is just not an option.²⁴

The second generation's 'anxiety about regression' and the felt need for a bulwark against deep-rooted authoritarian and xenophobic traditions in Germany, has had three prominent effects. First, it clearly contributed to the second generation's strong emphasis on constitutional principles, human rights, and the law, especially since the mid-1980s.²⁵ Second, it added a great deal of heat to Habermas' confrontations during the 1980s with postmodernism and poststructuralism, which he has tended to see as not simply mistaken but dangerous, for they

²³ Habermas, *The Past as Future: Interviews with Michael Haller*, trans. & ed. M. Pensky, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1994, pp. 119–120.

²⁴ Thus, the pragmatist approach to social criticism taken by Americans such as Richard Rorty or Cornell West is simply not an option for Habermas. It may seem ironic that someone so theoretically committed to deliberative democracy and pragmatism has as little faith in common sense as Habermas does. Part of the scepticism has to do with German history, but it also has to do with his theoretical commitment to a vigilant conception of critical reason, according to which we find, in the everyday practices of ordinary individuals, ideas of truth and moral rightness that transcend any settled common sense and challenge the taken-for-granted authority of traditions we inherit. This is a key point of contention in his debates with Hans-Georg Gadamer, a translation of which can be found in G.L. Ormiston & Alan D. Schrift, eds., *The Hermeneutic Tradition: From Ast to Ricoeur*, Albany, SUNY Press, 1989. This sceptical stance toward hermeneutics and common sense is much less prominent among members of the third generation.

²⁵ In the case of Habermas, see "Law and Morality", trans. K. Baynes, in ed. S.M. McMurrin, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 8, Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1988, pp. 217–279; *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. W. Rehg, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1996; and the 1995 debate with Rawls in *The Journal of Philosophy* (cited above).

attack the primary resource that keeps us from slipping back into barbarism: communicative reason.²⁶ Third, and most significantly, the second generation has tended to see an internationalist orientation as particularly important in the effort to ensure that the insanity of the Third Reich *never again* returns. Philosophically, this means looking beyond the German tradition in ways that have been considered heretical even in post-war Germany. In particular, Habermas' reliance on Anglo-American philosophy seems at least in part to be motivated by a desire to have German and American intellectual cultures so inter-married as to render absurd the idea of a pure German '*Sonderweg*' (the 'distinctive path' between Bolshevism and Americanism that was touted by Nazi intellectuals). In that regard, Habermas has been remarkably successful. Together with Karl-Otto Apel (and the third-generation sociologist Hans Joas), he has made philosophically respectable the pragmatism of Dewey, Peirce, and especially G.H. Mead. And, in conjunction with Starnberg collaborator Ernst Tugendhat and the publisher Suhrkamp, he has helped open German philosophy departments to analytic philosophy. By the late 1980s, in fact, the key points of reference for Habermas' graduate students and associates were more likely to be Donald Davidson, Michael Dummett or John Rawls than Adorno, Lukács or Marx – a shift that generated quite a bit of confusion on the part of foreign scholars who had gone to Frankfurt in search of 'Continental Philosophy'.

This turn to analytic philosophy represents perhaps the clearest departure from the first generation of Critical Theory – and not merely from Horkheimer and Adorno's prejudices against the banality of all things American. Habermas' insistence on very high standards for justification has drawn him into debates about truth, rationality, normativity and knowledge that are highly developed in Anglo-American philosophy. And his efforts to cash out his intuition that traces of reason are to be found in the deep structure of everyday situations in which people jointly try to figure something out (Habermas' phrase is "*verständigungsorientiertes Handeln*") have led him into the heart of very technical issues in philosophy of language. Initially, this may have been seen as a peculiarity of Habermas' own approach – and, for some, even as evidence that Habermas had left the Frankfurt School

²⁶ See especially *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* and the essays in *The New Obscurity*.

tradition altogether – but there doesn't seem to be any turning back now in this regard. Some degree of familiarity with analytical philosophy has become an entry requirement for many contemporary Critical Theorists.²⁷ Once certain demands for rigorous argumentation have been internalised and once certain technical theoretical issues can no longer be dismissed out of hand, critical social theorists have no alternative but to address these issues. In effect, Habermas' appropriation of analytic philosophy has raised the bar and made critical social theorists accountable for responding to more challenges than ever before: they must appropriate the increasingly large *corpus* of the Frankfurt School tradition (along with its roots in Kant, Hegel, Marx and Freud), stay informed and connected to empirical social science research, and now also answer to challenges from analytical philosophers, who as members of the dominant culture typically feel little or no obligation to fill in the gaps in their background that would make the argumentation of their Frankfurt School interlocutors seem less foreign.

The question is then whether anyone can master the full scope of the Frankfurt School tradition, once the scope has been broadened and the demands raised so high. As sociologists are quick to point out, the typical response to increasing complexity is specialisation, and this is what we see happening in the third generation. Perhaps this is a good thing. But the compartmentalisation of these domains of inquiry makes it hard to see how there could be such a thing as 'Critical Theory in the Frankfurt School tradition'. In what sense can it be said that discussions of Adorno's aesthetics, debates about the conceptual status of constitutional rights to freedom of religious expression, and arguments over the exact nature of validity claims are all discussions *within* that tradition? In a sense this is the question of whether there really *is* a 'third generation of the Frankfurt School'.

5. *Axel Honneth and the Third Generation: Unifying Themes and Ongoing Differences*

There is, of course, no *fact of the matter* as to whether a third generation *really* exists. Schools of thought are complex and dynamic

²⁷ Because I am focusing on those members of Habermas' generation who have joined him in engaging, at least to some degree, analytic philosophy, I will not have much to say in what follows about members of the second generation who either

phenomena we construct to bring order to the real-world messiness of publications, dissertations, conferences, patterns of citation, institutional affiliations, research aims, grants, dust-jacket blurbs, critical book reviews, and so on. But if one takes the themes and methodologies that are broadly shared by the first two generations and then looks at the institutional and personal connections to the second generation, then the outlines of the third generation begin to take shape – not only in the continuity of the tradition, but also in its distinctiveness.

Institutionally, perhaps one of the most striking things about the third generation is how international it is. There are numerous figures working in this broad tradition all over the world, from Dublin to New York to Rome to Lima to Sydney – often with very strong personal and institutional links to the second generation.²⁸ And many of the most important players in this generation of critical social theory work outside Germany. To keep my discussion manageable, however, I am limiting my focus here to German figures and particularly to philosophers who have been students of second-generation figures (such as Apel, Wellmer, Schmidt and especially Habermas). With regard to cultural and social history, the political consciousness of this generation is shaped by a different constellation of events to those influencing earlier generations. The original Frankfurt School generation came of age in the struggle to understand the non-revolutionary consciousness of the majority of German workers (despite their ‘objectively revolutionary’ situation), and then faced, as mature theorists, National Socialism’s crimes against humanity. The second generation came of age in the face of (revelations of) Nazi atrocities, and participated in the transformations around 1968 as mature theorists. The third generation came of

have been concerned exclusively with empirical studies (von Friedeburg and Nunner-Winkler) or have restricted themselves to keeping alive the flame of the older generation (Alfred Schmidt).

²⁸ It could be argued that the tradition is being kept alive as much outside Germany as within by such figures as Andrew Arato, Kenneth Baynes, Seyla Benhabib, Jay Bernstein, James Bohman, Susan Buck-Morss, Jean Cohen, Peter Dews, Alessandro Ferrara, Jean-Marc Ferry, Nancy Fraser, David Held, Dick Howard, David Ingram, Martin Jay, Douglas Kellner, Thomas McCarthy, David Rasmussen, William Rehg, Gillian Rose, Steven Vogel, Georgia Warnke, Stephen K. White, Joel Whitebook and others – many of whom studied with Habermas or Marcuse – as well as by second-generation figures as Richard Bernstein, Fred Dallmayr and Agnes Heller. At the same time, it must be said that few outside Germany follow the Frankfurt School tradition of combining interpretations of classic texts (Hegel, Marx, Freud, Lukács, and so on) with both critical social theory and social scientific research.

age during the upheavals of the late sixties and the new social movements of the seventies, and faced as mature theorists the fall of the Berlin Wall, the resurgence of European nationalism, and the acceleration of globalisation. And theoretically, they have grappled with the fall of the subject, the disunity of reason, and the challenges to universalistic proceduralist conceptions of justice. Whether as advocates or as critics, their thinking has been shaped by a widespread emphasis on particularity, difference and pluralism.

Amid this diversity, however, Axel Honneth figures as the undisputed gravitational centre of the third generation of the Frankfurt School tradition. And since viewing him as such serves to sharpen further the contours of the third generation, I shall begin by briefly recounting his institutional and thematic links to earlier generations and then identify three defining themes of Honneth's work, themes that he shares with other third-generation theorists and that distinguish them from the first and second generations. I then go on to discuss each of these themes in further detail, highlighting certain areas of ongoing controversy within the third generation.

Although not a student of Habermas, Honneth did finish his dissertation (directed by Urs Jaeggi at the Free University of Berlin and later published as *The Critique of Power*) while on a fellowship in Starnberg (1982–83) while Habermas was nominally director of the *Institut für Sozialwissenschaften* that served as the temporary successor to the institute he had run with von Weizacker. He was then hired by Habermas as the assistant professor (1983–89) in his research group in Frankfurt, where they frequently co-taught seminars. Then, after a rapid succession of appointments at the Institute for Advanced Study (*Wissenschaftskolleg*) in Berlin, the University of Konstanz, and (as professor of political philosophy) at the Free University of Berlin, Honneth returned to Frankfurt to take Habermas' chair in social philosophy in 1996. Despite these relocations, however, Honneth continued to work at shoring up the infrastructure of Critical Theory in Frankfurt, as one of the instigators of a biweekly *Humanwissenschaften* section of the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper, as the editor of several book series in critical social theory (with publishers Campus, Akademie, and Fischer – rather than Habermas' publisher of choice, Suhrkamp), and as the host to numerous influential visitors to the Frankfurt philosophy department. Finally, in 2001, Honneth assumed the directorship of the Institute for Social Research and has been the driving force behind a large number of new initiatives, including a

major grant from the Volkswagen Stiftung on “Structural Transformation of Recognition in the 21st Century” (for 2007–2010), several projects built around the research focus “Paradoxes of Capitalist Modernisation”, a book series with Campus Verlag, and the excellent new journal *WestEnd*, founded in 2004 with a subtitle that indicates the ambitions of the new Institute: “*Neue Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*”.

Honneth can be seen as working on three theoretical fronts more or less simultaneously. First, there is the continual mining of the tradition of modern Western philosophy for resources for Critical Theory, from Hegel to Adorno, from Lévi-Strauss to Castoriadis. Second, there is the theoretical engagement with qualitative social science research. And third, there is the development of critical social theory *per se*, particularly of the normative issues and, most specifically, in working out the details of his theory of recognition. And particularly with regard to this last task, Honneth aims to engage not only self-identified critical theorists but also the wider public of mainstream (and, internationally, predominantly analytic) philosophy – a task that, despite the growing acceptance of *inter alia* Hegelian lines of thought, remains a deeply asymmetrical matter of trying to convince English-language philosophers of the relevance of work being done in other countries.

Against the background of these three areas of theoretical activity and the intellectual trajectory sketched earlier, it becomes possible to identify three central themes in Honneth’s work thus far that are recognisably ‘Frankfurt School’, and yet distinctive of him, and that set much of the agenda for the third generation: a conception of society and history based on the struggle for recognition by social groups (section 6), a greater attention to the ‘Other of reason’ (section 7), and a contextualisation of normative foundations in the deep structures of subjective experience (section 8). These three themes represent points of controversy within the third generation, but they primarily serve to mark out important points of contrast with Habermas and the second generation. In highlighting the contrasts in what follows, however, it is important not to overestimate these contrasts, for Habermas and Honneth share the fundamental conviction that the social institutions that safeguard undistorted forms of intersubjectivity must be based, at least in part, on universalistic principles.²⁹

²⁹ Like Habermas, Honneth criticises Foucault, Lyotard and other neo-Nietzscheans or postmodernists with – as he puts it with regard to Lyotard – becoming

I now take up each of these themes briefly, discussing in each case the basic line of Honneth's approach, the departure from the first and/or second generation of the Frankfurt School, and the different directions from which Honneth's positions have been challenges within the third generation.

6. *The Agonistic Path to Social Justice*

Honneth's account of 'the social' focuses on the central role of conflict between social groups, rather than between individuals (as is assumed by Hobbesians and rational choice theorists) or between structural entities (as systems theorists, structuralists and even post-structuralists assume). This reinterpretation of the social was the focus of *The Critique of Power: Stages of Reflection of a Critical Social Theory*.³⁰ There he argued that, in their own ways, Horkheimer, Adorno, Foucault and Habermas *all* end up marginalising the genuinely *social* dimension of critical theory. What is needed, he argues, is an account of the social that emphasises that society reproduces itself through the often-conflictual interaction of real social groups, which are themselves the products of ongoing activities of interpretation and struggle on the part of participants. Honneth's theory of recognition – first articulated in *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflict*³¹ – is to provide the answer. On this view social groups represent both driving forces of historical development and essential conditions for human flourishing. With regard to the first, historical claim, Honneth is opposing Marxian and Weberian strands of critical social theory that have focused on deep structural dynamics, be they the first generation's focus on the domination of nature by 'instrumental reason', or Habermas' analysis of the conflict between 'system' and 'lifeworld', or Foucault's treatment of disciplinary regimes. Against such 'hypostatising'

"ensnared in the premises of his own thought; the antipathy to universalism forbids a solution to the very problem which he came up against with his demand for an unforced pluralism of social language-games. For, if recourse to universal norms is on principle blocked in the interests of a critique of ideology, then a meaningful argument in support of the equal rights to coexistence of all everyday cultures cannot be constructed" ("An Aversion Against the Universal: A Commentary on Lyotard's Postmodern Condition", *Theory, Culture, and Society*, 2, 1985, p. 155).

³⁰ German, Suhrkamp, 1986. English, trans. K. Baynes, MIT Press, 1991.

³¹ Trans. J. Anderson, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1996. German original, Suhrkamp, 1992.

philosophies of history, and inspired both by his reading of the young Hegel and his generation's practical *and* theoretical involvement with the 'New Social Movements', Honneth sees historical development as a matter of the emergence and struggles of social groups. Although he is guided by the Hegelian normative ideal of overcoming diremption (*Entzweiung*) through reconciliation and although he is somewhat more sanguine than many of his contemporaries about the degree to which these social struggles are part of a process of progressive *development*, Honneth's consistent focus on the dynamic, 'agonistic' nature of the social world is typical of a generation that is much more attuned to the positive aspects of heterogeneity and ambivalence than Habermas tends to be.

The question of just how *progressive* we can expect the struggles of groups for recognition to be has become a central fault-line within the third generation. In part, this is a question of how to conceptualise the anticipated point toward which these struggles are directed. Especially the normative guiding light of an anticipated point in the future of a social existence 'free from pain' sits uncomfortably with the emphasis many third-generation critical theorists place on pluralism, openness, difference, and even the unavoidably tragic character of social life.³² From this perspective, the objection frequently levelled at Honneth is that he is – despite his pronouncements to the contrary – implicitly wedded to a rather homogeneous notion of convergence and reconciliation. In line with this, many members of this generation focus on creative impulses and on the need for revolutionary imaginaries to complement evolutionary forces – in part as a rediscovery of the transformative dimension of aesthetics (including Foucault's aesthetics of existence) and even some fascination with the embrace among some French theorists of the liberating dimension of transgression.³³ For others, however, the recent history of identity politics and nationalist movements serves to highlight how social struggles for recognition are often not a route to social justice but rather an impediment to it. This is clear, for example, in the rather sharp debate between Honneth and

³² C. Menke, *Tragödie im Sittlichen: Gerechtigkeit und Freiheit nach Hegel*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1996.

³³ See, for example, Wellmer student Christoph Menke's book, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. N. Solomon, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1998. And here, contemporary theorists can draw inspiration from the writings of first-generation thinkers Marcuse and Adorno.

Nancy Fraser,³⁴ in which Fraser points to the dangers in holding the aspirations to social justice hostage to the vicissitudes of just any social movement. In part, in light of the negative aspects of ‘identity politics’, these theorists argue that the more pressing need is for normative criteria that can provide critical leverage, precisely with regard to the conflicting claims of social groups. And it is thus not surprising that so many critical theorists of this generation are focused on issues of human rights and the conditions for international democratic processes.³⁵ The open question is whether to put more trust in reason as it has been worked out in conceptions of justice and constitutional traditions or rather in the ongoing historical process of transformation of those standards themselves (and whether Honneth can make this anti-foundationalist move without ending up with a contextualism that lacks sufficient critical leverage).

7. *Listening Critically to the ‘Other of Reason’*

Honneth’s focus on social conflict as the motor of history fits with an intuition of his that is at least as deep-seated: the idea of a ‘*semantische Überschuss*’, that is, a ‘surplus’ of meaning and significance that goes beyond what we can now fully capture, appreciate, or articulate.³⁶ According to Honneth (and this is perhaps the point of closest affinity with fellow Hegelian Charles Taylor),³⁷ it is with our inchoate feelings, and at the margins of traditions, and more generally in the encounter with the *conflicted* and the *unresolved* that the needed innovative resources for Critical Theory are to be found. As we have seen, this theme is already reflected in the focus on the agonistic creativity of social struggles, but in his work since *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth has extended his normative view to capture more fully the aesthetic dimension of subjectivity and the emotional basis of moral

³⁴ Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. J. Golb, J. Ingram & C. Wilke, London, Verso, 2003.

³⁵ H. Brunkhorst, W.R. Köhler & M. Lutz-Bachmann, *Recht auf Menschenrechte: Menschenrechte, Demokratie und internationale Politik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1999; and M. Lutz-Bachmann & J. Bohman, *Perpetual Peace: Essays on Kant’s Cospolitan Ideal*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1997.

³⁶ A. Honneth, “Gerechtigkeit und kommunikative Freiheit. Überlegungen im Anschluss an Hegel” in eds. B. Merker, G. Mohr & M. Quante, *Subjektivität und Anerkennung*, Paderborn, Mentis, 2004, p. 225.

³⁷ See especially C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1989.

sensitivity. Against Habermas' more exclusive focus on the individual ego's capacity for self-determination, Honneth has emphasised the creative power of the unconscious. Echoing themes from Castoriadis, from Adorno's concept of the non-identical, as well as themes from the 'ethical turn' in postmodernism, Honneth has sought to make room in his critical social theory for the voices that have been silenced and marginalised as the 'Other' of reason – while at the same time retaining his commitment to the Enlightenment heritage of emancipatory reason.³⁸

This greater openness to the Other is widespread among third-generation theorists, whether that 'Other' is to be found in the public domain of pluralistic, multicultural sociality, in the domain of world-disclosive aesthetic experience, or in plumbing the unconscious depths of the self. First, as the neighbour we do not understand, the Other plays a central role in third-generation discussions of individual liberty and respect for cultural diversity within pluralistic, multicultural societies.³⁹ The heightened awareness of issues of integration, cultural identity and nationalism are very topical, of course, but the attention may also have something to do with the fact that, like the original generation of the Frankfurt School but *unlike* the second generation, several members of the third generation bring their Jewish identity into the discussion.⁴⁰ Second, as the site of aesthetic experience that

³⁸ On this range of issues, see especially "The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, ed. S. White, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 289–323; "Decentered Autonomy: The Subject after the Fall" in *The Fragmented World of the Social*, pp. 261–271; and section 1 of his "Rejoinder" in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, eds. B. van den Brink & D. Owen, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007. See also the other essays collected in Honneth, *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit: Aufsätze zur praktischen Philosophie*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2000 and the discussion of 'self-trust' in J. Anderson & A. Honneth, "Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice" in *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism*, eds. J. Christman & J. Anderson, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 133–135.

³⁹ G. Frankenberg & U. Rödel, *Von der Volkssouveränität zum Minderheitenschutz*, Frankfurt, 1981; B. Peters, *Die Integration moderner Gesellschaften*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1993; H. Brunkhorst, *Solidarity: From Civic Friendship to a Global Legal Community*, trans. J. Flynn, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2005; and (fourth-generation Frankfurt School theorist) R. Forst, *Contexts of Justice: Political Philosophy beyond Liberalism and Communitarianism*, trans. J.M. Farrell, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

⁴⁰ Micha Brumlik, Gertrud Koch and Martin Löw-Beer have worked hard to keep issues of the Holocaust and the place of Jews in Germany high on the cultural-political agenda, in part through the impressive but short-lived journal *Babylon* (which ceased

challenges and stretches us to envision new possibilities, the encounter with the Other figures in numerous authors' discussion of the emancipatory potential of aesthetic experience, drawing largely on Hegel's and Adorno's work, but often in combination with that of Nietzsche, Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault and others.⁴¹ And, finally, there is the Other *within*, the aspects of oneself that elude our attempts at domestication. This is, of course, a central theme in psychoanalysis, which has been gaining renewed attention after being largely abandoned by the second generation.⁴² In a parallel vein, there is Hans Joas' attempts to accommodate within social theory the *creative* and *innovative* moment of impulse and initiative in a more pragmatist vein, drawing, like Honneth and Habermas, on Mead's concept of the 'I' and the 'me'.⁴³

8. Normativity, Reification, and the Deep Structures of Subjective Experience

One of Habermas' central charges against the first generation of the Frankfurt School was its normative deficit, and this led to the second generation's focus on universalistic principles of morality, justice and truth. In light of the points already made, it will come as no surprise that the third generation is sceptical about the abstractness and uniformity they see in these approaches. Instead, they have focused on the importance of attention to the concrete Other, the unavoidability of

publication in 2002). Although the first generation was predominantly Jewish, the second generation includes, to my knowledge, only one Jew, namely, Tugendhat, who initially returned to his native Venezuela after retirement, in part because of the difficulties he faced as a Jew in Germany; see his *Ethik und Politik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1992. He now lives again in Germany.

⁴¹ H. Fink-Eitel, *Die Philosophie und die Wilden: über die Bedeutung des Fremden für die europäische Geistesgeschichte*, Hamburg, Junius, 1994. J. Früchtl, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und moralisches Urteil: eine Rehabilitierung*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1996. M. Seel, *Die Kunst der Entzweiung: zum Begriff der ästhetischen Rationalität*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1985; G. Koch, "Was ich erbeute, sind Bilder". *Zur filmischen Repräsentation der Geschlechterdifferenz*, Frankfurt, Stroemfeld Verlag, 1988.

⁴² See, for example, M. Löw-Beer, *Selbsttäuschung: Philosophische Analyse eines psychischen Phänomens*, Freiberg, Alber, 1990; as well as Honneth, "Postmodern Identity and Object-Relations Theory: On the Supposed Obsolescence of Psychoanalysis", *Philosophical Explorations*, 3, 1999, pp. 225–242; and "Aneignung von Freiheit Freuds Konzeption der individuellen Selbstbeziehung", in *Pathologien der Vernunft: Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie*, ed. Axel Honneth (Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 2007), pp. 157–179.

⁴³ H. Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, trans. J. Gaines & P. Keast, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

substantive ethical assumptions, the pluralistic character of reason, and the contextual nature of applying standards. The question, however, is how to give these concerns their due while still addressing the concern Habermas highlighted, namely, that the normative principles licensing social critique are not self-justifying.

Honneth's proposed solution is to locate the critical perception of injustice more generally within individuals' negative experiences of having broadly 'moral' expectations violated.⁴⁴ In lived experiences of denigration and disrespect, he argues, we can see most clearly what it means to deny people what they deserve. Importantly, however, this cannot be deduced from the outside. Rather, the sense of being wronged emerges *within* the subjective experience of victims of disrespect and finds its expression, as a moral claim, in social struggles. According to Honneth, although some social struggles are driven by self-interested conflicts over resources, once the ideology of instrumentalist reason is undermined, we can see these struggles as also giving expression to moral claims that can serve as normative standards. In many ways, Honneth's approach is thus closer to that of the first generation of the Frankfurt School than to Habermas' views, in that he looks to the experience of being subjected to domination (especially in the context of labour) to find the normative core for social critique.⁴⁵

It is out of the history of social struggles that Honneth reconstructs the normative standards for social criticism. The possibility for sensing, interpreting and realising one's needs and desires – in short, the very possibility of being *somebody* – depends crucially on the development of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. These three modes of relating practically to oneself can be acquired and maintained only intersubjectively, through relationships of mutual recognition. These relationships are not ahistorically given but must be established and expanded through social struggles. The 'grammar' of these struggles turns out to be 'moral' in the sense that the feelings of outrage and indignation generated by the rejection of claims to recognition imply

⁴⁴ This is the central theme of *The Struggle for Recognition*, especially chapters 5, 6 and 8. For Honneth's own account of how he came to this position, see Honneth's Afterword to the second German Edition, 1988, reprinted as a preface in the English translation of *The Critique of Power*.

⁴⁵ See Honneth, "A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory", in *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. Fred Rush, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 336–60.

normative judgements about the legitimacy of social arrangements. Thus, in place of Habermas' focus on undistorted relations of communication as revealing a standard of justification, Honneth focuses on the progressive overcoming of barriers to full interpersonal recognition, barriers such as legal exclusion and cultural denigration, as well as rape and torture. In this way, the normative ideal of a just society – what Honneth calls, in a phrase intended to synthesise liberalism and communitarianism, a “formal conception of ethical life” – is empirically confirmed by historical struggles for recognition.⁴⁶ We can reconstruct these social struggles as aspiring to secure the fundamental conditions for individual self-realisation and self-determination,⁴⁷ but what grounds these normative criteria in the real world are the very real feelings of humiliation and denigration that the oppressed actually feel.

The idea then is to ground the critique of social structures – and of globalising capitalism, in particular – in these subjective experiences of social fragmentation and reification.⁴⁸ Drawing on themes found in the early writings of Hegel, Marx and Lukács,⁴⁹ Honneth aims to keep alive a sense of ‘romantic anti-capitalism’ against the hegemonic anti-utopianism of current market Liberalism, at least in this sense: that critical social theory must foster a sensitivity to the devastating personal suffering caused by market forces.

In several regards, Honneth's approach to normative issues fits into a broader concern within the third generation with issues of particularity, contextuality, and substantive, non-proceduralistic principles. For example, many of those working explicitly on normative theory have focused typically on the ‘messier’ dimensions of application, contextual justification, the role of emotions, the Gilligan-Kohlberg debate

⁴⁶ Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, ch. 9.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Anderson & Honneth, “Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition, and Justice”.

⁴⁸ In addition to Honneth's collection of essays, *Desintegration*, Frankfurt, Fischer, 1994; see also U. Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans. M. Ritter, London, Sage, 1992; and G. Schulze, *Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*, Frankfurt, Campus, 1993.

⁴⁹ Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, trans. Joseph Ganahl, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, ch. 1 and “A Fragmented World: On the Implicit Relevance of Lukács' Early Work” in Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. C.W. Wright, Albany, SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 50–60.

over an ‘ethics of care’, judgements of appropriateness, evaluative claims about the good life, and applied ethics generally.⁵⁰

At the same time, however, Honneth’s focus on subjective experience as the point of departure for his social critique and moral evaluation has not convinced everyone in his generation of the Frankfurt School. To begin with, there is a concern that subjective experiences of humiliation are potentially fickle bases for criticism, in that *feeling hurt* seems immune to criticism. Nancy Fraser put this objection in their recent debate: “To stress the victim’s subjective feelings of injury is to endanger the possibility of a democratic adjudication of justice claims.”⁵¹ This objection fits with plenty of third-generation work that is closer to Habermas and to left-leaning procedural political theories of welfare rights, radical equality and social justice. One way in which critical social theory can develop is along these lines, with theoretical principles of justice grounding critiques of globalising capitalism.

In his most recent work, however, Honneth has continued to maintain that the focus of social critique – both in his justification and its target – should be the pathological effects on subjects generated by certain aspects of contemporary capitalism. In further developing his approach in his 2005 Tanner Lectures on reification⁵² and in his recent discussions of “paradoxes of capitalism”,⁵³ he continues to frame his normative critique as part of an analysis of the negative experiences generated by pathological social structures. It is likely that it will continue to be one of the key points of dispute within the third generation of Frankfurt School critical social theory. And, ultimately, this is a debate about how to understand contemporary capitalism: does its

⁵⁰ For example, eds. M. Kettner & K-O Apel, *Zur Anwendung der Diskursethik in Politik, Recht und Wissenschaft*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1992; M. Brumlik, *Advokatorische Ethik: zur Legitimation pädagogischer Eingriffe*, Bielefeld, KT-Verlag, 1992; H. Nagl-Docekal & H. Pauer-Studer, eds., *Jenseits der Geschlechtermoral: Beiträge zur Feministischen Ethik*, Frankfurt, Fischer, 1993; L. Wingert, *Gemeinsinn und Moral*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1993; K. Günther, *A Sense of Appropriateness: Application Discourses in Morality and Law*, trans. J. Farrell, Albany, SUNY Press, 1993.

⁵¹ N. Fraser, “Distorted Beyond All Recognition: A Rejoinder to Axel Honneth” in Fraser & Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. J. Golb, J. Ingram & C. Wilke, London, Verso, 2003, p. 234, note 4.

⁵² Honneth, *Reification*.

⁵³ For example, Honneth, “Organized Self-Realization: Some Paradoxes of Individualization”, *European Journal of Social Theory* 7 (2004): pp. 463–478; and Martin Hartmann and Axel Honneth, “Paradoxes of Capitalism”, *Constellations* 13, no. 1 (2006): 41–58.

pathological character lie primarily in the subordinating maldistribution it creates or more directly in what it *does to people*, its reifying and humiliating effects?

9. *Concluding Remarks*

Situating theorists within traditions or schools of thought always runs the risk of occluding the diversity and disagreement within traditions, of overemphasising the systematic coherence of the theories, and of neglecting the role played by those outside of the largely stipulative boundaries of a tradition. The foregoing attempt to situate the critical theory of Axel Honneth in the tradition of the Frankfurt School has doubtless fallen prey to some of these misrepresentations. In addition, talk of distinct 'generations' within the Frankfurt School is misleading insofar as Habermas and Honneth are still both actively pursuing their research programmes. Members of the second and third generations continue to respond to each other's innovations, as well as to the ongoing reappropriation of first-generation thinkers.⁵⁴ My hope is that the focus on central themes and generational differences has brought certain outlines and fault lines more clearly into focus. Clearly, however, other lenses would have allowed other connections to come into view.

Amid all the diversity, several distinctive foci continue to unite Frankfurt School Critical Theorists. These include concerns with the normative question of how to tune and calibrate the instruments for perceiving injustice; the critical and reflexive role of the social sciences; and the resurgent issue of how to correctly theorize capitalist crises, together with their multidimensional impact on individual lives and the supporting social fabric. And, perhaps most centrally, there is the shared sense that reason, autonomy, and freedom are not timeless metaphysical categories but real historical developments, driven forward (to the extent they are) by efforts to respond appropriately to political, social, cultural, material, and psychological crises through

⁵⁴ See the essays in the Festschrift for Honneth: Rainer Forst, Martin Hartmann, Rahel Jaeggi, and Martin Saar, eds., *Sozialphilosophie und Kritik*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2009; and Jürgen Habermas, "Arbeit, Liebe, Anerkennung (Zum 60. Geburtstag van Axel Honneth)," *Die Zeit*, July 16, 2009.

the often-difficult emergence of more inclusive, nuanced, perspicuous, and complex modes of life. In this sense, at least, there is no difficulty situating Axel Honneth at the heart of the unfinished project of Critical Theory.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ In places, the present essay builds on an earlier essay, entitled “The ‘Third Generation’ of the Frankfurt School” and published in *Intellectual History Newsletter* 22, 2000, pp. 49–61. In preparing both that version and the present one, I benefitted from comments from Casey Blake, Howard Brick, Bert van den Brink, Peter Dews, Rainer Forst, Axel Honneth, Pauline Kleingeld, Matthias Lutz-Bachmann, Thomas McCarthy, Kevin Olson, John Victor Peterson, Thomas Schmidt and Chris Zurn.

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With a Reply by Axel Honneth

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Danielle Petherbridge



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