**Immanent Critique in Axel Honneth: From negative to normative reconstruction**

Nathalie A. Bressiani

**Introduction:**

For those who follow Axel Honneth's work from the outset, *The Right of Freedom* can almost be seen as the result of an abandonment of his original critical project. Once central, the concept of recognition gives way to a conception of social freedom, the role of social conflicts is reduced and the negative strategy of reconstruction, the phenomenology of the experience of disrespect, is replaced by a notion of normative reconstruction whose object is the normative promises of modern institutions. This alters not only what Honneth understands by immanent critique, but also its object and the method he uses to do it. Considering the importance and the scope of these methodological changes, my aim today is to understand them, by identifying their causes - or at least the main one, that is: Honneth's attempt to deal with the normative deficit of his theory. To do this, I have divided my presentation into 3 parts that correspond to three different moments of Honneth's theoretical production.

1) Analyzing, first, some of Honneth's early texts, I will try to pinpoint the important role played by the phenomenology of the experience of disrespect (a negative strategy of reconstruction) in the development of his recognition theory. By doing so, I will try to explain that this methodological strategy is at the basis of the anthropological, historical and normative arguments he develops to overcome at least problems that he identifies in the work of the critical theorists that came before him.

2) Then, at the beginning of the second part, I resume critiques that problematize the strategy of negative reconstruction, by calling into question the normative grammar Honneth ascribes to the experiences of disrespect and to the recognition struggles motivated by them. Analyzing, then, texts published in the early 2000s, in particular *Suffering from indeterminacy*, I'll argue that, in response to these critiques, Honneth abandons the experiences of disrespect as the object of reconstruction and develops two new and different methodological approaches. One of them still has a negative starting point. It departs from the experience of suffering to reconstruct its cause, that is, the non-satisfaction of a structural human need of recognition. The second reconstructive strategy, in turn, takes modern institutions as its main object and tries to spell out its rational structure and to show how each one of them foster different forms of mutual recognition and social freedom. By doing so, Honneth not only reduces the importance of the experiences of disrespect, but also alters the normative grammar of his theory.

3) In the third part of the presentation, I will turn to more recent texts in which Honneth seeks to develop these two methodological approaches. In doing so, my goal is to show that, after facing a new set of critiques that pinpoint the relation between power and recognition and call into question the normative basis of his theory, Honneth, on the one hand, abandons the negative strategy of reconstruction, as well as the more anthropological arguments linked to it and, on the other hand, further develops the normative strategy of reconstruction, which becomes central in *The Right of Freedom*. Book where Honneth develops concepts such as misdevelopment and normative surplus, which enable him to deal with the negativity of recognition and with the normative deficit of his recognition theory.
By doing so, my aim is not to defend the theory developed in *The right of freedom* altogether, but to reconstruct the path that led Honneth to it as the result of his continuous efforts to deal with the normative deficit of his recognition theory.

1. Overcoming the deficits of critical theory: the emergence of the negative strategy of reconstruction

Honneth's early writings fit directly into the debate about the Marxist legacy awakened by Habermas' attempt to reconstruct historical materialism from a different theoretical framework. Unsatisfied with Habermas' shift toward universal pragmatics and his rejection of the emancipatory potential of work, Honneth resumes Marx in an attempt to rehabilitate an immanent critique of labor. Originally published in 1980, "Work and Instrumental Action" is one of the first papers in which he takes on this task. Emphasizing, initially, the controversies raised by the relation of complementarity established by Marx between the systemic crisis of capitalism and the theory of the class struggle, Honneth calls attention to the important role played by the category of social work in this respect. After all, Marx didn't reduce labor to its productive function, but also sought to understand it as an externalization process of the qualities and capacities of the worker, who would only be able to recognize himself individually and collectively as a subject when he identifies himself in the products of his work. According to Honneth, it is on the basis of this anthropological model, by which he distinguishes alienated and non-alienated forms of work, that Marx can make an immanent critique of capitalist economy.

According to Honneth, however, for work to be taken as the central concept of an immanent social critique, it is not enough to show that it is indispensable for social reproduction and for the formation of the workers subjectivity. It is also necessary to show how it can form the revolutionary or emancipatory consciousness of the proletariat. But, according to Honneth, Marx does not indicate, in any of the revolution theories he develops, how productive activity relates to the self-emancipation of the proletariat. In the first, presented in the *Paris Manuscripts*, he didn't elucidate how "the emancipation of workers could be explained on the basis of the immanent relations of alienated labor" which is devoid of its formative potential (Honneth, 1980, p. 191). If the worker only becomes aware of himself as a subject by perceiving his active character as a producer of reality, the question is: how could he form this consciousness in a context in which the alienated work does not allow him to? In later texts, Marx attempts to solve this problem by explaining how the very development of capitalism leads to the organization of the proletariat. In doing so, however, he would have presupposed the critical-reflective consciousness of the working class, but does not explain how it is formed.

For Honneth, the difficulty to understand the development of the workers' emancipatory consciousness jeopardizes the transformative potential Marx assigns to work activity. The developments that took place in capitalist production since then, such as the fragmentation of the production processes, the mechanization of productive activities, the reduction of the qualification required for work and the division of the working class, made this questioning even stronger. These changes have widened the gap between producers and their products and turned work into an activity apparently devoid of any social significance. Combined with the diagnosis that class struggles were neutralized, all these elements seem to require the abandonment of Marx's project.

While acknowledging, the difficulties posed by these social developments and conceptual problems, Honneth rejects that Marxism has ceased to be relevant. For him, it wouldn't make sense to
develop a functionalist theory of the capitalist crisis to explain the emergency of social conflicts. But this does not mean one should abandon the project of developing an immanent critique of capitalist society using the concept of social work. To develop this concept, he turns to different authors, particularly Phillipe Bernoux, who draws attention to the workers' constant attempts to subvert and modify production processes. Practices that would not only prove the critical potential of work and its importance for the formation of subjectivity, but also the existence of an emancipatory interest within social reality, that is, the workers' interest in overcoming alienated work. Having these practices in mind, Honneth states that the potential for conflict around work is not neutralized, but located in the workers' attempts to reappropriate production.

According to him, Habermas diagnosis of the neutralization of class conflicts results from an error: he takes the public sphere as his starting point and, because of that, he only sees the social conflicts that have already managed to break the barriers of the hegemonic public sphere. Habermas' point of departure would have led him to miss all the inarticulate and latent feelings of indignation and injustice that, by virtue of the effectiveness of class domination, were not publicly questioned. To access these feelings of moral indignation, that didn't reach the hegemonic public sphere, Honneth replaces the Habermasian reconstruction of tcommunicative action and of public sphere by a reconstruction of the social suffering implicit in certain social practices. His aim, with that, is to show that "there is a potential for expectations of justice, demands for needs and ideals of happiness negatively preserved in the consciousness of injustice of these social groups" (Honneth 1981, 212). Potentials whose articulation and publicization are blocked by different mechanisms of domination.

By doing so, Honneth outlines for the first time the project of developing a phenomenology of the experience of injustice, a negative strategy of reconstruction, through which he seeks to spell out the moral grammar implicit in the feelings of social suffering. Using this negative strategy, he believes it is possible to articulate, in the same theory, the suffering caused by alienated work and by the distortions in social interaction, as well as the possibility of their practical overcoming. After all, linked to the experience of injustice, social suffering is the motivation of social struggles. To accomplish this project, however, Honneth must show how these experiences of moral disrespect emerge and in what are they based on.

This project of negative reconstruction guides Honneth's efforts in the 1980s, period during which he tries to understand what drives people to feel outraged and to struggle for the transformation of society. From the material collected, he comes to the conclusion that it is "primarily the violence against individual or collective expectations for recognition that are experienced as moral injustice" (Honneth 1995, p. xv). The systematic reconstruction of negative experiences of disrespect shows that it is the violation of identity claims, caused by the denial or the lack of recognition, what makes people feel disrespected. As he says:

what we can understand as a search for recognition initially appears in a negative form as an experience of disrespect or humiliation. Only after doing a closer analysis and revealing the normative points of reference that often remain inarticulate in everyday social reality, does it become apparent that these negative experiences are implicitly based on a demand for a previously denied form of recognition (Honneth 2007d, pp. xii-xiii).

By using this reconstructive strategy, however, Honneth aims not only to show that subjects feel violated when they are not recognized, but also to understand what makes recognition so important, to the point that its denial leads to suffering and, in some circumstances, to social conflicts. Only by doing so, would he be able to claim that the struggle for recognition is the grammar of social
struggle, but also that this grammar is moral. In this regard, Honneth states that without the recognition of their interaction partners, subjects cannot become aware of their individuality or develop a positive self-image. Their self-realization and autonomy depend, therefore, on intersubjective recognition. To justify this thesis, Honneth mobilizes different authors and arguments. For my purpose, the most important ones are those presented in the second half of Struggle for Recognition, where he reconstructs what are the tree forms of recognition necessary for the undistorted identity formation and what are the different forms of practical self-relation enabled by them.

First, Honneth turns to the works of Donald Winnicott and Jessica Benjamin. According to him, the diagnosis that different types of psychopathologies could not be explained through Freudian psychoanalysis led these authors to see the importance of early affective relations to the process of psychic development. They realize that the deprivation of the affective dedication causes serious disturbances to the baby, even if all its bodily needs are satisfied. This enables them to recognize the importance of relations of affection and care to the development of self-confidence. According to Honneth, this link between affective recognition and self-confidence is further strengthened by studies that show how experiences of mistreatment and torture, in which the individual is violated in his own body, can lead to the loss of self-confidence (Honneth, 1992, chapter 6). The negative effects of the lack or violation of this kind of recognition shows that it is a necessary condition for the development and the maintenance of self-confidence, without which people would not be able to relate positively to their own desires, interests and needs.

This, however, is not the only form of recognition on which modern subjects depend. According to Honneth, the institutionalization of a universalist legal system has allowed individuals to understand themselves as equal subjects of rights and to develop a sense of self-respect. As in the case of the affective sphere, Honneth also justifies the importance of legal recognition through a negative argumentation strategy. It is, after all, the suffering generated by the violation of the expectations of legal recognition and the struggles generated by them that attest its social reality.

As important as it may be, legal recognition is also not sufficient for the full self-realization of modern individuals. It is only when they are socially recognized in their uniqueness that people see themselves as valuable and can develop a sense of self-esteem, without which they cannot follow their lives as they have determined. Without the experience of social esteem, the subject cannot freely develop his identity or see himself as a valuable interaction partner; situation that can lead him to a form of suffering that, under certain conditions, can also trigger social conflicts.

With the help of the negative strategy of reconstruction, Honneth arrives at the conclusion that all subjects need to be the object of love and care to develop self-confidence, but also that - in modern societies, where honor has been democratized - subjects also expect to be respected and socially esteemed and depend on those forms of recognition to develop self-respect and self-esteem. The reconstruction of experiences of disrespect shows, therefore, that the formation of personal identity and the possibility of leading a good life rest on a set of successful relations of mutual recognition. This explains why the denial of recognition is not felt by the subjects in a neutral way. Their own identities and their possibility of leading a good life is at stake, what explains not only why individuals can become aware of oppressions but also what motivates them to strive for overcoming them. Recognition is, therefore, the normative grammar that enables Honneth not only to understand the causes of social conflicts, but also to morally justify them. After all, it is, on the basis of this negative reconstruction, that he arrives at the concept of formal ethical life (Sittlichkeit), which corresponds to the anticipation of what would be a society in which the principles of recognition, implicit in the
experiences of disrespect, were fully realized, that is, a just society in which all social conditions to personal self-realization were present.

II - Suffering from indeterminacy and the development of two new methodological strategies:

Most of Honneth's interlocutors and commentators acknowledge that his theory of recognition has important strengths: critical theory becomes closer to the experience of social subjects, capitalism is once again within the reach of critique and social conflicts are seen as central to the processes of social reproduction. Nevertheless, a number of critiques have been directed to different aspects of his theory: Honneth's use of certain authors, the emphasis he gives to the category of recognition, the difficulty he has to understand institutions, etc. Many of these critiques are sound and have led to important changes in his theory. Here, I will restrict myself to a specific set of critiques that, in my view, have led him to abandon the negative strategy of reconstruction.

What set of critiques is this? One that questions the capacity of Honneth's theory to account for the relationship between recognition and power and, by doing so, problematizes the very strategy of negative reconstruction. I don't have the time to discuss these critiques in depth, but I think we can separate them into at least three groups:

1) The first group of critiques calls into question the moral status accorded by Honneth to the experiences of disrespect, drawing attention to the fact that they don't always have an emancipatory content. The current context, unfortunately, offers a huge range of examples in this regard. Examples that show that the presence and sometimes even the existence of what is seen to be different may be experienced by certain individuals as a threat to their own identity; a threat that can trigger a struggle for recognition that may assume the form of a struggle for exclusion or even for the elimination of the other (the indigenous, black, female, gay, lesbian, transgender, leftist, feminist). The search for self-realization does not always correspond to a struggle for justice.

2) There is a second set of critiques that also questions the moral status accorded by Honneth to the experiences of disrespect and the link between self-realization and justice, but does so in another way. It claims that many of those who are subject to forms of exclusion and injustice do not perceive them as such and also that, in many cases, people seek to conform to reductive and crystallized social roles to be recognized. This critique can be exemplified with an argument presented in *The Second Sex*, where Simone Beauvoir argues that the social recognition of women depends, to a great extent, on their acceptance of the roles that are socially assigned to them. What means that even when we have the inclusion of persons or groups in recognition relations, an inclusion that leads to gains in their possibility of self-realization, recognition continues to have a normatively ambiguous character. More recognition and more chances of self-realization for more people don't always mean more justice.

3) Finally, there is a third group of critiques that goes one step further and draws attention to the fact that, even in the cases where demands for recognition ensure greater inclusion and generate gains in individuation, they can be normatively ambiguous. Most of the examples discussed by Honneth are in the economic field, where unprotected and precarious work relations are justified in the name of greater recognition of one's own individuality, talents, and
creativity. With this, recognition takes on a paradoxical character. Its normative potential is twisted and used to justify something opposed to its original meaning.

These three types of critique have distinct complexity degrees and are directed to Honneth by different authors at different moments. Nevertheless, they all question the same thing: that to show that recognition relations are indispensable to personal self-realization is not enough to justify them normatively or to identify an emancipatory interest in social reality. All of them point, thus, to the existence of a normative deficit in Honneth's recognition theory, once it rests on an unjustified link between what is necessary for personal self-realization and what is necessary for the realization of justice. This is a very strong critique, because, if this link is proven to be weak, it's no longer possible to take experiences of disrespect, caused by the violation of a recognition expectation, as the normative basis of critical theory. If they are correct, they would require Honneth to change a central element of his theory: the negative strategy of reconstruction.

In what regards the first set of critiques, Honneth manages to answer them within his recognition theory, by highlighting that the struggles for recognition have an egalitarian structure, because overall they pressure to the inclusion of individuals and groups. The same thing, however, cannot be said about the other two sets of critiques, that require a broad revision of his methodological approach. Honneth seems to acknowledge this and tries to deal with these critiques, particularly in Suffering from Indeterminacy. In this book, he admits that the expectations subjects address to their interaction partners are not always moral and seeks to understand, for the first time, in what social conditions the search for self-realization corresponds to the search for justice.

Maintaining the thesis that the will and the desires of individuals are not natural, but the product of socialization processes, Honneth assumes the task of spelling out the normative structure of the intersubjective practices within which subjects would have to be socialized for their will and desires to be rational. The assumption here, as he argues, is that "the motivational structure of men is always the result of formation processes that could have sufficient influence to make current needs and inclinations be penetrated by rational commands" (Honneth, 2001, pp. 112-115). Because of that, he turns to the reconstruction of the communicative spheres of action, whose existence would be indispensable for the realization of a free rational will. Following, with some changes, the division established in The Struggle for Recognition, Honneth argues that this just social order is made up by three forms of recognition relations, which are already institutionalized in modern societies.

With this change, Honneth seems to offer a response to part of the critiques received. After all, he admits that those who are not included in these webs of recognition relations do not acquire the practical habits necessary for them to perceive themselves as intersubjectively dependent and for their will to became rational. He admits, therefore, that the expectations of social subjects are not always moral, and that the experience of disrespect triggered by the violation of recognition expectations cannot be the starting point of reconstruction. From now on, instead of starting from these negative experiences to spell out a positive conception of justice capable of normatively justifying the moral necessity of three forms of recognition relations, Honneth tries to achieve this goal by means of a reconstruction of the normative structure of modern institutions, explaining their importance for the realization of social freedom. By doing so, he makes it clear that only the rational forms of recognition, those that guarantee more inclusiveness and individuation are justified.

The importance of Suffering from Indeterminacy in Honneth's intellectual path is not restricted, however, to these reformulations. This is also the first text where he seeks to explain the causes of social pathologies, understood so far as the violation of recognition expectations. His intention,
however, is not to explain sociologically what causes the violation of moral expectations of recognition, but rather the pathologies that prevent their formation. Arguing, now, that subjects are not always included in the recognition relations on which their freedom depends, Honneth takes a step back and seeks to understand the pathologies that prevent people from entering into the rational practices that constitute ethical life. In *Suffering from Indeterminacy*, these blockages are conceptualized as the result of the universalization of insufficient forms of freedom. Up to this point, however, Honneth does not explain what would enable subjects to overcome this pathological and paralyzing situation and reconcile with modern institutions.

His argument, however, does not stop here. For Honneth, the subjects withdraw from the practices that make up ethical life not only blocks their individual self-determination, but also causes a feeling of suffering. Occupying part of the role played before by the experience of disrespect, suffering would be responsible for drawing the attention of those concerned to the importance of recognition relations and for triggering a practical process of liberation. In this book, however, Honneth still does not explain why individuals suffer whenever social conditions for the exercise of their freedom are not realized. It is not yet clear why non-participation in institutionalized rational practices generates suffering. It is only in a few texts published shortly after *Suffering from Indeterminacy* that he starts to develop an answer to this question, by emphasizing the importance of a primordial intersubjective praxis that would be responsible for generating a rational impulse for recognition. It is, based on this praxis, that Honneth seeks to explain the causes of social suffering, as well as its emancipatory potential. This project is carried out, for instance, in "Physiognomy of the Capitalist Way of Life", where he argues that the core of our rationality is linked to a primordial intersubjective attitude, whose distortion is not felt in a neutral way.

It does not take him a long time, however, to realize that the establishment of a link between this primordial form of recognition and rationality, as well as between suffering and rationality deficits require more mediations. Honneth admits this in an interview given to Olivier Voirol where he presents part of the project that would become *Reification*. Book where he argues that it is the memory of a primordial relation what corresponds to the impulse that leads people to continue establishing relationships of recognition through out their lives. It is this memory that can make people overcome the social pathologies that prevent the realization of their freedom. I won't have the time here to analyse this book, but it's important to emphasize that it also uses a negative reconstruction strategy: Honneth tries to prove the existence of these primordial relations, by showing that those incapable of establishing them develop cognitive deficits (autism).

I hope that, with these brief arguments, I have managed to show that in texts published in the early 2000s, Honneth changes his previous reconstruction strategy and develops two different ones. On the one hand, he turns to social suffering or to cognitive deficits to spell out the constitutive dependence of human beings on a primordial form of recognition; dependence that cannot be directly observed. This step enables him to argue for the existence of an impulse that motivates people to overcome social pathologies, understood here as what prevents them from engaging in intersubjective practices of recognition. This is the strategy he uses to identify a structural interest in emancipation, that would allow him to overcome part of the motivational deficit of critical theory. On the other hand, Honneth reconstructs the normative structure of modern societies, already institutionalized in the different practices of intersubjective recognition. This second reconstructive strategy allows him to elaborate a theory of justice, that is the normative basis of his immanent critique. By doing so, Honneth not only abandons the experience of disrespect as the object of reconstruction, but also develops a
theory of justice that justifies the necessity of recognition by showing its importance to the realization of social freedom. These two distinct forms of reconstruction, however, continue to be the object of critiques, which lead to new reformulations.

III - From negative to normative reconstruction: giving an account of social negativity

The first reconstructive strategy, the negative one, is once again subjected to a number of critiques. While, at first, Honneth was accused of presupposing a normative conception of the experience of disrespect, now the target of his critics is the positive character accorded to the primordial relations of respect. The three authors that debate *Reification* (Butler, Lear and Geuss) draw attention to the fact that the primordial relations of respect have an ambiguous character: they are also linked to an impulse of aggressiveness. This fact leads them to defend that the impulses that characterize the first social relations can also be the origin of the desire of elimination or subjection of the other. Therefore, they cannot be characterized as emancipatory, as something that generates a memory that leads subjects to establish reciprocal relations of respect in the course of their lives.

Although Honneth rejects these critiques and claims that his argument doesn't depend on a positive interpretation of this primordial form of intersubjective relation, he admits that his argument has some shortcomings and only applies to extreme cases. This makes him abandon negative reconstruction as a strategy for identifying a human interest in establishing mutual relations of respect. In later texts, such as *The Right of Freedom*, he maintains that subjects incarcerated into limited conceptions of freedom are in a pathological situation, but no longer argues that this pathology necessarily generates a feeling of suffering or that there is a memory that can trigger its overcoming. He abandons negative reconstruction along with the anthropological arguments linked to it.

From this moment on, instead of attempting to reconstruct subjective experiences to justify the necessity of respect, Honneth directs his efforts towards the reconstruction of the normative structure of modern institutions. Arguing that social orders and institutions are reproduced by individuals only when they are considered legitimate, Honneth states that the fact that they persist means that they have a normative dimension. As he states: "social reproduction is anchored in a certain set of shared fundamental ideals and values. The particularity of this model of society is the thesis that all social orders without exception have been legitimized in terms of ethical values and normative ideals which are worth fighting for" (Honneth 2015, p.20). From this perspective, the legitimacy and maintenance of social institutions can only exist if they promise to realize an important dimension of social freedom. Having that in mind, Honneth devotes the last two parts of the book to the reconstruction of the normative promises contained in different social institutions, the legal and the moral, but also in the spheres of personal relations, the market, and the democratic public sphere.

By doing so, Honneth develops the second methodological strategy presented in *Suffering from Indeterminacy*. To do this, however, he has to overcome some problems. First, he must respond to the critique that his position in *Suffering from Indeterminacy* is conservative. After all, by reconstructing the reciprocal relations of respect that promote freedom as something that is already institutionalized, Honneth seemed to claim that the realization of a just society depended only on the reconciliation of individuals with modern institutions. More than that, he also has to account for the third group of critiques mentioned earlier, which points to the fact that even if certain institutions promote inclusive relations of respect that foster individuation, this does not guarantee that they are normatively justified. As Honneth acknowledges, this is what happens with promises of freedom
for the worker to develop their own talents and creativity, which is used to justify the deregulation of the work relations. Flexibilization of working hours as well as vacations etc., which take away legal protections, are justified as a way of ensuring that the worker can adapt his routine to his own preferences and way of life.

In *The Right of Freedom*, Honneth responds to these critiques mobilizing concepts such as normative surplus and misdevelopment. On the one hand, he acknowledges that the normative promises of modern institutions are not entirely fulfilled. Therefore, emancipation does not depend only on overcoming the limited conceptions of freedom that prevent social subjects from participating in modern institutions. It is not enough that individuals reconcile with them, once the institutions do not fully guarantee the social freedom they promise. The purpose of normative reconstruction is not to justify social institutions as they exist, but to show that, far from being normatively neutral, they are seem as legitimate because they make normative promises, that press towards their realization. This is what Honneth calls a normative surplus.

In *The Right of Freedom*, Honneth also develops a second concept, that of misdevelopment, that helps him to deal with the phenomenon of social regression and with what I've called before paradoxical forms of recognition. That is, he admits that institutions not always develop in the direction of the realization of their normative promises, but also that these normative promises can be twisted against their original meaning. This, however, does not mean that they can't be criticized. After all, the reconstruction of the normative surplus implicit in the original normative promises of modern institutions would enable Honneth not only to criticize the distortions in their meaning, but also their actual historical development. Honneth seems, therefore, to offer an answer to the third set of criticisms. This does not mean - of course - that the critical model developed in *The right of freedom* cannot be criticized, but shows - at least I hope so - that it is possible to understand the different reconstructive strategies developed by Honneth after *Struggle for Recognition* as different attempts to deal with the normative deficit of his recognition theory.