

Critical Theory in Germany Today

An Interview with Axel Honneth

Axel Honneth is Professor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Political Science at the Free University, Berlin. He is the author of The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory (1985; English translation, MIT Press, 1991) and Struggle for Recognition (1992; English translation, Polity Press, forthcoming in 1994) – books which have placed his work at the centre of current debates in Germany within the Frankfurt School tradition.

RP: We'd like to begin with a question about your background. What was it like going through university in Germany in the late 1960s and early '70s? What were your formative experiences, theoretically and politically?

Honneth: I started to study in 1969, after the birth of the student movement, in very conservative surroundings, at the University of Bonn. Neither in philosophy nor in literature (which I studied at that time) was there anything of interest there for someone who had already been influenced by the student movement. In philosophy, a kind of neo-Kantianism was still hegemonic, which was typical of German universities at the time. It was oriented towards German Idealism in an enlightened way, but for the most part it was very boring. It had nothing to do with the questions of the political movements. The same was true in literature, where a very conventional form of literary history was prominent. The only point of contact between the two was Gadamer's hermeneutics. It was the bridge between literature and philosophy in the university. There was nothing left from the original generation of the 1950s in Bonn, to which the young Habermas and Karl Otto Apel belonged. They were both in Bonn as either students or assistants of Erich Rothacker, who was oriented towards philosophical anthropology, and they learned to combine Heidegger with a certain anthropological theory there. The early pragmatism of that generation was born in Bonn, but there was nothing of it left by the time I arrived, and it was not my reason for studying there.

What influenced me at the beginning was logical positivism. It was the methodological counterpart to Bonn's strange combination of neo-Kantianism, hermeneutics, and German Idealism; a methodological standpoint from which

we could criticise these boring conservative orientations which we found at the university. That took a year or two, no longer. The first person whose work allowed me to build a bridge between my political interests and what was going on in my theoretical studies was Adorno. Like a lot of young students in philosophy, I was totally influenced by Adorno. I had this tendency to just imitate him. It's awful to read now, the imitation of his language, using arguments which, if you don't really deepen them, if you don't have the background to place them philosophically, sometimes seem very silly.

At the same time, I wasn't very active in the student movement in Bonn. The real places for the student movement were Berlin and Frankfurt, maybe Heidelberg. That's where the interesting and intellectually far-reaching debates were. In Bonn, the student movement didn't really occur in the classroom, but only through some happenings on the street. I had no connections to this. I came from a much closer and much safer world, and I felt quite distanced from it. That changed when I went to the University of Bochum, which is huge.

RP: Which year was that?

Honneth: 1971. In philosophy, it's an interesting place because of the Hegel archive. They are preparing and editing the new Hegel edition, and they are very careful. The leading figure at that time was Otto Poggeler. Being there changed my philosophical orientation in two ways. Firstly, I could see that there was something in German Idealism which is not, let's say, simply to be killed by logical positivism. There are some speculative ideas which we should take much more seriously. Secondly, I read Habermas for the first time. This was of unbelievable importance to me because he started out from an immanent critique of logical positivism, and an immanent critique of what was happening in the conventional German university. If you read some of his early things in *Theory and Practice*, you can see how it was related by way of immanent critique to what was left over from Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann, and that kind of German philosophy of the 1920s and '30s. There was a chance for me to bring my different interests together.

This was also the way I came into contact with Marxism.

Maybe that's strange, for a student in a German university at that time to come into contact with Marx via Habermas, and not the other way round. My political orientation had changed insofar as I had become a member of the USOS, which is the youth organisation of the SPD, and which was quite radical at that time – although not as radical as most of the groups in the student movement. And I had become interested in a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of workers' movements. I began to see how one could formulate philosophical and theoretical questions in such a way that they have a certain relation to these movements. That was a very fruitful experience for me, even though the philosophical debates in Bochum were not relevant to this.

RP: What was the reception of Heidegger like in this period? We ask because of the more recent debates about the politics of Heidegger's philosophy. Heidegger's role in German philosophy is obviously much more complicated than these debates suggest. So I wonder, was there any Heideggerian influence?

Honneth: As far as I can remember, none at all. Most of us had read Adorno's Heidegger critique, and that was all. The fact that Habermas and Apel had a certain closeness to Heidegger in their early period – and you can see that when you read the very first articles, especially Apel's – was always something very strange for me. We did not even read *Being and Time* then. It was simply outside the debate of the philosophically-oriented members of the student movement.

RP: Gadamer wasn't viewed as a Heideggerian?

Honneth: No, Gadamer was the big person in Germany philosophy, formulating a hermeneutical position which had, we thought, quite conservative elements. But that was a book we read. One was very familiar with this book. It started to have a very big influence. It was already clear that there was an interesting confrontation brewing between Habermas and Gadamer. Gadamer's hermeneutics on the one side, and the developing theory of Habermas on the other, were the two poles between which we lived.

RP: At this time, was Habermas seen to represent an extension of the Frankfurt School tradition?

Honneth: No. Not at all. Never during my whole educational career was he ever seen as that.

RP: Was Habermas viewed primarily as a philosopher or as a social theorist?

Honneth: More or less a social theorist, I would say. The influence of Marxism and critical theory started in sociology. But he had a very hard time, because he was totally isolated from the student movement. He was even seen as an enemy in the circles of the student movement, because of his use of the phrase 'left fascism'. The movement was becoming more and more orthodox. Around 1973, when I wrote my *Magisterarbeit* (on Habermas, mainly his interpretation of psychoanalysis), the interesting people of my age started to orient themselves towards either communism in the Leninist sense or a certain Maoism. Only a very few people remained

unorthodox in the sense that they were simply oriented to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, or had a strong interest in Krahel. Krahel was a young, intellectually brilliant member of SDS, who combined a strong interest in Hegel with an enormous knowledge of the tradition of Western Marxism – something like a young Lukács in the student movement. He played a very decisive role in all discussions. He died in 1969, but he was an adversary of whom you really took notice. For myself, the move away from philosophy towards sociology was decisive. I started to study sociology, I came into contact with people who did empirical research on the class structure in Germany, and I learned a lot about empirical research.

Two other things should be mentioned. One is the growth of small groups reading *Capital*. I was a member of one of these private groups. It was a very typical event in these years. Everyone who had an interest in Critical Theory and in the critique of capitalism was in one way or another a member of such a group. This was interesting because the group I was in was not too orthodox. We had objections to either the methodology of Marx, or the content of the first volume of *Capital*. The other big experience was the opening up of a whole repressed tradition of Left thinking. I started to read Lukács, I was even influenced by Bloch in a certain way, and Karl Korsch. The unorthodox tradition of Western Marxism was a big influence.

RP: Did Althusser have any influence in your *Capital* reading group?

Honneth: At that time, no, not at all. That's something I was confronted with for the first time in Berlin. That was the next decisive step in my development. I got an offer to go with Jaeggi to the Free University in Berlin. He had written a book on capital and labour in the Bundesrepublik – an empirical study, which was very influential both among the unions and the student movement – and he invited me to go with him to the Institute of Sociology. That was an incredible break in my intellectual development because in Berlin there was a totally different atmosphere. It was overpoliticised in every class.

The Institute of Sociology was very orthodox, in the sense that most of the members believed either in Marx or in some other tradition in a very uncritical way. There were a lot of Leninists there at the time, a lot of people oriented to Maoism, and a growing interest in Althusser. Althusser was someone producing a new form of social theory and it was my luck or my fate, I'm not sure which, that the person I had come to Berlin with decided to establish an Althusser group. This group was totally convinced by Althusserianism. (One has to say that Althusser played a very minor role in Germany.) I had a very hard time because I was already a totally convinced Habermasian, and there were very few of us at that time. We were seen by members of the student movement and the growing parts of orthodox movements as reformists, absolutely reformists, betrayers of the goals of the movements; and for the very few conservative people in the humanities at the Free University we were too left-wing.

So I was in the strange situation of defending my

Habermasian approach against a growing belief in Althusser. On the one hand, I was very frightened by these orthodox tendencies, I felt very alone; on the other, I developed a real interest in a critique of Althusserian orthodoxy. It forced me to write an article against Althusser which was strongly attacked by all the other members of the group.* That was something like a first chance to formulate my own position. I wasn't an orthodox Habermasian in a strong sense, although everyone took me for one. I already had certain objections against Habermas especially in connection with his notion of work. I had problems with the way he reduced the Marxian notion of work to instrumental action because I was influenced by sociological studies on the experience of work. I always had a feeling that it is a much broader field of experiences than is possible to reduce to instrumental action.

The critique of Althusser gave me the chance to make my own approach much clearer. At the time, this meant starting out from something like a philosophical anthropology. So I was greatly interested in Marx's early writings. This also had something to do with the early Habermas and the early Apel. I found out that at the Free University, in my own Institute, there were people with a strong interest in philosophical anthropology. I came into contact with them and I started to work with Hans Joas. We wrote a book together on philosophical anthropology. There were some interesting people who were interested in philosophical anthropology. There was Gehlen, a conservative anthropologist, and Plessner, who played a very interesting role. We could connect this with certain tendencies in international Marxism, especially the Budapest School around Agnes Heller and Gyorgy Marcus. They had a special interest in anthropology via Lukács's development. So I could locate myself in a new and interesting way. I could see that there were certain bridges to developments in unorthodox Marxism, and on the other hand, to developments around Habermas in Frankfurt.

This was a strange point in my intellectual development. I started to come closer to philosophical anthropology at the precise moment at which Habermas was totally convinced that he had to give it up, for methodological reasons – because the propositions of an anthropology are too strong. They can't be falsified. He switched to the theory of language which was to replace the philosophical anthropology in his approach. My own development was in opposition to that. I thought of philosophical anthropology as a very fruitful and helpful tradition. It's a very German tradition. Much later I saw that, in Charles Taylor, for example, there was a similar development. But at that time I took it as a German tradition which had something to do with the early Marx. So my approach was in total opposition to the Althusserians, and to what was happening at that time in the hegemony of intellectual thinkers in Berlin.

*A translation of this piece, 'History and Interaction: On the Structuralist Interpretation of Historical Materialism', will appear in Gregory Elliott (ed.), *Althusser: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, forthcoming in 1994.

RP: In turning to the empirical, in a sense Habermas was more in line with the Althusserians: rejecting philosophical anthropology in the name of positive science – not the same positive science, but nonetheless ...

Honneth: Yes, one could say so. I wouldn't formulate it in that way, but I can see that one could say that. The orientation towards social theory, concentrating on the inner logics and mechanisms of development, one could understand it as a development in the same direction that the Althusserians took in concentrating on the late Marx and the inner logic of *Capital*. But I was strongly opposed to this development. At the same time, what was going on politically isolated me from any political movement. The youth organisation of the SPD became a more and more unfruitful form of orthodoxy – what was called Stamocap theory (State Monopoly Capitalism) – believing in the essentially capitalist character of the state. On the other side of the student movement there was a lot of debate about the importance and the moral legitimacy of terrorism. The colleagues I had were either orthodoxly oriented toward Leninism or, if they were unorthodox, they were oriented towards what I would call an orthodox Adornism. Adorno played a very decisive role at the Free University. But because I had separated from Adorno, via Habermas, I also felt isolated from this kind of thinking: something like a totalising critique of capitalism, as we know it from Adorno. This approach was used in every field of research, not only in the philosophical debates, but also in the different branches of sociology in which I was working at that time. I had split my work into a philosophical part and a sociological part, doing studies on the experiences of workers' children. I had dedicated a lot of my own work to the socialisation processes of working class youth. This was a very helpful empirical period of my own research and development, but again I felt quite isolated in this area. I was living in different worlds in Berlin. The only shared orientation I had was towards philosophical anthropology.

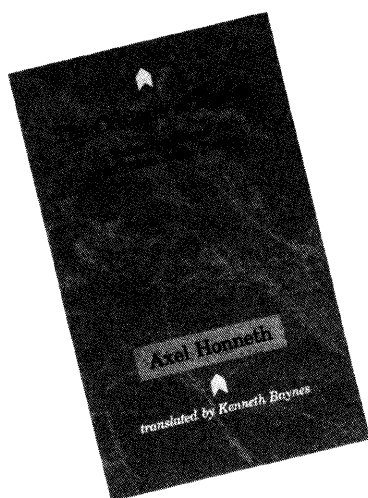
Critique of Power

RP: Perhaps we could move on to talk about some of the positions you adopt in your book *The Critique of Power*. The thing that strikes the British reader immediately is the way you place Foucault in the Frankfurt tradition. Habermas and Foucault are usually constructed in a binary antagonistic way, whereas your book assumes from the very beginning that Foucault is part of the Frankfurt tradition. Why is this?

Honneth: It has to do with my experiences in Berlin. Foucault was read by people who were formerly interested in Adorno. He was taken as a kind of extension of what Adorno did. The interest in poststructuralism came from people who were oriented towards Adorno. They switched from Adorno to Foucault. That was the intellectual situation in which I started to think of a book which would be a critique of the present situation of Critical Theory, taking Foucault as a part of it. I wanted to distance myself from approaches like those of Adorno and Foucault, in order to

show that neither has the means or the potentiality to build up a social theory which could compete with the complexity of theories like Parsons' and the tradition of Durkheim. That was my interest at that time. It was strongly located in a field of social theory, not so much in philosophy. I wanted to find a way to develop the necessary means to construct a social theory. So I started to give lectures on Adorno, on Foucault, and on Habermas.

RP: Could you say something about your understanding of the category of the social here? The book hinges around quite a strong claim that there is no such category as the social in Adorno and Foucault. Now, of course, in one sense that's quite explicit in Adorno in the essay called 'Society', but in other ways it's not so clear. Could you say something about this missing category? At what level is it constructed? Is it a transcendental category, or what?



Honneth: It had to do with the influence of philosophical anthropology combined with my growing interest in the French tradition of sociological investigation – Durkheim, but also Lévi-Strauss. I also started to read Bourdieu at that time. I took all these approaches to be investigations into the inner structure of the social – what Durkheim had in mind when he spoke of the collective consciousness, that binding force which is the only power to integrate a society. One could say that I meant what David Lockwood described as social integration as opposed to system integration.

RP: And this would be a more differentiated, and more empirically open way of doing what the Marxist category of ideology does, or something like that, would it?

Honneth: Yes, but without the immediately negative undertone which the notion of ideology has. Today, I would say it was a very Durkheimian step to concentrate on the social as those mechanisms of social integration which have to do with a certain amount of social consent in a society. I always had the feeling that neither Adorno nor Foucault had the right means to describe these mechanisms.

RP: Some people would put Foucault in the Durkheimian tradition of French social theory ...

Honneth: Yes, but that's a question of how to interpret Durkheim. If you take Durkheim as someone who was only describing mechanisms of ideological integration, like Althusser, maybe. If you take Durkheim from this side, it is easy to show that Foucault is in the tradition of Durkheim. But I took Durkheim much more from the concept of social consent: we don't have the methodological possibility of separating *a priori* an ideological consent from a true consent. On the other hand, I saw some big advantages in Foucault's approach over Adorno's. I had a very bad feeling about what Adorno had produced in the intellectual atmosphere of the German Left. It was my conviction that his critique of the sociological tradition had cut us off from a fruitful body of work, especially in my Institute. There is a biographical background to this feeling. I had the impression that my colleagues were not really able to read Durkheim or Parsons or Bourdieu, because they had internalised Adorno's critique of ideology. It put them in the position of not taking this approach seriously enough.

RP: This leads us on to the question of how you conceive the book in relation to what might be called the Frankfurt tradition. Would you now say that Habermas is in that tradition? And are you? At the Walter Benjamin conference in London last summer you were introduced as a member of the third generation of the Frankfurt School, but you immediately denied it by saying that there is no third generation. Is this really so? Alternatively, is there even a second generation?

Honneth: On the question of the second generation, I always answer positively. I once wrote an article on the linguistic turn in Critical Theory, quite similar to the article by Wellmer (we both wrote articles separately on the same topic) showing that all the decisive elements of Critical Theory could be saved on a methodologically higher level by Habermas's linguistic turn. That means that the decisive element of Critical Theory, the broad tradition of, let's say, the unorthodox Western Marxist critique of capitalism, is retained.

RP: That's much broader than Frankfurt Critical Theory ...

Honneth: Yes, that's broader. I would prefer a broader notion of Critical Theory. One that doesn't reduce it to Adorno and Horkheimer, but includes the young Lukács and Korsch. Habermas is still interested in a critique of capitalism as a reified form of social life. That interest is shared with the tradition, but he uses totally different methodological means. From the beginning, I thought this to be a better formulation of Critical Theory than the orthodox one I came to know in Berlin.

The problem with the idea of a *third* generation is that I can't see anyone who will reformulate Adorno's and Horkheimer's critique of capitalism in the horizon of the early Critical Theory. There is a lot of interest again now in Adorno in Germany. But all I see is an increasing interest in aesthetics, and in the critique of identity – an interest in the methodology of philosophy. I don't see a new way of

bringing back the critique of capitalism in my generation. Therefore I wouldn't say there is a third generation.

RP: But this is to define the third generation in terms of the first, rather than as a development out of the second.

Honneth: Yes. This is the other part of my answer. It's difficult to say whether those who are trying to develop an immanent critique of Habermas, bringing some motives of the early tradition back into Habermas, should be thought of as a third generation. The person who is doing that on the highest level is Albrecht Wellmer, who has a certain relation to Adorno, and tries to reformulate certain ideas of Adorno in the framework of Habermas. It's an open question. It really would be a third generation if we were able to reformulate some of the stronger notions of the critique of capitalism which Adorno and Horkheimer had, in a totally new framework, using a lot of Habermas but making the critique of capitalism much stronger. Then one could speak of a third generation.

Moral Struggle and Recognition

RP: In the linguistic reformulation of earlier motifs in the critique of capitalism, like reification, in the move away from political economy, there is a much closer relationship to classical liberal thought, in a Kantian mode. Now, one of the things that seems to be distinctive about your own work is an emphasis on the conflictual aspect of communicative action. This picks up some of the non-liberal motifs in Critical Theory, because of the notion of struggle. But it is formulated as moral struggle. Could you say something about this category of moral struggle, specifically in relation to whether the term 'moral' here has primarily Kantian or Hegelian implications?

Honneth: To answer the last part of your question first, I would say that it plays in between them. We can see this in all the productive approaches of Critical Theory: it's always an ongoing tension between Kant and Hegel. I would say that the most productive element – one of the most productive elements of the Critical Theory tradition – is to be unable to decide which side you are on here. The notion of moral struggle became more and more important to me in order to criticise the more liberal elements in Habermas. That's one of the backgrounds for it. The theoretical background is an interest in a more Durkheimian reading of Foucault; a reading in which the notion of struggle, which is very decisive for Foucault, is given another interpretation: struggle is *morally* motivated in a very broad way, not only by questions of injustice, but by all forms of disrespect, indignation, and so on. So I think the background for my notion of moral struggle is more Hegel than Kant: they are not only struggles for a just legal order, they are struggles for the recognition of the special value of your own life form. Charles Taylor is going in a quite similar direction. He has just published a book on multiculturalism, which has as a subtitle 'The politics of recognition'. He is making the

same step of describing struggles with the help of the notion of recognition. This is a distancing from Habermas, to see in struggle, I would say like Marx, the real productive force in society.

RP: In your latest book, *Struggle For Recognition*, you go back once again to the origins of the paradigm shift to an inter-subjectivistic theory of recognition – namely, to the young Hegel – in order to question anew the scope and direction of the theory of communicative rationality, and its normative implications. Could you say a little bit about the motivation for this attempt to actualise the insights of the young Hegel anew? In what respect does your attempt to reconstruct a formal theory of the good life differ from Habermas's attempt to offer normative foundations for Critical Theory by means of the concept of communicative rationality?

Honneth: The young Hegel is a motivating power for so many people. Everyone who has an interest in a critique of the modern world – the capitalist world – at a certain moment returns to the young Hegel. I really can't describe why that is. Perhaps it is because this young Hegel is very open and very direct, and not so controlled (like the later Hegel) by his own system. The young Hegel is one of the richest thinkers of the last two hundred years. There are romantic motives in him, there are certain influences of Kant in him. Everything is working towards him at a certain tangent. More specific was my conviction, which was influenced by certain studies in Germany, that in the young Hegel we can find a much broader notion of recognition than we can find in the later Hegel, who was used by Habermas. In the young Hegel we can see a threefold conception of recognition: *love*, something like a relation of rights, *legal relations*, and a third dimension which I would call *solidarity*, a word Hegel never used. He wrote *Sittlichkeit*, ethical life, a kind of community of shared values.

In relation to Habermas, this means two things. First, it means that we can ground Critical Theory not in a linguistic theory, but in some form of philosophical anthropology. I'm not sure whether that's the right word or category, but it is a much broader conception of human life than is allowed by linguistic theory. This allows me to bring in disciplines or motives which Habermas is forced to exclude more and more – like psychoanalysis, concentrating on prelinguistic experience, and so forth. So that's the first step, the first difference. The other difference is with reference to the normative foundation of Critical Theory. More and more I have the impression that if you have a broader notion of recognition you also have a broader concept of the normative background of Critical Theory. That's what I call a formal concept of the good. This is working together with certain trends in American philosophy, like Martha Nussbaum, and also some approaches in Germany. In normative questions you don't reduce yourself to the moral standpoint of a just society, but to the formal standpoint of identifying aspects of a good society. My impression is that the concept of recognition allows one to formulate some quite abstract conditions for every form of

a good human life. That gives me the hope of reconstructing some of the deep insights of the early Frankfurt School. But in this respect I'm still very unclear, and I have to work on that. The situation is as follows. The early Frankfurt School never had anything like a normative theory. There were, without question, some normative insights, some normative criteria, which they used to criticise capitalist society. But they never tried to work this normative background out in reference to what was going on in ethical theory, or in moral theory, at that time. You can find Horkheimer's article on morality, but there is no explicit contribution to the question of the normative background of Critical Theory there.

RP: One thing that is striking about your recent article on the young Hegel* is that in constructing an opposition between a Hobbesian/Machiavellian tradition of self-preservation and the Hegelian concept of recognition you connect up with the early Horkheimer's book on the bourgeois philosophy of history, which is very much concerned with this tradition of self-preservation. (Think also of the centrality of the concept to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.) So in a sense you are tracing the problem of a lack of normative foundations right back to there.

Honneth: It was always my conviction that it would be easier to go back to the early Horkheimer than to the middle period Adorno.

RP: Habermas himself begins by trying to go back to the early Horkheimer. There seems to be a whole series of overlapping returns here ...

Honneth: Going back to early Hegel, going back to early Horkheimer, yes.

RP: Going back to early Habermas!

Honneth: Yes. Maybe there is a systematic background for this: the early stage of a thinker is the methodologically more naive one, but the theoretically more productive one; the early stage of a thinker is the richest one in the sense that the most normative and creative ideas are formulated in a direct way in the first period. After that, there are certain tendencies to the systematic reduction of these early insights. I hope that it is possible via the reconstruction of the formal theory of the good, to make clear the normative background of the early Frankfurt School, which could then be redescribed in terms of normative criteria about the conditions of a good life for human beings. I would guess that, for example, in *Minima Moralia* you can find a negativistic form of such a theory. Adorno would like to show, via a negativistic method, what forms of human life exist, from which we can all see that they do not belong to a good form of human life; and then via this negativistic route to show indirectly some preconditions of a good

human life. If that is possible, it would mean that I would have a broader, but methodologically *more disputable* foundation for a critical theory; not so universalisable as the normative criteria Habermas is looking for, by reducing all normative criteria to the question of a just society. That is a difference, a difference from the liberal tradition. To go back to philosophical anthropology instead of linguistic theory means to have a broader approach to certain transcendental features of human beings. The only anthropological propositions Habermas would maintain nowadays are those describing mechanisms of understanding in human beings via language. Going back to philosophical anthropology is a necessary step if you want to have a stronger foundation, a broader foundation, for the normative critique of our present society.

RP: But isn't there a problem here? Any philosophical anthropology will already have normative assumptions about the most appropriate form of human existence built into its basic theoretical orientation. You would seem to be involved in a circle. Can philosophical anthropology ever be foundational in the way in which Habermas wants universal pragmatics to be?

Honneth: This is a very difficult question. I think that philosophical anthropology has to be understood in the same falsifiable way as universal pragmatics. This means that it follows exactly the same methodological rules: in order to find out whether there are any universal constraints on the process of human individuation, we have to collect as much empirical data as possible. My hope is that there is sufficient convergence between psychoanalysis, theories of moral development and sociological studies on personal concepts of injustice to show that the process of human individuation presupposes certain demands for recognition. It is clear that this anthropological hypothesis is not separable from the normative assumptions we have about the most appropriate forms of human existence. But as long as this hypothesis is not falsified empirically, this seems to me a legitimate presupposition.

RP: In *Struggle For Recognition* you use the psychoanalytic theories of Donald Winnicott – who is still relatively unknown in Germany – to provide an account of the intersubjective foundation of personal identity in childhood experience (Hegel's dimension of love). Why did you find the work of Winnicott in particular useful for these purposes?

Honneth: In the first place, Winnicott is one of the leading figures in object-relations theory. In my view, this is a much more convincing and promising approach than orthodox psychoanalysis because it understands the psychic development of the individual as something which is internally dependent on emotional relations with other people. What is most interesting about Winnicott's approach, however, is the way in which, almost like Hegel, he sees the intersubjective process of individuation as a struggle for recognition: namely, as a struggle between two people on the edge between fusion and demarcation. Jessica Benjamin

* Axel Honneth, 'Moral Development and Social Struggle: Hegel's Early Social-Philosophical Doctrines', in Axel Honneth et al., *Cultural-Political Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1992, pp. 197–217.

was the first person to make this implicit relation to Hegel clear to me, in her analysis of female masochism in her book *The Bonds of Love*.

RP: The project of a critical social theory has been radically challenged in recent years, both by the lack of utopian energy within society and at an intellectual level. What role do you think critical social theory has to play within modern society? Can we still conceive of an utopian drive for radical democratisation and a substantial redemption of the claims to a good life, or is Critical Theory confined to a level of critique which first and foremost concerns the distribution of goods and rights within the modern welfare state, as it would seem to be for Habermas?

Honneth: There is a certain tendency to reduce the potentialities of Habermasian theory in respect of his own political and normative insights. If you take his new book, *Faktizität und Geltung*, which just came out in Germany, and which has started to be discussed there now in the academic world, you can see that in respect to his book on communicative action he is not taking a step in the direction of accommodation, but in the direction of radicalisation. He's taking back some of his claims about the inviolability of systems. Nowadays, in this book, he sees a certain chance for the democratisation of what he previously called the political system, which was taken as a given. That was Tom McCarthy's criticism: in using systems theory for describing the political-administrative system Habermas was reducing himself to the conviction that no further democratisation of the political world is possible. In this new book he is much more radical in this respect, because he is again thinking of ways of democratising the administrative system. On the other hand, it's clear that you could say that immanent critiques of capitalist societies, hinting at a certain increase of democracy, without taking into view the possibilities of other forms of economy, or the working life, are too narrow. In this respect I am in a difficult position, because I can see the empirical justification for that. We are in a position in which we can't see a clear alternative to certain mechanisms of the capitalist economy. All over the world there is a certain apathy of Marxists and Leftists with respect to these economic questions.

On the other hand, I'm not sure whether we should put the question of the reconstruction of the economic system at the centre of our concerns today. Maybe it is more productive to ask what the preconditions are for a good life in our present situation, and then to ask how to reorganise society in order to fulfil this. I would strengthen some criticisms of the capitalist organisation of everyday life, and then ask myself, in a second step, what are the societal means to fulfil these normative conditions we think of when we criticise the capitalist organisation of everyday life in our time. I don't know whether we should call that utopia. There are certain utopian elements in it, but that is not what is decisive. If you think of the young Lukács, or the young Adorno, they are not utopian thinkers. They had a very strong idea about what reification is, and to describe

something as reification we need some standards or criteria in mind about what a non-reified human life is. But maybe that's enough today. Maybe that's an utopian background which you don't have to spell out.

Politics in Germany

RP: Perhaps we could move on to some more immediately political issues. Could you give us some indication of the way in which the German Left is responding to current events in Europe, particularly concerning nationalism, in relation to German reunification, on the one hand, and European integration on the other? What's most striking from the standpoint of the Left in Britain is what looks like a peculiar resonance between certain views of the German Left and views on the Right of the Conservative Party in Britain. What they seem to share is an incredible distrust of Germany as a reunified nation in Europe. From the standpoint of the British Left that looks like a very British chauvinism. Yet in some respects it's held even more extremely by people like Gunther Grass in Germany. So a certain German Left position looks very much like a certain British Right position.

Honneth: I'm not sure that's the right description. I have to say, there is a certain lack of interest in questions of European unity on the Left in Germany. Everyone is concentrating on the question of German unification and on the social results of this unification, in terms of the economic situation in which there is now a strong discrepancy between East and West in Germany, the new right-wing movements, and racism in Germany. The Left and the Right are both concentrating on Germany even though the Left wants to be non-nationalistic. I would say that the big mistake in this situation is this over-concentration on Germany, on both sides – the negativist nationalists and the positive nationalists. I see this tendency even in Habermas: overstressing nationality in a negativist way, struggling all the time against German nationalism, instead of thinking of a productive route to European unification. Leftists are in a familiar position because, on the one hand, we see that without any doubt European unification is the best way, as a next step in the political development of Europe; on the other hand, we see all the mistakes of the Maastricht treaty: the centralisation of Europe in a single financial system, the over-concentration of all political and economic power in one system. That is the main problem of the Maastricht treaty. The task of the future should be to think of new forms of federalism: new intelligent constructions of complex systems of local democracies, hanging together in a federalist way, so that we can speak of a unified Europe. That hasn't even started in Germany. Interestingly enough, the liberal thinkers are the only ones who are concentrating on this question. I can't see any interesting Leftist approach to it. Even people like Dahrendorf are thinking of these questions in Germany, but not the Leftists.

RP: There is a piece by Adorno from 1959 in which,

reflecting on the question of 'working through the past', he writes: 'I consider the continued existence of National Socialism within democracy potentially much more threatening than the continued existence of fascist tendencies against democracy.' This defines a very specific Frankfurtian position. How do you view that distinction, given the current situation? Does it still make sense, this way of thinking about capitalist democracy and fascism such that in some sense fascism isn't 'outside' the system? Or is this a completely anachronistic way of thinking?

Honneth: It belongs to the tradition of the political theory of the Frankfurt School concerning which I have many doubts, for liberal reasons. I see a strong difference between a *Rechtsstaat* and a totalitarian state. In this respect, there is a certain relevance to Hannah Arendt's separation between democracy and totalitarianism. Adorno and Horkheimer always wanted to undermine this differentiation, but I would say that all the experiences we have speak for Arendt instead of Adorno and Horkheimer.

RP: In a recent speech Manfred Frank went so far as to draw an analogy between the bowing to popular xenophobic sentiment on the part of the German political establishment and Goebbels's populism. Was Frank's analogy therefore misplaced? You don't think there is a danger within the political treatment of recent events which might reflect a new kind of cynicism in Germany's cultural consciousness of its past?

Honneth: I would be much more cautious than Frank, because what I hate at the present moment in Germany is this kind of instinctual reaction you have to use traditional words like fascism. We are still living in this schemata of being either fascist or a good leftist. So I have many doubts about Frank's analogy. The question of whether there's a new cynicism with respect to the past is one on which I'm quite optimistic regarding the cultural state of Germany. Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe I'm much too optimistic, but I think that even the conservatives, most of them, are quite aware of Germany's broken past. Even Kohl is aware of the moral debt we have. The difficulty that the conservatives have in debating the question whether German troops should join the UN troops shows how aware they are of this past. The only danger I see for a new cynicism is when the element which one finds in the young generation of skinheads has an influence on other generations and other groups. Then we have the cynical perspective on German history. That could be a danger. You can see it in certain elements of German cultural life. It is an intellectual reaction going back to the thirties. In this respect, I am quite worried sometimes that there could be a new conservative right. Interestingly enough, it is not in the conservative party as such. But that kind of cultural elitism does keep coming back.

RP: Do you regard the current situation in Germany – social disturbances, riots, strong reactionary sentiments, etc. – as simply a side effect of the reunification process,

likely to disappear according to the logic of a democratic learning process? Or are they perhaps due to more substantial insufficiencies within the contemporary political and societal formation, which make it hard to conceive of a frictionless development of German society?

Honneth: I would like to say two things. The first is I don't think that the events in Germany are correctly explained using the left-right schemata to describe them. What's going on in these teenage riots, for example, is very hard to describe with the notions we are still using in the German debate of 'fascism' versus 'leftism'. In Germany we are much too quick in using fascism as the key word for describing what's going on. It has a lot to do with the situation of jobless youth, a generation which has no other cultural means to find an identity except by using certain symbolic elements of the German past, which they know can produce certain provocations. That has to do with the cycles of cultural demarcation in the last thirty years. There was a whole generation using leftist symbols, even though we can see now that not all of them were morally convinced leftists – they were simply using the symbols. Now the members of the youth generation are in a situation in which their opposition to what's going on in Germany can only be made by using some protest materials in this way. It sounds as if I'm making the situation look much nicer than it is, but one has to respect that there is a cultural element there. On the other hand, it has to be said that there is also a big revival of small radically right-wing groups, even fascist parties, trying to exert an influence on the skinhead scene. The danger is without doubt this convergence between the symbolic and cultural forms of the young skinheads and the ideological content of the right-wing parties. It could happen that the fascist explanations make a more consistent, biographically more convincing, sense of the cultural symbols that the younger people are using.

RP: There does seem to be something specific about the West German state here, concerning immigration laws, for example, and the way that immigrant communities have been formally dealt with by the state in terms of their political rights. The move towards European unity is likely to make the German model the standard European model. Do you have any views about the political rights of *Gastarbeiter*?

Honneth: Germany is in a special position because we were never under the real pressure of an immigrant country. Now we are coming under this pressure, and we simply have to learn from the big immigrant countries. That means learning in a political respect and in a cultural respect. That's a learning process that has to be undertaken not only by the younger generation of skinheads, but by every other generation now living in Germany as well. It sounds very easy when the left is saying we have to become a multicultural country, but I'm not sure whether we are all prepared for that. There is a lack of the cultural democratisation which other countries simply had to learn. Something like the

introduction of a right to dual nationality would be a very helpful legislative means to force us into such a learning process.

RP: Is this why there is this distorting concentration on the concept of nationalism? Does it mark a resistance to these issues?

Honneth: Yes, on both sides: on the positive and the negative side of nationalism. Taking the rights of cultural traditions seriously, the rights of groups coming into Germany, and taking them as a normal part of our life, would destroy both sides of nationalism.

RP: So you would agree with Habermas's idea of post-traditional identities?

Honneth: Yes, but it has to be filled out. And I'm not sure whether I would agree with Habermas there, because I don't know whether this post-traditional identity really has to be a post-national identity. It may be a more open nationalism.

RP: How does this relate to the retributive side of German unification? By which I refer not only to such matters as the trial of the East German intelligence chief, Markus Wolf, but in particular to the treatment of intellectuals from the old East Germany, the vast

majority of whom have lost their academic jobs, and presumably have little hope of acquiring new ones. As a member of the German Left, how do you view this process?

Honneth: With very mixed feelings. On the one hand, there is the feeling that there should be sanctions (if not legislative, then moral) against all those who helped the totalitarian system to reproduce itself ideologically. On the other hand, I have strong doubts as to whether we, the West Germans, are the right ones to judge these intellectuals. We do not have enough knowledge about the everyday routines of this system, we are not in the hermeneutic position to understand the hopes, the ambivalences and the fears these intellectuals had at the time. There is still this tragic feeling that something is wrong when someone who spent years in a fascist prison is now the victim of a trial organised by the West German judiciary. I can't avoid seeing in all this a colonisation process which has given birth to a system of unequal exchange of moral power. In my view, what would have been best was a very open, public moral debate in the former GDR – a chance we have gambled away.

Interviewed by Peter Osborne and Stale Finke
Essex University, February 1993

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