

Arthur Bueno

## The Psychic Life of Freedom: Social Pathology and its Symptoms<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract** This paper discusses the relationship between Axel Honneth's intersubjective theory of recognition and his political theory of democratic ethical life by addressing the potentials and difficulties attached to the notion of social pathology. Taking into account the diverse uses of this concept throughout Honneth's oeuvre, it focuses initially on two of its formulations: first, the more recent discussions presented in "The Diseases of Society", some of which can be read in continuity with arguments presented in *Freedom's Right*; second, an implicit conception of social pathology that can be found in *Struggle for Recognition*. These formulations involve contrastingly different premises with regard to phenomenological, methodological, social-ontological and etiological matters. I argue that such differences can be better grasped if one bears in mind two distinctive ways of understanding the fundamental intuition at the basis of the notion of social pathology: either as an analogy or as a homology. By disclosing the actual or potential discrepancies between both conceptions, the aim is to outline the grounds on which they could be brought together within the framework of a comprehensive concept. With this purpose, I then critically examine a third conception of social pathology which was first presented in *Suffering from Indeterminacy* and later developed, with some restrictions, in *Freedom's Right*. Finally, a definition of social pathology is suggested which can bring together the different contributions of each conception while avoiding their pitfalls.

475

**Keywords:** social pathology, recognition, freedom, suffering, social ontology, analogy, homology, Axel Honneth

The notion of social pathology holds a central place in contemporary critical theory and especially in Axel Honneth's philosophical work (cf. Honneth 1996 [1994], Honneth 2009 [2004]). Yet, this is also one of the categories that went through more modifications along his intellectual trajectory. In this concept, perhaps more than in any other, were expressed some of the main changes in Honneth's theory, both in terms of its philosophical foundations and of the challenges presented by the diagnosis of the present time. As a consequence,

---

1 A previous version of this paper was presented at the workshop *Anerkennung und Freiheit – eine Verhältnisbestimmung* (University of Zurich, January 2016). I would like to thank all participants and especially Axel Honneth for their comments. I am also grateful for the valuable suggestions made by Hartmut Rosa and other members of the Max-Weber-Kolleg, by the participants of the workshop *Social Pathologies and Mutual Recognition* (University of Jyväskylä, May 2016), as well as by Mariana Teixeira and Dagmar Wilhelm. This work was generously supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung.

to this “nearly impossible concept” (Honneth 2014) was ascribed a wide variety of meanings, among which it may seem difficult to find a common core.<sup>2</sup>

In the following, some initial steps will be taken towards a conception of social pathology capable of combining conceptual breadth and consistency. Taking into account the diverse uses of this concept throughout Honneth’s oeuvre, I will mainly focus on three of its formulations. First, the more recent discussions on the topic – especially those presented in “The Diseases of Society” – will be examined with a view to highlighting its central features as well as its potentially problematic aspects. To that end, four dimensions of the concept will be considered: (a) phenomenological, (b) methodological, (c) social-ontological, and (d) etiological. Second, an implicit conception of social pathology that can be found in *Struggle for Recognition* will be reviewed and contrasted to Honneth’s more recent arguments on the subject. By disclosing the actual or potential discrepancies between both conceptions, the aim is to outline the grounds on which they could be brought together within the framework of a comprehensive concept of social pathology. With this in mind, finally, I will analyse the transformations of the conception of “pathologies of freedom” which was first presented in *Suffering from Indeterminacy* and later developed, with some restrictions, in *Freedom’s Right*, as well as suggest ways of avoiding its pitfalls.

476

### The Diseases of Society: Four Dimensions

The first question one must address in order to characterize social pathologies is how to *phenomenologically* define the psychological experiences which can be associated with them (a). Honneth states in *Freedom’s Right* that “such pathologies certainly cannot be interpreted as a social accumulation of individual pathologies or psychological disorders”. The symptoms in which social pathologies are reflected would rather appear in tendencies to “a certain rigidity in [...] social behaviour and relation-to-self expressed by diffuse moods of depression [*Niedergedrückttheit*] or a loss of orientation” (Honneth 2014 [2011]: 86-87). In a similar vein, Honneth has more recently argued that in order to diagnose societal functional disturbances it is sufficient to notice something “odd or irritating about social life”. The diagnosis of social pathologies would thus rely on “behavioural abnormalities” among members of society or “cases of merely vague indications of a social discontent, or even simply a diffuse prevailing social atmosphere” (Honneth 2014: 687, 690). The

2 For a review of the uses of this category in Honneth’s work, see Freyenhagen 2015. In contrast with the latter approach, my purpose is not to discuss in detail all the different meanings of the notion of social pathology in Honneth’s writings, but rather to critically reconstruct them in order to outline a more comprehensive and cohesive concept. For another overview of Honneth’s conceptions of social pathology, cf. Laitinen, Särkelä and Ikäheimo 2015.

main thrust of these arguments is to release the diagnosis of social pathologies from the necessity of relying on the accumulation of medically diagnosed mental illnesses, which played an important role in previous versions of the concept. However, it is not only psychological disorders which have ceased to be considered crucial to the diagnosis of social pathologies. In some passages of “The Diseases of Society” and of Honneth’s recent remarks on the subject (Honneth 2015a), this position is pushed even further: while the symptoms alluded to in *Freedom’s Right* still refer to experiences that might display some degree of suffering, even if the term is avoided, in his later writings this is no longer the case, and the idea of a necessary reference to such kind of experience is explicitly refused.<sup>3</sup> Honneth then holds that “societal abnormalities, which raise suspicion about something being pathological, can also consist of behavioural patterns that cause no individual suffering and thus also do not necessarily constitute psychic disorders” (Honneth 2014: 691).

One should notice that, in passages such as the latter, the term ‘suffering’ is applied only to cases of mental illnesses as physicians might diagnose them or which are perceived by individuals as a condition requiring therapeutic treatment. A sharp distinction between social behavioural problems (i.e. “visible abnormalit[ies] in ordinary behaviour”) and mental disorders (i.e. “suffering from mental impairments which are recognizable by individuals”) then becomes crucial to Honneth’s argument. He refuses to equate such behavioural abnormalities with mental disorders, for this “would lead us to set a very low bar for qualifying as a mental disorder, and would thereby downplay the suffering of the genuinely mentally ill”. Diagnoses of social pathologies could primarily rely – as it would be the case in Adorno’s and Foucault’s analyses – on “common enough behaviour patterns that are without any resonance within the subject in question” and might not appear to the latter as “perceived suffering” (Honneth 2015a: 216). Judging by this last passage, it may seem that Honneth’s intention is to unlink the diagnosis of social pathologies solely from mental illnesses and from suffering as perceived by the subjects themselves. However, at other times this decoupling is clearly taken further and related to experiences of suffering in general, be them reflectively perceived as such or merely felt. It would then be a matter of refusing altogether the “idea that the ‘suffering’ of the subjects would always provide a warrant for the initial diagnosis of a pathology”: one should rather avoid inflating this category, pushing it “at too far a remove from the experience of subjectively felt discomfort” (Honneth 2015a: 216-17).

However, while it seems plausible to claim that social pathologies are not necessarily expressed in mental illnesses or perceived suffering, the same may

3 It is also worth noting that in *Freedom’s Right* Honneth still talks about “symptoms”, whereas in more recent writings the term is avoided. Cf. Honneth 2014 [2011]: 86-87.

not be said of subjectively felt discomfort. Whether this experience is designated as suffering or not, we should assume that a social pathology must in some way resonate negatively within the subjects in question, or it would not make sense to attach such a strong expression to it. Neither would it be clear where the motivation to overcome a given social pathology could come from. Without relying on the subjects' negative experiences (even if these are not reflectively perceived as such), the reference point needed to establish certain modes of behaviour as problematic seems to be lost and the ascription of behavioural abnormalities appears as an arbitrary act of the analyst, with the corresponding risks of what Maeve Cooke (2006) called epistemological and ethical authoritarianism.

478

Such a stance regarding the phenomenological dimension of social pathologies also has specific *methodological* implications (b). The disconnection of societal disturbances from psychic illnesses and experiences of suffering is initially based on the assumption that it is not feasible to build such a diagnosis by relying on empirical research. In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth states that the diffuse moods which constitute a first indication of a social pathology only seldom can be directly perceived in empirical investigations, since the "analytical tools used by sociological researchers are generally too blunt to capture such diffuse moods or collective sentiments". Thus, indirect displays of these symptoms should be looked for in novels, films or works of art (Honneth 2014 [2011]: 87). In "The Diseases of Society", likewise, behavioural abnormalities are seen as displaying a lower degree of visibility than the symptoms by which therapists or physicians diagnose an individual's illness.

Once more, however, Honneth's latest stance seems to consist in a more radicalized version of the previous one: in his recent remarks on the subject, it is no longer simply a matter of difficult scientific access to those experiences but of their own epistemological status as expressions of social pathologies. Though conceding that "without the presence of some visible abnormality in ordinary behaviour we cannot have cause to consider whether a social pathology might be in play" – otherwise the analyst would not be in a position to identify an impairment to individual freedom –, Honneth considers that such behavioural problems would initially be perceptible only from the perspective of an observer (Honneth 2015a: 216). Since one could not rely on conspicuous symptoms of psychic diseases or (perceived) suffering in order to formulate diagnoses of social pathologies, the latter should be based solely on behavioural abnormalities of limited visibility which are hardly perceivable from the participant's point of view. Only afterwards would the afflicted individuals be able to "confirm that these problems really are extant, if they – thanks to the diagnosis – are made capable of taking up and recognizing both their affliction and the underlying causes of it" (Honneth 2015a: 216).

Yet, it is not clear how one should identify abnormalities in ordinary behaviour if not based on the lived experience of the subjects in question. Moreover, given that such problematic modes of behaviour constitute visible expressions of impairments to individual freedom, it seems one should assume that the latter are somehow subjectively felt. If this is so, then a diagnosis of social pathology must be able to identify or at least presume, by taking up the participant's perspective, subjective indicators or symptomatic expressions of such impairments – which could, in a further step, be referred to disturbances in social reproduction.

These arguments do not stem only from Honneth's stance with regard to phenomenological and methodological issues, but also from his particular standpoint in relation to *social-ontological* matters (c). In "The Diseases of Society", it is argued that social pathologies consist in functional disturbances which take place "on a level set principally above that of the subjects" (Honneth 2014: 700). Although they are expressed in certain moods or behavioral abnormalities, these should not be confused with psychological functional disorders or with the (perceived) suffering of individuals, insofar as it is "the 'society' itself [which is] encroached upon by a particular disorganization of its social institutions in their functional efficiency" (Honneth 2014: 684). Diseases of society should not be confused with the total amount of psychic illnesses affecting some sufficient number of singular persons, nor with the collective understood as a macro-subject with its own particular clinical syndrome. In rejecting the latter options, Honneth argues for "the strong thesis that diseases of society are *separate* phenomena, to be found *solely* at the level of society itself, not at the level of its individual members" (Honneth 2014: 688; emphasis added).

479

The claim that social pathologies are located only at the level of society and not of its individual members raises, however, some difficult questions from a social-theoretical perspective. Certainly, Honneth does not intend to establish a complete separation between these two levels; after all, diseases of society are seen to be expressed in behavioural abnormalities or diffuse moods experienced by its individual members. At times, his purpose seems to be merely the categorical clarification that functional disorders situated at one level are not always equally expressed as functional disorders at the other level. However, as this categorical argument is translated into the claim that an "ontological difference" (Honneth 2014: 688) holds between society and its members, the risk arises of incurring in a fallacy of misplaced concreteness (Whitehead 2011 [1925]) in the sense that two types of processes (social reproduction and psychological experience) come to be conceived as two different entities (society and the individual).

Given the Durkheimian accent of these formulations, we might turn to the writings of the French sociologist in order to highlight the potential

problematic aspects of such social ontological perspective. In Durkheim's writings, this kind of fallacy is most visibly portrayed in the frequent transition from the premise that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts – which amounts to understanding social life as the product of relations between individuals and not the mere juxtaposition of their individual experiences – to a tendency to personificate society in a “collective spirit”, an expression that “do[es] not have a mere verbal value but express[es] facts that are eminently concrete” (Durkheim 1975 [1887]: 272). Or in his account of the human being as “homo duplex”, divided between “our individuality – and more particularly, our body in which it is based” and “everything in us that expresses something other than ourselves” (Durkheim 1960 [1914]: 328), therewith assuming a split between individual and collective consciousness so that certain ideas and actions would have their origin in the former and others in the latter. While Honneth certainly does not make claims like these, one runs the risk of holding similar assumptions when social pathologies are defined as phenomena located solely within society as a *sui generis* entity, ontologically distinct from its individual members.

Based on such social-ontological arguments, Honneth advances two conceptions of the *etiology* of social pathologies (d). In a first, provisional definition, social pathologies are characterized as “the failure or disorder of a function whose fulfilment is required for the sake of the social order’s preservation” (Honneth 2014: 699), which means there would be as many diseases of society as there are self-preserving social functions. However, since the latter are always culturally defined, they should be understood as representing particular demands that can only be introduced by taking into account the normative self-understanding and the institutional arrangement of a society. Thus, “one can speak of a societal disease or pathology if a society in its institutional arrangement fails, according to its prevailing values, at one of the tasks it takes up within [its] functional cycles” (Honneth 2014: 699). Yet, such a definition seems to push aside the intuition underlying the concept of social pathology, namely the analogy to the notion of illness as “an interference that we experience as a restriction of freedom”. Honneth’s proposal is that, in order to preserve the analogy which lies at the basis of the concept of social pathology, the latter should be conceived as consisting of disorders and frictions occurring at the “higher level” of the entanglement of diverse functional spheres – that is, not at the level of society’s separate functional cycles but of their interplay.<sup>4</sup> Thus, diseases of society would take place when the

4 In “The Diseases of Society”, this interplay is conceived as one between the functional cycles of socialization, processing of nature, and regulation of relations of recognition. In *The Idea of Socialism* (2015b), however, the same argument is applied to the entanglement of the ‘ethical’ (*sittlich*) spheres of personal relationships, the market, and democratic will-formation.

institutional regulations of such spheres mutually prevent each other from successfully developing. With such a move, the parallel to the living organism would be preserved and, as in the case of individual illnesses, social pathologies would amount to “a troubled relationship of a subject [i.e. society] to its self” experienced as a restriction of freedom (Honneth 2014: 701). Correspondingly, the realization of freedom would appear as the harmonious cooperation between social organs leading to society’s unhindered development.

One should not forget that all this is formulated from the perspective of the “higher ontological level” of society as a *sui generis* entity. Hence, in this context what is meant by freedom is, strictly speaking, *society’s* freedom, considered solely at the level of its relation to itself. It is evident that one should bear in mind Honneth’s concept of social freedom presented only three years earlier, as well as his recent comments relating social pathologies to impairments to individual freedom. Understood in such terms, however, the concept of “diseases of society” seems to be at odds with the latter premises. After all, a conception of social pathology which relies on a strict ontological distinction between society and its members does not seem fit to grasp the continuity among two kinds of troubled or “free” self-relations: of individuals to themselves and of society to itself. By conceiving the parallel between living and social organisms as a purely analogical one, such a framework is only equipped to understand the relation among them as either one of mere similarity or one of exterior causality. Moreover, the combination of a holistic social ontology with a purely analogical conception of social pathology has the consequence of demanding a significant restriction of the concept. The only possibility of conceiving social illnesses is, then, at the highest level of the interplay between “social organs”, hence leaving aside a considerable part of what Honneth himself has designated in the past as social-pathological phenomena.

481

### **Pathologies of Recognition: Analogical versus Homological Approaches**

The problematic aspects of Honneth’s latest word on the subject can be further addressed by way of a reinterpretation of previous versions of the concept present in his work. Particularly relevant for this purpose is the fact that the analogy which lies at the basis of his more recent conception of social pathology has, seemingly, a previous version. In *Struggle for Recognition*, it is noted that individual experiences of disrespect are commonly described in terms of metaphors referring to “states of deterioration of the human body”, to “physical suffering and death” (Honneth 1995 [1992]: 135). Such metaphors imply an analogy between the “negative role that organic infections take on in the context of the reproduction of the body” and “the various forms of disregard for the psychological integrity of humans”: the experience of being socially denigrated or humiliated endangers the identity of human

beings, just as infection with a disease endangers their physical life. If this analogy seems plausible, as Honneth claims, it is first and foremost because “the comparison with physical illness prompts the idea of identifying, for the case of suffering social disrespect as well, a stratum of symptoms that, to a certain extent, make the subjects aware of the state they are in” – such as the sort of negative emotional reactions expressed in feelings of being ashamed or enraged, hurt or indignant (Honneth 1995 [1992]: 135). Hence, as physical illnesses constitute symptoms that make the subjects aware of threats to the reproduction of their physical body, certain negative emotional reactions could be seen as symptoms that signal threats to their psychological integrity.

482

Yet, such analogy does not hold only between organic and psychological states. For just as threats to the physical integrity of an organism emerge in the context of its relations with the environment, threats to its psychological integrity generally arise in relationships with the social surroundings. So, becoming aware of the state one is in might involve not only acknowledging one’s psychological status, but also the social forms of disrespect to which one is subject. Unlike organic diseases, however, such socially produced and psychologically experienced disorders take place on the basis of the normative self-understanding of a historical epoch. They always emerge within a certain ‘grammar’ on which subjects rely to formulate their discontent and expectations regarding social relations in which they are involved. In modern societies, the language in which those forms of disrespect are articulated is, according to Honneth, founded on the idea of mutual recognition. By connecting threats to the psychological integrity of humans to social forms of disrespect, the framework presented in *Struggle for Recognition* thus establishes a fundamental connection between personal identity and social patterns of recognition.

The reason for this can again be seen in the constitutional dependence of humans on the experience of recognition. In order to acquire a successful relation-to-self, one is dependent on the intersubjective recognition of one’s abilities and accomplishments. Were one never to experience this type of social approval at some stage of one’s development, this would open up a psychological gap within one’s personality, into which negative emotional reactions such as shame or rage could step. Hence, the experience of disrespect is always accompanied by affective sensations that are, in principle, capable of revealing to individuals the fact that certain forms of recognition are being withheld from them (Honneth 1995 [1992]: 135).

Those negative emotions are more than just an initial indicator of what might be involved in relations of disrespect; as symptoms, they already represent the first reaction of the organism to what threatens its psychological integrity. It is for this reason that they can be regarded as the motivational basis of moral struggles for recognition. However, as in the case of organic threats, that



chain of reactions does not necessarily occur: a physical discomfort does not necessarily constitute a disease; a disease is not always perceived or diagnosed as such; and even diagnosed, one may not proceed to its treatment. Similarly, a negative emotion does not necessarily constitute a sign of a form of disrespect; experiences of disrespect are not always perceived as such; and they may not give rise to forms of social struggle for the establishment of relations of mutual recognition. But to the extent that this chain of reactions does take place, social struggles for recognition can come to have a 'therapeutic' aspect, in that they constitute reactions against disturbed forms of social relationship and self-relation motivated by the establishment of "social guarantees associated with those relations of recognition that are able to protect subjects most extensively from suffering disrespect" (Honneth 1995 [1992]: 135).

Now one can observe that what is at stake in these arguments is more than an analogy. Disorders of organic and psychosocial type are not only similar in many respects; they are also *in continuity* with each other. Thus, if the metaphor presented in *Struggle for Recognition* makes sense, it is because it refers to the fact that disturbances in relations of mutual recognition effectively constitute a threat to the individual life of human beings and, correspondingly, to social life as a whole. The analogy between the biological and the socialized body might then reveal not only what is similar among them, but also that their similarity is dependent on their character as moments of the same vital process. Hence, one should speak in this context rather of *homology* than of analogy: while the latter comprises the establishment of superficial similarities between two entities or processes, a homology entails a common causal mechanism that underlies their resemblance and thus the assumption of a real continuity between them (cf. Elster 2009: 7-8). Designating certain phenomena as social pathologies therefore amounts to considering that, as in the case of physical diseases, one is dealing with occurrences by means of which human life – both in its individual and social dimensions – is threatened in its integrity.

This homological perspective significantly modifies the way in which the relationship between different analytical dimensions comes to be conceived in the diagnosis of social pathologies, in particular with regard to their symptomatic expressions. As reactions to threats to *psychic life*, negative emotions that arise in the context of experiences of disrespect are taken here as symptoms of social-pathological phenomena, but only at a first level of analysis. Beyond those emotional experiences, social pathologies would equally manifest themselves in disturbances which appear at the second level of the reproduction of *intersubjective life* and often lead to, as well as are opposed by, struggles for recognition. Finally, such a framework can be extended to the institutional realm of society, though in 1992 Honneth had not yet fully developed arguments in that direction: symptomatic indications of

social-pathological processes might then be detected at the level of *institutional life*, in the form of disturbances and conflicts regarding the definition of dominant social roles and their interplay. Each of these phenomena counts as a symptom of social pathology because, at various levels, they consist in “frictions” in human life that represent threats to its integrity, as well as provide the latter with the impulse to reverse this condition.

484 These arguments have important consequences for the concept of social pathology. First, as in Honneth’s recent writings, the perspective developed in *Struggle for Recognition* does not establish a necessary connection between social pathologies and psychic diseases. However, it does relate the occurrence of social pathologies to negative emotions (sometimes referred to as ‘suffering’), thus establishing a continuity between troubled forms of social relationship and experiences of subjectively felt discomfort. Even though it may be the case that in most situations this discomfort is not perceived by the afflicted subjects, hence largely appearing as a mere “diffuse prevailing social atmosphere”, one might find particular examples in which the underlying troubles are displayed in intensified form, either as perceived suffering or as psychological disorders.<sup>5</sup>

Second, this signals the possibility of empirically investigating social pathologies from the participant’s perspective. Subjects not only display their negative emotions in a number of implicit ways, but may also perceive them in moral or ethical terms. The social theorist is then able to anchor her own critical standpoint in the subject’s problematic experiences, either expressed in the ‘higher’ form of explicit manifestations of discontent or in the ‘deeper’ form of indirect displays of discomfort. Both of these represent the “pre-theoretical fact” (Honneth 2007 [1994]: 72) on the basis of which a critique of the relations of recognition can identify its own theoretical perspective in social reality and then, from a reconstructive standpoint, formulate its diagnoses by articulating the subjects’ (implicit or explicit) claims in social theoretical terms and developing them further.

Third, this implies a social theoretical standpoint that, while retaining the important categorical distinction between social reproduction and psychological experience, avoids the risk of building an ontological gap between them. Disorders in the process of social reproduction find expression in “irritations” within psychological experience as much as in “frictions” in patterns of social relationship and their institutional crystallizations. Therefore,

---

5 For instance, the disturbing consequences of consumerism (discussed in Honneth 2014) can be more clearly identified in the experience of subjects who see themselves as compulsive buyers. At least that is what I tried to demonstrate in a qualitative empirical research with members of the Debtors Anonymous group, who identify themselves as compulsive buyers and/or debtors. Cf. Bueno 2009.

relations between these analytical dimensions are marked by what Honneth, in a previous debate on the relationship between institutions and patterns of recognition, designated as “co-evolution” (cf. Honneth 2011: 402-405).

Fourth, despite the noticeable similarity of the metaphor presented in *Struggle for Recognition* with the analogy that opens Honneth's more recent article, a significant difference consists in that in 2014 the organic body is regarded as merely analogous to society as a *sui generis* entity, while in 1992 it is viewed as homologous to social patterns of mutual recognition and forms of individual relation-to-self. These analytical domains hence come to be perceived as continuously interconnected, so that the symptomatic expressions of disturbances in social reproduction are differently displayed in all of them. In this broad conception, frictions in the interplay between social spheres appear as merely one form of social pathology, and only inasmuch as they assume forms which to some degree represent threats to the integrity of social and psychic life.

485

### Pathologies of (the Possibilities of) Freedom

In view of this definition of social pathology as a process that endangers human life on several levels, we can now reconsider another model, developed by Honneth in the period between the two perspectives discussed so far.<sup>6</sup> In the initial formulation of this model, based on the reactualization of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, Honneth conceived the main social pathologies of modern times as a result of an absolutization of partial understandings of individual freedom, so that individuals would no longer be able to orient themselves by the rational content of their social relations of communication (Honneth 2001). Such pathologies would not only take place in the cases examined by Hegel, whereby legally defined freedom or moral autonomy are assumed to constitute the whole of individual freedom, but also in contemporary tendencies to absolutize other incomplete understandings of freedom, such as those represented by romantic individualism or the model of mere freedom of choice. These were all conceived as ‘pathologies of freedom’, whose problematic consequences for the subjects' self-relation found expression in the category of “suffering from indeterminacy”. Symptoms of this kind of experience were then identified not only in phenomena such as “solitude”,

---

6 It was in this period that social pathologies came to be conceived as “second-order disorders” (Zurn 2011). Though I will not be able to further discuss this point here, I agree with Freyenhagen (2015) and Laitinen (2015) on the fact that the designation of social pathologies as ‘second-order’ phenomena can be misleading if we understand by that only disorders in the *reflective* access to primary systems of actions and norms. In what follows, I will reconstruct Honneth's conception of “pathologies of freedom” in a way that encompasses, but is not restricted to, dysfunctional relationships between reflective and unreflective value-commitments.

“vacuity” and “burden”, which Hegel analysed in his *Philosophy of Right*, but also in the “most widespread forms of the subject’s psychic failure” in current society, such as the increasing incidence of depression (Honneth 2000).<sup>7</sup>

486

This model for conceptualizing social pathologies was preserved in *Freedom’s Right*, but with significant restrictions. Not only psychic illnesses lost the leading position they had in the previous formulation of the ‘pathologies of freedom’, but also these came to be seen as particular to the social spheres of modern law and autonomous morality. In this view, it would be specific to such institutional spheres – which share the characteristic of providing only “possibilities” of freedom – an internal tendency to continuously generate illusions of the complete realization of individual freedom. This would occur in such spheres by way of a practical misinterpretation of their underlying normative regulations, generated by the same norms to which this misinterpretation is committed. Thus, would be constitutive to them a structural tendency to bring members of society to mistakenly consider mere possibilities of freedom to be the whole of freedom. For their turn, the ‘ethical’ (*sittlich*) spheres of personal relationships, market relations, and democratic will-formation – precisely because they provide “realities” of freedom and thus already hold in principle the institutional conditions for its complete realization – would not have the internal tendency to generate systematic illusions. Since in these spheres “the participants [...] could not entertain the idea that they could realize their freedom through purely individual action”, structural deformations such as those prevailing in the cases of law and morality would not take place, but only misdevelopments (*Fehlentwicklungen*) arising from the influence of external factors, by means of which “the level of the realization of the underlying promise of freedom, which has been achieved through successful outcomes of social struggles, could either be entirely undone, or seriously put at risk” (Honneth 2015a: 215).

Honneth has recently reconsidered this distinction between social pathologies and misdevelopments. He now acknowledges the possibility that “the spheres of social freedom might [...] be vulnerable to systematic misinterpretation, as they cannot eliminate the possibility of having their principles understood merely in terms of *negative* freedom” (Honneth 2015a: 215). This signals, so to speak, a return to the broader model of pathologies of freedom

---

<sup>7</sup> The connection between partial understandings of individual freedom and forms of psychological suffering is also central in other texts published in the same period (Honneth 2004 [2002], Hartmann and Honneth 2006 [2004]). In these articles, a diagnosis of the present time is developed in which paradoxical reversals of normative potentials and extant forms of individualism are referred to an increasing incidence of cases of depression, as analysed by Alain Ehrenberg (2009 [1998]). Hence, they can be seen as part of this larger group of texts dedicated to the ‘pathologies of freedom’, even if the concept of social pathology is only incidentally mentioned in them.

presented in the early 2000s. One must then ask how such systematic misinterpretations would be possible in the 'ethical' (*sittlich*) spheres, since in these cases we cannot hold – as in the spheres of modern law and autonomous morality – that there is a misunderstanding of the incomplete character of the forms of freedom constitutive of those spheres. At this point we arrive at one of the probable reasons for Honneth's difficulty in conceiving the occurrence of internal social pathologies in the 'ethical' spheres. Indeed, it was only possible to assume in *Freedom's Right* that the participants in these spheres "could not entertain the idea that they could realize their freedom through purely individual action" (Honneth 2015a: 215) because their normative structure was conceived in an excessively homogeneous manner. Advancing a theory of justice that aims to proceed immanently with regard to social practices by finding its own principles in social reality, Honneth set himself the difficult task of defining, in the context of complex and heterogeneous societies, general normative principles that could serve as the basis for a critical reconstruction of their accomplishments and normative potentials. To do so, however, it was necessary to assume that to each institutional sphere corresponds a "dominant value" (Honneth 2014 [2011]: 6). Only then the "stylized" (*typisierend*) consideration of progresses and regresses in historical development would be able to take its course. However, this "sociologically stylized approach" with respect to the "conflictual and non-linear realization of these principles" (Honneth 2014 [2011]: 8) ended up losing sight, from a systematic point of view, of the *constitutive* role that normative conflicts between modalities of freedom might have within 'ethical' spheres. Without this, deviations in the realization of social freedom could only be conceived as misdevelopments caused by factors which are *external* to these spheres' normative regulations.

487

Especially in the case of the market, an examination – even if 'stylized' – of the normative conflicts which are institutionally inherent to it seems necessary for the conceptualization of the particular systematic misinterpretations that take place there. In order to do so, one must bear in mind that the normative structure of social spheres does not only comprise their participants' self-understandings, but also the way in which social roles are structured within them, often regardless of the subjects' explicit beliefs. This is particularly true for the economic sphere. Considering that social institutions are the medium which enables certain forms of social relation to take place, if we aim at understanding the normative regulations of the market sphere we must look at its primary medium, namely money.<sup>8</sup> One might

---

8 This amounts to adopting a different strategy than the one taken up by Honneth in *Freedom's Right*, which rather relies on theoretical explanations of the market and on the subjects' explicit understandings about it. Cf. Honneth 2014 [2011]: 176-252.

recall here Georg Simmel's arguments concerning the monetary means as an institution which *detaches* at the same time that it *binds*. On the one hand, the peculiar combination of (personal) distance and (impersonal) connection embodied by money allows for a multiplication of social bonds and the creation of renewed and extremely strong links between subjects: since it cannot be immediately consumed, the monetary means always points to the other participants in the economic system and, more generally, to the totality of economic exchanges. Moreover, its status as a universally recognized means of exchange offers "grounds for an immediate mutual understanding" among human subjects in such a way that Simmel deemed it partially responsible for the emergence of the idea of the "universally human" by the end of the eighteenth century (Simmel 1992 [1896]: 51). In both these regards, money is seen as representing a powerful medium for the generation of social cooperation and, thus, can be understood as an 'ethical' (*sittlich*) institution of recognition.

488

On the other hand, the inevitable and entangled character of the integration put forward by the money economy also allows for a larger openness for the development of individuality and personal independence. Due to money's capacity to distance what is simultaneously bound by it, monetary remuneration can serve in several contexts as a guarantee of some measure of personal freedom, since in payment in cash the individual does not deliver the totality of her self but only impersonal results of her work (cf. Simmel 2011 [1907]: 305-383). However, this freedom is often practiced and understood as a merely negative one, i.e. as freedom *from* something and not freedom *for* something, given the fact that money establishes a personal domain of reserve and choice which might remain, nonetheless, an empty realm of pure possibility. In this situation, as Simmel observes, it is not uncommon that subjects experience those "feelings, apathetic and so modern, that the core and meaning of life slips through our fingers again and again, that definitive satisfactions become ever rarer, that all the effort and activity is not actually worthwhile" (Simmel 1992 [1896]: 51). The structure of monetary exchange thus contains within itself the tendency to a restrictive practical misunderstanding of the normative potentials it itself establishes. Given its 'paradoxical' normative structure, the modern economy can be thought of as a sphere of realization of social freedom *and* simultaneously as motivating practices shaped according to the model of negative freedom: within economic relations, agents can think and act as if they actualized social freedom precisely as they think and act as detached self-interested agents.

In this as in other cases, we can thus speak of social pathologies in a broad sense as "persistent 'disorders' in the course of the gradual realization of our rational powers" by means of which "reason fails to adequately perform its available potential" (Honneth 2015a: 212; cf. Honneth 2009 [2004]), without

having to rely on an excessively restrictive conception of the way in which this process occurs. One must bear in mind, however, the different forms taken by those disorders within each sphere. In modern law and autonomous morality, as Honneth points out, there is an *undue extension* of partial understandings of freedom: incomplete forms are systematically misinterpreted as already complete ones due to their normative one-sidedness. In the market, as Simmel's arguments indicate, there is an *undue restriction* of social freedom: forms already posited as complete are systematically misinterpreted as incomplete ones due to their own paradoxical, self-undermining normative structure. In fact, even the spheres of personal relationships and democratic will-formation are potentially subject to such systematic misinterpretations, although the mechanisms via which this occurs still must be properly analysed. In any case, the diagnosis of social pathologies must proceed by analysing the internally conflicted nature of modern institutions and their specific tendencies for generating systematic illusions, whose problematic character, as the example of the market indicates, should be simultaneously assessed from the observer's and the participant's perspectives.

489

### Concluding Remarks

The question of a general definition of social pathology can now be briefly addressed. Unlike the other two models presented in "The Diseases of Society" and *Struggle for Recognition*, the conception of 'pathologies of freedom' does not find its justification in an analogical or homological allusion to organic processes. One might question, thus, if the term 'pathology' should apply to it at all. However, the above considerations regarding the interconnectedness of human life in all its levels should allow us to at least envision the possibility of interpreting this conception in the broader lines of the model at the basis of *Struggle for Recognition*. After all, as Honneth stated, "in contrast to pre-human collectives, determining what makes a human society capable of survival always involves regarding the normative beliefs of its members" (Honneth 2014: 697). Human social life develops historically by means of transformations in the normative self-understanding of its members, as well as through the experimental attempts to realize the values and ideals thus established. This process does not occur without disturbances, which can be regarded as social pathologies insofar as they constitute impediments to the realization of what a form of life, at a given moment in its history, considers appropriate to itself.

On the basis of the reinterpretation of Honneth's work carried out in this paper, such assumption can now appear as congenial to both the framework of 'pathologies of recognition' (presented in *Struggle for Recognition*) and the model of 'pathologies of freedom' (developed in *Suffering from Indeterminacy* and *Freedom's Right*). Each of these perspectives can be seen to emphasize

a different aspect of social reproduction and its disturbances: whereas the former focusses on the insufficient or inadequate recognition enjoyed by certain social groups, the latter emphasizes generalized and systematic misinterpretations of underlying norms and values. In both cases, however, those occurrences consist in social pathologies to the extent that they obstruct the realization of our current rationality's available potential and, as such, systematically disrupt social life at the psychological, the intersubjective, and the institutional levels. Only then, by referring to all these dimensions and their corresponding symptomatic manifestations, can one adequately comprehend – from a perspective that is at once observational and participatory, theoretically informed and empirically investigated – the internal connection between two kinds of troubled self-relations: of individuals to themselves and of society to itself.

490

### Bibliography

- Bueno, Arthur (2009), *As paixões do homo oeconomicus: racionalidade e afeto na ação econômica cotidiana*. Master thesis in Sociology. University of Sao Paulo.
- Cooke, Maeve (2006), *Re-Presenting the Good Society*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Durkheim, Émile (1975 [1887]), "La science positive de la morale en Allemagne", in Victor Karady (ed.), *Textes I*. Paris: Minuit.
- Durkheim, Émile (1960 [1914]), "The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions", in Kurt Wolff (ed.), *Émile Durkheim 1858-1957: A Collection of Essays*. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Ehrenberg, Alain (2009 [1998]), *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press.
- Elster, Jon (2000), *Strong Feelings: Emotion, Addiction, and Human Behavior*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Freyenhagen, Fabian (2015), "Honneth on Social Pathologies: A Critique", *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 16(2): 131-152.
- Hartmann, Martin and Honneth, Axel (2006 [2004]), "Paradoxes of capitalism", *Constellations* 13(1): 41-58.
- Honneth, Axel (1995 [1992]), *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Honneth, Axel (2007 [1994]), "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: On the Location of Critical Theory Today", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Honneth, Axel (1996 [1994]), "Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy", in David Rasmussen (ed.), *The Handbook of Critical Theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Honneth, Axel (2000), "Pathologien der individuellen Freiheit. Hegels Zeitdiagnose und die Gegenwart", in Hans Belting and Jörg Huber (eds.), *Darstellung: Korrespondenz*. Vienna/ New York: Springer.
- Honneth, Axel (2001), *Leiden an Unbestimmtheit. Eine Reaktualisierung der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie*. Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag.
- Honneth, Axel (2009 [2004]), "A Social Pathology of Reason: On the Intellectual Legacy of Critical Theory", in *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.



- Honneth, Axel (2004 [2002]), "Organized self-realization: Some paradoxes of contemporary individualization", *European Journal of Social Theory* 7(4): 463–478.
- Honneth, Axel (2011), "Rejoinder", in Danielle Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*. Leiden: Brill.
- Honneth, Axel (2014 [2011]), *Freedom's Right. The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Honneth, Axel (2014), "The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept", *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 81(3): 683–703.
- Honneth, Axel (2015a), "Rejoinder", *Critical Horizons: A Journal of Philosophy and Social Theory* 16(2): 204–226.
- Honneth, Axel (2015b), *Die Idee des Sozialismus: Versuch einer Aktualisierung*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Laitinen, Arto (2015), "Social Pathologies, Reflexive Pathologies, and the Idea of Higher-Order Disorders", *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 25: 44–65.
- Laitinen, Arto, Särkelä, Arvi and Ikäheimo, Heikki (2015), "Pathologies of Recognition: An Introduction", *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 25: 3–24.
- Simmel, Georg (2011 [1907]), *The Philosophy of Money*. London: Routledge.
- Simmel, Georg (1992 [1896]), "Das Geld in der modernen Cultur", in Heinz-Jürgen Dahme and David Frisby (eds.), *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe. Band 5: Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1894 – 1900*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Whitehead, Alfred (2011 [1925]), *Science and the Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zurn, Christopher (2011), "Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders", in Danielle Petherbridge (ed.), *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*. Leiden: Brill.

Artur Bueno

### Psihički život slobode: socijalna patologija i njeni simptomi

#### Apstrakt

U ovom radu se razmatra odnos između intersubjektivne teorije priznanja Aksela Honeta i njegove političke teorije demokratskog etičkog života, pre svega tako što se analiziraju potencijali i teškoće vezane za koncepciju socijalne patologije. Uzimajući u obzir različita značenja koncepcije u Honetovom delu, rad se na početku fokusira na dve formulacije: prvo, na skorašnju raspravu u „Bolestima društva“, koja se delimično može tumačiti i kao nastavak argumentacije iz *Prava slobode*; i drugo, na implicitnu koncepciju socijalne patologije koja se može pronaći u *Borbi za priznanje*. Ove dve formulacije se u potpunosti razlikuju u pogledu svojih fenomenoloških, metodoloških, socijalno-ontoloških i etioloških premisa. Smatram da te razlike mogu bolje da se razumeju ako imamo u vidu dva različita shvatanja fundamentalne intuicije koja leži u osnovi pojma socijalne patologije: razumevanje u formi analogije odnosno homologije. Kroz eksplicaciju nekih od realnih ili potencijalnih diskrepancija između ove dve koncepcije, cilj rada je da se ponudi jedna preliminarna osnova za povezivanje ove dve varijante u okviru jedne sveobuhvatne koncepcije pojma socijalne patologije. U svetlu svega navedenog, rad na kraju kritički razmatra treću koncepciju koja je predstavljena u *Patnji neodređenosti* i kasnije razvijena, uz određena ograničenja, u *Pravu slobode*. Konačno, predložena je jedna definicija socijalne patologije koja može da spoji različite doprinose svake koncepcije, ujedno izbegavajući njihove zamke.

**Cljučne reči:** socijalna patologija, priznanje, sloboda, patnja, socijalna ontologija, analogija, homologija, Aksel Honet

