Chapter Eight
Social Philosophy as Critical Theory

Honneth’s ethics of recognition can be regarded as the culmination of a research programme that was first enunciated more than ten years earlier. Perhaps “programme” is not quite the right term to use, but at the very least the mature ethics of recognition appear to be the final expression and articulation of a number of strong intuitions that all of his earlier writings had already flagged. This remark sounds innocuous at first, yet it underlines a feature of Honneth’s work that is significant for an adequate assessment of it. Read in isolation from the texts that preceded it, Honneth’s most famous book might seem to be plagued by a certain theoretical vagueness. The propositions contained in the book can be compared to specific inquiries into the different areas it touches upon (from social psychology to historical sociology, to social ontology, and so on), and would probably appear quite abstract or superficial by contrast. This impression could arise for example by comparison with the classical or contemporary sociological literature dedicated to the institutional framework of individual action, or the analysis of social movements. This impression vanishes, however, when the
theses put forward by *The Struggle for Recognition* are viewed against the back-
ground of Honneth’s previous work. Indeed, this has been the main exegeti-
cal principle behind this study. One truly captures the depth and strength of
Honneth’s intervention in contemporary social philosophy only if one sees
*The Struggle for Recognition* as the solution to problems in social and political
philosophy that define an entire tradition of European philosophy, basically
the critical heritage of Hegel. Viewed in this way, that is, as an alternative
proposal in critical social theory, the book appears as a real theoretical *tour de force*. The “mature” theory of recognition manages to bring together, in one
extremely diverse and ramified, yet consistent synthesis, all the conceptual
and critical concerns, all the key thoughts and categories, which ten years of
research had previously developed. And because this previous research was
itself characterised by an astonishing consistency, as the first articles already
exposed deep intuitions and bold theoretical decisions that were later fleshed
out by the more systematic texts, Honneth’s overall *oeuvre* in critical social
theory in the end displays an uncanny continuity. Taken as a whole, this body
of work represents a genuine contender for the introduction of a new para-
digm in critical theory, to challenge and possibly replace previous ones.

The presentation of Honneth’s “mature” model of critical social theory begun
in the previous chapter therefore needs to conclude by reconstructing the way
in which, from an “ethics”, it evolves into a full model of critical theory. Such
a transformation is performed in the last chapters of *The Struggle for Recogni-
tion*, with important details added in articles published immediately after-
wards, in “Pathologies of the Social”; “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect”;
and “Integrity and Disrespect”. These articles, following on from chapters six
and eight in *The Struggle for Recognition*, shift the focus from the normative
analysis to its use in critical arguments.

**Recognition and social movements**

Up until chapter 7, *The Struggle for Recognition* is a book of social psychology,
moral psychology and social theory. It offers the normative core of a theory
of socialisation, and sketches a new “concept of the social”, but it is not a
critical theory of society in the strict sense of the term. It is the aim of the last
three chapters of the book to transform the theory of society and the theory of