

Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life

by Axel Honneth

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by Loughlin Gleeson

Axel Honneth's most recent work, *Freedom's Right* [henceforth *FR*], originally published in German under the title *Das Recht der Freiheit* (Suhrkamp, 2011), represents an attempt to 're-actualise' the theory of justice first proposed in Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* [*PhR*].¹ The goal set by Honneth in *FR* is to reconstruct from within modern liberal-democratic societies, those norms, practices and institutions that can be justified as 'rational' on the basis of their ability to secure the ethical conditions necessary for the realisation of *individual freedom*.² His methodological procedure is therefore one of 'normative reconstruction,' according to which normative legitimacy can be distilled from extant social principles and conditions (6). This procedure presents itself not just as an alternative to the established approaches within contemporary theories of justice and their respective aporias—at once remedying the abstractness of Kantian, 'context-independent' accounts (Rawls) and retaining the kind of critical distance needed for strong moral evaluation seemingly absent in hermeneutical, or strictly 'context-immanent' accounts (Walzer)—but also as a means of reviving Hegel's practical philosophy today without relying on its underlying metaphysico-ontological claims.³

In Section I of *FR* Honneth details the historical background of the concept of freedom to serve as the basis of his normative reconstruction, distinguishing between 'negative', 'reflexive' and 'social' freedom. Negative freedom is defined largely in terms of the absence of external constraints à la Hobbes and more recently Nozick. Reflexive freedom, by contrast, foregrounds the individual's capacity for self-determination, whether conceived in terms of 'autonomy' (Kant/Habermas) or 'self-realisation' (Herder/Frankfurt). While the latter provides a clear alternative to the former and its core defect, which is that it fails to account for the 'internal' conditions of freedom beyond that of arbitrary 'free choice' (*Willkür*), reflexive freedom remains cut off from the kind of 'objective' conditions that Honneth's conception of social freedom takes as its starting-point: namely, that individuals owe their freedom to other subjects with whom they are necessarily situated in the context of a historically emergent 'ethical life' (*Sittlichkeit*). Following Hegel, social freedom designates the *relational*

achievement of 'being-with-oneself-in-the-other' (*bei sich Selbstsein im Anderen*).⁴ Only when, under the proper institutional conditions, subjects regard one another as necessary for the realisation of their own reflexive aims and goals, mutually recognising each other in turn, can they both be considered truly free.⁵ In consequence, a truly 'just' society is one in which subjects are granted equal opportunity to participate within 'freedom-guaranteeing' (*freiheit-verbürgenden*) institutions comprised of mutually recognised and recognising subjects (61). Against much of contemporary thinking then, Honneth claims that justice cannot be reduced to a set of hypothetically ideal (contractarianism) or merely formal (proceduralism) criteria.⁶

Honneth then proceeds in Section II to normatively reconstruct two kinds of freedom within modern societies that represent necessary, though limited conditions for individual freedom. As the structural correlates of negative and reflexive freedom respectively, 'legal' and 'moral' freedom are *necessary* in the sense that they safeguard the 'possibility' of individual freedom; they are however *limited* for the precise reason that they both abstract from the 'thick' context of institutionalised recognitive relations within which true, social freedom is realised. The necessity of legal freedom derives from the fact that it secures the fundamental rights and responsibilities required for basic subjective freedom (i.e., the protection of one's life and property). Moreover, through the exercise of moral freedom autonomous subjects are able to reflect critically on a given state of affairs in the light of universal normative standards (categorical imperative, say) that are not reducible to any particular historical or cultural context. When taken on its own or absolutised, legal freedom can lead to 'pathologies', understood as social disorders that 'impact subjects' reflexive access to primary systems of actions and norms' (86), such as the reduction of human subjectivity and therewith any external obligations and relations to merely *abstract* legalistic concepts or claims. Pathologies within moral freedom manifest themselves in the form of dogmatic moralism (as Hegel noted) and even supposedly morally justified acts of terrorism, where both defects share in common a fundamental disconnect with socially accepted practices and beliefs.

Finally, Section III explicates the tripartite structure of social freedom on the basis of the following modes of intersubjective interaction and their attendant institutional contexts: (i) personal relations; (ii) the market economy; and (iii) 'democratic will-formation' (*demokratischen Willensbildung*). In contrast to legal and moral freedom, each of these forms of social freedom are embedded within an 'intersubjectively shared reality' (124). Taking into account the many structural changes within personal

relations over the last century (e.g. the rise in divorce rates or gradual reorganisation of the 'nuclear family'), Honneth claims that friendships, intimate relations and families continue to allow individual subjects to have their particular needs and abilities confirmed and supported by significant others, to whom they are meaningfully bound through affective attachments such as love and trust.⁷ The subsequent account provided of the market economy is far more complex. On the one hand, Honneth defends the 'moral economicist' view found in Hegel and Durkheim, arguing to this end that the productive and consumptive activities of economic subjects, rather than being completely 'norm-free' (*as per* Parsonian functionalism), are instead underpinned by 'generally accepted assumptions of social freedom' (197). On the other hand, all the historico-empirical evidence gathered together in this section—take, for instance, the deregulation of labour market or the individualisation of consumer demands—points to the conclusion that in the context of the market economy any sense of shared cooperation and equality has been lost, only to be replaced by a pathological mentality comprised of self-interest and ruthless competitiveness. Honneth refers to these fissures within the fabric of social freedom as 'misdevelopments' (*Fehlentwicklungen*). Marking a significant departure from Hegel's account in the *PhR* of the modern nation-state as presided over by a constitutional monarch, Honneth then establishes an alternative conception of the political realm with the model of 'democratic will-formation' inspired by Dewey and Habermas. On this view of democracy, which is neither representative nor plebiscitary, the modern constitutional state—as an extension of the public sphere—represents the 'organ' of the communicative exchange of citizens by means of which pragmatic solutions to a broad range of social and political issues can be achieved on the basis of collective deliberation and agreement (306). Revealing the kind of attention to empirical facts and historical developments consistently displayed throughout *FR*, Honneth ends with the concession that, for all its transformative power, this model of democratic will-formation has been, and continues to remain subject to threats such as extreme forms of nationalism (at an *objective* level) and a general sense of political disenchantment (at a *subjective* level).

Since its publication, *FR* has attracted a great deal of attention, with much of this attention assuming the form of critical questions or doubts. One may ask whether Honneth has been successful in his capacity as a *critical* social theorist in the left-Hegelian tradition to ground immanent normative criticism in an 'emancipatory interest'. Indeed, one may well ask whether Honneth, particularly in his treatment of the market economy, has the conceptual resources needed in order to conceive not just of existing misdevelopments, but also the possibility of their overcoming in the kind of

potentially radical way that ‘de-socialising’ trends such as the deregulation of the labour market seem to call for? At any rate, the absence of the agonistic mechanism of ‘social struggle’ through which various forms of injustice directly experienced by social agents could be practically redressed, a mechanism that featured so prominently in his earlier works, would appear to imply a significant loss of ‘critical edge’ in *FR*.⁸ This brings us to a further question. To what extent is Honneth’s latest work actually consistent with his previous works, in particular *The Struggle for Recognition*? The question of systematic coherence seems relevant given the obvious differences in approaches marked between his early works and *FR*; the former being characterised as a quasi-anthropological account of the intersubjective recognitive preconditions (love, rights, esteem) required for individual self-realisation, and the latter with a rational reconstruction of the freedom-enabling norms and institutions constitutive of modern societies. It remains to be seen whether these seemingly divergent ‘universalist’ and ‘historicist’ accounts can be reconciled in such a way that would actually preclude calling into doubt the overall unity of his project.⁹ These questions are significant and no doubt deserve further attention.

The specific criticism that I would like to raise, however, concerns an issue that bears on the task of Hegelian scholarship. In contrast to Honneth, for whom freedom is limited or restricted to the social field, Hegel himself proposed a far more expansive idea with the concept of ‘concrete freedom’ (*konkrete Freiheit*). In addition to intersubjective relations and historically developed social norms and institutions, Hegel’s original formulation of concrete freedom—as embodied in the expression being ‘at home’ (*zu hause*) in otherness—also included ‘nature’ (*Natur*), and thus the framework within which subjects could be positively reconciled with both their ‘inner nature’ (body, first-order drives etc.) and the surrounding natural world. Without this additional dimension, Honneth is unable to grasp as a practical necessity the kind of *embodied* experience of human subjectivity within a *first-natural environment* that arguably grounds the modified account of ‘objective spirit’ (*Geist*) set out in *FR*. Put much more simply, there is a distinct lack of *nature* in Honneth’s reconstruction of Hegel’s thought.¹⁰

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Endnotes

¹ Honneth attempted this task of 're-actualisation' in an earlier work: Axel Honneth (2010), *Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

² For Honneth, the many and often highly contrasting conceptions of individual freedom does not detract from its status as the highest ethical

principle within modernity (15).

³ Honneth uncritically inherits from Habermas the view that *Geist* ('spirit' or 'mind') refers to a monistic, metaphysical substance. It is possible to understand *Geist* *minimally*, however, as referring to the totality of human activities and achievements, whether practical or otherwise, which necessarily incorporate— rather the simply eliminate— otherness.

⁴ Quoting Hegel: 'But the freedom of mind [*Geist*] is not merely an independence of the Other won outside the other, but won within the Other; it attains actuality not by fleeing from the Other but by overcoming it' (Hegel, 1830/2013, § 382).

⁵ Honneth clarifies the connection between intersubjective recognitive interactions and social institutions arguing that the latter 'appear as lasting embodiments' of the former (53).

⁶ Honneth takes up this point in an essay entitled 'The Fabric of Justice: On the Limits of Proceduralism' (Honneth, 2012, pp. 34-56).

⁷ Implied herein is a critique of Hegel for omitting friendship from the *PhR* as a genuine form of social freedom (Honneth; 2010, pp. 67-72).

⁸ Honneth appears to be relying instead now on a Habermasian model of consensus-orientated public discourse—a model that he was himself highly critical of in his earlier writings.

⁹ For more on this point, as well as a critique of Honneth's failure to connect the 'practical' and 'theoretical' components of Hegel's system, see Robert Pippin (2014) 'Reconstructivism: On Honneth's Hegelianism', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 40 (8), pp. 725-741.

¹⁰ A similar criticism is made by Deranty in 'Loss of Nature in Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy: Re-reading Mead with Merleau-Ponty' regarding Honneth's early writings.