Introduction

Recognition and Freedom in Axel Honneth’s Political Thought

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The chapters of this volume address Axel Honneth’s political thought. Some chapters discuss its theoretical foundations, some chapters apply it to actual cases, and some chapters compare it with other theoretical positions. This variety of topics and approaches demonstrates not only the complexity and multi-perspectival nature of Honneth’s political thought but also its relevance for anyone who wishes to understand and analyse the most critical challenges of modern societies: social fragmentation and discontent, the marginalisation of minorities, the reification of human relations, exaggerated individualism and egocentrism, unregulated financial speculation, and the erosion of the democratic public sphere.1

Honneth’s political thought shares a normative core with other contributions to contemporary political philosophy, in particular with political liberalism, namely, that justice requires the organisation of society to include each citizen as a free and equal person. Modern political theory must, therefore, begin by acknowledging “the normative idea that all members of modern societies must possess the same capacities and conditions for individual autonomy”.2 However, Honneth conceives the possibility of autonomy or freedom in a particularly extensive and demanding manner. For him, the achievement of freedom—be it our personal freedom to form and pursue a conception of the good, or our political freedom to contribute to democratic will-and opinion formation—is always based on experiences and relations of recognition. As formulated by Honneth:

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[My] conception understands individual autonomy not as a monological but as an intersubjective matter. Individuals achieve self-determination by learning, within relations of reciprocal recognition, to view their needs, beliefs and abilities as worthy of articulation and pursuit in the public sphere.3

According to Honneth, a just society is a society in which all cognitive conditions for freedom are met—not only conditions that can be regulated by the state (the parliament, the courts, and the bureaucracy). Consequently, as the contributions to this volume demonstrate, Honneth’s political thought encompasses more than the institutional framework of a liberal democratic state, namely, the entire range of intersubjective self-understandings, norms, practices, and institutions, which collectively constitute the social or cognitive infrastructure of freedom: “this model regards the normative idea of democracy not only as a political, but first and foremost as a social ideal”.4

In this introduction, we employ Honneth’s term “political ethics” to denote his normative theory of democracy’s social-cognitive infrastructure in its entire scope and depth.5 Even though Honneth’s political ethics is normative and critical, he claims it is grounded on an analysis of “empirically given interests”, including the “emancipatory” interest of persons who experience “asymmetries and exclusions”.6

In the remainder of this introduction, we proceed as follows: First, we provide a brief and highly selective overview of some of the main characteristics of and changes in Honneth’s political ethics from the publication The Struggle for Recognition (1992) to Das Recht der Freiheit (2011). Second, we highlight how he conceives his theory as an alternative to liberalism in the significant tradition that was created by John Rawls. Last, we introduce the chapters of this book by explaining how they highlight the social-ethical ideal in Honneth’s political thought.

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6 Ibid., p. 174.