Jean-Philippe Deranty


Axel Honneth, the director of the famous Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, and nowadays also a professor of philosophy at Columbia University, is still best known for his book *Struggle for Recognition* from 1992, read in the Anglophone world as a contribution to post-Rawlsian debates on normative political philosophy. Jean-Philippe Deranty’s ambitious study on Honneth’s social philosophy starts with the observation that such reception of Honneth’s work has been regrettably narrow in two ways. First of all, excessive focus on *Struggle for Recognition* has meant that Honneth’s other writings, which provide crucial motivations and developments of the themes presented in that book, are not taken into account, leading to misunderstandings of some its central ambitions. Secondly, as the reception has been very focused on purely normative political questions, Honneth’s broader understandings of the tasks of critical social philosophy and philosophical anthropology have been ignored. In Deranty’s view, then, a broader picture is needed.

Deranty’s book aims at providing such a broader picture of Honneth’s project – and succeeds admirably. The book is a highly recommendable companion both to *Struggle for Recognition* and for Honneth’s later work, such as the recently translated *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition* and *Freedom’s Right*. Deranty’s book remains the most thorough study of Honneth’s work.

Axel Honneth’s intellectual trajectory is patiently mapped in the first six chapters of Deranty’s book (while the latter six chapters are devoted to a systematical study of Honneth’s theory). *Struggle for Recognition* on its own gives the impression that Honneth starts from Hegel and then uses other theorists (such as Mead or Winnicott) to flesh out the Hegelian insights in a naturalized, less metaphysical form. But given the selectivity and creativity of Honneth’s Hegel-reading in *Struggle*, the readers may be left to wonder how and why these choices and selections were initially made. Deranty shows how the turn to Hegel was in fact a significant departure from Honneth’s key references until then – until 1992 Hegel was simply rejected by Honneth as a metaphysical thinker with a strong philosophy of history, with bad influence on Marx and Critical Theory.

In Deranty’s view, Honneth can be seen as creatively isolating a model from Hegel, which is not readily salient in Hegel’s texts, but which for Honneth provides a solution to pre-existing theoretical needs. Honneth’s turn to Hegel was an attempt to answer questions and concerns that have originated in different
sources: in the young Marx, in the ambitions of the Critical Theory of Adorno and Horkheimer, and in Habermas’s early work. Honneth shares with these the ultimate aim of critical analysis of contemporary society with emancipatory intent, but holds that none of these has successfully pursued that aim.

Deranty stresses how Honneth in each case identifies “a fork in the road” in the intellectual development of these theorists: they were onto something important, but took a wrong turn, and left a more promising path untaken – a path that Honneth’s own work then continues. Deranty then goes on to use the same move against Honneth, who in his view has posed the rights questions and formulated promising views, but has ended up narrowing down the concerns in a way that leaves some of the promise unfulfilled.

Marx was right to stress the need for a critical theory of society, which can articulate goals for social action understood as emancipation from domination, and which can account for its link with the social life whose reflection it is. A theory is needed both to explain capitalist society and to illuminate the possibility of emancipation. The good Marx stresses the role of class struggle, and the bad Marx turns to functionalist account of structures of capitalism, the “logic of capital,” or philosophy of history, threatening to make social movements or agents mere characters in a world-historical play – passive material for systemic forces. Marx’s view of class struggle is also outdated. Marx took the human species to be a collective subject, which had nature as its object: subject-object model was stressed in the model of social labour, instead of intersubjectivity which Honneth following Habermas stresses. Young Marx had had good insights into intersubjectivity following Feuerbach’s ideas concerning altruism. Deranty points out critically that while early Honneth also stressed the aspect of sensuality in Feuerbach and young Marx, he later loses that from sight in stressing intersubjectivity too narrowly – one of Honneth’s wrong turns.

The same “fork in the road” development concerns Adorno and Horkheimer. Their initial aim of critical theory is worth preserving, as are some ideas about the nature of social struggle. But roughly along the lines of Habermas’s criticism, Adorno and Horkheimer are rejected as providing an undifferentiated view of capitalist societies, as a seamless domination by administration and capitalism. Adorno and Horkheimer stress the connection between domination of nature and domination of others, whereas Honneth and Habermas stress the distinctiveness of intersubjectivity and social domination. Here Deranty asks whether domination of nature is after all connected to the social domination – perhaps Honneth ends up losing sight of the former.

Perhaps the most intricate debate concerns Honneth’s relation to Habermas’s intersubjective and communicative turn. Habermas makes distinctions which