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# Recognition and democracy: Honneth's concept of social life

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## **Recognition and democracy: Honneth's concept of *social life*.**

### **Introduction**

This speech aims to emphasize the link there is between recognition and democracy. I'd like to show how the recent revival of the concept of recognition in political and philosophical fields can lead to a renewal in the current reflection about democracy. For that purpose, I will focus on some texts from Axel Honneth, whose ethics of recognition entails in my opinion a potential for rethinking democracy. This argument may be astonishing as far as in most of his texts, Honneth only skims over the subject. He is even sometimes stigmatised as an apolitical thinker. This viewpoint is probably due to a misunderstanding concerning his position towards identity claims and the cultural definition of the identity and concerning his concept of politics. In the debate with Nancy Fraser which was published under the title "redistribution or recognition?", Honneth quotes Bourdieu in *La Misère du monde (the Misery of the world)* about the definition of politics. In his opinion, the concept of politics should entail "the diffuse expectations and hopes from the citizens"<sup>1</sup>. The innovative potential from Honneth's theory relies on the necessary consideration of an affective side of social experiences and in an opening of the political world to the social world. Therefore in this speech I will intend to focus on the problematic of the social field in its relation to democracy and in particular on Honneth's concept of social life. I'd like to show how some punctual aspects of his reflection on recognition could constitute appropriate leads in order to enlarge and perhaps give new impulses to the contemporary reflections about democracy.

After briefly referring to the historical and philosophical context in which the concept of recognition knew a revival in the 80's and 90's and in particular of the German reception of the debate between Liberals and Communitarians, I'll focus on the procedural concept of democracy and the problem of the access to the public sphere in order to explain, in a last step, in what way we could speak about Honneth's viewpoint of democracy as a social ideal.

### **I. Revival from the concept of recognition and reflection about democracy**

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<sup>1</sup> „Unformuliertes und unformulierbares Unbehagen, welches die politischen Organisationen nicht wahrnehmen und erst recht nicht in ihre Verantwortung nehmen können, verfügen sie doch nur über die verstaubte Kategorie des Sozialen, um dieses Unbehagen zu denken. Um dieser Rolle gerecht werden zu können, müssten sie erst einmal ihre aus vergangenen Tagen herübergerettete engstirnige Auffassung von Politik selbst erweitern und nicht nur für die von den verschiedenen sozialen Bewegungen u. a. Ökologischer, antirassistischer oder feministischer Orientierung öffentlich angemeldeten Forderungen öffnen, sondern ebenso die diffusen Erwartungen und Hoffnungen der Bürger einbeziehen“, *Umverteilung oder Anerkennung*, p. 141-142.

So, to start with: how did the concept of recognition meet a revival at the end of the last century and what impact did it have on diverse thoughts about democracy?

*A. (Context from the revival of recognition)*

The resurgence of the concept of recognition in the philosophical field coincides with the apparition of a political discourse of recognition, in particular in the sphere of social, cultural, sexual and minority struggles. Many reflections about recognition rely on the historical examples of the civil rights movement, the feminist demands in the 70's and also the problems linked to postcolonization. Using the concept of "the right to difference", these groups claim for the recognition of their specific identities.

One of the most significant philosophical debates concerning these issues is the debate between Liberals and Communitarians in North America in the 1980's. My purpose here is not to get into the details of the complex stances of the debate, but to stress on the impact it had on the reflections about democracy and its conceptual link to recognition.

In the communitarian thoughts, the concept of recognition plays a critical role. It represents a means to oppose to liberal tolerance, that is to say to the neutrality of the state towards the different conceptions of good life and more generally towards the private life of individuals. The individual is part of a community that plays a substantial role in his integration to society and in so far, this part of the individual identity has to be recognised in its specificity. Of course, this statement raises a lot of questions, the first one being the question of the definition of identity and community. The danger is to absolutise the concept of identity, making it a fix and immutable characterization of the individual and to simplify the social process of integration into a cultural problem. But the merit of the debate with all its ramifications is to have put at the centre of political discussions the problems concerning the integration and the creation of common values in plural societies. Indeed, all these thinkers are trying to take up the challenge of postmodernity. They have to conceptualise the society and the community in the context of the decline of normativity. In this sense, the whole debate around recognition shows (voluntarily or not) the real problems democracy thoughts have to face in the postmodern context: If identity has to be recreated, then it is the democratic identity, that is to say the mediation between individual and community and between society and community. In this perspective, the German reception of the debate introduces an innovative point of view.

B. (*Reception of the debate in Frankfurt and contribution to a renewal of democracy thoughts*)

Following the general argument from E. Renault in his article “Entre libéralisme et communautarisme: une troisième voie?”<sup>2</sup> (“Between Liberalism and Communautarism: a third way?”), I’d like to question briefly how the American debate was met by the successors of the Critical theory. The German thinkers proceed to a redefinition of the central problematic of the debate in what we call the “continental” context of questions about nationality, citizenship and democratic deliberation.

The first aspect of this redefinition is a methodological one. The aim of the German thinkers is to proceed to a synthesis of both viewpoints, to think “over Liberalism and Communautarism” as Rainer Forst says<sup>3</sup>. In this perspective, the methodological principles inherited from the young Critical theory constitute an important base, in particular the definition of critique given by Horkheimer in 1931. The critical side of the theory relies on the unity from the descriptive and the normative. Critical philosophers refuse to distinguish between the properly normative aspect of the reflection and its social efficiency. Their approach of the social context entails the search for a transcendental immanence, which could be the anchor of the critique. Therefore, the social field constitutes the criterion of normativity. As far as the theory arises from a specific approach of social immanence, the contemporary Critical thinkers oppose to the abstract and reconstructive liberal theory and each of them from one’s own perspective to the Theory of justice of John Rawls. For E. Renault, the political consequence of such a methodological premise is the reformulation of the communautarian critique in a non communautarian way.

But at the same time, most of Critical thinkers also argue against the communautarian critique of the liberal unencumbered self. Following the political and critical premises of the human interest to emancipation, they try to avoid becoming bogged down in a contextual argumentation. That’s the reason why these thinkers refuse to stick to identity and culture in the way it is debated on in America. Habermas’ definition of recognition in *die Einbeziehung des Anderen* and Honneth’s critical point of view towards Fraser’s americanocentrism in the controversy about redistribution and recognition are so many examples of the refusal of this tight perspective. On this point, they encounter the liberal requirements of the definition of universal rights. But the concept of quasi-transcendental interests is also a means to revitalize

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Renault, « Entre Libéralisme et communautarisme : une troisième voie ? », in : Emmanuel Renault et Yves Sintomer, *Où en est la théorie critique ?*, La Découverte, Paris 2003.

<sup>3</sup> Rainer Forst, « Kommunitarismus und Liberalismus – Stationen einer Debatte », in : Axel HONNETH (dir.), *Kommunitarismus. Eine Debatte über die moralischen Grundlagen moderner Gesellschaften*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1993.

the liberal conception of the negative liberty. Universal rights are conceived as ways to oppose to social and cultural contexts, which can be negations of liberty. One might think of Wellmer's definition of the negative liberty as the right "to be and to act as a dissident" in an essay called "Bedingungen einer demokratischen Kultur. Zur Debatte zwischen Liberalen und Kommunitaristen"<sup>4</sup>. What is at stake through this revitalization of the concept of social life is the renewal of the central questions about democracy, such as the redefinition of the line between private and public sphere and of the notion of negative liberty, which is at the centre of the controversy between Liberals and Communautarians. For that purpose, the common base of the German reflections is intersubjectivity. Communication becomes a central point in the integrative process of democracies.

## **II. The problem of the access to public sphere**

### *A. (methodological divergence)*

For now, I'd like to grasp on the theme of the procedural democracy model developed by Habermas and the problem of the access to public sphere through Honneth's specific perspective of the recognition. Honneth's relation to his predecessor Habermas is ambivalent and evolves with time. In his first texts, Honneth sees in the role played by intersubjectivity and communication in Habermas' ethics of the discourse the central point of a renewal of the Critical theory. It liberates the Critical tradition from its Marxian scoria and first of all from the absolutising paradigm of production and work (*Kritik der Macht*). Therefore, Honneth's ethics of recognition was not conceived in opposition, but in continuation to Habermas' position. But at the same time, the main difference between these two successors of the Critical theory - which is a methodological one - enables Honneth to develop an independent and polemic theory of the social world through his reflections about recognition. Honneth's thoughts are upstream of Habermas' theory. Whereas Habermas considers intersubjective communication as an appropriate anchor to his analysis of social integration, Honneth focuses on the normative criterion of the experience of injustice. His perspective is the one of the pathological aspects of social life. This negative viewpoint aims at considering the affective, qualitative and individual side of injustice, which is directly linked to (the experience of) recognition (or its denial). So whereas Habermas presupposes (most of the time implicitly) the existence of cultural and institutional conditions making the expression of arguments and

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<sup>4</sup> Albrecht Wellmer, « Bedingungen einer demokratischen Kultur. Zur Debatte zwischen Liberalen und Kommunitaristen », in : Endspiele. Die unversöhnliche Moderne. Essays und Vorträge, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1993, p. 54-80.

opinions possible in the democratic society, Honneth questions these conditions of possibility and consequently the process of integration. In so far, his theory of recognition corresponds to an analysis of the social implications and premises of Habermas' theory.

### *B. (political implications)*

The methodological divergence leads Honneth to the development of independent political reflections lying on the critique of Habermas' procedural model of democracy. One of the first critiques formulated as such, which Honneth addresses to Habermas consists of a revelation of the implicit criterion of justice in Habermas' theory. As for Honneth, Habermas doesn't want to accept the necessary substantial part of his theory of the discourse and as such tries to avoid the questions linked to its definition. But this substantial criterion is the one, which justifies the distance there is between the institutionalised rule on the one hand and the general will and consensus on the other hand. In his text called *Verdinglichung*, Honneth highlights the fact that societies can show other normative failures than the ones linked to a breach of general principles of justice<sup>5</sup>. That's also the reason why Honneth criticises, in Habermas' procedural model of democracy, the missing of a consideration of social struggles in the process of social reproduction and of the moral justification of the democratic motivations of the individual. These critiques are in line with the major critiques addressed to Habermas, but the originality of Honneth lies on the references he summons in order to justify his point of view and in the way he tries to proceed to a synthesis of various European thoughts and traditions. In a very important text, extracted from *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit*, Honneth refers to the contemporary normative turn of poststructural ethics as a challenge for Habermas' theory. The first part of the text reminds of Lyotard's concept of "linguistic play" aiming at questioning the consensual aspect of the language in Habermas' ethics of the discourse. What is at stake in Lyotard's concept of the dissensus is the distance that arises between the judging discourse and the discourse of the judged person. On that point, it encounters the honnethian concept of recognition. According to Habermas, the recognition intervenes only after the demand for recognition has passed the line of the public sphere, that is to say has been expressed in the common language of the publicity and thus has

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<sup>5</sup> „Die Gesellschaftskritik hat sich in den letzten drei Jahrzehnten im wesentlichen darauf beschränkt, die normative Ordnung von Gesellschaften daran zu messen, ob sie bestimmten Prinzipien der Gerechtigkeit genügen; dabei hat sie bei allen Erfolgen in der Begründung solcher Standards, bei aller Differenzierung der zugrundeliegenden Hinsichten aus den Augen verloren, dass Gesellschaften auch in einem anderen Sinn normativ scheitern können als in der Verletzung von allgemein gültigen Gerechtigkeitsprinzipien“, *Verdinglichung*, p.106 -107

been subjected to the test of discussion. Whereas according to Honneth, the recognition comes first and is the condition to a fair integration to the public space. The Honnethian concept of recognition lays the stress on the negative side of the procedural democracy that a priori excludes, with its focalisation on the political aspect of deliberation, some forms of social conflicts and protests; The article about the postmodern ethics has to be read in parallel with the article entitled “Moralbewusstsein und soziale Klassenherrschaft”. This article belongs to a former period of Honneth’s work. Honneth himself admits in the foreword to *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit* that many faults can be found in this article. But he decided to publish it in 2000 in order to put forward the reflections, which led him to his ethics of recognition. The starting point of his argumentation is also here the insufficiency of Habermas’ concept of public space. Struggles for social recognition and conflicts in the sphere of work are so many moral condemnations of the existing social order. As for him, the problems encountered by these claims for social justice in order to be positively formulated, are linked with the existence in the society of complex exclusion mechanisms. Those take two main forms: on one side the cultural exclusion of the dominated, and on the other side the individualisation of the conscience of injustice. That’s the reason why Honneth insists on rethinking the necessary social conditions to a real integration. Through his references, Honneth enlarges the philosophical dialogue concerning democracy.

### **III. democracy as a “social ideal”**

Finally I’d like to outline the definition of democracy as a “social ideal” standing out from different political thoughts scattered in Honneth’s work. In this perspective, I’d like to consider one very significant text called “Demokratie als reflexive Kooperation. John Dewey und die Demokratietheorie der Gegenwart”. It is one of the few texts dealing directly with political issues and as such a text, which draws the problematic line of Honneth’s argumentation in this field. The reference to Dewey may once more be an astonishing one, as far as he has also been an important reference of Habermas. While Habermas insists on the epistemological dimension from Dewey’s thoughts, Honneth’s interest has to do with his action-theoretic concept of thinking and with its consequences on the political field. The reference to Dewey and to his original concept of feeling already appears in *Kampf um Anerkennung*. As for Honneth, Dewey’s pragmatic thesis, and especially his thoughts about democracy in *The Public and its problems*, represents a relevant argument to go beyond republicanism and also proceduralism concerning the questions of democracy. This may sound paradoxical, as far as Habermas himself mentions Dewey in *Zeit der Übergänge* as a

potential inspiration for the “Republic of Berlin”. So I’d like to focus on the main aspects of Dewey’s reflection used by Honneth in order to surpass Habermas’ theory.

*A. (The link between social and political world in the redefinition of democracy)*

As for Honneth, the current discussion about democracy disputes the validity of the formation of the general will conceptualised in political liberalism. Republicanism and proceduralism both try to give substance to the empty liberal conceptualisation of the general will through a representation of the publicity. In this perspective, the originality of Dewey lies for Honneth in the importance he attaches in his own definition of publicity to the prepolitical sphere<sup>6</sup>. The central point of Dewey’s conception of democracy is the notion of social cooperation, through which he perceives a means to recreate a kind of mediation between individual, community and society. From a methodological point of view, this concept also enables the creation of a new link between the political sphere and the social one. There is in Dewey’s reflections a necessary link between prepolitical associations and integration of the individual. This assertion has to be understood from an intersubjective viewpoint on socialisation. The capacities and needs of the individual can only be stabilised through recognition by his partners in the social cooperation. Thus, individual liberty is linked with this prepolitical recognition. Of course, the concept of social cooperation reminds us here of the honnethian concept of solidarity and of the third sphere of recognition developed in *Kampf um Anerkennung*. The positive side of Dewey’s viewpoint compared with the tradition of republicanism (which is represented by Arendt in Honneth’s article) is therefore to explain the political implication of the individual from a prepolitical perspective and in this sense to break with the notion of political virtue. As for Dewey, the human being is as political as consuming or sportive. Therefore, Dewey’s reflections are appropriate to rethink democracy in the contemporary context of a disaffection towards politics and of a disintegration of the society. The communicative liberty of the individual and also his access to publicity hasn’t to do with the intersubjective discourse (as in Habermas’ ethics of the discourse), but with the individual involvement in the social cooperation. As a consequence, Dewey outlines a concept of responsibility based on a redefinition of the relation between the individual and his environment. Dewey defines this relation as a qualitative and holistic reaction to the fulfilling

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<sup>6</sup> „öffentlich ist jeweils jene Sphäre sozialen Handelns, von der eine Gruppe der Gesellschaft mit Erfolg nachweisen kann, dass sie aufgrund der Hervorbringung übergreifender Konsequenzen einer allgemeinen Regelung bedarf; und eine *Öffentlichkeit* besteht demnach aus dem Kreis derjenigen Bürgerinnen und Bürger, die aufgrund einer gemeinsam erlebten Betroffenheit die Überzeugung teilen, dass sie sich mit dem Ziel der administrativen Kontrolle der entsprechenden Interaktion an den Rest der Gesellschaft zu wenden haben“, „Demokratie als reflexive Kooperation“, in; *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit*, p. 300.



or not of his attempts. In this way, Dewey's conception of the publicity entails the dimension of a common experience, on which Honneth also focuses 70 years later. This part of Dewey's reflections explains the constitution not of a democratic publicity but I think of multiple prepolitical publicities. Now the question is: how do all these publicities get in touch with? Here Dewey's conception of the state intervenes through a new demarcation between public and private sphere. Thus, an interaction becomes a public problem when it affects the people who do not belong to the previous interaction. In that perspective, the state is a kind of second order association whose mission aims at resolving the problems engendered by these consequences of interaction and at regulating the contacts between the various prepolitical spheres of publicity. The state is therefore the condition of respect-achievement. In Dewey's thoughts the access to publicity consists of three steps: the personal commitment of the individual in a prepolitical association, the contribution to social cooperation and the respect of other associations. The main question this concept raises is now to understand how the motivations of the individual could be involved in a prepolitical association. The starting point of Dewey's conceptualisation of democracy on that issue is the fair division of work.

### *B. (Sphere of work and publicity)*

Through the detour via Dewey's reflections, Honneth comes across the sphere of work again, which plays an important role in his ethics of recognition. In comparison with Habermas, Honneth tries to reintroduce the moral aspect of the concept of work in his political reflections. But he also refuses to absolutise the paradigm of work<sup>7</sup>. As for Honneth, the sphere of work only constitutes an appropriate example of the necessity for the individual to be recognised beyond the sphere of equality rights as a human being whose social contribution itself has a value. It also constitutes a sphere in which the moral condemnation of society can arise. Inspired by Foucault's reflections in *L'Ordre du discours*, Honneth tries to show that the exclusion of some social claims through linguistic mechanisms of control coincides with an institutionalised repression from the history of social movements in general

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<sup>7</sup> « mit der Chance, einer ökonomisch entlohnten und somit sozial geregelten Arbeit nachzugehen, ist auch heute noch der Erwerb jener Form von Anerkennung verknüpft, die ich soziale Wertschätzung genannt habe. Andererseits aber darf diese Aufwertung der Arbeitserfahrung auch nicht dazu führen, noch einmal hinter das Niveau zurückzufallen, das Habermas mit seiner kategorialen Entschlackung des Arbeitsbegriffs bereits vor 20 Jahren gesetzt hatte; denn in der marxistischen Tradition und selbst noch bei Horkheimer ist die gesellschaftliche Arbeit geschichtsphilosophisch so sehr zu einem Bildungsfaktor überhöht worden, dass nur das Gegenmittel eines möglich nüchternen, von normativen Implikationen gereinigten Begriffs der Arbeit vor der Gefahr einer solchen Illusionsbildung schützen kann. Aus diesen gegenläufigen Tendenzen erwächst die Frage, bis zu welcher Schwelle der Begriff der Arbeit neutralisiert werden kann, ohne damit zugleich die Bedeutung einer zentralen Quelle von moralischen Erwartungen zu verlieren“, „Die soziale Dynamik von Missachtung“, in: *das Andere der Gerechtigkeit*, p. 104-105.

and from the cultural tradition of the political learning they represent in particular<sup>8</sup>. This is the only context in which Honneth uses the concept of culture. As for him, all claiming movements belong to the same tradition and that's the reason why he refuses to distinguish between the contemporary identity claims for recognition and the traditional social movements. This viewpoint is all the more significant as Honneth attempts to recreate an access to the sphere of symbolic goods as mediation towards the public space. This access can only be realised through the publicities created in the sphere of work. In that perspective, the sphere of work reveals the dialectic between socialisation and individualisation based on the demand for recognition. It belongs to the third sphere of recognition conceptualised by Honneth, which is the sphere of social esteem. The working context of the individual –even if it is not the only sphere of publicity encountered by the individual- plays an important role in the way he is recognised in his specificity and therefore in his access to the public space. Of course, this kind of publicity presupposes the existence of common ethical values that fluctuate with the historical composition of the society, and particularly with its plurality. This is the reason why Honneth mentions the necessity of rethinking and enlarging the concept of work as a contribution to social reproduction. It is, in his eyes, the only way to elaborate an appropriate concept of the culture, able to play an important role in the thought about democracy.

## **Conclusion**

To finish with, I'd like to lay the stress on the significance of Honneth's concept of social life in his reflections about democracy. Honneth's purpose is first of all to reflect the social conditions of a real integration. The concept of social life leads to a quite radical conception of democracy, in which social equality plays a role in its own right and has also the precedence over the principle of a democratic constitution of the general will.

I would like to conclude in relating the significance of the concept of recognition, and especially of its actual political implications in my own research. Honneth's large concept of recognition constitutes the starting point of my investigations, which aim at considering in what way the concept of recognition could be a kind of mutation of the concept of tolerance in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and especially in the German *Aufklärung*. What is at stake in the debate

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<sup>8</sup> „Dieser recht gut belegte Prozess des Sprachraubs (Entsprachlichung) wird durch Prozesse der institutionellen Verdrängung der kulturellen Traditionen und politischen Lernprozesse sozialer Widerstandsbewegungen begleitet. Das Ausmass, in dem die symbolischen Zeugnisse der Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung etwa aus der öffentlichen Arena der Bundesrepublik ausgeschlossen sind, ist dafür ein plastisches Beispiel“, „Moralbewusstsein und soziale Klassenherrschaft“, in: *Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit*, p. 120 – 121.

about tolerance in the *Aufklärung* is the process of acceptance of the other. Does this acceptance always involve a similarity between the subjects of the tolerance and in that way the adaptation of at least one of them? Is it possible to accept the other in his radical difference and in his specificity? This is the question Honneth tries to answer with his analysis of the possible recognition of the particularity of the personal social contribution, which constitutes the third dimension of recognition. Honneth considers this third sphere as a product of the historical changes appeared at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the separation of the legal recognition and the social esteem; and with the transition from the category of honour to the one of dignity. In so far, the third dimension of recognition related by Honneth in his ethics of recognition seems to be an appropriate viewpoint to consider retrospectively the debate of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

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