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THE FRAGILE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF SOCIAL FREEDOM

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Axel Honneth's *Das Recht der Freiheit* is guided by the idea that social freedom is a distinctive, invaluable, fragile, and difficult accomplishment. Social freedom is distinctive in that it differs from 'negative' and 'reflexive' modes of freedom in ways that are, according to Honneth, frequently overlooked. The importance of social freedom, according to Honneth, comes into view when one appreciates its unique character as a context in which individuals see their own individuality realized in a form of cooperation with others that is grounded in genuine mutual recognition and a full appreciation of their underlying interdependence. These claims about the distinctiveness and value of social freedom are complex and contested, but I will not take them up here. Instead, I would like to make two brief remarks about the last two adjectives: the sense in which social freedom is a fragile, vulnerable accomplishment, and the forms of individual competence that are necessary for participating in and sustaining forms of social freedom.

I. *Ideologiekritik* as the Disclosure of Sites of Social Freedom

The fragility of social freedom is underscored by the various forms of social pathology discussed in *Das Recht der Freiheit*. In terms of critical social theory, the central claim of the book is that certain ongoing social transformations have come to distort our ability to see the fundamental importance for us of social freedom (and of its becoming institutionalized). Freedom is thereby undermined – not as the result of domination, not as the result of our being subjected to laws and restrictions that we have not endorsed as co-legislating, politically autonomous agents, but rather as the result of pathology-generating ideology.

The specific form of ideology central to *Das Recht der Freiheit* can be seen as emerging in a four-step argument: (1) Humans have an historically conditioned but anthropologically grounded need for relations of mutual recognition and the associated forms of social freedom. (2) These recognition relations are in turn dependent on something like a socio-cultural ecosystem – institutionalized social practices, or what Hegel terms *objektiver Geist* – owing especially to the fragility of these relations of mutual recognition and the human vulnerability involved. (3) For social freedom to be realized, it is not enough that we are *de facto* interdependent, or that these relations of recognition emerge through a process of blind adaptation; rather, we must have a certain understanding of and affirmative attitude toward this interdependence; the recognition of interdependence must be part of the collective self-consciousness. (4) There are institutionalized understandings of freedom that function, as ideologies, to thwart attempts to realize (shared) self-understandings of our interdependence, thereby undermining the possibilities for realizing the forms of social freedom that these interdependencies call for. These ideologies involve the notion that social freedom is not necessary, not possible, and/or dangerous – dismissals that are reinforced by a wide array of cultural, social, and institutional forces.

This particular form of institutionally entrenched ideology is the primary target of Honneth's mode of social critique: the profound denial of our interdependence and our need for what can only be provided under conditions of relations of mutual recognition. Accordingly, the transforma-

tive potential of *Ideologiekritik* lies in bringing us back into contact with these suppressed insights, of reconnecting us with the fact that the possibilities for genuine autonomy require jointly and freely acknowledged forms of intersubjectivity. One way of doing this is along the lines of what Charles Taylor has done for the notion of non-naturalistic value (in *Sources of the Self*; see Taylor 1989) and for a sense of experiential ‘fullness’ (in *A Secular Age*; see Taylor 2007). Similarly, much of *Das Recht der Freiheit* is a matter of uncovering the alternative resources for how to think about freedom – as social freedom – and identifying historical strands that can be resuscitated. Honneth is, however, aware of the dangers of an overly discursive or culturalist account, though his approach is clearly informed by it. He also seeks to identify concrete social dynamics that either thwart or facilitate our ability to feel, see, experience, or live social freedom. This is what puts him so squarely in the tradition of the *Frankfurter Schule*: he focuses on how the powerful social dynamics concretely distort how we experience the world, as a lived social reality, thereby occluding the importance of social freedom.¹ For example, in the case of the labor market’s pressure on employees to adapt their skill set: once this is built into how job interviews are run, how secondary education is structured, what managers are directed to track, or what is offered by job centers, it becomes almost impossible to resist or escape this way of understanding what ‘economic independence’ involves or what it is to be a ‘freelancer’. And the possibilities for social arrangements in which labor is a locus of social freedom slip out of view.

In various ways, then, Honneth’s transformative social critique aims to connect us to concrete practices and modes of thought that bring social freedom more clearly into view. These attempts are forward-looking in the sense that they are attempts to help us move out of our current predicament into a future in which ideals of justice and autonomy are more fully realized. But, in another sense, there is a marked tendency on Honneth’s part to take a retrospective orientation, emphasizing lost or threatened contexts of social freedom at the expense of new and emerging practices. Throughout *Das Recht der Freiheit* the examples tend to be taken from the past, such as twentieth-century labor movements (Honneth 2011: 410-429) or the political communication in the early years of newspapers and radio (Honneth 2011: 502-505). Except for the case of more

egalitarian relations within the family (Honneth 2011: 305-317), contemporary developments (especially if they involve the internet, e.g., Honneth 2011: 140-1, 565) generally fall into the category of maldevelopments (*Fehlentwicklungen*). This is perhaps not surprising in a book that is critical, appropriately, of many recent developments. But the question is: where should social critics and social movements situate the emancipatory imaginary? Where are the sites at which the ‘actuality’ of social freedom is institutionally revealed (a process one could term ‘the institutional disclosure (*Erschliessung*) of social freedom’)? There is, of course, also a danger in focusing optimistically on recent innovations; many of them will likely turn out to be dead-ends, for a variety of reasons. But a focus on the retrieval of recognition relations that have been destroyed (or the preservations of modes of social freedom that are under threat) definitely has its dangers: not only does it fail to engage motivations of new generations of social activists, it also risks sliding into a *sentimental* mode of utopianism, a focus on futures past, practices that emerged in the past and were very promising, but whose availability today may be blocked by more than ideology, but by transformations in material, economic, legal and social reality. Neither the Hegelian methodology (of using historical reconstruction to bring into view normative advances) nor the critical emphasis on maldevelopments (*Fehlentwicklungen*) should crowd out the role in critical social theory of the exploration of the innovative potential of new developments, new modes of institutionalizing social freedom. *Das Recht der Freiheit* would have benefited from a few more such concrete examples of emerging practices and forms of institutionalization.

II. Autonomously Juggling Freedoms

It is clear that it is no simple matter to bring about and sustain the recognition relations (and underlying institutions) that make social freedom possible. It is an ongoing accomplishment requiring progressively more complex forms of subjectivity and agency. In particular, the differentiation of forms of freedom – legal, reflexive, and social – brings with it a new set of challenges for individuals, something that Honneth does not analyze in the book.² My sense is that we need a better understanding of how

we, as autonomous agents, navigate the competing demands and perspectives of different sorts of freedom. Sometimes, legally instantiated negative freedom is exactly what is best for jointly arranging my relations with others and is the most appropriate modality of freedom for that context. Sometimes the *cold cash nexus* is exactly what we want to use in organizing our relations. Other times, as Honneth emphasizes, the atomistic character of legal freedom and the moral line-drawing of reflective freedom are not appropriate and need to make way for social freedom. And, as far as I can see, what is missing from the analysis in *Das Recht der Freiheit* is anything about the capacities that autonomous individuals need in order to navigate between the different sets of demands – and about the possibility that genuine freedom is fully actualized only when agents can do that.

In clarifying this, let me start with a critical point. There is a tendency in *Das Recht der Freiheit* to suggest that social freedom is the ‘good’ kind of freedom, whereas legal or reflective freedom is somehow intrinsically deficient. Reading *Das Recht der Freiheit*, one can sometimes get the sense that relying on moral and juridical forms of freedom is intrinsically suspect and that the expansion of scope for these forms of freedom directly jeopardizes individuals’ freedom, autonomy, and/or well-being. I realize that this can’t be Honneth’s considered view, but the overall tone leaves the impression that these non-social forms of freedom are tainted at an ontological level.

I assume, however, that *Das Recht der Freiheit* is advocating the more nuanced (and plausible) view that the appropriateness of negative and reflective freedom depends on the context, as well as on the background understanding that they do not exhaust the scope of freedom. Given this pluralism about freedom, something needs to be said about how to go about determining what form of freedom is relevant to any given context, and this strikes me as a matter of complex adjudication by autonomous agents themselves.

Consider an example. Suppose you share a large office-space with several colleagues. You and your office-mates jointly adopt various arrangements about how to share the office. You set up a schedule specifying times

when the office is quiet and when each of you can use the space for, for example, meeting with students. Let’s say your slot is Thursday morning. On Thursday morning, this arrangement guarantees you a certain degree of negative liberty, to do pretty much as you please in the office. Others have to work around you (go to the library or put on headphones). This quasi-legal, quasi-contractual arrangement is framed by a shared understanding of what we are doing; and there is also room for critical reflection as to whether this arrangement really is morally legitimate and justified. But the core of the freedom that you have on Thursday mornings lies in the fact that you don’t need to discuss it. That’s part of what makes it so liberating (and why it would be *truly* liberating to actually have ‘A Room of One’s Own’). It seems a deeply valuable form of freedom, in which each of you knows what he or she is entitled to. What this example is intended to illustrate is that some social contexts involve a complex mix of negative, reflective, and social freedom, and that one modality of freedom may be more apt for some purposes. This is something that we all have to navigate as agents on the ground, as it were.

It seems to me that there may well be a distinctive dimension of agency in play here, a form of *autonomous agency* that involves competently and appropriately navigating these different domains of negative, reflective, and social freedom. A truly free context of recognition relations would then be one in which one can move, as appropriate, between these modalities. The issue is parallel to debates about how to navigate competing preferential, ethical, and moral rationalities and about what kind of ability or rationality allows one to move appropriately between them and keep them in balance (see, e.g., Seel 1993). What we need, then, as a supplement to the existing discussion in *Das Recht der Freiheit*, is something under the rubric of ‘the unity of autonomy and the diversity of its freedom.’ It’s not entirely clear what this would precisely involve, but my sense is that developing a full theory of social freedom requires also paying attention to the action-theoretic perspective of the agent who is trying to knowledgeably navigate these different perspectives (see Anderson forthcoming a and b).

If I am right about the importance of this, it strikes me as a significant gap (in what is, I will grant, already a long book) that Honneth does not de-

velop an account of this intersubjectively supported but ultimately *individual* capacity for navigating these complex waters. In focussing on structural dynamics that occlude the possibilities for freedom, Honneth has a tendency to locate freedom – or its lack – more or less at an ontological level, leading to an overemphasis on the structural at the expense of the agentic. The approach falls prey to the same objection that the ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (1964) leveled at Talcott Parsons: that individuals end up becoming ‘judgmental dopes’ when it comes to how these different ontological structures (of legal, reflexive, and social freedom) frame and channel what individuals do. Garfinkel’s point against Parsons was that, in the Parsonian constellation of social structures, agents ended up being pushed around by a variety of social forces, mere ‘judgmental dopes’ acting out various cultural scripts and acting out institutional roles without much room for savvy improvisation or strategic choice.

Similarly, most of the central critical claims in *Das Recht der Freiheit* are about what various structures or ideologies *do* to people. But freedom is not something that *happens* to us. Undoubtedly, Honneth is right to devote attention to the underpinnings of freedom in social ontology and to the ways in which social ontology shapes what we think, feel, desire, condemn, praise – and whether we feel at home in the world. My point is not that we should ignore these effects or suggest that the solution to alienation and anomie is for people to adapt in a more savvy way to circumstances. Rather, my point is that social ontology needs to be understood as also constructed by its inhabitants. To adapt the well-known phrase from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*: people make their freedom, but not under conditions of their own choosing.

Once we restore the balance (or, perhaps, effect an *Aufhebung*) in critical social theory between individual agency and social structures, important questions emerge – questions for which a radically democratized Hegelian social theory may have interesting resources for addressing. If the task of navigating these different modes of freedom is a crucially important but very difficult task, it is to be expected that many of us may lack the autonomy-skills to successfully navigate these various options. We’ll make inappropriate judgments about when negative freedom is what we should

focus on. From a ‘left-perfectionist’ perspective, would a truly just and freedom-promoting *Sittlichkeit* be one that also serves to facilitate this task of appropriately navigating this pluralistic normative space of freedoms? In *Das Recht der Freiheit*, this role seems limited to providing counter-steering and counterweights, against a widespread slide toward the cultural default position of neo-liberalism. But could there also be a function for *Sittlichkeit* in enhancing the autonomous agency expressed in adeptly navigating these various domains of freedom? Perhaps, then, what is needed is not primarily counter-steering in favor of social freedom, but a political culture within which the value of different forms of freedom can be articulated and a set of practices with which agents can learn, as an ongoing accomplishment, how to find their way within this plurality of modalities of freedom.

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¹ For an overview of the relationship between Honneth and earlier generations of the Frankfurt School, see Anderson 2011.

² See, however, the related discussions of autonomy in Honneth 2007 and Anderson/Honneth 2005.