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THERE MUST BE SOME WAY OUT OF HERE
IN SEARCH OF A CRITICAL THEORY OF WORLD SOCIETY

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With his brilliant cover of the apocalyptic Bob Dylan song *All Along the Watchtower* Jimi Hendrix expresses perfectly the discomfort of an entire generation. The unease was primarily fuelled by anger over the Vietnam War and with the authoritarian relations within the family and at the university. For many, the opening line of the song expresses the demand for the end of this horrible war and of reprehensible relations: 'There must be some way out of here.' This powerfully conveys that pop music is to a large extent about freedom. Not only Dylan's song, but also many other songs voice the longing for liberation from something that one doesn't want. Even though pop music is in many cases governed by the culture industry, it creates again and again new spaces of social freedom where young and old can freely express their discomfort about the status quo. Moreover, they often voice the desire for another world.

Although the statements of Theodor W. Adorno about pop music are rather condescending, many pop musicians express the same discomfort and desire as the representatives of critical theory. Perhaps this is a reason

why Axel Honneth, one of the main representatives of current critical theory, does not have such a negative view about pop music and edited with others an interesting book with essays on Dylan (Honneth, Kemper and Klein 2007). In any case, pop music illustrates one of the central theses of his comprehensive book *Das Recht der Freiheit* (RdF), namely that freedom encompasses more than legal and moral freedom. To have shown that with some verve is the great merit of the book. It provides good arguments for distancing oneself from all those political philosophers who developed moral theories that don't give us an account of what is going on in the world.

As Honneth himself wants to revitalize critical theory, I will investigate to what extent RdF actually contributes to it. Does it provide intellectual tools for a critical theory of what we can nowadays call world society? In answering this question, my presupposition is that a critical theory is characterized by four claims. First, a cognitive claim: a critical theory aims at an adequate analysis of world society. Someone who scrutinizes the world on the basis of such a theory claims that his or her analyses are true. Second, a normative claim: a critical theory pretends not only to deliver an adequate analysis of world society, but also a correct evaluation of it. The adherents of critical theory confront the actual situation with certain moral principles. Thirdly, an emancipatory claim: based on an analysis and evaluation of world society, critical theory wants to contribute to end practices that are objectionable. At least indirectly, the theory aims at practice. Therefore, attention is given to actors who overthrow conditions 'in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being' (Marx 1978: 60). Fourth, a self-reflexive claim: a critical theory pretends that it will look at itself with the same eyes with which it looks at others. This means that a critical theory not only objectifies others, but also itself. This self-reflexive attitude leads to critical questions about its own project.

My four comments on Honneth's book correspond to these claims. They touch on the concept of world society, moral facticity (*moralische Faktizität*), the promise of emancipation, and a sociology of critique.

1. World Society

The goal of Honneth's RdF is to 'develop a theory of justice by way of a social analysis' (Honneth 2011: 18). That reminds me of a famous phrase from Jürgen Habermas' *Knowledge and Human Interest*, namely that 'a radical critique of knowledge is possible only as social theory' (Habermas 1971: vii). Before I will come back to both quotes, I first want to dwell on Honneth's concept of society. What does he exactly mean by it?

Honneth uses the concept of society most often to denote the nation-state and the various social phenomena within the confines of its borders. For instance, when he addresses social pathologies, he refers to members of a political community who are no longer able to understand adequately the meaning of institutionalized practices and norms that are constitutive for the nation-state (Honneth 2011: 157, 206). Honneth is by no means blind to social phenomena that have a transnational character. He underlines that consumption patterns and the labour market don't care about the borders of the nation state.

In times of globalization, however, the question arises of whether critical theory needs a concept of world society to account for social phenomena with a transnational character. Apart from the question of whether one should conceptualize the world society à la Beck, Luhmann or Wallerstein, it is important to have intellectual tools that enable one to analyse how decisions that are taken at the headquarters of multinational companies or by the IMF, World Bank and WTO affect the quality of life of people throughout the world. Shouldn't the concept of society be denationalized to bypass the problem of methodological nationalism (cf. Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002)?

This raises the question of whether Honneth's concept of society can carry much weight in current debates about justice. Because of existing worldwide interdependencies many political philosophers discuss global rather than domestic justice. To this end, the aim of Honneth's book could be reformulated as follows: 'to develop a theory of global justice by way of an analysis of world society'. Perhaps one should even put the issue in terms of world *societies* to account for the disparities between eco-

nomic, cultural, legal and political globalization. It is quite possible that only people in North America and Europe are struggling with the social pathologies described by Honneth, but that at same time almost all world citizens suffer from global warming and the global economic crisis that began in the autumn of 2008 with the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Isn't a concept of world society essential for mapping the 'gleichzeitige Ungleichzeitigkeit' of the developments described by Honneth? How else than with a rich concept of totality (cf. Jay 1984) can one give an account of the 'Verweisungszusammenhang' of the ambivalent and discordant global transformations of economy, law, culture and politics?

2. Moral Facticity

In RdF Honneth criticizes Kantian constructivism and embraces Hegelian reconstructivism. According to him, Kantians construct their moral principles more or less independently of all practices and institutions. In fact, he wants to put Kantian political philosophy 'from its head onto its feet'. To this end he reconstructs norms that are immanent to a variety of practices and institutions and indispensable for social reproduction. Instead of operating with a sharp opposition of 'is' and 'ought', Honneth wants to give an account of moral facticity. He shows, for instance, that the market is impregnated with moral norms that can be mobilized to criticize and correct deviations. The normative reconstruction he proposes allows him to hold up a mirror to various practices and institutions, so that he can 'sing their own melody to them' (Marx 1978: 56).

Again, the normative reconstruction of the embeddedness of social freedom is largely based on an analysis of the so-called Western world. The question is whether Honneth should have taken into account the fact that there are large differences between moral facticities. From a global perspective, there is more than one 'we' of personal relationships, economic activity and democratic politics. Were he to have engaged in normative reconstructions in various parts of the world, this would undoubtedly have led to the conclusion that moral norms which guide practices and institutions in context X are often at odds with those in context Y. The question is whether Honneth's method of normative reconstruction

is helpful in addressing this issue, which, for the sake of convenience, I refer to as the 'moral facticity of the incongruities between moral facticities'. Should one construct an 'overlapping consensus' (Rawls) to overcome these incongruities? Or should such a consensus be reconstructed? Wouldn't a normative reconstruction of the development of the moral facticity of international law provide opportunities to cope with conflicts induced by different worldviews?

The status quo can certainly be criticized on the basis of such a normative reconstruction. The explicitly-made pretensions can be played off against reality. So the classical critique of ideology largely consists in the confrontation of the capitalist promise of freedom and prosperity with the actual lack of freedom and with severe poverty. However, there is also another way to criticize the status quo than on the basis of constructed or reconstructed moral norms, and that is telling the truth. In this case, one does not play normative cards, but cognitive cards. A critical philosopher or scientist gives a true description of a piece of reality and leaves the normative judgment to the people. Foucault, for instance, describes the power-knowledge nexus of various practices and institutions without passing a normative judgment on them; he could safely leave that to his readers. In a sense, Foucault carries out the program of the Habermas quote from above: he radically criticizes the knowledge generated by social science via a social theory that points out how that knowledge is used to discipline and normalize people in asylums, hospitals and prisons. By showing how the disciplinary power of these institutions is based on scientific knowledge, Foucault provides his readers with a critical perspective on science.

In contrast to Honneth, Foucault points out that critique does not necessarily have to be based on a theory of justice. Often it is sufficient to show the power-knowledge nexus in different practices and institutions. Similar to Foucault, the members of the first generation of critical theory pay much attention to a radical critique of knowledge ('Positivismusstreit', etc.), but they neglect what today passes for a theory of justice. In the case of Honneth it seems to be just the opposite: RdF focuses on a theory of justice and neglects the critique of knowledge (albeit in passing Honneth rightly criticizes the way the majority of economists think). Isn't Honneth in that respect closer to Kantian constructivism than he likes to be?

Doesn't a critical theory of world society not only require a theory of justice, but also 'a radical critique of knowledge [...] as social theory'?

3. The Promise of Emancipation

A critical theory of world society can only do justice to its emancipatory claim if it scrutinizes what is and what can be in the light of justified moral principles. For that purpose it combines a sense of reality (*Wirklichkeitssinn*) with a sense of possibility (*Möglichkeitssinn*) (Musil 1981: 116). Honneth seems to endorse this by stating: 'this should not simply be about outlining a certain desired state, i.e. just proceeding normatively, but about interpreting existing reality in terms of its practice potentials in which universal values may come to be realized in better, that is more comprehensive and faithful ways' (Honneth 2011: 27). He doesn't want to reproduce reality, but to change it by highlighting existing opportunities to change the world.

In RdF, however, Honneth doesn't put much effort in indicating 'practice potentials' (Honneth 2011: 27) that could be tapped in order to approach or even reach certain ideals. He doesn't systematically investigate the possibilities that reality provides. It is true that he does point to the importance of 'feelings of solidarity' (Honneth 2011: 495). According to Honneth these feelings include civic morality and constitutional patriotism. He also points to other factors that are conducive to emancipation, such as a functioning rule of law and a strong public sphere. However, the burning question is which actors in the public sphere raise the issues Honneth addresses in RdF. Who is the driving force behind emancipation today? Are there actors that successfully politicize the social pathologies described by Honneth?

Another issue concerning the emancipatory claim of critical theory is whether political struggles today are mainly about issues related to legal and moral freedom or about issues related to social freedom. Honneth is right in arguing that social freedom cannot be reduced to legal and moral freedom. Of course, in the current political struggles for emancipation new slaves (cf. Bales 2008), poor people (cf. Pogge 2010), Roma (cf. Van

Baar 2011) and others also strive for social freedom, i.e. 'being-with-oneself-in-another' or mutual recognition (Honneth 2011: 85). But isn't their political struggle primarily a quest for negative freedom and moral autonomy? Don't they fight mainly against exploitation, deprivation and exclusion rather than against social pathologies?

4. Sociology of Critique

Experiences of and with people who are exploited, excluded and humiliated are often a trigger for developing critical theories. To voice the experiences of these people and investigate the causes of their situation is one of their main tasks. According to the self-reflexive claim of critical theory one must ask whether these theories perform this task properly. In *Critique of Power* Honneth argues that the first generation of the so-called Frankfurt School is not adequately fulfilling this task, because it has a sociological deficit (Honneth 1993). Without mobilizing sociological knowledge a critical theory would fail in its duties. One of the great merits of Honneth's work is that he systematically integrates the findings of modern sociology.

In modern sociology, much attention is paid to its own role in society. So, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant look at sociology with sociological eyes. On the basis of their reflexive sociology they criticize not only *la misère du monde*, but also the affirmative character of positivist sociology (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). As reflexive and critical as Bourdieu and Wacquant are, they neglect the reflexive and critical competence of the object of their research. In their sociology of critique Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot point out that this competence is also present among lay agents, i.e. people who are not trained sociologically (cf. Boltanski and Thévenot 1999). A sociologist who, for instance, does research on poverty or migration will discover that poor people and migrants are often very critical and reflexive. That comes very close to what I said about Foucault, who argues that he could leave the moral judgment safely to his readers. Boltanski and Thévenot argue that critical sociologists should not limit themselves to analysing the social structures that determine the fate of actors behind their backs from a third-person per-

spective. They want to account for the first-person perspective, i.e. the perspective of those who participate in certain practices and institutions. Those who take this participant perspective seriously will discover that many theories of justice are embedded in everyday life (cf. Dubet 2006).

Robin Celikates has convincingly shown that Boltanski and Thévenot hardly pay attention to the social conditions of the development of reflexive and critical competences in everyday life (cf. Celikates 2009). To put it simply, he builds a bridge between the third-person perspective overemphasized by reflexive sociology and the first-person perspective overemphasized by the sociology of critique. With his program of normative reconstruction Honneth meets Celikates, because he distances himself from mainstream political philosophy that confronts norms with reality from an external perspective and neglects the participant perspective of those who are involved in practices and institutions. Instead, Honneth distills norms from moral facticity and thereby accounts for the point that the sociology of critique makes.

When it comes to the self-reflexive claim of critical theory, one has to go a step further. The sociology of critique should not only pay attention to the critique generated by the object of research, but also to the role different types of critical theory fulfill. The question is why the romantic types of critical theories, put forth by Alain Badiou, Michael Hardt, Chantal Mouffe, Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière, Slavoj Žižek and others, are so popular and embraced by both people who are exploited, excluded and humiliated and by those who are committed to them. This is a pressing question, because unlike the critical theory of Honneth their critical theories don't do justice to the complexity of reality and are dubious because of their lack of reflexivity concerning normative issues. In spite of that (or because of it?) there seem to be no communication blockades between the critical theories of Badiou cum suis and their addressees. The point I want to make is that self-reflexivity asks us to consider (potential) communication blockades between those critical theories that account in a non-romantic way for the complex world and their potential addressees. If a critical theory wants to hold on to the emancipatory claim, it has to voice the experiences of people who are exploited, excluded and humiliated and those who are committed to them.

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Dylan's music expresses not only their experiences, but also their longing for freedom. The freewheeling he embodies is an exploration of what Honneth calls social freedom. To explore and enjoy this social freedom is a necessary but not sufficient condition to make an end to exploitation, exclusion and humiliation. What Dylan and Honneth have in common is that they don't pretend to know the way out of a world that is characterized by these phenomena. However, that doesn't mean that one shouldn't proclaim loudly that 'there must be some way out of here'.

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