

Marjan Ivković

## The intersubjectivist conception of autonomy: Axel Honneth's Neo-Hegelian critique of liberalism

**Abstract** The paper reconstructs Axel Honneth's Neo-Hegelian critique of the classical-liberal conception of autonomy and his articulation of an alternative view of personal autonomy as the property of certain types of intersubjective relations of recognition in modernity, developed most systematically in Honneth's recent work *Freedom's Right (Das Recht der Freiheit)*. The analysis of *Freedom's Right* focuses on reconstructing Honneth's critique of the 'negative' and 'reflexive' types of freedom (autonomy) articulated within the liberal tradition, and contrasting the former two with the conception of 'social freedom' (the intersubjectivist conception of autonomy) that Honneth formulates through a detailed 'normative reconstruction of modernity'. Finally, the paper considers the proximity of Honneth's 'Hegelian liberalism' to communitarianism.

**Key Words:** Honneth, liberalism, autonomy, freedom, intersubjectivity, individualism

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### Introduction: Axel Honneth's Critique of the Classical Liberal Conception of Autonomy

In his recent works, Axel Honneth, the influential third-generation critical theorist and social philosopher, has described himself as a 'Hegelian liberal' (Honneth, 2011b). The central concern of Honneth's works such as *Suffering from Indeterminacy*, *Pathologies of Individual Freedom*, and *Freedom's Right* is the reappropriation of the mature Hegel's philosophy of right, which aims at presenting a substantive 'Hegelian liberal' theory of justice, methodologically grounded in what Honneth terms the 'normative reconstruction' of modernity (Honneth, 2001, 2010, 2011a). This project is to a considerable extent underpinned by what Honneth understands as his critique of classical (individualist) variants of liberalism and an attempt to articulate an alternative conception of personal autonomy, grounded in the notion of an intersubjectively constituted 'ethical life'. In this paper, I reconstruct the logic of Honneth's Hegelian critique of the classical liberal conception of 'negative freedom' and the individualist understanding of autonomy as moral 'self-determination' against the background of Honneth's own intersubjectivist conception of autonomy as 'social freedom'.

As Bert van den Brink and David Owen note in *Recognition and Power*, 'with Kant, Habermas, and Rawls, Honneth shares a strong commitment to the

notion of the autonomy of the person understood as a source of justified social claims that are brought into practices of public moral reasoning', but he criticizes these authors at the same time for developing their concepts of autonomy too narrowly, 'in abstraction from historical contexts of institutionalized ethical life' (van den Brink and Owen, 2007: 7). As I will try to show, these contexts of ethical life are theorized by Honneth as specific institutionalized relations of *symmetrical intersubjective recognition*, which Honneth understands as the actual 'media' of personal autonomy – in other words, personal autonomy can only be meaningfully exercised within these intersubjective relations.

### Honneth's Conception of Democracy as 'Reflexive Cooperation'

Honneth's neo-Hegelian critique of classical liberalism also encompasses an articulation of a political ideal – a particular theorization of democracy – which combines Deweyan pragmatism with Honneth's theory of recognition. For example, in 'Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation', Honneth interprets John Dewey's theory of democracy as arguing in favour of a social order of 'cooperative self-realization'. Honneth distinguishes between two principal contemporary theories of radical democracy – republicanism and proceduralism – claiming that Dewey's perspective differs from both conceptions, as it shifts the theoretical focus from 'communicative consultation' to 'social cooperation' (Honneth, 2007: 220). In contrast to Hannah Arendt, Dewey's critique of the classical liberal perspective rests on a fundamental pragmatist conviction that 'communicative freedom' is not embodied in linguistic interaction as such but in the 'communal (*gemeinschaftlich*) employment of individual forces to cope with given problems' (ibid: 222). Honneth identifies the Deweyan idea of 'cooperative self-realization', not only in Hegel's theory of ethical life, but in the prominent representatives of the first- and second-generation critical theory as well: 'the different models of practice that Horkheimer, Marcuse and Habermas offer are all only representatives of that one thought, according to which the socialization of human beings can only be successful under conditions of cooperative freedom' (Honneth, 2009: 26).

Dewey's reflections provide Honneth with initial conceptual means for elaborating his 'formal concept of ethical life' into an explicit political ideal. In 'Post-Traditional Communities', for example, Honneth further builds on these arguments, claiming that 'the freedom of self-realization thus depends upon the existence of communities in which individuals value one another in light of commonly shared goals' (Honneth, 2007: 257). Democracy as reflexive cooperation requires the existence of a substantive ethical 'life-world' which is at the same time capable of accommodating the processes of legal universalization and cultural inclusion. However, it is only in his

reappropriation of the late Hegel's philosophy of right, in works such as *Suffering from Indeterminacy* and *Freedom's Right*, that Honneth will substantially elaborate his political-theoretic position.

### Individualism as 'Moral Disorientation'

Honneth's reconstructive efforts in *Suffering from Indeterminacy* are complex and detailed, but the main aim is to bring to attention Hegel's argument that 'abstract rights' (negative freedom) and 'morality' (freedom of choice between meaningful alternatives) are necessary but insufficient preconditions of human autonomy (Honneth, 2001). The subject's 'abstract right' to withdraw from any particular intersubjective commitment that is not legally binding is a necessary precondition of freedom, and so is the capacity for moral reflection which enables a subject to 'turn inwards', and, weighing up the available arguments, decide for the best possible course of action. However, when most of the intersubjectively articulated action-guiding norms become problematized in times of rapid social change (such as Hegel's own time), the subject's turning inward will easily lead her towards endless reflection and self-examination, resulting in an incapacity to act. In Hegel's words, the individual will be 'suffering from indeterminacy' – a state of moral disorientation that Hegel considers to be characteristic of his own time.

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The modern social actors' preoccupation with abstract legal rights and moral autonomy have, according to Honneth, obscured the fact that our social reality embodies exactly the ethical resources that we need in situations which demand complex normative judgement. In Honneth's interpretation of Hegel, true moral reflexivity requires an individual to recognize that the norms which guide her action do not exist as pure ideas, but are present within the practical circumstances of her social existence. Hegel transforms his moral-philosophical account into a diagnosis of social pathologies ('indeterminacy') by arguing that, as long as social actors are, so to say, 'bewitched' by the argumentative force of negative freedom and the Kantian individualist conception of moral autonomy, society will remain in a state which resembles Durkheim's concept of *anomie*. In Honneth's understanding, social reality in Hegel's perspective is not 'indifferent' to the way subjects experience it (Honneth, 2001).

As Honneth explains, Hegel's fundamental normative and social-theoretical premise is that the institutional order of the modern (bourgeois) society already embodies a high degree of 'reason', and that it provides the means for overcoming the individuals' state of 'indeterminacy'. However, it is only in his recent *Freedom's Right* that Honneth will elaborate the intersubjective nature of this societally embodied 'reason', in the form of specific normative claims that underpin social interaction in modern societal 'sub-domains' of the private sphere, the market economy and the political public sphere.

## Freedom's Right: Personal Autonomy as the Property of Intersubjective Relations

*Freedom's Right* is essentially an extensive elaboration of Honneth's main line of argument developed in *Suffering from Indeterminacy* – the critique of the liberal concept of negative freedom and the Kantian notion of moral autonomy in favour of the Hegelian account of 'social freedom'. Honneth elaborates his earlier Hegelian thesis, arguing that the greater part of everyday social interaction in modern societies consists of intersubjective relations of a 'substantive-ethical' kind. Some types of these relationships – personal relationships, capitalist economy, the public sphere – possess the potential of providing social actors with an experience of 'social freedom' (which I here interpret as an intersubjectivist conceptualization of personal autonomy), a potential that has been realized to a greater or lesser degree over the course of history. The two other forms of modern 'freedom' within social reality – the 'legal' or 'negative' freedom (absence of any form of coercion, often equated with 'freedom' as such in everyday language) and the 'moral' or 'reflexive' type (most commonly associated with the Kantian notion of moral autonomy), Honneth argues, can only exist and have meaning against the background of what Honneth terms the cultural 'lifeworld' of substantive-ethical relations.

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However, as Honneth suggests, these insufficient forms of human freedom are commonly mistaken for its 'totality', and the realm of the cultural lifeworld is generally treated as a realm of heteronomy, without any kind of emancipatory potential – this self-misunderstanding of modern social actors, according to Honneth, leads to certain forms of *social pathologies*<sup>1</sup>.

The main thrust of Honneth's 'normative reconstruction', in my understanding, is the conceptualization of specific 'normative claims' (*Ansprüche*) – the fundamental action-guiding principles that underpin the three spheres of social action – the private, the economic and the political – and constitute the essence of their 'freedom potential', although the empirically existing spheres are otherwise shot through with relations of power, status subordination and economic exploitation. Honneth's perspective here relies on an earlier definition of 'reconstructive social critique' articulated in 'Grounding Recognition', where Honneth identifies a 'gap' between the normative 'potentiality' and 'actuality' of the institutionalized action-guiding principles in the mentioned spheres. (Honneth, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Max Pensky argues, for example, that these pathologies can be understood as 'problems of solidarity': 'Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, as his mature theory of social solidarity, is crucial for Honneth's project', since 'it explores how an ethical conception of bourgeois civil society – the modern condition of political existence – generates *problems of solidarity* that at least for Hegel cannot be solved at the level of civil society itself' (Pensky, 2011:130).

According to Honneth's critique, liberal political philosophy has 'severed' the theorization of normative principles from the analysis of social reality, so that the former occurs in abstraction from empirical reality (Honneth, 2011: 14). Hegel's philosophy of right provides an alternative model: it formulates a theory of justice through the analysis of the actual, empirical 'ethical life' of modern societies, and reconstructs the normative-theoretical principles of justice on the basis of the existing normative claims that frame social interaction.

One of Honneth's foundational theoretical premises in *Freedom's Right* is that the notions of *justice* and *freedom* have become completely interimbricated over the course of modernity. In other words, all contemporary conceptual variations of 'justice' and the 'just society' crystallize themselves around one core idea – that of individual freedom, or personal autonomy (Honneth, 2011: 35). In the manner of Charles Taylor's hermeneutics of modernity, Honneth argues that the fusion of the discourses of justice and freedom has occurred gradually, over the course of the last several centuries, and that the concept of *personal autonomy* has exerted a tremendous 'gravitational force' with respect to all other concerns of moral-philosophical thinking (ibid: 36).

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The concept of *equality*, Honneth suggests, is actually a dependent variable – it is merely the means for attaining the fundamental *end* of freedom, in the sense that only an egalitarian social order can provide the institutional framework that safeguards everyone's autonomy. Honneth thus becomes able to draw a *line of continuity* between two forms of normative theory – the 'formal' and 'substantive' moral-philosophical standpoints.

Honneth's argument attempts to erase the 'unbridgeable chasm' between those theoretical standpoints concerned with protecting the irreducible pluralism of moral worldviews, on the one hand (all variants of liberalism), and those that put forward a substantive 'vision of the good life', i.e. social order that enables the 'flourishing' of all its subjects, on the other (various forms of 'perfectionism'). Honneth argues that within every modern theory of justice, freedom is the *telos* of justice, regardless of how both are conceptualized. The argument that Honneth develops might be represented by the following scheme:

Justice <-> Freedom <-> Self-Realization

The concept of freedom in Honneth's perspective is synonymous with personal autonomy, and it mediates between the two opposing paradigms, as they had, for example, been conceptualized by Nancy Fraser in her critique of Honneth, and enables him to draw a line of continuity. Honneth also makes one crucial ontological claim: that freedom is essentially a *property of intersubjective social action*, not a state of an individual self understood *in abstracto*, or the absence of undesirable circumstances. This argument enables

Honneth to claim that there is no categorial difference between those conceptualizations of freedom which are considered 'formal' in the above mentioned sense (e.g. liberal 'negative' freedom), and those which treat freedom as a state of individual self-fulfillment.

### The 'potentiality of freedom' – the insufficiency of the legal and moral forms of autonomy

These theoretical moves prepare the ground for Honneth's central argument that the Hegelian conception of freedom has significant advantages over the liberal and proceduralist standpoints. The normative-reconstructive enterprise that Honneth subsequently embarks upon should demonstrate that the negative and reflexive types of freedom, although indispensable for modern autonomous life, ensure a mere 'possibility' of living autonomously, whereas the thick interactive webs of 'ethical life' found in informal personal relationships, the economy and the political public sphere are the 'reality' of freedom in which social actors can, so to say, immerse themselves – they are the 'stuff' of which autonomous life is actually made.

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The first two types of freedom are 'parasitic upon' the latter, as they only enable a social subject to temporarily withdraw from the immediacy of the everyday webs of interaction, and to reflect upon her position within them – her particular choices and commitments – with the possibility of changing it. The crux of Hegel's argument that Honneth takes over is that the experience of personal freedom is best described as the feeling of 'being at one with oneself in another' ('bei sich Selbst sein im Anderen'); in other words, the situation in which the pursuit of our own 'purposes' is *facilitated*, rather than obstructed, by the other actors' pursuit of theirs, and vice versa (Honneth, 2011a: 113-114). In the language of Hegelian recognition theory, the experience of freedom is the equivalent of the interactive partners' mutual *recognition* of their *capability* to facilitate each other's self-realization within the institutionalized realms of social interaction.

The Hegelian concept of freedom, according to Honneth, is more comprehensive and more empirically adequate than the rival concepts of negative and reflexive freedom, and it is more *intuitively plausible* to us than the liberal and Kantian conceptualizations. As Honneth argues in a crucial paragraph of the book:

Hegel's idea of social freedom possesses a higher degree of correspondence with the pre-theoretical intuitions and social experiences than other modern representations of freedom. For socialized subjects, it must be a kind of self-understandable fact that the degree of their individual freedom depends on how responsive their contexts of action are with respect to their goals and intentions: the stronger their impression that their purposes are

supported, even carried forth, by those with whom they regularly interact, the more they will come to see their social environment as the space within which their self constantly expands (Honneth, 2011a: 113, my translation).

It is highly questionable, in my opinion, whether this notion of freedom is intuitively closer to ordinary social actors than the classical liberal and Kantian conceptualizations. Charles Taylor's hermeneutical analysis, for example, would rather suggest that we have 'learned', over the course of modernity, to think of freedom and autonomy primarily in terms of the liberal conception, as the property of an individual subject (Taylor, 2001). However, there is some degree of plausibility to Honneth's claim that it is impossible to theoretically exhaust the meaning of 'freedom' in all its empirical manifestations by defining it as a state-sanctioned, legally guaranteed set of rights that prevent coercion and remove particular obstacles to action.

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Honneth argues that the greater part of what we consider to be 'individual freedom' in contemporary societies does not come in the shape of legally codified rights, but is a property of a 'network of weakly institutionalized practices and customs, which give us a feeling of social confirmation or of a possibility to express ourselves freely' (Honneth, 2011a: 126, my translation). Although Honneth does not use recognition-theoretic language in this instance, he later clarifies that intersubjective relations within the ethical lifeworld are in fact relations of mutual recognition, those of the reciprocal confirmation of the actors' emotional needs, moral autonomy and their valuable roles within the process of social reproduction.

There is, according to Honneth, a strong tendency in contemporary societies to overlook the fact that our experience of freedom has a multi-faceted nature, and to reduce it, both in theories of justice and in public discourses of justification, to the realm of state-sanctioned rights. This reduction is the source of a number of social pathologies that Honneth subsequently discusses in his analysis of legal and moral freedom. As Honneth argues, a social pathology consists in the 'curtailing [Beeinträchtigung] of the social actors' rational capacities of taking part in diversified forms of social cooperation' (Honneth, 2011a: 157, my translation). The key of the definition is the adjective 'rational': according to Honneth, pathology differs from injustice in that it manifests itself as a 'reflexivity' disorder (or 'second-order disorder') – a situation in which some or most social actors are no longer able to comprehend the full meaning of the 'primary action- and value-systems' of a given social order (ibid).

Honneth's conceptualizations of 'legal' and 'moral' freedom, taken together, constitute the realm of the 'possibility', or 'potentiality' (Möglichkeit) of freedom, which only has meaning against the background of freedom's 'actuality' (Wirklichkeit), embodied in the three mentioned spheres of modern

ethical life. Let us first take a look at the most basic precondition of personal autonomy - the liberal concept of negative freedom. The realm of state-sanctioned rights that protects the individuals' freedom from coercion plays the role of providing the individuals with a 'space for the exploration of their penchants, preferences and intentions' (Honneth, 2011a: 129, my translation). The two fundamental instances of legal freedom are the *right to form contracts* and the *right to private property*. In line with Honneth's understanding of freedom as a quality of intersubjective relations, the realm of 'subjective rights' is a particular 'sphere of action'.

There is a fundamental contradiction within this sphere of action in Honneth's view, since legal subjects can only enjoy their right to negative freedom in privacy, as atomized individuals, while, on the other hand, they can only come to understand themselves as authors of these same rights in terms of a collective of citizens engaged in democratic will-formation. The 'negative' and political-cooperative dimensions are both constituents of the legally guaranteed freedom, but they establish two qualitatively different spheres of action. The tension between the private and the collective autonomy 'runs through the centre of the legal subject', as Honneth puts it (Honneth, 2011a: 144, my translation).

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The first, negativist meaning of legal freedom is purely procedural, while the second, cooperative one requires the actors to internalize an entire cultural pattern of democratic civic activism. In other words, it requires the existence of a certain form of *ethical life*, without which the actors would have no motivation to engage in collective will-formation in the first place (Honneth, 2011a: 130-131). The full exercise of personal autonomy within the action sphere of legal rights is, according to Honneth, only possible if an entire realm of *social freedom*, in the form of a 'democratic ethical life' is already in place (ibid: 119). Even the negative dimension of legal freedom is premised upon the existence of a differentiated ethical lifeworld. Echoing John Stuart Mill's argument, Honneth points out that without the rich variety of ethical worldviews which stand at the disposal of social actors, not only would there be little motivation for political action, but the process of ethical self-questioning, safeguarded by the liberal right of freedom from coercion, would hardly be possible at all.

In light of these arguments, Honneth further clarifies that the 'social' rights of the modern democratic welfare state should be understood in terms of the state providing social actors with the *material foundation* for effective exercise of personal autonomy - in other words, these rights are there to enable the realization of the mere 'potentiality' of negative freedom (Honneth, 2011a: 142). Honneth argues that any attempt at shrinking the volume of social rights guaranteed by the state or rendering them conditional upon



the 'good conduct' of the subjects destroys their fundamental meaning of the 'guarantors' of autonomy that every citizen is entitled to (ibid: 142-143). This argument, in my opinion, helps Honneth fend off the widespread criticism that he is a 'culturalist' concerned only with the symbolic preconditions of successful identity formation (e.g. McNay, 2008; Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Alexander and Lara, 1996)<sup>2</sup>.

As Honneth argues, modern developed societies are witnessing cases of a *social pathology* related to the sphere of legal freedom – social actors are increasingly prone to 'forgetting' the limitations and the particular role of legal freedom, and mistaking this particular type of freedom for its *totality*. Since Honneth explains social pathology as the reduction of the actors' multi-faceted capacities for rational action, the result of the above process is not a 'deformation' of the individual character, but an 'impoverishment' and 'rigidification' of social interaction and the actors' self-relation. The absolutization of legal freedom involves an excessive juridification of interpersonal relationships (Honneth, 2011: 162a). Echoing Habermas' argument that juridification is an instance of the systemic colonization of the lifeworld, Honneth argues that the individuals engaged in social interaction within such 'ethical' spheres as the family, education system, and the realm of cultural production in contemporary societies are ever more inclined to act exclusively as rights-bearers.

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### The Limits of the Kantian Conception of Moral Freedom

Unlike the sphere of legally guaranteed subjective rights, stepping into the realm of moral freedom does not require the actors to abstract from the wealth of their and their interactive partners' particularities. Moral freedom could be seen as the second step towards personal autonomy in Honneth's perspective: while the sphere of legal rights establishes a kind of firm outer boundary that protects a space of individual normative self-reflection from outside interventions, moral freedom represents the actual 'set of tools' with which the reflective process is carried out. However, moral freedom does not itself provide the material of reflection, which consists of substantive-ethical components.

The Kantian conception of reflexive freedom is centred around the argument that personal self-determination should have the form of 'self-legislation' (Selbstgesetzgebung), a practice which requires the actor to submit

2 In the rejoinder to his commentators in *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, Honneth most concisely defines his political position as Hegelian liberal: 'I, too, am convinced that the theory of recognition results in a "Hegelian" expansion of liberalism, which consists in adding social conditions of autonomy to the catalogue of rights that ensure autonomy' (Honneth, 2011b: 414).

her inherited moral worldviews and guidelines of action to the test of universalizability, and then reappropriate or discard them.

However, there is more to Kant's conception of moral freedom than the mere reconsideration of pre-given, internalized and inherited ethical determinations, as Honneth points out. The essence of reflexive freedom, in the Kantian sense of self-legislation, is the imperative that we arrange our whole lives, the entire network of our action-orientations, according to the reflexively appropriated universalist moral norms (Honneth, 2011a: 182). In other words, self-legislation does not only consist in applying the test of universalizability to particular situations, but requires one to define one's entire being through a form of acting consistently, and to gradually actualize one's normative self-image in the complexes of social action, 'expressing in practice what kind of person one wants to be' (ibid: 184, my translation). Moreover, this is not an *a priori* defined process, as the actor actually *learns* and decides upon what kind of moral subject she wants to be over the course of countless particular situations.

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As in the case of negative freedom, there are strong tendencies in contemporary societies according to Honneth to hypostatize reflexive freedom as the totality of personal autonomy. The exercise of moral autonomy, like that of legal freedom, presupposes the successful formation of a specific type of social subject – the 'moral personality' – through the process of socialization. In order to act as a morally autonomous subject, one has to abstract, not from the entire complex of one's ethical self, but from all the convictions and relationships that cannot pass the test of normative universalization – in other words, one has to abstract from the normative 'situatedness' of one's ethical self. As Honneth explains, we as moral actors are required to think and behave as if we did not already share with our interactive partners a 'particular pre-understanding regarding the institutional facts and norms' of our cultural context, in other words, as if our interlocutors were virtually 'understanding' and 'consenting to' our arguments in a cultural vacuum (Honneth, 2011a: 196).

This is another way for Honneth to point out that reflexive freedom, just as its legal variety, only makes sense within a context of ethical life. Moral reflection always happens within an ethical lifeworld, and it is supposed to help us find our way in the complexities of everyday interaction and become what we might call 'autonomous citizens' of such a lifeworld, not help us 'emancipate' ourselves from it. Moreover, moral autonomy in the form of self-legislation is not antithetical to the world of concrete social roles and ethical bonds<sup>3</sup>.

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3 This can also be understood in the sense that 'we *become autonomous* only through being taken care of within an autonomy-supporting culture', as Antti Kauppinen has argued (Kauppinen, 2011: 296).

The mentioned pathology of reflexive freedom results from the actors' inability to understand its limits and proper place, as outlined above. This means that the actors succumb to the seductive image of moral autonomy as completely sovereign individual self-legislation conducted in an ahistorical and context-insensitive manner. The actors then begin to lose from sight the fact that their everyday interactive contexts are already 'shot through' with moral reason to some extent.

### The 'actuality of freedom': privacy, economy and democratic will-formation as spheres of social freedom

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In light of the above considerations, one might say that the negative and reflexive types of freedom are there to provide social actors with the right to temporarily 'free themselves' from 'social freedom' itself. When we exercise negative and reflexive freedom, we do so in everyday interactive situations which require us to ascribe certain capacities to our interlocutors and vice versa. What, then, is the qualitative difference between acts of recognition within the first two forms of practicing personal autonomy, and those pertaining to the third one, without which, according to Honneth, the former would in fact be meaningless?

The Hegelian argument implies that freedom consists in an experience of 'being at one with oneself in another', i.e. the realization that the pursuit of one's goals in life is not only compatible with, but that it *facilitates* the self-realization of one's interactive partners, and is in turn *facilitated by it*. The crux of this argument is an ontological claim that freedom equals a state of emotional fulfilment that comes with intersubjective *recognition*. The principal difference between recognition in the spheres of legal and reflexive freedom, on the one hand, and in that of social freedom, on the other, is in the relationship between the act of recognition and the pursuit of the actors' individual goals. In the first two spheres, Honneth points out, recognition is only a *precondition* for the individual actors' concrete pursuits. I cannot exercise my right to negative freedom or moral reflexivity if the others do not recognize me as a person capable of comprehending and acting upon the principles that culturally constitute these types of freedom.

In the case of social freedom, embodied for example in relations of friendship, recognition has a more *constitutive* role – one cannot pursue a course of action as a *friend* except with respect to another person who *recognizes* her as a friend. In other words, being recognized as a friend is *intrinsic to the role of friend*, i.e. to the very practice of social freedom. In the spheres of social freedom, recognition is an end in itself, an act that creates a nexus between two individuals in the form of a friendly relationship (Honneth, 2011a: 224-5). Honneth argues that this form of intersubjective recognition is a 'moral'

phenomenon because it requires us to approach the other subject as if we had already *presumed the value* of her strivings and goals of action and understood the role that our own acts will play in their realization. Only those domains of social interaction that are constituted on the basis of such intrinsic morality can be considered spheres of social freedom. This criterion enables Honneth to single out personal relationships, economic action and the political public sphere as dimensions of social freedom in contemporary societies. These spheres, Honneth argues, are all characterized by the quality of 'complementary reciprocity' (komplementäre Wechselseitigkeit) (Honneth, 2011a: 269).

In Honneth's perspective, personal relationships are the framework for giving and obtaining *affective care*, the realm of economy should enable the actors to obtain *self-esteem*, while the public sphere offers the necessary room for experiencing *respect* of one's moral autonomy. The modern institution of 'romantic', interest-free friendship that, according to Honneth, has no 'historical precedent' in pre-modern forms of friendship, is one such institution that 'actualizes' the possibility of an anxiety-free expression and confirmation of one's emotions in an interactive context (Honneth, 2011a: 243). Modern friendship is a sphere of social freedom, Honneth argues, because it enables us to experience our feelings, impressions and intentions as 'presentable' and articulable. It offers us an experience of the 'setting free' of our will in friendly interaction – this experience of free, relaxed 'self-articulation' constitutes the essence of modern friendship, as Honneth points out (Honneth, 2011a: 249).

A similar role, in Honneth's understanding, is played by modern *romantic love*, a sphere of the 'free emotional interplay' between individuals, which provides a qualitatively distinct kind of affective care and the possibility of 'expressing' one's emotional self (and thereby affirming its reality). The sphere of the modern *nuclear family* is the third dimension of social freedom within the realm of personal relationships. The normative transformation of the nuclear family, as Honneth points out, is closely intertwined with the evolution of intimate relationships, more precisely their internal 'emancipation' from economic and status imperatives over the course of modernity.

The modern sphere of *economic interaction* (the capitalist market) is another sphere of social freedom. Hegel, and later Durkheim, were, according to Honneth, among the rare theorists who were able to conceive of the new economic sphere as the potential source of social *solidarity* through the actors' experience of *mutual interdependence*. The crucial premise of both thinkers' perspectives, in Honneth's view, is that market interactions can only function smoothly if the actors do not treat each other merely as bearers of legal contract rights, but also recognize each other as 'members of a cooperative

collectivity' (Honneth, 2011a: 329). These acts of recognition enable actors to begin experiencing 'solidarity' and are in fact the *precondition* for the actors' capacity to treat each other as legal persons – their existence thus implies that market economy can be theorized as a sphere of *social freedom* as well.

The nexus of solidarity that is established between the actors engaged in economic interaction enables them to experience the market as a sphere of social freedom, since their actions possess the quality of 'complementary reciprocity': the actors facilitate the fulfillment of each other's *material needs* through acts of economic exchange (Honneth, 2011a: 348). Honneth argues that the sphere of economic action has, since the establishment of capitalism, possessed a 'normative surplus', a promise of freedom that had to be 'actualized' through class struggle and other types of political conflict – this process, according to Honneth, is still far from completion.

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In Honneth's understanding, the *democratic public sphere* is a realm of social freedom *par excellence* – that is, if its potential could ever become fully actualized (Honneth, 2011a: 470-71). Similar to the realm of economic action, this sphere might give us a false impression that it is constituted purely on the basis of *legal* and *moral* freedom, as the liberal and proceduralist standpoints would have us believe. Honneth's perspective, in contrast, stresses that a 'democratic ethical life', a cultural pattern that teaches individuals to treat democratic will-formation as a worthwhile activity, is the very core of the political public sphere. Echoing the earlier mentioned conceptualization of democracy as 'reflexive cooperation', Honneth argues that political rights cannot be understood in relation to an isolated individual, they are inherently intersubjective in nature. Moreover, the public sphere should not be theorized in isolation from the previously analyzed ones of personal relationships and economic interaction. Whether or not this sphere of action stands up to its own potentiality of freedom depends, according to Honneth, on whether the debates within it are part of an overarching learning process that reinforces the struggles for the actualization of freedom in the other two spheres (Honneth, 2011a: 473).

Honneth bases his argument on the Durkheimian concept of 'constitutional patriotism', which presumes the readiness of social actors to interiorize the communicative roles of 'speakers' and 'hearers', enabling them to reciprocally 'express' their personal strivings and search for the best institutional framework to realize them (Honneth, 2011a: 500). Honneth points out that Durkheim's perspective is close to that of John Dewey, who conceived of democracy as the 'governance of reflexivity', a collective employment of the individual members' intelligence in the solving of problems that constantly arise within everyday life (ibid: 504-5).

For this purpose, the institutionalization of a democratic public sphere on the basis of legal and reflexive freedom is insufficient. What is required in order to realize the potentiality of collective will-formation is a long series of social struggles to remove the *substantive obstacles* to deliberation – class domination, gender subordination and cultural hierarchies. This should eventually result in the formation of a 'class-transcending, all-encompassing realm of communication', without which there can be no meaningful 'exchange of opinion' between social groups (Honneth, 2011a: 540, my translation). According to his perspective, the normative conception of the state that can be 'read out' of modern Western history is the one of 'reflexive organ', which the social actors engaged in democratic will-formation can use to practically implement their 'experimental' solutions to crucial societal problems (Honneth, 2011a: 570). These experimental solutions can, for example, take the shape of policies that are implemented through state intervention in the economic sphere, which Honneth considers to be the precondition for transforming the market economy into a domain of social freedom (ibid: 580).

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The third, final precondition for transforming the public sphere into a realm of social freedom, as I already indicated, is the existence of a particular 'political culture' (Honneth, 2011a: 612). In Honneth's view, democratic will-formation is impossible without a degree of already actualized social freedom. Social actors must already be able, to a certain extent, to experience freedom in the realms of economic action and personal relationships, before they can begin to understand themselves as citizens of a democratic state. Honneth argues that the mentioned 'all-encompassing' realm of communication can only be brought about by a kind of 'synergy' between the struggles for recognition in all three spheres of (potential) social freedom – the private, the economic, and the political.

### **Concluding Remarks: Hegelian Liberalism and Communitarianism**

As I tried to show, Honneth's main criterion for evaluating the normative progress achieved within the three spheres of 'social freedom' up to the present is the extent to which social actors have actualized the normative potential of 'complementary reciprocity' (symmetrical recognition) that each of these spheres harbours. The essence of Honneth's 'Hegelian liberalism' is the argument that it is only through participating in relations of symmetrical recognition within the three spheres of modern ethical life that social actors can actually experience personal autonomy in the full sense of the term – namely, they can experience 'social freedom' as a sense of 'complementary reciprocity' that characterizes their intersubjective relations. As Antti Kauppinen points out, Honneth's argument can also be interpreted in a negative

sense – it is primarily when we experience a *disruption* in the normal functioning of these intersubjective relations that we realize they are constitutive of our sense of personal autonomy:

Honneth's methodological starting point is a solid Hegelian insight: the dependence of autonomy on social relationships is revealed when the disruption of those relationships leads to a reduction in one's ability to make autonomous choices. The normally invisible intersubjective dependence manifests itself when there is a problem (Kauppinen, 2011: 267).

In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth's 'Hegelian liberal' perspective comes, in a normative-theoretical sense, considerably closer to communitarianism and the notion of 'situated criticism' than in any of his previous works, since the potential of 'complementary reciprocity' that the modern societal spheres of intimacy, economy and politics possess is a thoroughly historical phenomenon, whose origins can be located within the confines of Western modernity. Honneth effectively argues that, without being immersed in the universe of the historically evolved spheres of intersubjective ethical life, there isn't much that the subject can reflect upon, and the liberal and Kantian conceptions of freedom seem rather useless. A similar point has been made by communitarian political philosophers, notably Michael Walzer, who argues, in opposition to what he considers to be the 'postmodern' visions of 'radical freedom' as self-transformation, that the freedom to completely redefine oneself is meaningless unless it exists against the background of a complex web of already given cultural and ethical commitments (Walzer, 1983).

However, the crucial difference with respect to communitarianism consists in the fact that, in Honneth's perspective, the argument that the negative and reflexive types of freedom have little sense without pre-given commitments that stem from traditional lifeworlds assumes a very specific meaning, since in Honneth's view the ethical lifeworld, or, rather, the three spheres of symmetrical intersubjective recognition (the private, economic and public sphere) are the very *medium* of personal autonomy, not just the background against which it is exercised.

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## Marjan Ivković

Intersubjektivistička koncepcija autonomije:  
Honetova novohegelijanska kritika liberalizma

### Apstrakt

U radu se rekonstruiše novohegelijanska kritika klasične liberalne koncepcije autonomije u delu Aksela Honeta, kao i Honetova formulacija alternativnog shvaćanja lične autonomije kao karakteristike određenih formi intersubjektivnog priznanja, koja je najsystematičnije izložena u *Pravu slobode (Das Recht der Freiheit)*. Analiza *Prava slobode* se fokusira na rekonstruisanje Honetove kritike koncepcija 'negativne' i 'refleksivne' slobode (autonomije) artikuliranih u liberalnoj tradiciji, i kontrastira ove koncepcije sa pojmom 'socijalne slobode' (intersubjektivističke koncepcije autonomije) koji Honet artikulira putem detaljne 'normativne rekonstrukcije modernosti'. Rad se naposljetku osvrće na odnos Honetovog 'hegelijanskog liberalizma' i komunitarizma.

**Ključne reči:** Honet, liberalizam, autonomija, sloboda, intersubjektivnost, individualizam