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## Chapter 2

# Axel Honneth's Antagonism: What Changes When the Mode of Acquiring Recognition Changes

Estelle Ferrarese

Axel Honneth defines his objective as the theorization of a “permanent struggle for recognition” (Honneth 2002: 502), where this permanence is conceived in the form of historical stages, driven by successive struggles, progressing through the expansion of the normative content of recognition. As has been frequently pointed out (see, for instance, Markell 2003), such a permanent struggle is accompanied by permanent reconciliation. In this chapter, I would like to focus on an additional assumption that this argument relies upon, one which has been less frequently highlighted and even less elucidated: the assumption that there is a struggle in the first place.

While Honneth clearly demonstrates that a denial of recognition does not necessarily lead to a struggle, the recognition that is given is generally considered in a context of struggle. From his project to reveal the “moral grammar” of social conflicts in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995), to his reflections on the recourse to violence in his essay on “Invisibility” (2001), through to his debate with Nancy Fraser, in which he argues that “each principle of recognition has a specific surplus of validity whose normative significance is expressed by the constant struggle over its appropriate application and interpretation” (Honneth, in Fraser & Honneth 2003: 186), his position on this subject has varied little. Even the central thesis of *Reification* (2008) does not question this idea. Admittedly, Honneth now defines “recognition” as a primary form of the relationship to the world in a way that seems to reduce the significance of the motif of conflict: “our actions do not primarily have the character of an affectively neutral, cognitive stance toward the world, but rather that of an affirmative, existentially coloured style of caring comportment. In living, we constantly concede to the situational circumstances of our world a value of their own, which brings us to be concerned with our relationship to them” (Honneth 2008: 38). However, this is a more fundamental level of recognition than that addressed in previous studies, and Honneth’s account of it in no way calls into question other modes, including their relations with conflict. As Honneth emphasizes in his response to his commentators, including Judith Butler and Martin Jay, this original form of recognition “is not intended to contain any norms of positive concern or respect. Nor does it claim that certain positive, benevolent feelings are at work” (Ibid: 151). Love and hate, ambivalence and coldness, can all be expressions of this elementary recognition. But at the higher level, where three modes

of recognition are distinguished, hate, ambivalence and coldness may be seen as denials of recognition which give rise to struggle.

It is very clear that Honneth reflects on the nature of the moral attitude that causes a person to respond to the other's normative expectations (see, for instance, Honneth 2007a). However, the motif of recognition rarely appears without being accompanied by that of struggle, implying that the potential instance of recognition *resists* my expectations or even my demands.

The self-evident character attributed to the motif of struggle can of course be linked to the thesis – a weak one at that – of a historical realism. According to this thesis, the permanence of struggles is merely what is revealed by the history of modern societies; struggle enjoys prominence simply because it provides a means of obtaining by force that which could not be obtained by any other method.

But if we scrutinize the phenomenology of struggles, they are less self-evident since that they imply that the party to whom the requests for recognition are addressed acknowledges that it is indeed an addressee of requests, but at the same time it *resists* these requests. However, this admission assumes accepting the burden of the justification of the denial. Hence the solution consists in either denying any antagonism, or in redefining the nature or the reason for the interaction. As pointed out by Frantz Fanon, in a well-known footnote of *Black Skin, White Masks*, the White man does not interpret his relationship with the Black man in terms of a struggle where recognition is at stake; what he expects from the Black man is his work (Fanon 1986: 194). At the

other end of the spectrum of neglected possibilities, there is the case of recognition granted without struggle. This is particularly true in the framework of reflexive democracies: many colonized societies or dominated groups often no longer have to struggle for their freedom. Rather it is negotiated, obtained through constitutional amendments, or simply given by the colonizer or the dominant groups, and granted in the form of political rights (see Coulthard 2007).

A more demanding explanation would be that the presence of struggle arises from a genuine theoretical necessity, from a constraint internal to Honneth's philosophy. In this case, his social theory should account for the existence of social groups that have an *interest* in the permanence of particular social situations. However, it is difficult to find such an account, for recognition is not posited by Honneth as a scarce good, which would mean as a matter of course that some people's access to this good would deprive others of benefiting from it too. In this case, what people have to gain from resistance is obvious, as it is in the theory of class struggle, where some people's dependency on the position occupied by others in relation to the mode of production makes the struggle to end the existing order inevitable. But there is no room for such an interpretation in Honneth's moral grammar of social conflicts.

Why then, in spite of the fact that struggle does not in any way proceed from a logical constraint, is it put forward? What is lost, on a theoretical level, if we speak of recognition without speaking of struggle? The idea of toleration, brought into play in similar contexts of cultural or religious heterogeneity, does not seem to focus on antagonism. Similarly, the idea of the decent society (Margalit 1998), which is

presented as the political and moral antonym of humiliation, is not mediated through the idea of conflict. It therefore seems that it is not its finality (which is shared with theories that do not resort to conflict) that gives struggle the pre-eminence it enjoys in Honneth's theory of recognition. Instead we may put forward the hypothesis that the centrality of struggle derives from something specific to its movement, to its economy, which gives it a character that is as inevitable as it is normatively desirable.

In light of these reflections, I believe it to be necessary to identify the properties attributed to struggle that could explain the central place it occupies in Honneth's system. First, I will consider some hypotheses concerning the history of the concept in order to try to explain the prominence of struggle (1). Then I will examine the effects that the two struggling parties have on each other (2), before considering the effects attributed to struggle in the world in which it emerges (3).

## **1. Struggle and the history of philosophy**

Hegel would seem to be the inevitable starting point for investigating the association between recognition and struggle. However, approaching the question from this angle turns out to be quite unproductive:

1) When Honneth draws on Hegel, he does not follow the line of thought opened up by Kojève's reading of the dialectic of master and slave, which in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* makes struggle an inescapable fact. In this tradition, "action", defined as the transformation of the world that is hostile, "will begin with the act of

imposing oneself on the “first” other man one meets. And since this other, if he is (or more exactly, if he wants to be, and believes to be) a human being, must himself do the same thing, the first anthropogenetic action necessarily takes the form of a fight” (Kojève 1980: 11). But such an anthropology is nowhere to be found in Honneth’s writings. He does not interact with this tradition at all.

2) Honneth devotes the first two chapters of *The Struggle for Recognition* to proving the need to reformulate the theory of struggle found in Hegel’s Jena writings, because it is impossible to grasp precisely the reasons for the initiation of struggle. But when he describes how he himself fits into the Hegelian heritage, he has the same difficulty. In fact, even though *The Struggle for Recognition* is based exclusively on the Jena writings, it is Hegel’s *Philosophy of Law*, from which struggle is conspicuously absent, that Honneth must turn to in order to defend his conviction – shared by all the members of the Frankfurt School – that the cause of society’s negative state, the source of social pathologies, is to be ascribed to a deficit of social rationality. According to Honneth, the idea of Objective Spirit contains “the thesis that all social reality possesses a rational structure, which one can offend against by the practical application of false or inadequate concepts only on pain of prompt repercussions throughout social life itself” (Honneth 2000: 19). And he argues that, in one way or another, all of his predecessors in fact adopted for their own purposes Hegel’s idea that social pathologies should be understood as the result of societies’ inability to adequately express the rational potential already inherent in their institutions, their practices and their routines (Honneth 2004). But we are left with no explanation – other than the Frankfurt School’s passage through Marxism – as to why he then adds that for Critical Theory the Hegelian

realization of reason must be understood as a multifaceted *conflictual learning process* in which universally applicable knowledge is produced when the resolution of problems provides improvements, where this occurs against the resistance of dominant groups (Ibid). In other words, the deployment of reason derives from a common praxis that creates solutions inextricably linked to conflicts that enable learning. However, this proposition cannot be justified by the framework borrowed from the *Philosophy of Law*, and so we still do not know why the resistance of some to others is the necessary condition for this learning to happen.

3) As already mentioned, for Honneth, the legal and institutional order is changed by a series of struggles for recognition. Indeed, it is merely the product of successive struggles, which, in modernity, have progressively broadened the normative content of the concept of recognition. Here again, he simply assumes that there is resistance, in the sense that the existing institutions actively resist the demands for recognition.

Nevertheless, here we are very far from the metaphor of the siege used by Habermas to characterize relations between the processes of the democratic formation of opinion and the political system: “Communicative power is exercised in the manner of a siege. It influences the premises of judgment and decision making in the political system... It thus aims to assert its imperatives in the only language the besieged fortress understands” (Habermas 1997: 59). In this case, it is easy to imagine (which is not exactly what Habermas does) a fundamental state of conflict between institutions and civil society, the two being strangers to each other in nature, consistency and logic.



Let us consider how Honneth, in *Suffering from Indeterminacy* (2000), reproaches the Hegel of the *Philosophy of Law*. In this work, Honneth interprets *Sittlichkeit* as a concept that refers to all spheres of communication, which, because of their moral assumptions, are capable of producing a reciprocal demonstration of recognition. Thus, he describes a constitutive series of need, self-interest and honour, which form so many degrees of individuation, and which correspond to three institutions, the family, civil society and the state. However, observing that in the case of the intersubjective confirmation constituted by love, it is the family, and not friendship that Hegel uses to develop his thesis, Honneth concludes, with regret, that Hegel favours the *legally institutionalized* forms of *Sittlichkeit*. He sees two reasons for this stance: the stability specific to legally institutionalized forms, which is conferred upon them by the possibility of legal sanctions, and the fact that they can be created by mechanisms that are controllable by state legislation.

While, according to Jean-François Kervégan (2008), the *Philosophy of Law* posits the state at the same time as an (inter)subjective reality, a lived bond, a shared aspiration to living-together, and an objective system of institutions, Honneth sees it as exactly the opposite. According to him, when Hegel comes to question the form of recognition specific to this sphere in the chapter on the state, he shifts from forms of intersubjective recognition, as in the case of the family and civil society, towards vertical forms of recognition between citizen and the state (§260), with the result that the intersubjective dimension of the state is lost.

Honneth opposes a conception of the institution, derived from the work of Arnold Gehlen, as a “practical set of actions ...that have taken the form of intersubjectively shared routines and habits” (Honneth 2001a: 115). According to Gehlen, to whom Honneth devotes an extensive discussion in *Soziales Handeln und Menschliche Natur* (1980) – an early work written with Hans Joas – institutions unburden man (who is described as a being abandoned by his instincts) of the complexity of the world. Institutions are seen as coagulations into forms, and include morality, legal relations and stereotyped models of behaviour.

The question that then arises is why such institutions should resist demands for recognition, and thus always make struggle necessary. Here we are dealing with institutions in the way Vincent Descombes (1997) defines them, in terms of the grammatical rule and the shared meanings which individuals find themselves faced. In other words, the strength and form of the institutions can be illustrated by language, the use of which is possible only as long as it conforms to pre-existing constraints. Understood in this way, at best institutions are unavailable to constant change. However, to speak of resistance and confrontation in this context makes little sense. Can one struggle against language?

The intention here is not to deny the autonomy of the system of norms that constructs institutions from every individual’s opinions. But the most obvious thesis regarding the ineluctability of struggles against institutions, that of the solidification of norms and representations in positive law and in state apparatuses, which become

intangible and self-centred, is swept aside by the very type of reproach that Honneth directs at Hegel.

If the theoretical background from which the idea of recognition is extracted does not suffice to explain the centrality attributed to struggle for recognition, we must turn our attention to the attributes which struggle assumes in its material expression, according to Honneth. From a logical point of view, we can consider three possible effects specific to struggle: it transforms A who demands; it transforms B who resists; or else it modifies their interaction and the world that gives shape to it (in a way that the absence of combat would not allow). Let us begin by considering the effects that the two struggling parties have upon one another.

## **2. Struggle and the struggling parties**

First, let us examine the ability of struggle to affect the party to whom the requests for recognition are addressed: the most radical possibility here would be to put an end to the denial of recognition by doing away with this party, rather than forcing it to take my existence into consideration. This is the model of the struggle to the death. Unsurprisingly, it has no place in Honneth's work, and more fundamentally, the motif of confrontation must remain compatible with the following: "A decentering takes place in the recognizing subject because she concedes to another subject a 'worth' that is the source of legitimate claims infringing upon her own self-love. 'Confirmation' or 'affirmation' thus means that the addressee is equipped with as much moral authority

over one's person as one knows oneself to have in being obligated to carry out or abstain from certain classes of actions" (Honneth 2001b: 122). In other words, we are not in an agonistic perspective in the full sense of the term, where the temporary end of the conflict does not result from renewed understanding, but purely and simply from the *victory* of one of the two parties.

The project of the proponents of "agonism", such as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, just the same as Honneth, is to demonstrate that antagonism is constitutive of the social. Mouffe thus defines 'the political' as opposed to 'politics', as "the dimension of antagonism inherent in human relations" (2000: 101). However, this perspective is founded on a denial of the moral dimension of the human relations. According to these authors, the refusal of morality is the condition of a democratic politics whose purpose is to "construct the "them" in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an "adversary", that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question" (Ibid: 102).

For Honneth, by contrast, social conflicts that concern the adequate interpretation of dominant standards of recognition necessarily have a *moral* point. "What makes such claims moral is, first, that they concern the social conditions of undistorted subjectivity and agency, and second, that they require of social agents an attitude that goes beyond an immediate concern with their self-interest in being responsive to the needs of others" (van den Brink and Owen 2007). If we have to abandon the proposition that struggle is simply what makes the other submit, we must

dismiss the idea of a struggle whose result would be to force others to accept as true what is already true for oneself, that is, to win a cognitive victory. Contrary to this model, which posits that awareness of the other bestows truth to the certainty that the winner has of his being, for Honneth, the instance of recognition is not merely required to passively ratify an existence or an identity, since it must be involved in co-producing it.

Let us now consider how struggle changes individuals who enter into it. One might claim that it is important that the person who has experienced a denial of recognition frees himself of it himself, because struggle is a process in which a subjectivity is revealed to itself and at the same verifies itself. Here, subjectivation is to be understood as the emergence of a political subjectivity. I will leave aside the question of ontogeny, which would mean engaging in psychological considerations that have no place here.

The intertwining of subjectivation and antagonism is put forward by Jacques Rancière in *Disagreement*. He considers the process of subjectivation, not as the acquisition of awareness and voice in an entity existing prior to this confrontation, but as taking form through a series of operations involving the production of a new field of experience, operations with which it remains co-extensive. “By subjectification I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience” (Rancière 1995: 56).

Honneth hints at a move in this direction in *The Struggle for Recognition*, when he writes that social shame is “a moral emotion that expresses the diminished self-

respect typically accompanying the passive endurance of humiliation” from which one can be liberated only through active protest and resistance (Honneth 1995: 121).

However, the idea that struggle creates the subject engaged in it remains in the background for Honneth, who restricts himself to considering the effect of struggle on the relationship to self and qualifies it as a “secondary motivation” (Honneth 1995: 163) of the conflict. This idea was a lot more in the foreground for Fanon, for whom the irreducibility of the motif of confrontation in the logic of recognition proceeds quite plainly from the self-affirmative function attributed to struggle. To the extent that he did not *make* the other recognize him, the French Negro was “acted upon”; only confrontation enables him to free himself from “the inessentiality of servitude” (Fanon 1986: 194).

It is worth also noting that in Honneth’s theory absolutely no room is given to the establishment and assertion of a collective subject, or even just a collective consciousness. The process of transition to struggle is described in its collective dimension, but we know nothing about the nature of this collective or its reason for being. We are told that only if the individual is able to express his feelings in a context of intersubjective interpretation that identifies him as typical of a whole group, then the transition to struggle is possible. In other words, the effectiveness of the struggle depends on the existence of a collective semantics (Honneth, 1995: 163). Honneth therefore only clarifies the formation of a collective entity in terms of the availability of grammatical, almost cognitive resources that make certain formulations and the articulation of certain demands possible. However, nothing is said of the process of producing the common inherent to the struggle itself. He does not consider struggle as a

modifier, and even less as a generator of this collective, although this is the approach taken by Georges Sorel, whom he quotes. Considering that Marx is mistaken in his belief that society is divided into two fundamentally antagonistic groups, Sorel attributed violent struggle with the function of dividing the society “into two camps, and only into two” (Sorel 2007: 164). In this way, he accounts for the unifying and auto-transformative logic of struggle and for the shaping of the collective entity that carries it. By failing to do the same, Honneth seems to postulate a given consciousness and an identity that precede the conflict.

Generally speaking, for Honneth, struggle has no ability to act as a force of revelation of self to self -- except in the margins: “the idea of a struggle for recognition doesn’t necessarily imply that subjects struggle merely on the basis of a diffuse feeling of being disrespected totally, thus only gaining a clear conception of their actual goal in the course of their social struggle. Rather, what generally motivates these struggles is the still unclear and merely negatively formulated realization that one possesses the same qualities and abilities as those who have been recognized (institutionally), but without enjoying corresponding public recognition” (Honneth 2007: 364).

I have thus made clear that struggle is not prominent in Honneth’s theory because of its possible effects on the struggling parties. Let’s therefore examine the last theoretical option: the effects one can attribute to struggle in the world in which it emerges.

### **3. Struggle and the world**

At first glance, this explanation seems to be the easiest to defend, since for Honneth struggles for recognition move nothing less than history itself. As the instrument by which societies experiencing moral progress gain in rationality, such struggles are seen as the condition of possibility for the learning process described above. Here we are dealing with a clearly Hegelian postulate. As Honneth himself points out in *Disrespect*, Hegel's model includes the "venturesome but challenging idea that ethical progress unfolds in a series of three levels of increasingly demanding patterns of recognition, and that an intersubjective struggle mediates between each of these levels, a struggle that individuals conduct for the purpose of having their identity claims confirmed" (Honneth 2007a: 132).

Nonetheless, Honneth distances himself partly from the Hegelian position because for him conflict does not have the function of motivating the transition to the next ethically-constituted institutional step. Each sphere must be marked by an internally-caused conflict over the legitimate application of the principle of recognition in question (Honneth, in Fraser and Honneth 2003: 144). It remains the case that struggle is normatively justified as the engine of evolution, both at the level of the species and at that of individuals. This is most certainly related to an idea that has no explicit foundation, apart from at the individual level: there is no access to the principles of justice except negatively. This is the reasoning that Honneth develops from the role played by the emotions in the transition to struggle, emotions that he endows with a cognitive dimension. The expectation of recognition is integrated into the structure of interactions, to the extent that the individual implicitly expects to be taken into account



in the projects of others in a positive way (Honneth 1995: 45). It is on the occasion of failures of recognition, and through the emotions they arouse, that the subject discovers himself to bear normative expectations which relate to his vulnerability. The attention of the disappointed subject shifts to his own expectations, making him simultaneously aware of the cognitive elements – in this case the moral knowledge – that governed his action (Honneth 2001c: 110).

We are given less explanation about the evolutionary effect of what is (sometimes) the later stage – that is, collective struggle. We are simply informed that it unfolds the surplus validity of the norms of recognition in force, against the dominant interpretative praxis. This characteristic calls for two remarks.

(1) One might think, since struggle creates a normativity that would otherwise remain out of reach, that confrontation is the necessary condition for an act of recognition to be normatively valid, in the sense that struggle would qualify the justice or the fairness of the result. But here we encounter a problem: for, when Axel Honneth examines the ideological – that is to say, normatively false – forms of recognition, it is not struggle that constitutes the evidence of a non-ideological recognition. Rather, such recognition stands out because “something in the physical world – be it modes of conduct or institutional circumstances – must change if the addressee or addressees are to be convinced that they have been recognized in a new manner” (Honneth 2007c, 342).

I will therefore propose the following thesis: struggle has a mediate role in Honneth’s schema. The fact that it occurs does not directly imply that the act of

recognition to which it leads is normatively valid, but it is proof that the world has changed.

In modern societies characterised by reflexivity, there are two possibilities. Either the denial of recognition perceived by a group is “justified”, in the sense that another group in a position of domination has integrated the practice of denial, by means of a coherent legitimating discourse, in a social order apparently neutral from the moral and epistemic point of view. Or else the denial quite simply does not appear, as the available grammar precludes the characterisation of what certain subjects undergo. Bringing to light the denial thus implies overcoming the epistemic deficit which hinders a person from making a lived experience intelligible to himself and to others. But the impossibility for the victim of making heard the wrong it has undergone results from unequal participation in the creation of collective models of interpretation. This is also what Nancy Fraser highlights, when she states: “it is unjust that some individuals and groups are denied the status of full partners in social interaction simply *as a consequence of institutionalized patterns of cultural value in whose construction they have not equally participated* and which disparage their distinctive characteristics or the distinctive characteristics assigned to them” (Fraser, in Fraser & Honneth 2003: 29). Because as much as the justifications made for some denials of recognition – and the existence of an epistemic deficit which masks others – result from power relations, their contestation always implies the claim to, or the appropriation of a power to construct meaning and hence the world.

(2) Furthermore, it should be noted that the idea of surplus validity – as unfolded by struggle – refers to something that already exists as potential: it is not about creating something new, but about making a potential actual. Indeed, Honneth considers it as part of the legacy of leftist Hegelianism, which he claims as his own, that there must be an identifiable element of practice or experience that is a piece of socially incorporated reason insofar as it contains a surplus of rational norms or organizational principles *pressing for their own materialization* (Honneth, in Fraser & Honneth 2003: 238).

However, if it is then a question of actualization, we must clearly understand what is meant by this concept. It was defined by Axel Honneth in a debate initiated by Arto Laitinen, who, in discussing the nature of the act of recognition, attempted to overcome the choice between the constructivist model of attribution, and the response model (which treats acts of recognition as responses to pre-existing reasons that reside in what the subjects claiming recognition *really* are – that is to say, what they are *already*). In this context, an act of recognition merely actualizes an identity, a quality or a capacity existing as potential. However, Honneth adopts this proposal in order to give it a particular meaning (Honneth 2002: 510). His inquiry proceeds from the difference between the qualities that we know intellectually and those that we embrace emotionally, precisely the movement that is covered by the concept of actualization: “I intended this notion to indicate the act by which subjects become capable of identifying wholly with the evaluative qualities of which they are already culturally aware.... The distinction between potentiality and actuality indicates neither an epistemic gap nor a space to be bridged over, but a rift between ethical knowledge and social expression”

(Honneth 2007b: 356). It seems to me that *this* is the function performed by struggle; it confers the quality of world-changer to the party demanding recognition.

In bringing together these last two points, we can understand the importance of struggle in the motif of recognition. To be sure, Honneth's reasons for his preference for antagonism remain unclear. But this inquiry into his theory allows us to reconstruct the following justification. Extracting the *ability* to modify the state of the world seems always to be the object of the struggle for recognition, whether explicitly or implicitly, accompanying a claim to be recognized as a member of a polity or as the bearer of particular identity. In the same way that requests for visibility are doubled in reality – as demonstrated by Axel Honneth – by more fundamental expectations relating to the status of being worthy of moral consideration, an attentive reading of the confrontational movement, so obvious and yet so rarely questioned directly in the constellation of contemporary theories of recognition, teaches us that any struggle for recognition comes with a double meaning: on the one hand, it is about the designated object (identity, lifestyle, contribution to the common project, status, etc.), and it is also about a power of construction, or, to put it in other terms, the world-changer status. And this double meaning then provides us with an explication for the unspoken necessary motif of resistance. The status of world-changer can only result from a struggle against an enemy that resists; for if the latter anticipates the request, or even the expectation, for recognition, it maintains its monopoly over this status.

Thus, at the conclusion of my examination of the idea of struggle in analyses of recognition, it turns out that the initial reticence of the instance, which nonetheless ends

up yielding to good reasons, is the sign – because it is defeated during the struggle – of my ability to alter the world. In other words, the logic that explains the prominence of struggle in Honneth's theory of recognition, far from revealing simple fidelity to the Hegelian reference, covers the three points of analysis that I set myself: struggle is necessary and desirable because it triggers the transformation of A who demands, B who resists, and the world; and each is changed because all the others are changed. In this sense, there is never a return to a commonness preceding the struggle, even though the recognition of the subjects having engaged a struggle would not seem to have modified the social and political order.

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