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DOSSIER *THE RIGHT OF FREEDOM*
A DEBATE WITH AXEL HONNETH ON HIS BOOK
DAS RECHT DER FREIHEIT
INTRODUCTION

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When Hegel wrote his *Philosophy of Right* in the first third of the nineteenth century he attempted to develop a practical philosophy in the double sense of a philosophical account that is both *about* practice – our legal, moral and political practices and how they *should* be organized – as well as *rooted in* practice, in a proto-sociological understanding of how these practices *are* organized.¹ In the contemporary theoretical landscape, where philosophical concerns have come to be largely separated from sociological concerns, such an integrated perspective has given way to a division of theoretical labor in which practical philosophers engage in normative theorizing and sociologists empirically investigate our social reality. Unhappy with the results that this mutual distancing has produced on both sides, a series of scholars has more recently attempted to bring the Hegelian framework up to date. One of the most influential and interesting attempts at renewing this integrated perspective can be found in the work of Axel Honneth. What Honneth, who is considered to be the most

prominent representative of the third generation of the Frankfurt School, prepared in his Amsterdam Spinoza Lectures from 1999 (Honneth 2000, 2010), namely a re-actualization of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, he more recently systematically executed in a massive 600-page monograph with the title *The Right of Freedom* (Honneth 2011; the full German title reads: *Das Recht der Freiheit. Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit*; an English translation is forthcoming from Polity).

In this book, Honneth undertakes a historical reconstruction of how modern society – its legal, moral, political as well as social and economic practices and institutions – came to be centered around individual freedom as the highest value of this cultural formation. The aim of this reconstruction, however, exceeds historical narrative and has both a theoretical and a normative point: theoretically, and against both normative as well as empiricist approaches which focus either on abstract principles or on actual reality, Honneth wants to show that we can only gain an adequate understanding of, and critical perspective on, modern society if we analyze its different social spheres as attempts to institutionalize the value of freedom; normatively, and against both revolutionary and conservative approaches, he wants to show that the structure of this institutionalization allows for a progressive, ever more adequate realization of the value of freedom as social actors appeal to the constitutive idea of freedom to challenge the concrete forms of unfreedom that remain characteristic of our social reality. Democratic ethical life – *demokratische Sittlichkeit* – is that set of dynamic practices and institutions which both already realizes freedom and enables its own transformation from a partial towards a more comprehensive realization of freedom. In this process a one-sided, overly individualist and negative understanding of freedom is overcome in the direction of a social order that can be regarded as just to the extent that it adequately institutionalizes freedom in its comprehensive sense.

In a veritable 'long march through the institutions', Honneth gives an account of personal relationships, market-mediated economic interactions, and the public sphere as the three spheres which he identifies as fundamental to the modern project of the social realization of freedom (not only in its narrow legal and moral, but also in its more encompassing social, sense). His analysis traces the progress in the realization of this pro-

ject as well as its ‘pathologies’ and regressive tendencies which are largely due to one-sided interpretations of the ideal of freedom and an unawareness of the social conditions that allow these spheres to function. While his assessment of the family and other personal relationships is largely positive and optimistic (for some probably overly so), his perspective on the current state of the economy and democracy is gloomier. Honneth follows Durkheim instead of Marx in interpreting the capitalist market not as a system of domination and exploitation to be analyzed in functional terms but as an institution that promises the general realization of individual interests and capacities – an essential dimension of freedom – and therefore has to be understood in normative terms. From this perspective, the manipulation of the needs of consumers and the fragmentation and precarization of work relations appear as deeply antithetical to the market’s promise of freedom but not as structural features of the capitalist system. In an essentially social-democratic spirit Honneth hopes that the problematic developments he identifies with great care can in principle be countered by more regulation, democratic control and a general re-embedding of markets on a transnational level. The extent of the current crisis and the, at the same time, helpless and deeply authoritarian political reactions it has until now provoked, seem to put even this hope into question (see, from a different perspective, also the critical discussion in Claassen 2013). Honneth’s analysis of the sphere of democratic will-formation is equally ambivalent: on the one hand, the nation-state has for some time successfully institutionalized public deliberation and the implementation of democratically legitimate decisions; on the other hand, however, the structural transformation of the public sphere through mass media, the legitimacy crisis of the established party system and the general inability of politics to control globalized and financialized capitalism, let him end on a rather pessimistic note – democratic ethical life, despite its prefiguration in actually existing societies and the historical evidence of learning processes, still seems a long way to go, an unfinished project.

An ambitious study of this size and scope can be expected to raise difficult questions on the methodological, theoretical and historical level, and it is certainly one of the marks of the innovative, original and challenging character of Honneth’s book that it does so (see, e.g., Honneth/

Busen/Herzog 2012). The contributions to this dossier on the book respond to that challenge in different ways and from different philosophical perspectives.² In his contribution, René Gabriëls addresses the theoretical framework and underlying methodological assumptions of Honneth’s project, raising the question of whether they are still wedded to the paradigm of ‘methodological nationalism’. The next three contributions all critically interrogate Honneth’s conception of social freedom and the way it is related to other forms of freedom: Thomas Nys is worried about the neglect of negative liberty, especially in the diagnoses of ‘social pathologies’; Beate Rössler defends a Kantian notion of moral freedom against Honneth’s Hegelian attempt to overcome it; and Joel Anderson questions the neglect of the capacities presupposed in the idea of autonomous agency. The remaining three contributions are devoted to the three spheres that, according to Honneth, make up the social reality of freedom: with regard to the family, Bert van den Brink raises doubts about Honneth’s optimism and points to the importance of public education; in his comments, aimed at uncovering Honneth’s ‘hidden constructivism’, Rutger Claassen questions Honneth’s understanding of the economy; and Yolande Jansen points to problems with Honneth’s understanding of the nation and the supposedly unified process of democratic will-formation. In his extensive reply, Honneth responds to these challenges, clarifying his arguments and developing them further.

Honneth’s book will certainly find a broad audience once its English translation appears. It provides one of the few systematic and – despite all the thoughtful objections that have been and will continue to be raised against it – convincing alternatives to the separation of normative philosophy on the one hand and social-theoretical and empirical analyses of social reality on the other, as well as a convincing analysis of both freedom and justice that in important ways goes beyond the liberal paradigm, reminding us of a normative commitment modern societies have already disavowed far too often and might be in the process of damaging irreparably. With this dossier we hope to contribute to a critical discussion of this major work in an engaging way.

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¹ In this introduction I use some of the material previously published in a review of Honneth's book (Celikates 2012).

² The articles have initially been presented as papers at a workshop with Axel Honneth on his book at the University of Amsterdam on March 22-23, 2012, co-organized by Beate Rössler and myself.