Conclusion

Recognition or Interaction?

The most impressive aspects about Honneth’s work are the quiet assurance and the amazing consistency with which he has been able to maintain a deeply original intellectual vision over three decades, despite all the changes in the intellectual contexts and despite all the criticisms. Indeed, as the mood of the academic context in which Honneth’s thinking is located has been taking an ever greater Kantian tone, Honneth’s position has become increasingly uncomfortable. And yet, as his latest texts demonstrate, he has not recanted on the fundamental features of his project; in fact he has now made the existential core of his theory of recognition perfectly explicit. At the end of this long journey retracing the steps in his philosophical evolution, we can see that in his recent *Reification* lectures Honneth simply attempts to find the clearest, most precise formulations for the fundamental intuition that was already driving his early neo-Marxist studies, his critical reception of Critical Theory as well as the embrace of philosophical anthropology, in particular Mead’s social psychology. This intuition is that the most basic, defining feature of the *anthropos* is the affective, existential response
of the human being to the other human being, and that recognition, therefore, before it designates specific normative strands of modern societies (recognition of needs, of rights, or contributions), is primarily the name of the most fundamental feature of the human condition, at the core of all forms of human interactions (with others, with the world and with oneself). Honneth’s fundamental intuition is that, since human beings become subjects capable of rational conduct and practical agency, only via the interactions with other human beings, these primary interactions are also the most fundamental condition of any elaborate interaction, in natural, symbolic or social worlds, including objectifying or cognitive interactions. Without primary attachment, that is, the processes by which the human subject takes his or her place in the human sphere through the human (affective) acknowledgement of the human, human beings could not develop specifically human modes of conduct.

Indeed it is this dual status of recognition, as a tripartite, normative concept, and as a fundamental philosophical-anthropological concept, equal in its paradigmatic scope to ‘labour’ or ‘communication’, which is the key to understanding both the power and the difficulties of Honneth’s model. Recognition is a lot more than just a normative concept grounding an alternative theory of justice. It is also a concept with explanatory value in social ontology, inspiring an alternative theory of society, for example, as we have seen, an alternative theory of social action, social movements, power, domination, class relations, politics, institutions, including the economic ones, and so on. But of course such paradigmatic use of recognition brings with it tremendous theoretical difficulties, which Honneth’s critics have not failed to highlight. In the end, a concept borrowed from social psychology, a mere psychological notion, seems not just to inspire an intervention in normative debates on justice or moral action, but in effect to support the whole edifice of a new social theory, including the basic lineaments of a critique of political economy.

This book has attempted to show the great scope of Honneth’s contribution, well beyond the narrow focus on contemporary normative discussions. Indeed, it is precisely the goal of showing the full breadth and import of recognition theory that required the return to the sources of Honneth’s mature theory of recognition. It is only against the background of his substantive exchanges with historical materialism, classical social theory and Critical Theory, that one fully appreciates the great systematic force and the deep philosophical originality of Honneth’s thinking.