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Two Attempts at Grounding Social Critique in „Ordinary" Actors' Perspectives: The Critical Theories of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth

Abstract *This paper analyzes two contemporary, „third-generation" perspectives within critical theory – Nancy Fraser's and Axel Honneth's – with the aim of examining the degree to which the two authors succeed in grounding the normative criteria of social critique in the perspectives of 'ordinary' social actors, as opposed to speculative social theory. To that end, the author focuses on the influential debate between Fraser and Honneth Redistribution or Recognition? which concerns the appropriate normative foundations of a „post-metaphysical" critical theory, and attempts to reconstruct the fundamental disagreements between Fraser and Honneth over the meaning and tasks of critical theory. The author concludes that both critical theorists ultimately secure the normative foundations of critique through substantive theorizations of the social, which frame the two authors' „reconstructions" of the normativity of everyday social action, but argues that post-metaphysical critical theory does not have to abandon comprehensive social theory in order to be epistmologically „non-authoritarian".*

Keywords: *Honneth, Fraser, critical theory, post-metaphysical, critique, domination, normativity, reconstruction*

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One defining characteristic of the tradition of critical theory ever since its founding in the 1930s has been a persistent focus on the phenomenon of *social domination*.[1] As a simultaneously explanatory and normative perspective on social reality, critical theory aims to articulate an evaluation of a given social order by theorizing a „gap" between the normative „potentiality" that this order harbours and the still deficient „actuality" of its current state of development. In that sense, critical theory anchors its normative perspective on social reality in a theorization of the „historically effective rationality".[2] Within a critical-theoretic perspective on

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2   According to Anton Leist, who, in my opinion, gives an excellent definition of critical theory, the *differentia specifica* of critical theory is a concept of a „basic structure" (he borrows the term from John Rawls out of context). As Leist explains: „for critical theory, a structure is basic insofar as it meets two requirements, one functional and

social reality, certain social phenomena are theorized as „unjust" or „pathological" – i.e. as instances of social domination – since they contribute to keeping the above mentioned *potentiality* of a given social order (e.g. to provide „reasonable conditions of life" to all social actors) from being realized (Adorno 2006). The critique of social domination defined in such broad terms, as the repression of a social order's normative potentiality of „reason" can be seen as a thread that runs through the „three generations" of critical theory, despite the fact that the contents of such critique have been profoundly transformed over time.

In this paper I focus on the „third generation" of critical theory that has been evolving since the late 1980s, and has for the most part evolved as a response to (or continuation of) the theoretical work of Jürgen Habermas.[3] Two among the most influential representatives of the third generation – the German social philosopher Axel Honneth and the American political theorist and feminist Nancy Fraser – will be in the focus of this paper. The paper aims to examine the degree to which contemporary critical theory, as represented by Fraser's and Honneth's perspectives, has managed to overcome the legacy of „epistemological authoritarianism" (Cooke 2006) that, despite all their differences, characterizes both the first-generation Frankfurt School's and Jürgen Habermas' social critique. By „epistemological authoritarianism" in critical theory I mean the tendency to secure the normative foundations of critique through a theorization of social reality that takes little, if any, account of the perspectives of „ordinary" social actors, more precisely their explanatory and normative efforts to make sense of their societal surroundings.

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another normative. First, a structure is functionally basic if it is supportive of, and causally responsive to, a representative part of society. Second, a basic structure is to be related, internally or externally, to a form of *rationality* which not only plays a constitutive role for the functional side of the basic structure, but also provides standards to *judge* this functional side" (Leist 2008: 335).

3   The image of „three generations" within critical theory is, of course, far from being unproblematic. There is an underlying ambiguity regarding the term „generation" – should we understand it in the sense of chronology (and institutional affiliation) or qualitative change? Joel Anderson, for example, accentuates the difficulty of identifying a coherent third generation of critical theory in both a thematic and an institutional sense, as the authors associated with this label are neither necessarily related to the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, nor dealing with a range of themes that can easily be identified in terms of a common agenda (Anderson 2000, 2011). One theoretical constant within this complex and meandering history of critical theory, as I indicated above, could be found in a *critique of domination* – in my view, this thread that runs both through the history of critical theory and the works of contemporary authors identified with the tradition justifies the use of the „three generations" term.

I Critical theory and the challenge of post-metaphysical thinking

The issue of epistemological authoritarianism in critical theory is closely related to the thematic field of „post-metaphysical" thinking, i.e. the problem of grounding social critique in a theoretical basis free of essentialist speculation about human nature, claims of insights into „trans-historical" facts about social reality such as a historical teleology, or a „transcendentalist" understanding of human reason (see Habermas 1990, Rorty 1989). The problem of post-metaphysical thinking, as one can observe, is deeply intertwined with the most fundamental debate in social epistemology – that between „nominalism" and „realism". A „metaphysical" grounding of critique in essentialist explanatory and normative claims seems to require a firmly realist grounding, whereas a post-metaphysical one would only be compatible with a nominalist one. Upon a closer look, however, the question of compatibility hinges upon a more precise definition of the term „post-metaphysical".

Within the contemporary debate regarding the proper foundations of theoretical social critique, two influential conceptions of post-metaphysical thinking have emerged: Jürgen Habermas' (weaker) and Richard Rorty's (stronger). The first conception has been articulated within the context of Jürgen Habermas' „linguistic turn" in critical theory, more precisely his attempt to normatively ground critical theory in a historically „immanent" concept of reason defined as the property of human linguistic interaction, as opposed to the first-generation Frankfurt School's reliance on a „transcendental" reason understood as a property of human consciousness (Habermas 1990, 1987, 1984). Habermas' „post--metaphysical" critical theory is free of substantive philosophical speculation regarding the universal characteristics of human nature that had still informed the Hegelian-Marxist basis of the first-generation critical theory. However, Habermas does not give up on the task of identifying universal, trans-historical properties of social reality (communicative reason or „instrumental action") and the corresponding universal causal mechanisms in history (communicative rationalization, or the emergence of the „systemic" logic of action-integration). Habermas in that sense remains to a considerable extent within the „epistemologically authoritarian" critical-theoretic tradition, despite his aims of formulating an „immanently" grounded post-metaphysical critical theory.

A stronger version of the term „post-metaphysical" can be found in the neo-pragmatist perspective of Richard Rorty (Rorty 1989), and is defined

by three main imperatives: that social critique be fully compatible with *epistemological nominalism*; that it fully acknowledge the *contingency of history* and abandon any form of historical teleology; and that the normative grounds of critique be free of any *substantive philosophical speculation* (regarding human nature, the ontology of the social, or any „trans--contextual" characteristics of social reality in general). Within the Rortian perspective, Habermas' grounding of critique in a „grand" social theory with universalist explanatory and normative ambitions would still be an example of metaphysical thinking, despite the historical „immanence" of the concept of communicative reason. It is only this more demanding definition of a post-metaphysical social critique that requires the critical theorist to overcome the remnants of epistemological authoritarianism.

One defining characteristic of the „third generation" of critical theory, I would argue, can be found in the fact that critical theorists associated with the latest, post-Habermasian generation are strongly animated by an ambition to live up to the more demanding, Rortian criteria of a post-metaphysical grounding of critique. This becomes particularly evident when one takes a look at the predominant trend within contemporary critical theory – the quiet abandonment of *social theory* as the means to securing the normative grounding of critique in favour of a purely *political-theoretic* one. The majority of the contemporary critical theorists, such as Seyla Benhabib, Maeve Cooke, Rainer Forst, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, have primarily engaged in elaborating the *political-theoretic* dimension of Habermasian critical theory, while the *social-theoretic* side has largely slid into the background (e.g. Benhabib 2004; Forst 2002, 2003; Cohen 2012; Cohen and Arato 1994). The reason for this trend, I would argue, should be looked for in the growing contemporary distrust of social theory as intrinsically epistemologically authoritarian due to its predominantly positivist orientation (Cooke 2006).

The theoretical perspectives of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, which I chose to focus on in this paper, definitely share the third-generation theorists' concern with establishing more demanding criteria for a post--metaphysical social critique than Habermas' (Fraser is foremostly a political theorist herself). However, with respect to this very concern, the two authors are rather unique within present-day critical theory: namely, instead of following the strategy of „cleansing" critical theory from the problematic social-theoretical foundations of critique, Fraser and Honneth both openly engage in comprehensive social theory. Their strategy of articulating a post-metaphysical social critique, in opposition to the

exclusively political-theoretic authors mentioned above, consists in an attempt to anchor their predominantly social-theoretical foundations of critique in the *perspectives of ordinary social actors*. In that sense, one crucial motive for my focusing on Fraser's and Honneth's theoretical projects in this paper is to engage with the question whether post--metaphysical critique can at all be anchored in a *social-theoretical* normative foundation.

As I will argue below, both Fraser's theory of social domination and Honneth's theory of „recognition" are meant to present complex and nuanced „reconstructions" of the actors' explanatory and normative perspectives on social reality. The theoretical reconstruction in both Fraser and Honneth aims at transforming the already „empirically effective normativity" of everyday social action into a systematic and (as a guarantee of post-metaphysical plausibility) philosophically „immanent" foundation of social critique. In Nancy Fraser's works the latter takes the shape of a „dualist" theory of justice grounded in two „folk paradigms" of justice, redistribution and recognition, while in Honneth's it assumes the form of a theoretical account of the „normative surplus"[4] within the empirically observable moral claims of social actors informed by institutionalized patterns of evaluation (see e.g. Fraser 1997; Honneth 1996).

The two author's strategies of grounding critique in ordinary actors' perspectives, however, diverge with respect to some central epistemological issues, and thus uncover their deeper theoretical disagreement regarding the very meaning and tasks of critical theory – this divergence is the central motif of the influential debate between Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, which will be in the focus of my analysis in the following sections. In order to examine the relative success of Fraser's and Honneth's attempts at grounding social critique in ordinary actors' perspectives, and grasp the essential disagreement between the two authors regarding the meaning of such „grounding", we will have to take a closer look at the debate.

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4   The Hegelian concept of „normative surplus" within Honneth's theory points to the fact that institutionalized historical patterns of intersubjective evaluation (recognition) that social actors use to orient themselves in everyday action, no matter how inega-literian, always harbour a potentiality of full equality understood as *complementary reciprocity* (*komplementäre Wechselseitigkeit*), since only an equally valued interactive partner can logically have the authority to „recognize" the other's socially superior status (this is why historical patterns of intersubjective recognition have always been unstable and fragile). This „surplus" of evaluative patterns has historically been articulated and realized through actors' experiences of injustice in everyday interactive situations and their collective struggles to reinterpret these patterns.

II The Fraser-Honneth debate: critical theory between deontological dualism and social-philosophical monism

Redistribution or Recognition? presents an important development within contemporary, third-generation critical theory (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Although the debate has the subtitle *A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, it is in fact a debate about the very meaning of critical theory, its epistemological and normative foundations, its diagnostic tasks and its political relevance. In order to grasp the logic of the debate and the central disagreement between Fraser and Honneth regarding the proper „post-metaphysical" grounding of social critique, we will have to first take a glance at the two authors' fundamental theoretical premises.

Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition

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In his mature works, Axel Honneth articulates the normative foundations of social critique in the form of a theory of „recognition". The task Honneth sets himself is an ambitious one – to overcome what he perceives as the limitations of Habermas' perspective by means of a new intersubjectivist approach to critical theory. His theory of recognition is supposed to present a more empirically adequate account of social action, grounded in the normative experiences of ordinary social actors in everyday interactive situations (their „expectations of recognition") and to the role of social conflicts („struggles for recognition") in the historical process of moral growth. The social-ontological core of Honneth's theory of recognition is the „action-theoretic" and „conflict-theoretic" premise that the production and maintaining of the social order takes place through the interaction between asymetrically positioned social groups, whereby the groups themselves are constituted through the collective articulation of the social actors' *normative experiences* of social reality. In developing his social-theoretical perspective, Honneth relies on an interpretation of the early Hegel's account of the „struggle for recognition" (Kampf um Anerkennung) (Honneth 1996).

Honneth's theory of social change conceptualizes history as a contingent, non-teleological process of moral growth, brought about by the historical struggles of social actors for the recognition of their claims to the greater *moral respect* and *cultural esteem* of their personalities. „It is individuals' claim to the intersubjective recognition of their identity", Honneth argues, „that is built into social life from the very beginning as a moral tension, transcends the level of social progress institutionalized thus far, and so gradually leads via the negative path of recurring stages of conflict

to a state of communicatively lived freedom" (Honneth 1996: 5). For Honneth, in contrast to Habermas, social actors do not merely interpret linguistic statements as true or false, right or wrong, truthful or insincere. Much more importantly, they *experience* the others' symbolic actions in a *normative* way, which involves their cognitive capacities, their emotional apparatus and their somatic reactions, fused within Honneth's perspective in the concept of an individual's „practical self-relation".

Honneth argues that social actors engaged in symbolic interaction do not merely strive towards an understanding free of coercion, but that, more fundamentally, they expect a certain positive disposition (attitude) from their interactive partners that Honneth terms „recognition" (Honneth 1996). Recognition is defined within Honneth's perspective as „a reaction with which we respond rationally to evaluative qualities we have learned to perceive in human subjects to the degree that we have been integrated into the second nature of our life-world" (Honneth 2002: 510). There are three basic dimensions of interpersonal recognition in Honneth's theoretical system: emotional care (primary relationships), legal respect (the actors' reciprocal recognition of the equal value of their *personhood*) and cultural *esteem* (the actors' reciprocal recgonition of the value of their particular abilities to contribute to the common good). The actors' *expectations* of recognition (love, respect and esteem) are framed by a historical *normative order of interaction* (an institutional system), which itself represents a temporary resolution of conflicts between social groups over the institutionalization of evaluative patterns (patterns of recognition). In Honneth's theory of recognition, the social order appears as a fragile institutionalized compromise – an outcome of the struggle between social groups with unequal symbolic and material power – regarding the scope and content of the evaluative patterns that structure social action.

On the one side, institutionalized relations of recognition follow a historical path of *legal universalization* and the *expansion of the contents of legal rights* – a gradual progress in our understanding of what it means to be a legal subject, brought about through social struggles. Relations of social esteem, on the other hand, have been growing in *inclusivity* due to social struggles, which allows for ever more action-orientations, life projects and visions of the good to be socially appreciated as valuable – or, more precisely, as equally valuable, which means that relations of esteem are also becoming ever more *egalitarian* (non-hierarchical). Honneth argues that the ever more symmetrical relations of recognition in modernity are not a consequence of the social actors' ability to directly „transcend"

the horizon of unsatisfactory, asymmetrical relations and envision a more fulfilling order of ethical life. Instead, Honneth claims that the negative experience of *disrespect* is the primary motivational factor for the group articulation of claims to recognition (in case the group possesses the necessary „shared semantics"), and that the subsequent social struggle is fought to eliminate the institutional arrangements that are seen as the causes of these experiences. Institutionalized patterns of recognition (legal norms and socially dominant cultural patterns) do not of themselves produce some kind of normative surplus, pointing towards the still unrealized possibilities of individual flourishing or visions of utopia; it is rather their constant insufficiency with regard to basic human needs that sparks off an open-ended and unpredictable struggle.

Nancy Fraser's „dualist" critical theory

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As I have tried to show, Axel Honneth's critical theory is centred around the core idea of the „normative surplus" of the historically evolving institutionalized patterns of emotional care, legal respect and cultural esteem that structure everyday social interaction and inform the *moral experiences* of social actors. The task of critical theory is to „reconstruct" the actors' experiences of disrespect in such a way as to make explicit and articulate systematically the „normative suprlus" of a given pattern of recognition upon which the actors are drawing in their critique of an existing institutional order (e.g. a recognition pattern of universal legal respect in a Western country whose emancipatory potential is „restricted" at the current state of development by being reserved for the citizens of a given political community, and does not apply to the immigrants). Although Honneth thus partially secures an „immanent" normative foundation of critique, his perspective is informed by an explicit (necessarily speculative) social ontology – ontology of recognition – and a theory of the human subject, which reintroduces a degree of epistemological authoritarianism into Honneth's perspective and does not fit comfortably with the above mentioned „demanding" conception of post--metaphysical thinking.

In contrast to Honneth, Nancy Fraser is nominally far more distrustful of a speculative social-theoretic grounding of critique: she sees little need for anchoring the normative criteria of post-metaphysical critique in a social ontology and a theory of the subject. Any such attempt would necessarily fail to do justice to the complexity of social reality and subsequently make us blind to the operations of power and dimensions of

inequality within the empirical world. For Fraser, the most important task is to avoid theoretical *reductionism* in conceptualizing justice and social domination. From her point of view, an overly ambitious social--philosophical attempt to articulate a theoretical „successor" to Habermas's work such as Honneth's theory of recognition is intrinsically inclined toward such reductionism. At a first glance, it appears as if Fraser engages in social-theoretical considerations only to reinforce and complement her more fundamental political-theoretic arguments – as I will argue, however, this nominally „modest" role of social theory within Fraser's perspective is transformed into a more foundational one as Fraser attempts to solve some internal problems regarding the normative justification of her „dualist" approach.

In *Justice Interruptus: Reflections on the Post-Socialist Condition*, Fraser tends, in a manner reminiscent of authors such as Richard Rorty, to dismiss the question of philosophically grasping the „essence" of concepts such as „justice" or „autonomy": „I shall leave to one side questions such as, do redistribution and recognition constitute two distinct, irreducible, *sui generis* concepts of justice, or alternatively, can either one of them be reduced to the other? Rather, I shall assume that however we account for it metatheoretically, it will be useful to maintain a working, first-order distinction between socioeconomic injustices and their remedies, on one hand, and cultural injustices and their remedies, on the other" (Fraser 1997: 16). As I see it, Fraser mostly endorses the pragmatist/late-Wittgensteinian epistemological orientation, which defines the concept of „truth" in consensual terms, and judges the truthfulness of a theoretical statement by asking whether the latter possesses any potential for providing a better orientation to social actors in their coping with empirical reality. According to such perspective, the adequacy of explanatory arguments in critical theory should be judged against the background of the urgent practical need of tackling injustice and domination.

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In *Redistribution or Recognition?* Fraser further elaborates this argument, claiming that her central normative concepts of *redistribution* and *recognition* „refer not to philosophical paradigms but rather to *folk paradigms of justice*, which inform present-day struggles in civil society" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 11). „Folk paradigms of justice", according to Fraser, „are transpersonal normative discourses that are widely diffused throughout democratic societies, permeating not only political public spheres, but also workplaces, households, and civil-society associations" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 207–208). In order to grasp Fraser's strategy

of grounding critique in ordinary social actors' perspectives, it is thus important to understand that her conceptual apparatus for articulating social critique is obtained through a reconstruction, not of the concrete social actors' normative claims, but of the *discursive practices* that are used by actors for justifying and criticizing the social order in everyday interactions. Fraser speaks, for example, of „the fund of interpretive possibilites available to agents in specific societies" (Fraser 1997: 152).

Fraser argues in *Justice Interruptus* that the contemporary world is characterized by a political-ideological climate which she terms „the post-socialist condition" (Fraser 1997). This condition comprises the following characteristics: 1) absence of a credible alternative vision to the existing (capitalist) order; 2) a changed „grammar of political claims-making" – from struggles for material redistribution within the welfare-state paradigm to the preoccupation with „identity politics" in the post-1989 world; and 3) „resurgent economic liberalism" (Fraser 1997: 1–4). The convergence of these three tendencies has led toward a „general decoupling of the cultural politics of recognition from the social politics of redistribution", which is reflected in the world of theory, as Marxist social critique is marginalized and replaced by various „culturalist" perspectives (Fraser 1997: 3). Charles Taylor is the paradigmatic example of such shift for Fraser, followed by Axel Honneth.

Fraser's perspectival dualism of „redistribution" and „recognition" is *analytical* in nature. She treats this distinction as legitimate since the two forms of injustice pertaining to these categories – socio-economic and cultural – have proven *mutually irreducibl*e in the real world. Fraser demonstrates this quite persuasively with examples such as „the case of a white, male, skilled labourer who loses his job due to a corporate merger", on the one hand, and that of „an African-American Wall Street banker who can't get a taxi to pick him up after work", on the other (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 34–35).The critical-theoretic enterprise begins with the attempt to disentangle the empirical interimbrication of the „economic" and „cultural" orders which simultaneously structure any particular social phenomenon. It is through a process of *abstraction* from empirical complexity that the theorist reaches a „conceptual schema" that can „illuminate" the empirical world (Fraser 1997: 12–13). Not only is it unnecessary, in Fraser's view, to provide ultimate philosophical „definitions" of the economic and the cultural, it is also of secondary importance how far the practically useful analytical categories are „actually" empricially adequate: „and let us bracket whether this view of class fits the actual historical

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collectivities that have struggled for justice in the real world in the name of the working class" (1997: 17).

For Fraser, *class* is one fundamental mode of social differentiation, rooted in the political-economic structure of society, while the *status group* is another such mode rooted in the cultural (symbolic) order, i.e. in „social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication" (Fraser 1997: 14). Every social actor has a particular location within both axes of differentiation, so that her overall standing within the social hierarchy is the composite of the two positions. The „actually existing" social groups are often subjected to both economic and cultural injustices simultaneously. The idea of „multiple cross-cutting axes of subordination" is central to Fraser's pluralist approach to domination: most social actors will be privileged along certain axes and dominated along others. On the basis of her „perspectival dualism", Fraser theorizes injustice as a phenomenon that is further differentiated within both its socio-economic and its cultural dimension.

Socio-economic injustice, according to Fraser, encompasses exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation, whereas *cultural*, or *symbolic injustice*, includes „cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own)", „nonrecognition (being rendered invisible by means of the authoritative representational, communicative and interpretative practices of one's culture)", and „disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions)" (Fraser 1997: 14). A perspectival-dualist approach treats social reality as shot through with both forms of internally differentiated injustices. The two dimensions of injustice, however, always have to be analytically disentangled, since they require two distinct kinds of „remedies" – material redistribution and cultural recognition – and it is up to empirical social research to determine which particular (individual or collective) actors need which kind of remedy in which situations.

III Normative foundations of critique between the actors' moral experiences and the folk paradigms of justice

As I would argue, the question that lies at the heart of the debate between Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth assumes the following form: can critical theory develop an „immanent" normative grounding of critique in its approach to the contemporary forms of social domination (both Fraser

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and Honneth agree that this has to remain the defining trait of critical theory today) without resorting to philosophically substantive speculation about human nature or the goals of social action? Both Fraser and Honneth subscribe to the premise that social critique has to be anchored in an instance of the „empirically effective normativity" – the social actors' claims to recognition in Honneth's case and the „folk paradigms of justice" (redistribution and recognition) in Fraser's. However, Fraser defends an argument that a refined *deontological* reconstruction, that provides a conceptual apparatus for an empirically sensitive theorization of social domination in all its complexity, is the only legitimate basis of social critique. Honneth, on the other hand, defends his fundamental theoretical intuition that some form of philosophical anthropology and a corresponding theory of self--formation, corroborated by social-scientific findings, are indispensable for any normative evaluation of social arrangements.

The „metatheoretical" disagreement between Fraser and Honneth regarding their basic visions of critical theory is reflected in a number of theoretical oppositions that emerge as the two authors move between different levels of discussion: methodological, moral-philosophical, social-theoretical, and political. Methodologically, Fraser relies on a „perspectival dualism" which enables her to differentiate between the social actors' claims to „redistribution" and „recognition" in her moral-philosophical reconstruction of everyday normativity; and to differentiate between the *systemically* and *culturally* integrated societal domains at the level of social theory. Honneth, in contrast, defends a methodological „monism", which, at the level of the normative foundations, treats all types of the social actors' normative claims as variants of the fundamental human need for recognition, and understands all domains of social reality as „normatively" integrated in social-theoretical terms[5].

When it comes to social critique and the political implications of critical theory, Fraser defends a two-dimensional approach to the critique of social domination in contemporary capitalist societies: a critique of *the distribution of material resources* in capitalism informed by political economy, and a critique of *status subordination* grounded in hierarchical cultural patterns of evaluation. Honneth, on the other hand, argues that all political action should be directed towards expanding the „horizons

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5   Since Honneth combines a strong (substantive) normative approach to social critique with an *explanation* of societies as thoroughly „normatively integrated", his position has been defined by authors such as Rainer Forst and Nicholas Smith as „anti anti-normativist" (Forst 2011; Smith 2011).

of interpretation" of the institutionalized patterns of intersubjective re-
cognition (Fraser and Honneth 2003). As Maeve Cooke points out with
regard to the already mentioned idea of the „normative surplus" in Hon-
neth's theory, „Honneth attributes a semantic surplus (*Überschuss*) to
the idea of social equality, which may gradually be opened up by way of
innovative interpretations without ever being completely or finally de-
terminate" (Cooke 2006: 65).

The Fraser–Honneth debate is thus framed by the question whether post-
-metaphysical critical theory should be normatively grounded in a recon-
struction of the „moral experiences" of social actors complemented by
substantive social-theoretical speculation (Honneth's position); or in a
reconstruction of the depersonalized „folk paradigms of justice", which can
illuminate the complex reality of social domination and provide guidance
for political action without having to reflect on the „essence" of concepts
such as justice and participation (Fraser's standpoint).

Nancy Fraser's most fundamental criticism charges Honneth with nor-
mative „sectarianism" (particularism), as she argues that Honneth uses
a speculative moral-psychological concept of human „flourishing" (ade-
quate emotional, legal and cultural recognition) to ground his social
critique. Another central line of critique, strongly related to the previous
one, addresses the question of Honneth's theoretical *reductionism*. Fraser
focuses on one of Honneth's central arguments: that all types of the social
actors' normative claims, and all forms of injustice in contemporary ca-
pitalism, can be traced back to the anthropologically grounded human
need for intersubjective *recognition*. Fraser criticizes this conception as
normatively „essentialist", empirically reductionist *vis-a-vis* the plurality
of the social actors' motivations for dissent, and social-theoretically re-
ductionist with respect to the economy/culture distinction.

In Honneth's perspective, recognition pertains to the fundamental human
need for developing an undistorted practical self-relation, which, as we
saw, translates into three basic normative claims (claims to affective care,
respect for one's moral autonomy and esteem of one's contribution to
the common good). Fraser dismisses this theorization as a form of psycho-
logism, and warns against the „reduction of political sociology to moral
psychology" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 201), arguing that Honneth has
„equated immanence with subjective experience", since he treats the actors'
moral experiences of denied recognition as an adequate empirical basis
for a normatively universalist social critique (2003: 202). Honneth's re-
liance on social-scientific evidence in the reconstruction of the normativity

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of everyday action is „dubious", in Fraser's view, as Honneth neglects the empirical variety of the actors' experiences of suffering and discontent. In line with her pluralist approach, Fraser argues against the grounding of normative theory in one type of subjective human experience.

Instead of Honneth's „moral-psychological" approach to grounding critique, Fraser proposes that we understand recognition as pertaining to the *social status* of actors. She argues that critical theory has to conceptualize symbolic injustices in terms of *status subordination*, a product of the *institutionalized value patterns* that define „the relative standing of social actors" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 29). The most important question is whether such value patterns institutionalize status equality by „constructing" social actors as *peers* – only in such case can we speak of adequate mutual recognition. In the case of misrecognition, we are, according to Fraser, not dealing with the distortion of the actors' *identities*, but with status subordination through institutionalized patterns of cultural value.

There is more than one reason, in Fraser's view, why we should endorse the status model of recognition and the norm of participatory parity instead of Honneth's „moral-psychological", self-realization model and the norm of undistorted practical self-relation. Fraser argues that Honneth's moral-psychological foundations of critique, unlike her own, are vulnerable to *scientific discreditation* due to his reliance on social-scientific research. She argues as well that her „deontological" approach based on the reconstruction of folk paradigms of justice is „morally binding under modern conditions of value pluralism", whereas Honneth's is unavoidably sectarian for anyone who does not share his own neo-Hegelian view of self-constitution through recognition. With respect to her central norm of *participatory parity*, Fraser points out that „a society whose institutionalized norms impede parity of participation is morally indefensible *whether or not they distort the subjectivity of the oppressed*" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 32). For Fraser, participatory parity is not just a theoretical norm, but „serves as an idiom of public contestation and deliberation about questions of justice" (2003: 43). Critical theory must not get in the way of deliberation, but there is no need for a total retreat in the Rortian sense either. A proper balance has to be found, as the theorist has to identify the right ratio of theoretical and „dialogical" reasoning in dealing with a particular case of injustice.

The main thrust of Axel Honneth's response to Fraser's critique is the argument that the goal of „articulating" and „morally justifying" the normative claims of social actors should be pursued by *recognition-theoretic*

means rather than the deontological reconstruction of the actors' discursive practices, as the former approach „establishes a link between the social causes of widespread feelings of injustice and the normative objectives of emancipatory movements" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 113). This link is supposedly missing in Fraser's proceduralist perspective, because her „folk paradigms of justice" are not conceived in relation to subjective experience. Honneth criticizes Fraser's „reconstruction" of the two folk paradigms of justice by arguing that Fraser actually grounds social critique in the normative claims of the present-day social movements, thus affirming the „prevailing level of political-moral conflict in a given society" (2003: 115). His critique is centred around his thesis regarding the „prediscursive morality" of the working class and the critique of Habermas' discourse ethics developed in the early article „Moral Consciousness and Class Domination" (Honneth 1995). Honneth argues that Fraser's grounding of critique in the normative claims of social movements neglects the fact that these claims are, so to say, only the „tip of the iceberg", since most experiences of injustice do not reach the level of discursive articulation.

Honneth introduces the concept of „pre-political suffering" into his perspective, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's *The Weight of the World* (Bourdieu *et al.* 2000), and argues that „the overwhelming share of cases of everyday misery are still to be found beyond the perceptual threshold of the political public sphere" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 118). For this reason, moral-psychological considerations have to be introduced into the normative foundations of critique independently of the language that is used by the social movements themselves. Honneth thus argues that his definition of the empirically effective normativity in terms of the pre-discursive moral experiences of injustice, as it were, goes „deeper" than Fraser's reconstruction of folk paradigms of justice.

As a response to Fraser's central charge of normative „sectarianism", Honneth tries, in a more explicitly *political-theoretic* line of argument, to defend a claim that social critique is impossible without „anticipating a conception of the good life" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 114). For Honneth, the question of how resilient Fraser's perspective actually is with respect to normative „foundationalism" assumes the following form: whether Fraser can normatively justify her concept of participatory without at all having to draw upon an ethical idea of the good life (2003: 172). In Honneth's view, Fraser's concept of participatory parity has an „unclear in--between position" with regard to proceduralist and teleological variants of liberalism. If Fraser wants to defend a Habermasian understanding of

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„participation", Honneth argues, this would require a „thinner" conception of participation thant Fraser's demanding one, which, according to Honneth, cannot do without ethical considerations regarding the goals of social action (2003: 178).

This argument enables Honneth to propose that Fraser's distinction between her own „universalist" and Honneth's „sectarian" normative foundations of critique obtained through the reconstruction of the actors' normative perspectives is an oversimplification and that determining the relative degree of „formalism" with respect to „substantivism" in both theoretical standpoints is a question of nuance. To that extent, both perspectives should ultimately be judged by social actors in terms of how convincing they find the necessarily substantive theoretical arguments of the two authors.

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In her final rejoinder, Fraser dismisses Honneth's claim that his normative foundations lie „at a deeper level" than her own. As she sees it, Honneth „professes to find a body of pristine experience in inchoate everyday suffering that has not been politicized" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 203). This is problematic, in Fraser's view, first because it reduces the variety of the actors' motives for discontent, and, more importantly, because it neglects the fact that critical theory cannot capture the pre-discursive subjective experience of injustice within social reality. By stressing the „decentred" nature of the folk paradigms of justice, Fraser counters Honneth's argument that her social critique is grounded in the claims of organized political movements. Fraser insists on the thoroughly discursive nature of social reality: even the „reactive" moral consciousness of the less educated social strata has to be expressed linguistically by means of normatively charged terms, and it is precisely such terms that constitute the two „decentred" paradigms of redistribution and recognition. Fraser argues that both her reconstruction of the folk paradigms and Honneth's phenomenology of moral experiences must draw upon the everyday discursive articulations of injustice.

Fraser agrees with Honneth that her principle of participatory parity is „thicker" than the classical liberal norm of equality of opportunity, because ensuring that all actors can fully participate in social interaction requires that all of them be provided with the necessary *means* – both the economic resources and the adequate recognition of their cultural identity. However, she insists that her conception is grounded in the „central moral idea of modern liberalism: the equal autonomy and moral worth of human beings" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 228). Participatory

parity then appears in Fraser's perspective as a historically dynamic norm, growing in substance over time and gradually filling the empty framework of the liberal principle of equal autonomy.

Anti-foundationalist critique and epistemological realism: the tension within Fraser's standpoint

There is one important ambiguity in Fraser's perspective which I would like to draw attention to and which ultimately leaves the „social-ontological persuasiveness" (i.e. empirical adequacy) of her social critique, rather than the fact that it is grounded in „folk paradigms of justice", as the most important criterion for comparison with Honneth's work. Honneth's questioning of Fraser's „deontology" in his response implies that Fraser's concept of participatory parity is not free of normatively substantive components. In her rejoinder, Fraser tries to defend participatory parity as a „deontological and substantive" concept at the same time, arguing in opposition to Honneth that the two are not intrinsically antithetical (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 230). In light of Fraser's self-positioning, I would argue that a considerable tension can be identified within her standpoint which is related to her stern defense of the „material-symbolic" dichotomy at the level of social theory and her treatment of systemic (economic) rationality as categorially distinct from the symbolic (cultural) order of a society. As I would argue, Fraser's insistence on the dichotomy results in a contradiction between her *social-theoretical* considerations, on one hand, and her anti-foundationalist *epistemology* and methodological approach, on the other.

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The tension becomes particularly evident with Fraser's decision to relativize the importance of the folk paradigms of justice for grounding social critique. Since the „post-socialist condition" of the contemporary world has resulted in a marginalization of the struggles for redistribution, Fraser finds it necessary to introduce a *second* basis for her normative-theoretical approach, arguing that the folk paradigms of justice do not present an „incorrigible foundation from which to derive the normative framework of Critical Theory" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 208).

One independent way in which a theorist can critically interrogate the actors' normative claims, according to Fraser's perspective, is to „evaluate their adequacy" by determining „whether a society's hegemonic grammars of contestation are adequate to its social structure" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 208). This, according to Fraser, has not been the case within the political-ideological constellation of „post-socialism", where one grammar of contestation, namely recognition, becomes absolutized. Confronted

with such situation, the theorist who follows Fraser should bring forth a more „adequate" conception of social reality than the one used by the actors themselves in their political struggles against domination. The social-theoretical argument regarding the mutual irreducibility of the two dimensions of social reality (systemic and cultural) is put forward by the theorist in order to correct the inadequacy of the empirically effective grammars of contestation – it is no longer itself rooted in the latter. In other words, the social-theoretical argument now rests on a firmly *epistemologically realist* grounding.

This theoretical move, in my view, introduces a significant degree of tension into Fraser's perspective since the social-theoretical dichotomy of the systemic and cultural logics of integration should not normally be understood in realist terms in Fraser, as „corresponding" to empirically separate domains of social reality, but as a social-theoretical „tool" that best complements the moral-philosophical conceptual pair of redistribution and recognition, which is understood in a pragmatist (nominalist) spirit.[6] However, in Fraser's account of the corrective role of an independent social-theoretical perspective as opposed to the two folk paradigms, the „truth" of concepts such as the „systemic rationality" of the economic sphere can no longer be understood in consensual terms, but rather in the sense of „correspondence".

In my understanding, Fraser combines a consensual (nominalist) theory of truth in her epistemology with a predominantly representational-realist approach in her social theory in order to safeguard her normative foundations of critique from what Honneth had defined as the danger of „affirming the prevailing level of political-moral conflict in a given society" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 115). However, if critical theory should fall back on a „superior insight" into the social structure once the folk paradigms of justice have become insufficient, the material/symbolic dichotomy can no longer be theoretically defended as „perspectival", in the sense that it only reflects a more fundamental normative dichotomy of redistribution and recognition. This is because the latter itself should depend on the existence of two distinct „grammars of contestation" in Fraser – if one of these has all but disappeared, the hermeneutical circle

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6   This tension in Fraser is identified concisely by Rainer Forst: „what are the grounds of Fraser's distinctions? For the most part, they are pragmatic. That is, they are useful for both directing and keeping fluid the practice of normative criticism ... At the same time, however, Fraser appeals to social-theoretic considerations not directly tied to pragmatic criteria to back up the particular distinctions she employs. This becomes clear when we consider what Fraser means by 'the economy'" (Forst 2011: 331).

is broken. In other words, the *social-theoretical* dichotomy of the material and the symbolic now assumes primacy in the normative grounding of critique. Consequently, the most important criterion for judging the normative validity of Fraser's social critique becomes the *empirical adequacy* of her dualist social theory – the „social-ontological persuasiveness" of her perspective, as Honneth would put it.

IV Conclusion

On the grounds of the above considerations, I would finally like to revisit the question of the post-metaphysical plausibility of Fraser's and Honneth's perspectives, in light of Fraser's powerful critique of Honneth's „moral-pyschological" reductionism. The central point of my „defense" of Honneth is that Fraser misinterprets one crucial aspect of Honneth's normative perspective – his conceptualization of *social injustice* (and domination). Fraser considers Honneth to be a „psychological reductionist", as she argues that Honneth reduces structural injustices to „individual psychological harm", conceptualized in terms of misrecognition.

To begin with, and contrary to Fraser, I would argue that normative „immanence" is not equated with subjective experience in Honneth's perspective, since the concept of recognition (the three-dimensional normative one, not the „elementary" one) is historically and institutionally mediated in Honneth, not purely „psychological", and his social critique is primarily grounded in the normative „surplus" of the existing recognitive patterns, rather than the experience of disrespect. Furthermore, Fraser reads Honneth's perspective as suggesting that „everyone always needs their distinctiveness recognized", and argues that „such an approach" – in comparison to the status model – „cannot explain why those occupying advantaged positions in the status order, such as men and heterosexuals, usually shun recognition of their (gender and sexual) distinctiveness" (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 46). However, Honneth's concept of the struggle for recognition does not pertain to the cultural identity or „distinctiveness" of social actors.

In Honneth's theory, an actor's legitimate „claim to recognition" pertains either to the universal properties of human beings (the need for emotional care and for respect of personal autonomy) or to particular abilities of contributing to the common good (the need for cultural esteem), but not to one's particular „identity" in terms of membership in a social group or cultural community. More importantly, not every claim to recognition in the above sense is *justified* within Honneth's perspective simply because it expresses a fundamental human need. In order to be endorsed by critical

theory, a claim to recognition has to pass the test of compatibility with the two (ongoing) processes of emancipation that Honneth identifies in history: the process of *legal universalization and equalization* and the one of *progressive cultural individualization and inclusion*.

In that sense, the moral „growth“ of recognitive relations over the course of history does not translate in Honneth’s theory into a normative imperative that everyone should be „equally recognized“. As Simon Thompson argues in *The Political Theory of Recognition*, Honneth’s ideal of the „good society“ implies that the institutionalized relations of recognition should become „symmetrical“ rather than „equal“, i.e. that no social actor should be „constituted“ as less worthy of particular kinds of affective, legal or cultural recognition than anyone else (Thompson 2006). I would agree with Thompson that Honneth’s perspective on social injustice and domination is much closer to Fraser’s than it might seem, since Honneth argues that the institutionalized patterns of asymmetrical recognition are responsible for „constituting“ social actors as unequal in the same way as the „institutionalized value patterns“ give rise to status subordination in Fraser’s perspective. An asymmetrical pattern of recognition can thus actually be criticized as unjust within Honneth’s perspective without necessarily taking into consideration the psychological harm it inflicts on the discriminated subjects. This, I would argue, is the core of Honneth’s perspective on social domination, which resonates considerably with Fraser’s concept of „status subordination“.

On the other hand, Honneth’s concept of recognition, unlike Fraser’s norm of participatory parity, is social-ontological as well as political-theoretic, which supposedly renders Honneth’s perspective normatively „sectarian“ in comparison to Fraser’s, since its normative conclusions cannot be binding for anyone who rejects Honneth’s social ontology as empirically inadequate. However, I have argued that Fraser also introduces social-ontological arguments into her theory „through the back door“, so to say, as she (ultimately) grounds her material/symbolic dichotomy in epistemological realism. In the end, Fraser finds herself in the same situation as Honneth – her social critique is not normatively binding for anyone who rejects her dualist social ontology of the „economy“ and „culture“ as empirically inadequate. I have tried to show that, despite their shared effort of grounding critique in the perspectives of ordinary actors and thus articulating an epistemologically non-authoritarian post-metaphysical critical theory, it is after all the *empirical adequacy* of Fraser’s and Honneth’s *social theories* that presents the most important (if implicit) criterion for judging the normative validity of the two authors’ social critiques.

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The ultimate grounding of Fraser's and Honneth's normative perspectives in social theory points to the limits of critical theory's capacity to respond to the demanding, Rortian criteria of post-metaphysical thinking – critical theory cannot fully endorse a completely nominalist and anti-positivist epistemological position. The abandonment of the core critical-theoretic aim of securing the normative foundations of critique through an explanatory theorization of the social reality would, in my view, result in the reduction of critical theory to moral-philosophical social critique. However, if the normative criteria of critique cannot be fully grounded in the reconstruction of the ordinary actors' perspectives, the most important guarantee of „anti-authoritarianism" in critical theory consists precisely in its readiness to submit its arguments to the test of „persuasiveness" with respect to these very actors: as Maeve Cooke has argued persuasively, the „claims to validity" of critical theory should not be treated as „empirically verifiable scientific facts; rather they are contestable claims that are subject to assessment in public processes of inclusive, open-ended, and fair argumentation in a suitably historicist, comparative, and concrete manner" (Cooke 2006: 196).

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Marjan Ivković

Dva pokušaja utemeljenja društvene kritike u perspektivama
„običnih" društvenih aktera: kritička teorija Nensi Frejzer i Aksela Honeta

Apstrakt

U radu se analiziraju dve savremene perspektive unutar „treće generacije" kritičke teorije – perspektive Nensi Frejzer (Nancy Fraser) i Aksela Honeta (Axel Honneth) – sa ciljem da se ispita mera u kojoj pomenuti autori uspevaju da normativne osnove svoje društvene kritike utemelje u stanovištima tzv. običnih društvenih aktera, umesto u spekulativnoj društvenoj teoriji. S tim ciljem na umu, autor se fokusira na uticajnu debatu Frejzerove i Honeta *Redistribution or Recognition?*, koja razmatra pitanje odgovarajućih normativnih osnova „postmetafizičke" kritičke teorije, i nastoji da rekonstruiše temeljna razmimoilaženja između dva autora u pogledu samog značenja i osnovnih zadataka kritičke teorije. Autor zaključuje da i Frejzerova i Honet u krajnjoj liniji razvijaju normativne temelje kritike putem supstantivnih teorizacija društvene stvarnosti, koje u stvari definišu okvire njihovih „rekonstrukcija" normativnosti svakodnevnog društvenog delanja. Ipak, autor na kraju argumentuje da postmetafizička kritička teorija ne mora nužno da odustane od pokušaja sveobuhvatne teorizacije društvene stvarnosti kako bi izbegla epistemološki „autoritarno" pozicioniranje.

Ključne reči: Honet, Frejzerova, kritička teorija, postmetafizičko, kritika, dominacija, normativnost, rekonstrukcija