

The Concept of Social Domination in Axel Honneth's Critical Theory

Abstract

This paper attempts to reconstruct the concept of social domination articulated in the early works of Axel Honneth, a key figure of the 'third generation' of critical theory. The author argues that one of the key ambitions of the early Honneth, expressed through his critique of Jürgen Habermas, was to theorize the process of societal reproduction in contemporary capitalism in 'action-theoretic' terms, i.e. as determined by the inter-group dynamics of social conflict and domination, as opposed to Habermas' systems-theoretic approach. The author analyzes Honneth's criticism of Habermas developed in 'The Critique of Power', and focuses more narrowly on Honneth's conceptualization of social domination outlined in the early article 'Moral Consciousness and Class Domination'. The analysis grounds the author's subsequent reconstruction of the early Honneth's conception of social domination as a two-dimensional phenomenon that encompasses an 'intentional' and a 'structural' dimension. Turning towards Honneth's mature perspective, the author argues that a critique of social domination no longer occupies a central place in Honneth's influential theory of recognition. Finally, the author considers Honneth's only recent attempt at theorizing domination presented in the article 'Recognition as Ideology', and argues that Honneth has so far missed the opportunity to integrate the early social-theoretical perspective on domination into his mature theoretical system.

Key Words: Honneth, social domination, social conflict, critique, action theory, ideology, social pathology

In this paper I argue that in some of his most important early works, the philosopher and social theorist Axel Honneth, a key figure in the 'third generation' of the Frankfurt School and critical social theory more generally (Anderson, 2000), articulates a fruitful outline of a theory of social domination in contemporary capitalism through a critique of Jürgen Habermas, the central figure of the 'second generation'

of critical theory. I argue that Honneth's early theoretical work puts forward a promising outline of a theory of social domination that goes beyond Habermas' narrow focus on social pathology in the form of the 'systemic colonization of the lifeworld'. However, the outline of a theory of domination is not systematically elaborated within Honneth's mature theory of recognition, where the role of social domination and social conflict becomes marginalized, and the theoretical focus shifts, as in Habermas, towards the conceptualization of social pathologies of contemporary capitalism. On the basis of the reconstructive analysis, I formulate a two-dimensional conception of domination that, as I argue, underpins Honneth's social theory prior to the development of the 'struggle for recognition' perspective. In the concluding section, I focus on Honneth's mature theory of recognition, arguing that, apart from introducing the notion of 'ideological recognition' into his conceptual apparatus, the mature Honneth once again shifts the focus of his work to one central preoccupation of both the first-generation Frankfurt School and Habermas - to the phenomenon of the 'social pathologies' of late capitalism.

I The first-generation Frankfurt School: late capitalism as a 'pathological' social formation

In order to clarify the context of Axel Honneth's early critique of Habermas which grounds the outline of his theory of social domination, I will briefly discuss the first-generation Frankfurt School's perspective on domination in the broader context of its Marxist philosophical foundations, and will then turn to some of the most important domination-theoretic implications of Juergen Habermas' famous 'linguistic' turn.

One defining characteristic of the first-generation theorists within the Frankfurt School tradition such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno was an attempt to conceptualize 'late capitalism' as a fundamentally *pathological* social formation (a 'distorted life-form'), in which the various manifestations of intersubjective social domination (class domination) assume a rather epiphenomenal role with respect to the fundamentally pathological state of the social reality (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 2007, Horkheimer, 2004, Adorno, 1981). The attempts of the dominant social groups (the capitalist class) to secure the legitimacy of the existing social order in late

capitalism do not, so to say, possess 'epistemological autonomy' for theorists like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, because the actions of the dominant social groups are determined at a deeper-lying level – that of a general structuring of the social reality on the pathological basis of the absolutization of *instrumental reason*, which shapes both the dominant and the dominated social groups' state of consciousness and their action-guiding principles.

Within the perspectives of first-generation theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno, the unjust division of labour¹ and the ideological efforts of the dominant social groups to strengthen its legitimacy within the capitalist system – the primary forms of the 'structural' and 'intentional' intersubjective social domination – are, I would argue, both conceived as causally subsequent with respect to a more fundamental *pathological cultural pattern* of the late-capitalist Western societies, characterized by the ever expanding 'commodity principle'. Within the pathological formation of late capitalism, social actors come to internalize, through socialization, the primary action-guiding principle of capitalist reproduction – the infinite expansion of material social reproduction – as an end in itself, and no longer the means toward accomplishing other ends (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2007).

Within such perspective, it seems that a societal revolution in the form of the abolishment of intersubjective social domination - an exploitative system of production, unjust division of labour and the ideological efforts of the capitalist class to legitimize the former would be insufficient with regards to changing the pathological cultural pattern of modernity that absolutizes instrumental reason. As Juergen Habermas and Axel Honneth have pointed out in their respective critiques of the first-generation Frankfurt School, in the late works of Horkheimer and Adorno, such as *The Eclipse of Reason* or *Negative Dialectics*, the very possibility of revolution disappears, as the authors are treating the entire realm of social action as *inherently* instrumental-rational (e.g. the pervasive 'systemic thought' in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*), and any social order based on organized transformation of the natural world as necessarily pathological, in the sense that it reduces the rational capacities of human beings to one single dimension (Habermas, 1990, Honneth, 1991).

¹ An 'unjust division of labour' is here understood in the classical Marxist sense – as the one that denies most social actors the possibility of exercising meaningful, non-fragmented work, which the Marxist theory of human subject sees as essential for human self-realization.

This fundamental theoretical outlook of the Frankfurt School, as I see it, is essentially in agreement with the classical Marxist philosophy of history, more precisely its *systems-theoretic* conception of social reproduction which, taking its cue from Hegelianism, develops a *teleological* and *functionalist* understanding of history as the gradual perfecting of human capacities for transforming nature (their *productive* capacities). The possibility of social change (the formation of class consciousness and the outbreak of social conflict) and the general range of available options for socially transformative action are still determined within the first-generation critical theory by the structural properties of society at a given historical stage of the development of productive forces (Cohen, 2000). The pathological nature of the late-capitalist formation (its reduction of human rational capacities) is not conceived by Horkheimer or Adorno primarily in terms of inter-group social dynamics, in which the privileged groups monopolize the right to the 'reasonable conditions of life' (Adorno, 2006) at the expense of the rest. It is instead defined as the result of a *contradiction* between the institutionalized form of societal rationality (instrumental reason, or the maximization of productive efficiency) and the achieved level of technological progress which no longer requires such exploitative social order for the sake of collective self-preservation.

II Habermas' 'linguistic turn' and Honneth's early work as a critique of the 'pathological life-form' thesis

In my understanding of Axel Honneth's perspective, one fundamental motivating force behind his theoretical project has been the 'action-theoretic' conviction that the production and maintaining of the social order (in capitalism and in general) should not be understood in the above mentioned systems-theoretic terms, but in terms of the dynamics of interaction between social groups, which is primarily characterized by the collective articulation of the social actors' affectively laden *normative experiences* of social reality (Honneth, 1996, 1991). In endorsing such a basic theoretical orientation, Honneth is, I will argue below, opposed not just to Marxism and the first-generation Frankfurt School, but to Jürgen Habermas as well, since the Marxist dialectic of the forces (technological innovation) and relations of production (the legally institutionalized order of action-guiding principles) corresponds, in terms of a theory of

social change, to the Habermasian contradiction between the imperatives of communicative rationality and those of material social reproduction (systemic rationality) within modern societal formations (Habermas, 1987, 1984).

Notwithstanding the fundamental epistemological and social-ontological differences between Habermas and the first-generation Frankfurt School that arose from Habermas' famous 'linguistic turn' in critical theory, their respective conceptualizations of social change are still homologous, in the sense of being both systems-theoretic and teleological². The 'communicative rationalization of the lifeworld' has an autonomous logic in Habermas' perspective, insofar as it is driven by the normative force of everyday linguistic interaction oriented towards reaching an uncoerced consensus, and not directly constrained either by the imperatives of material social reproduction or by the unquestioned authority of the 'sacred' (Habermas, 1987). As Habermas argues, the initially severely restricted, but nevertheless existent, exercise of communicative reason within everyday life slowly 'erodes' the irrational symbolic order of pre-modern social formations and gradually replaces all forms of unquestioned authority as the basis of institutional justification (ibid).

However, the process of social reproduction within Habermas' perspective can always only partially rest on communicative reason, since the imperative of *efficient* material reproduction, unlike that of the normative justification of the social order, cannot be made contingent upon processes of rational deliberation. The imperative of efficient reproduction in modernity gives rise to the gradual institutionalization of *systemic* rationality in the modern social domains of the economy and the bureaucratic state, and the dynamic relationship between emancipatory social change and social 'pathology' is thereafter conceived by Habermas primarily in terms of the *colonization/countercolonization* processes, along with the further communicative rationalization of the 'lifeworld' spheres (the nuclear family, the political public sphere, and the domain of cultural production). As in the first-generation Frankfurt School's systems-theoretic conception of late capitalism as a 'pathological life-form', neither the communicative rationalization (societal emancipation) in Habermas nor the systemic colonization of the lifeworld (social pathology) are phenomena that can be theoretically

² The fundamental difference between the two perspectives in this respect is in the following: the first generation is using a one-dimensional concept of societal reason, which gives rise to both pathology (maximization of efficiency imperative) and emancipatory social change (technological innovations), whereas Habermas is using a *two-dimensional* concept of reason, in which one dimension is purely functional, the other purely normative (see Leist, 2008).

traced back to the *power relations between social actors and groups*, as Axel Honneth points out in his critique of Habermas (Honneth, 1991).

There is, I would argue, even less scope in Habermas' perspective for theorizing *intersubjective social domination* such as class domination as the phenomenon that fundamentally shapes a particular system of social reproduction, than there is within the first-generation Frankfurt School. Habermas introduces into critical theory the *two-dimensional concept of reason*, and the corresponding differentiation between the systemic and lifeworld societal domains. This theoretical decoupling no longer enables the conceptualization of capitalism as a *holistic system of societal reproduction*³, which is still present in the first generation, and which presumes the constant necessity of the *normative justification* of economic and bureaucratic institutional arrangements (intersubjective social domination in the form of *ideology*) in capitalism as a fundamental component of successful reproduction. Moreover, the irrational spilling over of systemic imperatives into the institutionally protected, rationalized spheres of the lifeworld – systemic colonization – cannot be theorized in Habermas' perspective in terms of inter-group societal dynamics, but only as a form of a depersonalized, macrostructural social pathology.

In light of these observations, Axel Honneth's theoretical project, I would argue, revolves around two crucial insights:

1) that Habermas' attempt to overcome the social-theoretical deficiencies of the first-generation theorists is characterized by an inability to substantially go beyond the latter's *systems-theoretic approach to social reality*, and

2) that Habermas' two-dimensional concept of rationality destroys the basis for *the critique of social domination in capitalism*.

One fundamental limitation of Habermas' social theory, I would agree with Honneth, is to be found at the level of his *social ontology* which treats social action as conditioned by a new fundamental dialectic (that replaces the classical Marxist one) – that between the collective human imperatives of *self-preservation* and *understanding*. This social-ontological premise is the grounds on which Habermas builds his dualist social theory (system and lifeworld) and his systems-theoretic account of social change. As Honneth argues toward the end of his crucial early work *The Critique of Power*, the

³ This is very well observed by Deborah Cook in: Cook, 2004

central task that critical theory still faces after Habermas' linguistic turn is the one of articulating a more *empirically adequate account* of social action that can serve as the basis for a re-invigorated critique of social domination (Honneth, 1991).

III The basic premises of the early Honneth's theory of social action

In *The Critique of Power*, Honneth extensively elaborates on the fundamental theoretical premises he had articulated in his first major work, *Social Action and Human Nature*, co-written with Hans Joas (Honneth and Joas, 1988). One such fundamental premise is that every successful social critique has to rest on a certain substantive theorization of *human nature*, and that it cannot escape a certain degree of philosophical-anthropological speculation.

On the basis of this primary assumption, Honneth articulates, more or less explicitly, the following basic theoretical premises⁴:

1) Social action is fundamentally shaped by the actors' *moral experiences* in the context of interpersonal encounters – both the individual human consciousness and social reality are thoroughly *normative* phenomena.

2) A *conflict-theoretic* argument that societal development, i.e. moral progress is to be understood primarily as the outcome of social *struggles* between groups of actors, which are in turn caused by the collective articulation of individual moral experiences. (Honneth, 1991). The early Honneth argues against the conception of social orders as 'macrosubjects' of history, in which social conflict is reduced to a 'dialectical' property of a social formation that 'transcends itself' (whether in Marxist terms, as the contradiction between the forces and relations of production, or Habermas' tension between systemic and communicative rationality).

3) Honneth has from the very beginning of his theoretical development defended an *action-theoretic* understanding of social reality, i.e. the view that the entire social structure (institutional framework) is directly produced and maintained in *the realm of*

⁴ A somewhat different and more exhaustive presentation of Honneth's fundamental theoretical premises can be found in Jean-Phillipe Deranty's impressive study *Beyond Communication* (Deranty, 2009)

direct face-to-face social interaction and that there is no such thing as an autonomous 'systemic' dimension of society (Deranty, 2009). In light of premises 1) and 2), this also means that the production and maintaining of the social order is shot through with *conflicts* between social actors that arise out of the differences in their normative self-understanding and the ways in which they experience the legitimacy of the existing institutional arrangements.

4) Honneth's understanding of social change and moral growth is *non-teleological*, as there is no guarantee of social progress 'deposited' in the fundamental structure of social reality such as one finds in Habermas' concept of the communicative rationalization of the lifeworld. The early Honneth argues against treating the process of social change as a teleologically guaranteed 'developmental unfolding' of some emancipatory potential that is inscribed in the basic structure of social reality. Thus, Honneth is prepared, very much in the spirit of post-metaphysical thinking, to fully accept the *contingency* of history and societal emancipation. In other words, there is no guarantee that the actors' moral experiences of injustice will lead to social conflict and institutional change. The likelihood of an articulation of the collective consciousness of injustice and the subsequent outbreak of a conflict depends primarily, in my understanding of Honneth, on the *effectiveness of social domination practiced by the dominant social groups* in a given formation – this will be discussed in more detail below.

These fundamental theoretical premises reflect Honneth's background in philosophical anthropology and pragmatism, as well as his early interest in formulating a more adequate historical materialism. The theoretical stress on the constitutive role of the actors' *normative experiences* for the construction and maintaining of the social order is intrinsically linked to Honneth's conflict-theoretic and non-teleological understanding of societal development. Honneth's perspective presents a critique of the classical Marxist conceptualization of social conflict, more precisely the two fundamental premises it rests upon: the dialectic of the forces and relations of production as the 'motor of history', and the premise that class struggle is primarily an *interest-based* social conflict. Honneth argues that the historically existing types of social conflict that have driven social change cannot be understood in terms of the 'objective interest' of the dominated groups in taking over the process of material reproduction (and thus improving their social-structural position), but that it can only be

causally explained through focusing on the actors' *subjective* understanding of a given social order as normatively deficient. Moreover, this understanding is not a purely cognitive phenomenon, nor can it be conceived in terms of rational choice-making – it is foremostly a *practical and affectively charged experience* which requires a new theorization of the human subject to replace Marxist philosophical anthropology and Habermas' focus on linguistic interaction.

IV Honneth's critique of Habermas's systems-theoretic approach to social reproduction and change

Honneth generally accepts Habermas' linguistic turn as having considerably increased the philosophical plausibility and empirical adequacy of critical theory in comparison to the first-generation Frankfurt School, but he rejects Habermas' theory of social action grounded in the concept of communicative reason. Already in *Social Action and Human Nature*, Honneth (together with Joas) introduces the fundamental argument against Habermas in the form of a *critique of evolutionism*, which Habermas takes over from Marxism: as the two authors point out, 'the explanation of socio-cultural evolution by developmental logic must abstract from the determinate complex of events and from the unique experiences within whose historical framework social groups act historically with momentous consequences' (Honneth and Joas, 1988: 164). As soon as a developmental logic related to the fundamental structure of social reality (organized labour or linguistic interaction) is introduced into the explanation of social progress, the 'unique experiences' and the particular 'complex of events' lose their power of causation and are reduced, in a Hegelian fashion, to mere concrete instances of the dialectical self-overcoming of the social order conceived in monolithic terms. According to Honneth and Joas, on the other hand, the bearers of moral progress in history are *concrete social groups* acting upon their normative experiences of the existing order.

In *The Critique of Power* Honneth formulates, through a reconstruction of the early Horkheimer's work, the fundamental outline of his social ontology and theory of the social structure and change, that will serve as the basis of the theoretical system developed in *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth, 1996). Honneth arrives at his own

understanding of the role of critical theory by re-interpreting Horkheimer's concept of 'critical activity' in the context of his action-theoretic premises:

'critical activity is ... the reflexive continuation of an everyday communication shaken in its self-understanding. ... [S]ocial struggle can be conceived as the cooperative organization of this everyday critique: it would be the attempt by social groups, forced by the conditions of the class-specific division of labor and excessive burdens, to realize within the normative structures of social life the norms of action acquired in the repeated experience of suffered injustice' (Honneth, 1991: 29, emphasis added).

According to Honneth's reconstructive critique, the early Habermas was able to develop, in contrast to the first-generation Frankfurt School, a specific understanding of social interaction as 'the struggle between social groups for the organizational form of purposive action' (Honneth, 1991: 269). This is a big step forward, as Habermas introduces the idea of *consensus* into the analysis of power relations within a social order, and is able to think about social power in *normative* terms and understand that every form of social domination has to include a consensual dimension. 'With the introduction of the theory of interaction', Honneth argues, 'the origin and exercise of social power is represented differently [in Habermas] than in the social theory of Adorno ... it is represented as a *normative event*' (ibid: 244, emphasis added).

However, Honneth argues that Habermas in his later works gives up on the idea of a morally motivated social struggle as an autonomous driving force of history and turns toward an evolutionist and systems-theoretic understanding of social change, which leaves little room for a theorization of power and domination. The latter no longer play a fundamental role in the process of social reproduction in Habermas' mature perspective, since societal reproduction is determined by the interplay of the communicative and systemic dimensions of reason, *not by concrete relations of power between social groups*. In Honneth's words, '[Habermas] not only gives up the possibility of a justified critique of concrete forms of organization of economic production and political administration', '[he] loses above all ... the communication-theoretic approach he had initially opened up: the potential for an understanding of the social order as an institutionally mediated communicative relation between culturally integrated groups that, so long as the exercise of power is asymmetrically distributed, takes place through the medium of social struggle' (Honneth, 1991: 303).

If the first-generation Frankfurt School had lacked a normative foothold for social critique located in an *empirically effective* instance of emancipatory reason, Habermas has in turn formulated, in Honneth's understanding, an empirically inadequate normative foundation of critique: a social theory which neglects the fundamental role of conflict, power and domination in the process of historical moral growth and hypostatizes the consensual dimension of societal reproduction. Although Habermas theorizes social *pathology* in the form of the systemic colonization of the lifeworld, social *domination* as an intersubjective and inter-group phenomenon disappears from his analytical horizon.

On the grounds of his critique of Habermas, Honneth formulates an outline of a theory of social domination in another important early work: the article 'Moral Consciousness and Class Domination' (Honneth, 1995 [1982]).

V The early Honneth's critique of the 'deactivated class struggle thesis'

In this innovative early work Honneth elaborates his critique of Habermas' perspective, arguing that Habermas' grounding of critical theory in the concept of communicative reason leads to a distorted and inadequate understanding of the nature of the social actors moral expectations, as well as to a growing gap between moral-philosophical undertakings and everyday social interaction (Honneth, 1995)⁵. Honneth reaches the conclusion that Habermas' account of the normative structure of linguistic interaction, although itself an empirically plausible explanation of the normativity of language, has been hypostatized to represent the driving force of historical progress. Because of such a hypostatization, Honneth is arguing, a whole realm of moral claims that do not reach the level of discursive formulation drops out of sight. Honneth argues that 'Habermas must implicitly ignore all those potentialities for moral action which may not have reached the level of elaborated value judgments, but which are nonetheless persistently embodied in culturally coded acts of collective protest or even in mere silent "moral disapproval"' (Honneth, 1995: 208).

⁵ The importance of the essay can also be judged from the fact that it has been republished in Honneth's more recent collection of essays, *Disrespect: On the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, in which he tries to further build on the insights from *The Struggle for Recognition*. Moreover, the arguments that Honneth here develops figure prominently in his exchange with Nancy Fraser (Honneth and Fraser, 2003)

Honneth questions Habermas' solution to the 'central problem of critical theory': how to make the 'connection between normative theoretical intention and historically situated morality' (Honneth, 1995: 205). Since Habermas proposes that we identify 'the empirical bearers of socially innovative moral principles ... according to the ethical level of their forms of moral consciousness and ideas of justice' (ibid: 208), he must reach the conclusion that the bearers of moral progress in contemporary capitalism, in which class struggle is largely been pacified through the achievements of the welfare state, are the post-materialist social movements which articulate qualitatively new normative demands (the feminist, ecological, movements for minority rights, etc). Criticizing this conception, Honneth argues that critical theory must not content itself with analyzing the social actors' discursively articulated normative claims to justice, because the ability to articulate such claims at the level of argumentation that satisfies Habermas' criteria of discourse ethics is itself a privilege related to the class standing of the actors engaged in articulation.

To support this claim, Honneth makes use of some sources in the social history of the underclass, which point towards the conclusion that 'the normative systems that have been developed within the culturally qualified strata contain internally coherent and logically connected ideas of right and wrong', whereas 'the social ethic of the lower strata represents an uncoordinated complex of reactive demands for justice', and that, accordingly, 'the social ethic of the suppressed masses contains no ideas of a total moral order ... abstracted from particular situations' (Honneth, 1991: 209). Honneth borrows from Barrington Moore the concept of 'consciousness of injustice' to name the logic of the moral experiences of underprivileged social actors. This term should point out the primarily reactive and 'negative' essence of these experiences, rather than treating a particular 'claim to justice' as a deduction from some internally coherent and sophisticated vision of a good society, an application of a general context-transcending moral worldview to a concrete situation.

Members of the oppressed social groups do not normally develop such a coherent vision of a good society, according to Honneth, *precisely because of the effective exercise of class domination*. First, the working class actors are not compelled by their social standing, as the dominant classes are, to justify the existing social order in terms of a comprehensive theory of justice (Honneth, 1995: 210). Second, as the result of the dominant groups' symbolic domination, working class actors lack the cultural (linguistic) resources for articulating their experience of injustice in such

systematic terms. Moreover, the 'cultural milieu' of the underprivileged groups does not require social actors to give such kinds of justifications for their own moral acts, it relies on the 'intuitive capacity of the actors' to handle complex situations in a mature way (ibid: 211). Thus, members of the underprivileged groups do not develop an 'inferior moral consciousness' in comparison with the 'progressive social movements', it is rather class domination itself that causes these groups to lack the cultural resources to put forward a comprehensive critique of the social order.

Accordingly, the disappearance of class struggle in post-war capitalism, as Honneth argues, is not the result of the welfare state's capacity to 'institutionalize' conflict and satisfy the expectations of the working class through various forms of compensation, but a product of ever more effective mechanisms of class domination. Honneth theorizes two principle mechanisms of the neutralization of class conflict: *cultural exclusion* and *institutionalized individualization*. Cultural exclusion 'consist(s) of strategies that limit opportunities for articulating class-specific experiences of injustice by systematically withholding the appropriate linguistic and symbolic means for their expression' (Honneth, 1995: 213). Institutional individualization, in turn, 'consist(s) of all those strategies encouraged by the state ... that attempt to counteract the danger of communicative agreement on group- and class-specific experiences of injustice by either directly requiring or providing long-term support for individualistic action orientations' (ibid: 214). The latter is a complex strategy of intersubjective social domination which includes the legal sanctioning of individualism, the fostering of individualistic worldviews and value patterns through cultural production and media, new forms of urban planning, etc.

The two modalities of intersubjective social domination, according to Honneth, do not 'dissolve the consciousness of social injustice' among the working class actors, but they 'co-determine the way it is experienced and made public' (ibid). It is experienced in the already mentioned reactive and negative way, and when it is made public, one might add, it is often in the forms of violent protests which seem to be lacking a political agenda the way we conventionally understand it.

On the basis of this conceptualization, Honneth is able to develop a critique of the so-called 'deactivated class struggle' thesis which figures prominently in Habermas' work (Honneth, 1995: 216). The basic premise behind the thesis is that class struggle has been pacified because the demands of the working class have been 'compensated' by a higher material standard of living and more free time, i.e. that the *normative*

demands of the working class actors for a just society have been 'deflected' onto an *a-normative* plane. What remains implicit in this 'critique', according to Honneth, is the 'central argument ... that the experiences of deprivation bound up with the social class situation lead to demands that can be fulfilled by means conforming to capitalism, i.e. the individual distribution of money and time' (ibid). It turns out in the end that the 'deactivated class struggle thesis' accepts at face value the premise *that the working class has been successfully co-opted into the system*, which, according to Honneth, is an ideological claim.

VI The two-dimensional conception of intersubjective social domination in the early Honneth's work

The early Honneth's perspective, as articulated in *The Critique of Power* and 'Moral Consciousness and Class Domination', treats the phenomenon of social reproduction as simultaneously consensual and shot through with different forms of conflict, stressing the *provisional* nature of any normative consensus between social groups on which the legitimacy of a given institutional order (including the system of economic reproduction) rests. In the essay on moral consciousness in particular, Honneth argues persuasively that this provisional consensus in contemporary capitalism depends on certain processes, such as the 'institutionalized individualization' (a form of 'legal' domination) and the 'cultural exclusion' of the lower social strata. These practices ensure that even though underprivileged social actors are able to experience the normative deficiency of the existing institutional order, they remain unable to translate their experiences into positively defined collective demands for social transformation. In other words, the early Honneth stresses the central role of *symbolic (intersubjective) domination* in the overall process of social reproduction, which encompasses both the 'cultural' and the 'economic' dimension.

In the early Honneth's perspective, social integration – the reproduction of the status hierarchies and material inequalities in a given order – depends on the complementarity, one might even say the 'dialectic' of the *intentional* and *structural* dimensions of intersubjective domination (both of which have a symbolic – status – and material dimension). Relations of structural domination (unjust division of labour and a

hierarchical cultural pattern of identification) 'constitute' social actors as unequal in terms of material resources and status. It is the task of different forms of intentional domination, such as the above mentioned strategies of neutralizing class-consciousness, to prevent the actors' articulation of a critique of the unjust social formation.

In my reconstruction of the early Honneth, the concept of social domination that underpins Honneth's early works consists of the following two dimensions:

1. The *intentional* dimension encompasses the different techniques of control and manipulation deliberately employed by the dominant social: domination through direct political control of the processes of *normative institutionalization of worldviews* (the earlier mentioned 'institutionalized individualization') as well as the processes of the *cultural exclusion* of the lower social strata from the spheres of education, cultural production and the public debate.

2. The *non-intentional* (or *structural*) dimension of social domination in contemporary capitalism – the unjust division of labour and a status order as the temporary and precarious 'normative compromises' between struggling social groups – could be considered as operating at a 'deeper level' of social reality, that of the very process of subject formation, and is responsible for the 'constitution' of social actors as materially and symbolically unequal. Since it is not consciously devised and practiced by any individual or collective social actor, structural domination has an *impersonal* character, although it is constitutive of the *interpersonal* and *inter-group inequalities*.

The early Honneth's 'action-theoretic' (and 'conflict-theoretic') perspective on social reality, I would argue, presents a big step forward within critical theory in comparison to Habermas' systems-theoretic focus on 'pathologies' – a step towards both a post-metaphysical *and* more empirically adequate critique of social domination in capitalism. However, as I will argue below, the mature Honneth once again returns to a significant extent to the first-generation Frankfurt School and Habermasian legacy of 'pathology diagnosis' – one exception is his recent theorization of 'ideological recognition'.

VII Mature Honneth's shift towards social pathologies and the account of 'ideological recognition'

In contrast to Habermas' two-dimensional conceptualization of 'reason' within social reality (communicative and functional), in his mature works Honneth articulates a new 'foundational' concept which fuses explanatory and normative purposes – intersubjective *recognition*, understood as the universal precondition of human self-formation. *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth, 1996) can be read as Honneth's attempt to transform his criticism of Habermas from *The Critique of Power* and 'Moral Consciousness and Class Domination' into a positive vision of a new critical theory, built on a conflict-theoretic account of societal evolution and reproduction. In Honneth's fully developed perspective, as in the early works, the social order appears as a fragile institutionalized compromise – an outcome of the struggle between social groups with unequal symbolic and material power – regarding the scope and content of the fundamental evaluative patterns that structure social action. However, despite the fact that these patterns are shot through with power, there is an inbuilt claim to *reciprocity* in relations of mutual recognition.

The Hegelian logic of Honneth's theory of recognition stresses that if I fail to properly 'recognize' my partner in interaction, my self-consciousness cannot obtain in return the same kind of 'recognition' which I need for developing a positive self-relation, since such recognition can only be provided by a properly recognized interactive partner. As Honneth argues, 'if I do not recognize my partner in interaction as a certain type of *person*, his reactions cannot give me the sense that I am recognized as the same type of person' (Honneth, 1996: 38). In an essay titled 'Grounding Recognition', Honneth also explains concisely the *normative essence* of recognitive acts: 'the implication of this line of thinking is that the reason why acts of recognition must be moral acts is that they are determined by the value or worth of other persons; acts of recognition are oriented not towards one's own aims but rather towards the evaluative qualities of others' (Honneth, 2002: 513). However, in *The Struggle for Recognition* Honneth in my opinion misses a crucial opportunity to elaborate on his early theoretical arguments regarding social domination. Honneth does not reintroduce in this work the fruitful arguments regarding the *techniques* of domination in contemporary capitalism – cultural exclusion and institutionalized individualization – both of which are primarily directed toward preventing the collective articulation of social discontent, i.e. toward neutralizing the actors' struggles for greater recognition. *The Struggle for Recognition* provides new normative foundations for critical theory,

but it does not articulate a social critique, more precisely a critique of contemporary capitalism. In that respect, has the mature Honneth articulated a recognition-theoretic social critique in his subsequent works, based on the new normative foundations? I would argue that Honneth's mature social critique is almost entirely devoted to the 'pathologies' of intersubjective recognition that the late-capitalist social formation engenders.

Starting with the essays collected in *Pathologies of Reason*, Honneth begins to significantly shift his 'diagnostic' approach to social reality, as he begins to espouse the first-generation Frankfurt School's thesis that late capitalism represents a 'distorted life-form'⁶. In 'A Social Pathology of Reason', for example, Honneth argues that the core of critical theory consists in a definition of 'capitalism as a social form or organization in which practices and ways of thinking prevail that prevent the social utilization of a rationality already made possible by history' (Honneth, 2009: 35). According to the Frankfurt School's appropriation of Freud, social actors experience such reduction of historically effective reason as a certain form of *suffering*, and must therefore feel compelled in some way to overcome this suffering by unfettering the suppressed surplus rationality (e.g. Adorno, 1981). The mature Honneth thus defines contemporary capitalism as a social order which *neutralizes the rationality-potential* of modern societies that has historically been developed through social conflict.

The new approach to critique is particularly evident in Honneth's lectures *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Honneth, 2008). Honneth's lectures articulate a bold argument which is firmly situated in the tradition of the original Frankfurt School: namely, that contemporary (neoliberal) capitalism engenders such forms of 'thinking and conduct' which prevent social actors from relating to each other in a fully human way. Honneth grounds his argument in an innovative interpretation of Georg Lukács's concept of *reification*, focusing on its fundamental logic: when a subject, socialized under the conditions of the expanding 'commodity principle', begins to treat her partners in interaction as mere instruments for an achievement of a particular goal,

⁶ The extent to which Honneth has changed his position on the first-generation legacy in *Pathologies of Reason* is evident in his largely positive reconstructions of Adorno's and Horkheimer's perspective in 'The Possibility of a Disclosing Critique of Society' and 'A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Life-Form' (Honneth, 2005, 2009), which stands in stark contrast with his earlier assessment of Adorno from *The Critique of Power* and the essays in the *The Fragmented World of the Social*.

she is not committing an epistemic 'category mistake', nor is she behaving in a 'morally reproachable way' – she is, rather, engaging in a form of 'praxis' that is 'structurally false' (Honneth, 2008: 26). Honneth argues that contemporary capitalist society is characterized by a partial restriction of the fundamental human capacity for affectively experiencing the world, as it engenders the formation of 'reifying' action-orientations that are instilled into the individual's consciousness through mechanisms of socialization.

In his recent works grounded in the theory of recognition, Honneth has only attempted once again to engage in a theorization of social domination in an article titled 'Recognition as Ideology'. In this article, conceived partly as a response to the criticisms developed in *Recognition and Power*, Honneth develops a concept of 'ideological recognition': the 'positive classifications whose evaluative contents are sufficiently credible for their addressees to have good reason to accept them' (Honneth, 2007b: 341). As Honneth argues, 'any new distinction granted to these addressees has to be able to alter their self-conception in such a way as to promise a psychic premium of heightened self-respect on the condition that they do in fact take over the abilities, needs, and virtues associated with this distinction as being their own' (ibid: 341-42). Ideological recognition is not 'false' or 'irrational' in the sense that it differs in its internal logic from proper recognition; its ideological nature rather comes from the fact that it is not substantiated by improvements in the material life-conditions of the addressees that would allow them to realize the normative 'potential' of the recognitive act in everyday interaction. Instead, the group or the institution that grants recognition, according to Honneth's argument, has the aim of inducing the addressee (the worker) to accept a certain state of objective injustice (exploitation, bad working conditions) that goes along with recognition.

Honneth's primary example of ideological recognition, which echoes Boltanski's and Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007), is the new 'management literature' adapted to contemporary, post-Fordist capitalism which, for example, introduces the term 'entrepreneur of one's self' instead of 'worker' or 'labourer' (Honneth, 2007b: 343). Such expressions, as Honneth argues, grant *genuine* recognition in the form of heightened social esteem to the ones they are addressed to, and enable them to develop a more positive self-relation, but they are used strategically to induce the workers to accept a greater workload and insecure jobs as if

these were instances of emancipation. With the introduction of the concept of ideological recognition, Honneth distinguishes between instances of genuine (materially substantiated) societal emancipation and those in which the emancipatory effects of an expanded pattern of recognition are, as it were, ideologically 'displaced' since the recognitive act is neutralized by an unjust social order. However, the emancipatory effects are not completely annulled by this displacement, since, at the level of subjective experience, the workers do indeed 'feel' more autonomous in their redefined social roles.

Conclusion: recognition and social domination – the missing synthesis

With the above considerations I have tried to show that the mature Honneth has devoted little attention to the phenomenon of intersubjective social domination, notwithstanding the attempt at conceptualizing 'ideological recognition' as a form of intentional social domination in post-Fordist capitalism. He has instead attempted to situate his perspective more firmly in the tradition of the critical theory's diagnosis of capitalism as a 'pathological life-form' (whether absolutely pathological, as in the first-generation theorists, or only partially, as in Habermas' colonization thesis). Honneth has so far not attempted to integrate his fruitful early theorization of intersubjective social domination, which I have tried to reconstruct in this paper, into his mature recognition-theoretic perspective.

This is somewhat surprising, I would argue, since Honneth's theorization of ideological recognition itself presented an excellent opportunity for Honneth to reconnect his mature social critique with the earlier conceptualization of class domination – let me briefly elaborate. Contemporary liberal democracies, I would argue in agreement with both Habermas and Honneth, are characterized by the ongoing processes of the universalization and de-formalization of positive law, on the one hand, and those of the individualization and equalization of cultural value-patterns on the other. At the same time, the already mentioned *unjust division of labour* persists within the post-Fordist capitalist formation – this structural contradiction is actually the foundation of 'ideological recognition' as theorized by Honneth. The contradiction

manifests itself as an ever greater *discrepancy* in contemporary liberal-democratic capitalist societies between the 'potentiality' (or the normative 'promise') of legal respect and cultural esteem (two crucial dimensions of recognition in Honneth's perspective) and the actuality of economic exploitation. To that extent, the act of legal or cultural recognition occurs within a system of social reproduction which embodies relations of *structural* domination between social groups.

Citizens of the normatively advanced contemporary capitalism experience ever more legal and cultural recognition in terms of mature Honneth's theory, but they are still structurally *dominated* (exploited, impoverished) by the ruling elites in terms of the early Honneth's perspective on intersubjective social domination. Different forms of *intentional* social domination are thus required more than ever in order to neutralize the possibility of the dominated actors' interpretation of this structural contradiction in the form of a fundamental *social injustice* – precisely such forms of domination as the 'institutionalized individualization' and 'cultural exclusion' of the underprivileged social groups that Honneth has theorized in his early article. For example, the contemporary capitalist managers who rely on ideological recognition as a strategy of legitimization must also rely on forms of institutionalized individualization such as the cultural pattern which individualizes the responsibility of social actors for their material circumstances, so that the above mentioned 'entrepreneur of the self' accepts that the discrepancy between the normative promise entailed in the act of recognition and the impossibility of its fulfillment is her own fault, not an instance of structural social injustice.

With his influential theorization of the struggle for recognition, Honneth has succeeded to an extent in realizing one of his crucial aims articulated in the critique of Habermas: to develop an alternative intersubjectivist theorization of the social reality which achieves an initial synthesis of the Foucauldian paradigm of conflict and the Habermasian paradigm of understanding. Honneth achieves this initial synthesis with an account of the 'morally motivated struggle' of social groups over the normative frameworks (patterns of recognition) of social action.

However, in developing his theoretical system Honneth mostly gives up on the *second* major aim from the above analyzed critique of Habermas – to redefine the Marxist theorizations of class struggle and the mechanisms of social domination on the

more empirically adequate grounds of intersubjectivist critical theory. As I would argue, Honneth has so far not fully realized the potential of his early outline of a theory of social domination by explaining how the struggle of the underprivileged social groups for greater *legal respect* and *social esteem* (the struggles for *a universalist legal system* and *a just division of labour*) become neutralized in contemporary capitalist societies through techniques of intentional social domination.

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Pojam društvene dominacije u kritičko-teorijskoj perspektivi Aksela Honeta

Apstrakt

Rad nastoji da rekonstruiše koncepciju društvene dominacije formulisanu u ranim radovima Aksela Honeta, jedne od ključnih figura „treće generacije” kritičke teorije. Autor argumentuje da je jedna od ključnih ambicija ranog Honeta, artikulisana kroz kritiku teorijskog stanovišta Jirgena Habermasa, nastojanje da se proces društvene reprodukcije u savremenom kapitalizmu konceptualizuje u „delatno-teorijskim” kategorijama, kao proces determinisan među-grupnom društvenom dinamikom, nasuprot Habermasovom sistemsko-teorijskom stanovištu. Autor analizira Honetovu kritiku Habermasa razvijenu u delu *Kritika moći*, fokusirajući se na Honetovu konceptualizaciju društvene dominacije predstavljenu u ranom članku „Moralna svest i klasna dominacija”. Analiza utemeljuje autorovu potonju rekonstrukciju koncepcije društvene dominacije u perspektivi ranog Honeta, kao dvodimenzionalnog fenomena koji obuhvata „intencionalnu” i „strukturnu” dimenziju. Preusmeravajući potom pažnju na Honetove zrelije radove, autor argumentuje da kritika društvene dominacije više nije u fokusu Honetove uticajne teorije „priznanja”. Na posletku, autor razmatra Honetov jedini skorašnji pokušaj teorizovanja dominacije u članku „Priznanje kao ideologija”, zaključujući da Honet do sada nije uspešno integrisao svoj rani društveno-teorijski pristup fenomenu dominacije u okviru svog razvijenog teorijskog sistema.

Ključne reči: Honet, društvena dominacija, društveni sukob, kritika, teorija društvenog delanja, ideologija, socijalna patologija