CHAPTER ELEVEN

RECOGNITION, CULTURE AND ECONOMY: HONNETH’S DEBATE WITH FRASER

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1. Introduction

In their co-authored introduction to *Redistribution or Recognition?* Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth state that “at its deepest level” their book is concerned with the relationship between the economic order of contemporary capitalism and the patterns of cultural valuation that prevail in capitalist society.¹ The motivation behind their inquiry is to correct the flawed conceptions of economy and culture that, in their view, debilitate the tradition of critical social theory, and to renew that tradition around non-reductive, more differentiated conceptions. Fraser presents her contribution as pointing the way beyond “economism” and “culturalism”, two pernicious forms of reductionism that account for all social change, including the kind of change brought


Should capitalism, as it exists today, be understood as a social system that differentiates an economic order that is not directly regulated by institutionalized patterns of cultural value from other social orders that are? Or should the capitalist economic order be understood rather as a consequence of a mode of cultural valuation that is bound up, from the very outset, with asymmetrical forms of recognition? At its deepest level, this book attempts to pose this question theoretically and to develop a common framework for assessing our divergent answers.

This highly condensed passage is hard to follow because while it hints at two competing solutions to a single problem, it actually poses two distinct problems the logical relationship between which is unclear. One could answer both questions in the affirmative without contradiction: there is no obvious inconsistency in asserting both that the capitalist economy is not directly regulated by ‘institutionalised patterns of cultural value’ and that it is in some sense a ‘consequence of a mode of cultural valuation’. Conversely, one could answer both questions in the negative with equal justification: it is conceivable, of course, that contemporary capitalism should be understood in neither of the ways suggested.
about by progressive politics, in either economic or cultural terms alone.\textsuperscript{2} Honneth, for his part, targets the “anti-normative” bias in the way the Critical Theory tradition conceives the capitalist economic system, but he is just as opposed to notions of culture as an undifferentiated source of norms and values.\textsuperscript{3} Honneth and Fraser share the conviction that critical social theory must develop a conception of capitalist society that articulates the relation between its economic structure and cultural norms in a more satisfactory manner than do currently available models.

For the critical social theorist, three types of consideration are relevant to determine whether an articulation of this sort is satisfactory or not. First, there is the question of its descriptive and explanatory adequacy. The standard against which the theory’s descriptive and explanatory adequacy is to be measured is social reality itself. Second, there is the issue of determining the normative significance of this reality. An articulation that is satisfactory in this respect will render perspicuous the fit (or lack of it) between what is and what ought to be. Such articulations, when successful, at once clarify the grounds of social criticism (the standards against which the worth of social reality should be judged) and make the need for social criticism more palpable. A third kind of consideration concerns the grounds for hope that existing normative deficits, or the gap between standard and reality, can be overcome. A critical social theory that provides no grounds for such hope is as unsatisfactory as a physical theory that delivers no recipes for intervening effectively in the physical environment. In striving to articulate the proper relation between economy and culture, critical social theorists must keep in mind all three kinds of consideration: the descriptive/explanatory, the normative and the emancipatory/transformative. This desideratum is crucial for both Honneth and Fraser and it shapes the course of their debate, which criss-crosses over issues in social theory, theories of justice, diagnoses of the times and strategies for progressive politics.

I have no wish to question the idea that the commitments implicit in one’s beliefs about society, one’s moral judgements and social hopes should be expressible in a unified philosophical vocabulary. On the contrary, Critical Theory owes its power precisely to its stubborn

\textsuperscript{2} \textit{ibid.}, pp. 50–53.
\textsuperscript{3} \textit{ibid.}, pp. 128–129, 134.