CHAPTER SIX

POWER, RECOGNITION, AND CARE: HONNEHT’S CRITIQUE OF POSTSTRUCTURALIST SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

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Honneth’s seminal 1985 work, *The Critique of Power*, is well known for its immanent critique of Foucault’s social philosophy. Yet it also suggested the possibility of a critical dialogue between critical theory and poststructuralism.¹ This tantalising possibility – suggested by Habermas’ critique of Foucault, Manfred Frank’s lectures on neostructuralism, as well as Foucault’s remarks shortly before his death – has remained, however, largely unfulfilled, both from the perspective of poststructuralist social philosophy and that of Honneth’s own theoretical trajectory.² While some important work has been done to further the dialogue between French poststructuralism and critical theory, to date this fascinating critical encounter is yet to be developed.³ Against Habermas’ more hostile reception, Honneth’s work during the 1990s evinced a critical yet sympathetic engagement with important French thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida. In what follows, I argue that Honneth’s critique of poststructuralist social philosophy offers a productive perspective for further developing the ethics of recognition, but also that the latter could benefit from a critical appropriation of certain aspects of poststructuralist thought.

I begin with an examination of Honneth’s critique of Foucault’s analysis of power, in particular the tension between action-theoretic and system-theoretic perspectives that Honneth identifies as the crucial impasse in Foucault’s theory of society. I then turn to Honneth’s critical confrontation with poststructuralist critiques of the modern subject, in particular his criticism of the Nietzschean-aestheticist concept of freedom. Finally, I consider Honneth’s critical engagement with poststructuralist approaches to ethics, in particular his claim that Derrida’s Levinasian ethics of care for the singular other presents a moral perspective that challenges Habermasian discourse ethics. I conclude that a renewed dialogue with the poststructuralist critique of instrumental rationality and of monological autonomy, which in turn suggests a return to the thought of Adorno, would provide a timely contribution to Honneth’s recent questioning of the future of critical theory.4

1. Honneth’s Critical Confrontation with Foucault

Honneth’s relationship with recent French philosophy is deep and longstanding, beginning with an extended study of Foucault in his 1980 book co-authored with Hans Joas.5 This interpretation was developed further in Honneth’s critical reconstruction of Foucault’s analysis of power in The Critique of Power, and extended into numerous essays in the 1990s on the poststructuralist critique of reason, the postmodernist subject, and deconstructive ethics.6 In the context of Honneth’s

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