CHAPTER 12

Freedom, Solidarity, and Democracy

An Interview with Axel Honneth

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The point of departure of this interview is Axel Honneth’s latest *magnum opus*, namely *Das Recht der Freiheit*\(^1\). This book is an ambitious attempt to establish a new theory of justice on the basis of a whole new interpretation of the social infrastructure of individual freedom (or what Honneth calls ‘social’ freedom). However, the interview also traces the development of themes and concepts in Honneth’s *oeuvre* since *The Struggle for Recognition* from 1992.

The interview is divided into three main sections. In the first section Honneth defends the fundamental idea that individual freedom has become the criterion for social justice and legitimacy in all central modern practices and institutions. The second section is concerned with Honneth’s delineation of three spheres of social freedom, that is, personal relationships, market society, and the self-determining democratic public. The last section deals with Honneth’s hopes and concerns for the future of democracy and solidarity.

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1 Freedom as Normative Foundation of Modern Society

1.1 Competing Models of Society

MRM: In *Das Recht der Freiheit*, which was published in German in 2011, you attempt to legitimise and criticise the central institutions of our society taking-up from the outset the concept of individual freedom. This monistic approach could give rise to several concerns, some of which I would like to be the theme in the first part of our conversation. Another set of questions concerns how the different treatises in your *oeuvre* that thematise freedom and recognition fit together—if, indeed, they do fit together at all. Well, for

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a start, the first worry would be: Why exactly is ‘freedom’ the foundation of modern society? One could, it seems to me, challenge this model in three ways, or with three foundational alternatives: a monistic, a cynical, and a pluralist. The monistic alternative would propose a different value from which to reconstruct the modern order, say, ‘justice’ or ‘solidarity’. The cynical would be a Nietzschean point of view and would argue that the whole modern order is basically better explained through motives of power, security, or fear. The third would be a pluralist position similar to Charles Taylor’s, which argues that we need a plurality of values, such as freedom, but also equality, wellbeing, etc., in order to reconstruct a much more complex picture of the norms of modern society.

AH: Difficult question . . . Maybe it is best if I go through the alternatives one at a time? As a matter of fact, the question of whether it is possible to interpret the modern world from one value, or from values at all, has been a core puzzle for generations of philosophers and social scientists. Typically, one must say that the answer has been monistic. Hegel, Durkheim, Parsons, and I would add, Habermas all interpret modernity, maybe not from this value, for they do not all ascribe to the concept of ‘value’, but they interpret it from the idea of individual freedom. Most clearly, of course, Hegel says that it is the fundamental principle of modernity. First of all, I simply follow this interpretation. However, I attempt to substantiate the claim more strongly, in that I try to show how the essential institutions of our society can only be understood in their constitutive rules through the idea of freedom. There are hardly any institutions of significance in our society, in which the constitutive rules cannot in some way be interpreted as freedom promoting or freedom realising. Thus, there is a strong case for assigning freedom this central role. Concerning the idea of justice: I don’t consider justice to be a value that is pursued for its own sake. Rather, justice can only be understood through its connection with another value, it cannot be a superior value of a society. I think that all societies operate under the idea of justice. There is hardly any society that does not operate under the demand to establish a just order, and a demand that must—one way or another—be legitimated towards all participating members. Understood in this manner, justice is not a value specific to modern societies. I think that the societies of antiquity, of the middle ages, yes, also the so called archaic societies, existed and were subject to demands and norms of social justice. This, I would claim, also holds regarding the demands of solidarity. Consequently, I do not think that justice or solidarity can be the superior values of modern societies, because, they are—how am I to put it—legitimating foundations and principles of any society.