CHAPTER TWELVE

SOCIAL PATHOLOGIES AS SECOND-ORDER DISORDERS

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In light of the attention and interest that Axel Honneth’s development of a systematic theory of recognition has generated, it is perhaps not surprising that another of his contributions to reorienting the tradition of critical social theory has garnered less attention. Aside from continuing the project of grounding the normative standards that critical social theory employs in specific features of human intersubjectivity (in his case, in the formal anthropology of intersubjective recognition), in the last decade or so Honneth has also been substantively engaged in reanimating an older tradition of social philosophy, one that is specifically focused on explicating and diagnosing social pathologies.

It is imperative for social philosophy to find a determination and discussion of those developmental processes of society that can be conceived as processes of decline, distortions, or even as “social pathologies” … Social philosophy, in distinction from both moral philosophy and political philosophy, can be understood as an instance of reflection within which measures for successful forms of social life are discussed.¹

Believing that this is indeed a productive reorientation of critical social theory, I intend here to show, first, how Honneth’s different social diagnoses exhibit a similar underlying conceptual structure, that of second-order disorders. The first part of the essay argues that a number of different social pathologies that Honneth has recently analysed – those of ideological recognition, maldistribution, invisibilisation, rationality distortions, reification and institutionalised self-realisation – all operate by means of second-order disorders, that is, by means of constitutive disconnects between first-order contents and second-order

reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused.

Once this underlying conceptual structure is grasped, I claim, it becomes clear that there are a number of different tasks a theory designed to diagnose social pathologies must fulfil. It must not only accurately identify and describe the second-order disorder as a social pathology, it must also be prepared to explain the root social causes of the pathology if it intends to carry out the basic emancipatory aims of a critical social theory. Taking its cue from the relative paucity of explanatory content that might fulfil these latter desiderata in Honneth's substantive analyses of social pathologies, the second part of the essay argues that more attention must be paid to etiological, prognostic and therapeutic concerns. A sufficient diagnosis of social pathologies must do more than simply take note of a complex of related social symptoms. It must also develop a convincing explanation of the social pathologies precisely so that social members can comprehend the discontinuities between their first-order experiences and their second-order reflexive understandings of them as discontinuities caused by specific social institutions, structures and practices, and for them to engage productively in the manifold social struggles necessary to overcome the causes of the pathological disorders. Said simply, a critical social theory of social pathologies needs not only an accurate explanation of pathological disorders at the level of personal experiences but also insightful sociological explanations of the causes of those pathological distortions. My sense is that the current theory of recognition has managed the first task better than the second. Nevertheless, articulating the second-order disorder structure of social pathologies can help to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of different methodological strategies for explaining their causes and pointing the way towards a less pathological society.

1. Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders

1.1. Ideology and Ideological Recognition

Marx's articulation of a theory of ideology, grounded in an historical materialist social theory, is a good example of the conceptual structure that this essay claims is central to Honneth's attempts to reinvigorate the practice of social critique through the diagnosis of social pathologies: namely, the grasp of social pathologies as second-order disorders.