CHAPTER 10

Ultimate Values and Immanent Critique

On Axel Honneth's Das Recht der Freiheit and Gunnar Myrdal's
An American Dilemma

Carl-Göran Heidegren

In his major work, Das Recht der Freiheit, Axel Honneth argues that a theory of justice ought to take its point of departure in the ultimate values of a society, as realised in its existing institutions and practices.¹ This approach must, at the same time, allow for an immanent critique of these institutions and practices as possibly not fully realising the relevant values. In my view Honneth's position is, to a certain extent, anticipated in the writings of Gunnar Myrdal, Swedish social scientist and Social Democrat, most notably in his famous book An American Dilemma from 1944. However, for Myrdal the context was not the development of a theory of justice, but rather the problem of the relation between science and politics, between facts and values.

Myrdal is generally considered to be one of the key figures behind the development of the Swedish welfare state. He believed in a prophylactic social policy that paved the way for a new well-ordered and well-functioning society, and ultimately for a new type of human being. In a Swedish research context Myrdal has sometimes been portrayed as a ruthless social engineer who, on the basis of his scientific expertise, believes he knows better than ordinary people what is best for them and how they should live their lives.² In this article I try to present a different picture of Myrdal by way of discussing An American Dilemma in relation to the approach found in Honneth's above-mentioned book as well as some strands within contemporary critical theory.

² Cf. for example: Yvonne Hirdman, “‘Social Planning under Rational Control.’ Social Engineering in Sweden in the 1930s and 1940s”, in Pauli Kettunen and Hanna Eskola (eds.), Models, Modernity and the Myrdals, Helsinki: The Renvall Institute for Area and Cultural Studies, 1997, pp. 55–80. It has been argued that the three pillars in the idea of the Swedish model were progress, mutual understanding (instead of class conflict), and centralism (the benevolent state). Ola Sigurdson claims that: “Social engineering intended to be a rational way of using and distributing resources in order to maximize progress”. See: Ola Sigurdson, Den lyckliga filosofin Etik och politik hos Hägerström, Tinsten, makarna Myrdal och Hedenius, Stockholm/Stehag: BÖB Symposium, 2000, p. 197.
Firstly, I will elaborate on Honneth’s position (section 1) and thereafter take a closer look at Myrdal’s anticipation of it (section 2). In the following section I will then relate Myrdal’s approach to an attempt by Robin Celikates to develop a model for a critical theory of society (section 3). The final section returns to the comparison between Myrdal and Honneth, now on the issue of immanent critique (section 4).

1 Theory of Justice as Analysis of Society

The overall goal of Axel Honneth’s Das Recht der Freiheit is to develop a theory of justice in the form of an analysis of society. The primary theoretical inspiration for this undertaking is Hegel’s philosophy of ethical life (Sittlichkeit) as outlined in his Philosophy of Right (1821). The American sociologist Talcott Parsons stands out, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, as a second major theoretical inspiration. This becomes clear if we take a look at the four methodological premises that Honneth delineates in the introductory chapter of his book.3

If we then add some material from subsequent parts of the book we can aptly summarise his approach.

1. The first premise states that the reproduction of societies presupposes the existence of values and ideals that are held in common and that provide an orientation which is shared among the members of society. This is what Parsons characterises in terms of the ultimate values of a society; they constitute the top level in what he calls the hierarchy of control. The normative societal order is legitimised through ethical values and ideals that are considered worth striving for. No form of life is, as such, conceived of as good or bad, but is good or bad only in the light of certain values and ideals. Every society, including any highly complex modern society, is normatively integrated.

According to Honneth, of all the ethical values, the one which has primacy and which has marked the self-understanding and institutional order of modern Western societies is that of freedom in the sense of individual autonomy.4 Our notion of social justice is bound up with the idea of freedom as individual self-determination. This is the ultimate value that is considered worth striving for. The value of equality is, according to Honneth, a derivation from that of freedom, in the sense that the former spells out that each member of society should have equal opportunity for individual self-determination. Thus, the

3 Cf.: Axel Honneth, Das Recht der Freiheit, op. cit., pp. 14–31. Besides Hegel and Parsons, Émile Durkheim should be mentioned as a third major theoretical inspiration for Honneth.

4 Ibid., pp. 35 ff.