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**Recognition and learning processes  
in modern societies**  
*(Reconhecimento e processos de aprendizagem em sociedades modernas)*

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## Recognition and learning processes in modern societies

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Axel Honneth has set himself the task of finding a new theoretical language with which the current political demands may be justified in the context of a critical theory. This fundamentation is supposed to expose which normative expectations are, and which are not upon the the different aspects of social life. Honneth defined the concept of recognition as the generative core of this language, around which he developed his approach to a theory of recognition.

In *The struggle for recognition* (2002) Honneth defines recognition as an intersubjective condition of individual selfrealization. As it is known, the patterns of recognition, them being love, rights and solidarity are there presented as preconditions for the practical self-relations, them being self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. Primary relationships, legal relations and the community of values (Wertegemeinschaft) correlate as forms of recognition. Patterns of recognition as forms of social integration correspond to emotional connections, conferring of rights and common value-orientation, on the one hand, and abuse and rape, deprivation and exclusion, humiliation and insult correspond to forms of disrespect on the other.

In order to explain the distinction between the second and the third form of recognition, the author reconstructs the internal differentiation of honour, which was determining for social placement in traditional societies. In modern societies, it appears as differentiated in legal recognition and social-esteem. The recognition mediated through legal rights expresses "general characteristics of human subjects", from which the normative expectation of equal treatment is derived - even if law can not entirely cover this expectation. Contrasting the latter, social-esteem refers to "differences" (p. 199-200), to skills and achievements with which the members of a society classify

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themselves as unequal despite the principle of equal treatment.

While legal recognition can be presented as plausible, being based on arguments, including the mutually accorded normative expectations under law, solidarity can only difficultly be presented as a concept to express a mutual respect among the participants of a communitarian horizon of shared values. Skills, behaviours and achievements refer to very different situations, although together can hardly conceptually be linked to solidarity. Therefore it is no wonder that Honneth soon finds a replacement.

In his reply to Nancy Fraser (Honneth, 2003) the three *patterns* of recognition are presented as differentiated *spheres* of recognition in society. Despite love and law, achievement is presented as the third sphere. They are resumed by the author as follows:

In intimate relationships, marked by practices of mutual affection and concern, they are able to understand themselves as individuals with their own needs; in legal relations, which unfold along according to the model of mutually granted equal rights (and duties), they learn to understand themselves as legal persons owed the same autonomy as all other members of society; and, finally, in loose-knit social relations – in which, dominated by a one-sided interpretation of the achievement principle, there is competition for professional status – they in principle learn to understand themselves as subjects processing abilities and talents that are valuable for society. (S. 168; ep 142)

This reformulation contains two changes that will be discussed in more detail: one is that *patterns* of recognition are changed into *spheres* of recognition, and the other is that the third dimension referred to as solidarity is replaced by achievement. First, I would like to analyse if here is emerging a concept of society where the three forms of recognition represent three forms of social relations. Then I will ask whether the change from solidarity to achievement and thus the obtained language specificity also evoke a change in the theoretical access to the related social conflicts.

I begin with the question referring to the concept of society. In *The struggle for recognition* (p. 151-152) Honneth mentions various examples of triparted society concepts common in social philosophy. He complements it with the observation that only Hegel and Mead referred these three “spheres of interaction” to “different patterns of mutual recognition”. In the already mentioned reply to Fraser (Honneth, 2003, p. 169) patterns of recognition are no longer spoken of, but it is emphasised that there occurred a differentiation of three spheres of recognition. Therefore it seems that for Honneth the use of a tripartite division is legitimized.

The hole reconstruction of the concept of recognition suggests, that Honneth derives this tripartite division from Hegel. Though for Hegel it is stated (Honneth, 2003, p. 170), that by mentioning family, civil society and the state he refers to three institutional complexes of ethical order - which without further notice cannot be seen as equal to the society. Therefore the question remains whether by referring to the differentiation into three spheres of recognition Honneth is really suggesting that three major forms of social relations are themselves being crystallized here, respectively corresponding to three areas of social life. This question is not answered explicitly, but there are strong indications that Honneth assumes that by reconstructing the process of differentiation of these three spheres of recognition he also reconstructed the emergence of three sectors of society with their respective forms of coordinating social relations (see p. 167).

Considering relevant literature might give the impression that in social theory we do not need more concepts or images of society (see Kneer et al., 1997). Although looking for theoretical approaches that seem to be related to the approach of Honneth, Weber and Habermas best come into consideration.

About Max Weber it is often said that he had not even developed his own concept of society. In fact, he has very consistently avoided commenting on this in a detailed way. This is due to the fact of his approach being totally focused on the individual: for Weber, an individual's social action is the subject of sociology, major social formations occur as contexts that affect this action.

In his text, *Class, status, party* (Weber, 1981), he asks how power is distributed in society. He draws a three-dimensional social space in which the individual assumes his social position based upon the available power it has in these three dimensions. If one looks closely, it becomes clear that for Weber these three dimensions stand for the three relevant sectors of society: economy, culture and politics; in each of them social action is guided by a specific form of goal-rationality. Thereby, a concept of society is not yet well defined, but the most important outlines of it for Weber are presented. Social action takes place within this framework and gains its sense according to the rules of the correspondent area. Although a large number of individuals might take a "joint position" from the specific composition of their power, for Weber the reasons for common action are not evoked by it. Apparently the individual described as actor is autonomous to such

extent that the social theory does not need to be concerned with specific social problems that could affect the individual's life.

In his text *Work and interaction*, Habermas has distinguished the cultural reproduction from material reproduction, and thus made a major decision for his theory, especially for his concept of society. In his work *Theory of communicative action* (Habermas, 1988), he does not raise the question of the distribution of power, like Weber does, but asks about the coordination of social action, developing a concept of society, which is also divided into three parts. The areas of economics and politics, which are jointly responsible for the material reproduction of society are represented in the language of system theory, though corresponding broadly to the same sectors named by Weber. Instead of culture perhaps Habermas uses the concept of life-world for the third one, responsible for the reproduction of cultural life. It actually is the centre of Habermas' approach and must be protected from the intrusion of the other two areas' coordination forms of social action. Especially after some additions made by dialogue partners, such as Cohen and Arato, in this theoretical approach it was more specifically shown how a common social action may arise in the form of social movements: collective interpretations of situations are perceived through the public sphere and amplified through already existing forms of cooperation, structured and designated as civil society, and transformed into mobilization for collective action. To these movements Habermas attributes the task of protecting the life-world against the invasion of forms of action coordination coming from other sectors, or, if penetration of such alien forms already have occurred, they have to be rejected in order to decolonize the life-world again.

Even with the aforementioned restriction about Weber, for each of these two approaches can be found a concept of society, according to which there are basically three differentiated spheres of action in the society. In each area power is allocated according to other criteria, or social action is coordinated according to another form of rationality. These two forms of classifying social interactions according to domain-specific principles make an implicit claim to involve all socially relevant interactions. They are indeed capable to capture economics and politics, the two key areas of the present capitalist societies, according to their own objectives, but both authors assign a significant proportion of socially relevant action to a very heterogeneous concept – culture by Weber and life-world by Habermas.

In Honneth's approach, the situation is somewhat different. As mentioned above, it is evident that his tripartite division is derived from Hegel's conception of an ethical order. He remarks a distance, because Hegel fixes his interpretation on one institution of the ethical order, and thus disregards other social institutions as well as the possibility of interpenetrated influences between institutions and principles of recognition. While Honneth, as part of his project to develop a theoretical language adapted to the current social demands, increasingly speaks about three differentiated spheres of recognition, I believe that he implicitly raises the claim to capture the totality of society. E.g. when he says (2003, p. 185) that “a satisfactory definition of the capitalist social order” in addition to the three spheres of recognition, must take into account the “cultural values”, “with their normative principles subjects may associate legitimate expectations of reciprocal recognition”.<sup>2</sup>

The author prefers to speak about a type of “social order” not focusing on differentiated social action of society members, but on the recognition, or on the disappointment because of the absence of these expectations of recognition, seen as legitimated, which are turned into discomfort or injustice. In other words, legitimated claims for their expectation to be recognized by “the society” indeed have been made, but the experience of recognition, or disappointment is a personal experience. Before I can continue to discuss the impact of this perception towards a mobilization for resistance, it is necessary to detain me a little more with the change of name of the third form of recognition.

As Honneth moves from the reconstruction of inter-subjective patterns of recognition to the attempt to “interpret the bourgeois capitalist society as an institutionalized order of recognition” (2003, p. 162), he calls the third form of recognition achievement as a substitute for solidarity. This formulation emphasises the fact that this form of society wants to avoid the difficult task to evaluate specific human qualities;<sup>3</sup> it can even abstract completely from their content, taking into account their outcomes exclusively. Although skills and forms of behavior can contribute to the

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2 I assume that the restriction on the interpretation of the achievement principle results from the context of argumentation and that also the other two principles are influenced by the cultural values in their interpretation.

3 About it, see the debate from Taylor (2000) and Habermas (1997).

outcomes, they are not being evaluated as such. Honneth remarks in some extent that the maintenance of the legally equal treatment can de facto legitimize inequalities.

In the context of this interpretation Honneth mentions that the new achievement principle “represented little more than part of an influential ideology insofar as it simply expressed the on-sided value horizon of those social groups which, because they possessed capital, had the means to reorganize economic reproduction” (2003, p. 174; ep. 147). The author realizes that the question here is much more than just about a tension between equality and difference, that it is not primarily a question of the possible priority of redistribution or recognition. The point here is about the social naturalization and generalization of measurement criteria. Quite different from the construct of an early state of ignorance about the actual abilities and assets, such standards are imposed by those members of society who know exactly about the resources or capabilities they and their fellow citizens have.

Honneth identifies it namely as an ideology, but does not deepen this very sensitive issue for a critical theory. He refers more generally to the influence of cultural values – and also to the possibility of these principles in some way making it available to the individual standards by which it may become aware of its situation. Especially in this context, it would seem desirable to reflect more upon the question of the dynamics of the ideological struggle about the interpretation of the situation - an interpretation of the situation that goes far beyond the measurement of achievement. Despite questioning what the true issue in the struggle for recognition at the ideological level is, it ought to be asked who the opponents in this fight are, who fights with whatever means, under what circumstances and with which aims.

R. Kreckels' book *Political Sociology* (2004) could potentially help as a starting point to investigate the ideological character of the achievement principle, especially in capitalist societies. Besides economics and politics, however, the achievement criteria of other requirements present in everyday life also should be investigated in order to unveil their processes of naturalization. A theoretical approach in which the social dynamics of such conflicts is presented in a differentiated manner (even if in my opinion still not adequately), comes from Bourdieu. With his theory of fields and its criteria remarked as valid, he shows how certain social groups, are able to establish field-specific criteria and rules to govern the field and thus put themselves in a position, in which they will be more able to continue fulfilling the requirements than their counterparts. In the book

*Distinctions* (1997) the author shows how even in everyday situations, such as consumption, social groups act to favour themselves over their fellow citizens through self-imposed distinctions.

A growing generalization of these differentiation strategies leads to the situation that many people who by nature are not equipped with skills according to the specific requirements of individual achievement or those who have insufficient access to the markers of social distinction perceive themselves as second category. Thus, the negative judgement of achievement is transferred to the person itself, or is recorded as such by the individual himself - thereby spreading from one life-segment to the whole subject. This creates a background consensus which, based upon certain criteria such as capabilities or potential of consumption, divides the people hierarchically, assigning to those in the lower ranks an identity that grants them a low self-esteem and low social prestige. This way, people and groups are socially displaced to the margin, pruned in the possibility of creating their own life plans and severely impaired in the possibility of realizing them – meaning, in their *autonomy*. Such situations show, how unstable the differentiation of life-spheres, that are considered to be a positive achievement of Modernity, can be: social inequalities, measured in a specific area of life on the basis of socially defined standards are extended and applied to other areas of life, and lead ultimately to an ontologized distinction between the people themselves.

In societies where such ideological struggles have progressed and have been generalized, the naturalization of social inequalities in everyday life has a similar impact to that of the figure of invisibility, drawn from literature, employed by Honneth (2003a) in his presentation about the precedence of recognition about the cognition. There is usually no open conflict anymore; “inefficient” people are largely ignored and overlooked by the “powerful”, and “voluntarily” take the place that is assigned to them.

Empirical research would be necessary to answer the question of whether and how the live situation and opportunities of the “inefficient” people in poor and rich countries differ from each other. It can be assumed that the live situation of such individuals in poor countries differs very much from that of an individual who is exposed to the *paradox of capitalism* in a rich country. While the latter feels how many normative advances of the past will “be transformed into mechanisms of integration of the society under the pressure of the neoliberal detaming of capitalism” (Hartmann and Honneth, 2004), the “many normative advances” will remain largely denied to the former. It seems

likely that also the different forms of practical self-relation will be affected differently for both.

Honneth rightly points out that in most currently popular conceptions of justice, the distribution of goods builds the centre of the reflections. Similarly can be referred to the objectives of many social movements. Honneth encounters this prevailing tendency in the theories of justice with a conception formulated in the language of recognition of individual autonomy; which is not characterized by the access to goods, but to certain intersubjective relationships, namely by relations of recognition. Although the author succeeds in justifying the normative expectations, he has difficulties to integrate the necessary mediations, capable of bridging the gap between social theory and political struggle for recognition into his theoretical approach. I want to consider a possibility indicated by Honneth himself: the learning of recognition – and therefore I shall refer to the possible functions of social movements in modern society.

Honneth appoints that society is reproduced only when people learn to recognize their fellow citizens.<sup>4</sup> Even in *The struggle for recognition* he stated: “[...] the reproduction of social life takes place under the imperative a reciprocal recognition, because the subjects only can arrive at a practical self-understanding if they learn to see themselves from the normative perspective of their interaction partners as their social addressees” (p. 148). Similar indications of the thesis that recognition must be learned, are repeated in the subsequent writings of the author. This learning process is understood as part of the process of individualization. If I have understood Honneth correctly regarding this, then for him relations of recognition are always founded upon intersubjectively formed basic values that are appropriated through learning processes and advanced by the individual.

The relations of recognition are given for each individual as a normative expectation to begin with– as an expectation that he can legitimately have, but that he also has to fulfil for others. The central question is, how can he first take note of it, and then assume it as a duty for himself. The development of the child, as described by Winnicott and recorded by Honneth, is surely a basic building block of the entire learning process, but it is far from being able to describe today's highly differentiated socialization processes present

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4 Here can not be addressed his thesis that the recognition comes before the recognition may by “forgotten”. In my opinion, it is not here directly concerned.

in every sector of society. And if the relations of recognition are to be the central form of social relations within the three differentiated spheres of society, as established by the theory of recognition, then this theory must reconstruct the necessary learning processes that have to take place as part of the socialization beyond the intimate relationships, through which each individual assumes the expected basic attitude of recognition for himself and lets it become a habit.

TH Marshall's classic text *Citizenship and social class* (Marshall, 1992) is usually mentioned in connection with the expansion of citizenship. There are good reasons to assume that this citizenship in Marshall's conception means much more for the social relations than the recognition of individual rights (see Honneth, 2002, p. 190). So for him the general right to (school) education is the most important social right: it is presented as a means of turning people into citizens. Even if it in today's school systems there is a broad pallet of design options, it still remains one of the central institutions of socialization in modern societies. In this institution the individual is offered competing conceptions of ethical values which are represented in society and from which he composes his own mosaic, taking into account the current significant others. If from this process results a surplus of recognition, cannot be answered from the theoretical work-up. Rarely, however, the school system is a place where the naturalized conceptions of values of a given society are subjected to a critical reflection. The main function of school is certainly contributing to a stabilizing social integration.

Assuming that the present society has already reached a satisfactory level of justice, or adopting the perspective according to which there is a natural evolutionary process for the better, then these institutions of socialization may be sufficient. However, if one is convinced that the given conditions contradict the normative expectations to the extent that social transformation processes appear as necessary, then the question of alternative learning processes, where the subjects acquire the desired values and also can develop correspondent forms of habit rises more insistently.

Now it is very important for a critical social theory that it, despite the consistent theoretical basement of the normative principles of its approach, also questions itself how these principles can be relevant in the everyday lives of those who have served as a reference for building the theory. An important role in this context, appointed by Habermas and now also by Honneth, will be ascribed to social movements. How is this

role specifically defined and how should it be played? I am convinced, that there are three tasks that social movements have to fulfil in modern societies. First, as Flickinger already noted (2004), they can serve as an early warning system to draw attention to societal illnesses. Secondly, they can even if often only to a limited extent, provoke or prevent processes of social transformation (see Raschke, 1994). Thirdly, they can achieve what in the movement research is described as *framing* (see McAdam et al., 1996): particularly if opinion can be formed through democratic discussions in the public sphere, people learn in and through them to interpret their situations in a new way and to develop alternative projects or utopias.

This last task is of central importance in the context of a theory of recognition because it demonstrates a possible way of how the individual's "violation of deep-seated expectations of recognition" (Honneth, 2002, p. 261) can be reflexively processed and socially shared. It is this common interpretation of the situation<sup>5</sup> that mobilizes for social resistance. This social learning becomes particularly important, when a critique of ideology is necessary in the form of a reinterpretation of the situation. If one looks closely to the goals of most contemporary social movements, their motivations may be mainly attributed to two forms of violation of recognition expectation: either social inequality is propagated under the guise of equality, according to their interpretation, or people are dismissed or discriminated because they cannot or do not want to provide exactly those services, specified as crucial for social recognition in the relevant context. Mobilizing against that requires making normative expectations plausible and applying them to the jointly shared given situation.

This could just be a supplement of the social movements to the critical reflection and could contribute to bridge the gap between critical theory and political practice.

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5 Together, even if the person is not directly involved, but others interpret her/his situation in common – especially because under names such as *advocacy* can take place what has been called by Weiß (1984) as a delegate or representative action.

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