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FROM PERSONAL RELATIONS TO THE REST OF SOCIETY

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*Das Recht der Freiheit* moves me for the courage with which it engages in what Honneth's project of the last twenty-five years has always pointed towards: a full-blown articulation of the ethical substance or *Sittlichkeit* of modern societies. There is an adequate pessimism that breathes through the pages on the market and democratic politics on the one hand and a refreshing optimism with regards to modern personal relations on the other. The organizers of the conference asked me to take a look at what I just described as the most optimistic discussion in the book: the one on personal relations (see Honneth 2011: part C.III.I: Das 'Wir' persönlicher Beziehungen, 232-317).

At the heart of Honneth's Hegelian conception of freedom sits the idea that freedom becomes social and hence 'real' where subjects meet in concrete and reciprocal relations of recognition secured by strong institutions and are able to understand their own wholeheartedly engaged-in actions as conditions of the realization of similar actions of relevant others. In this way, ego and alter can experience the realization of their desires and intentions as something that is not just legally and morally *allowed* – as negative and reflexive freedom would have it<sup>1</sup> – but genuinely *desired* in social reality. Honneth's positive message as to modern personal relations is that friendship, intimate relations, and the family largely live up to this

demanding task – and much more so than other social spheres do. Let me look at the three types of relation in a bit more detail.

The core function of modern friendship is that a person can articulate her desires and intentions in the presence of another person who wants her to strive for this articulation, deliberates with her as to what the articulation implies, and expects the same of her friend. The mutual affection characteristic of friendship is typically motivated by an interest in the *well-being* of the friend, not by any strategic further interest.

This view on motivation is typical of all three personal relations that Honneth discusses and fits with the historical starting point of his discussion, according to which, from circa 1800 onwards, modern personal relations were increasingly seen as 'those social relations amidst anonymity and isolation in which the inner nature of man can find its freedom through reciprocal affirmation' (Honneth 2011: 235). It is important to see that Honneth takes this as the starting point of his normative reconstruction of the core of personal relations. It sets a certain tone of *defense* against larger society; a theme to which I will return later.

Modern intimate relations – personal relations motivated by a mutual sexual desire and erotic relation – are understood partly along the lines of friendship, to which a component of orientation to a shared future is added, and which is then enriched with the sexual and erotic component and a claim as to what is described as an 'all-encompassing joy in the corporeality of the partner' (Honneth 2011: 263). To be oneself in another in an intimate relation is to affirm the natural neediness both of self and other not just in the affectionate and deliberative aspects of friendship, but in sexual and erotic corporeal communication that is free from the fear of exposure and harm caught up with undesired intimacy (Honneth 2011: 270). Again, the reflexive and realized desire that alter and ego stand in a concrete relation is central. Honneth remains true to his insight from *Struggle for Recognition*, according to which the experience of love is constitutive of an elementary form of self-confidence that grows with the experience of seeing one's natural neediness institutionally met in a lasting, trustworthy social relation (Honneth 2011: 276).

Finally, Honneth turns to the family, the core function of which is described as ‘the socialization of children’ (Honneth 2011: 278). Honneth notes, in what I think is the most interesting and conceptually innovative contribution to this part of the book, that with the longer life expectancy of the members of modern families, the democratic egalitarianism of the modern family expresses itself in a form of reciprocity in which, first, the parents care for an extended period of time for the well-being of children, and, second, there is a long period in which adult children and parents meet each other as equals and, in interaction along several lines of need and competence, can take on different roles toward each other. Finally, towards the end of the life of the parents, this relation changes again and the children actively, and often for an extended period of time, now care for the parents. Here, Honneth sees nothing less than a metaphor for the realization of the ‘cycle of life under the aspect of human sociability’ (Honneth 2011: 310).

What Honneth develops most strongly in his reflections on personal relations are deeply *existential* aspects of embodied intersubjectivity, focused on the ‘temporal dimension of human life’ as it affects the body and social roles (Honneth 2011: 306 ff.). He reconstructs the modern family as an ideal-typical modern community characterized by complex but egalitarian and reciprocal relations of solidarity organized around existential aspects of human life. As with friendship and love, it is presented as a safe haven in a harsh world; as an institution that finds its integration through the affectionate relations between its members and that warrants them a safe place in face of the often destabilizing imperatives of social systems such as the economic market or the political community.

Surprisingly, it is not until the last four of the nearly hundred pages of this part of the book that the three kinds of personal relations are systematically connected to the idea of a democratic *Sittlichkeit*. The argument is that in democratized and egalitarian personal relations, societies find a breeding ground for the forms of mutual respect and toleration, socially responsible independence, flexible role-taking abilities, and deliberative competences that the social spheres of the market and the democratic community expect or at least, normatively speaking, should require of those who participate in them. This conclusion comes as a bit of a surprise

because, up until this point, the discussion has been strongly existential in focus, concentrating on questions of corporeality, life, death, temporality, and mutual support and desire in the face of questions of self-interpretation. It remains unclear why we may assume that the forms of mutual support and desire that Honneth puts on center stage in his reflections on personal relations may be expected to be a breeding ground for ethical relations in social spheres that play very different functional roles in society and lay very different requirements on persons from personal relations. In what follows, my questions all relate to the translation of these competences, as acquired in personal relations, to the other spheres.

## I. Affection and Other Motivations for Interaction

The forms of egalitarianism and democratic attitudes that Honneth sees at the heart of modern personal relations are motivated by personal affection. A structural replacement for this along the lines of solidarity in the political and economic sphere is said to be hard to find in modern nation states, let alone on the supra-national level (Honneth 2011: 495 ff., 617). My main question regarding Honneth’s trust in the substance of personal relations as a breeding ground for a comprehensive notion of democratic *Sittlichkeit*, is why one’s being familiar with existential and ethical forms of care and deliberation with loved-ones should be expected to prepare one for the normative requirements of democratic citizenship and economic interaction. There seems to be more than enough evidence to the contrary. We know, for example, that competent members of loving and egalitarian families do vote for policies and parties that, if they had their way, would exclude entire groups of citizens from full participation in society. Honneth would seek reasons for this rather in deficits in the economic and political spheres than in the ethical substance of personal relations. But I am not sure than we can let personal relations off the hook so easily.

Affection within personal relations is partly defined by the very fact that there are, by definition, always those with whom one does *not* stand in an

affectionate and personal relationship. This constitutive aspect of in/exclusion to personal relations does not stand in the way of specific forms of deliberation, toleration, care, and mutual respect being exercised within these relations. But mastering these competences within a, by necessity, exclusionary framework of affection does not necessarily imply that similar virtues will be mastered within the normative structures of social spheres, such as citizenship and a well-ordered economic market. If an internally loving and egalitarian family imprints less than respectful and egalitarian patterns of evaluation of certain members of society in children, then the gradual social integration of these children into larger society is likely to be tainted with these evaluative patterns in economic and political relations. In his treatment of the family, Honneth has remarkably little to say about the family as a source of deep-seated social prejudices and discrimination.

## II. Formal Education as a Missing Link

I had expected a thorough reflection on the role of formal primary and secondary schooling with regard to questions of the social integration of children in society. In schools children are for the first time systematically introduced, in a clearly demarcated institutional setting, to the lasting presence of others with whom they do not necessarily stand in an affectionate personal relation, but in whose presence they work on cognitive, emotional, and civic self-development. The dispositional changes that this realm of social freedom requires of the child with regard to exercising deliberation and toleration, showing care and mutual respect, are considerable and a downright necessary step in what I have called the translation of the social competences and virtues acquired in personal relations to the more distanced and formal relations in civil society and the state.

Neither is there any reflection on the importance of the general and civic education of children in the chapter on democracy in *Das Recht der Freiheit*. Instead, the public sphere is presented as the main breeding ground of civic competence. Here, I would like to bring out the standard argument that Honneth himself uses – rightly, I add – against deliberative de-

mocrats: you cannot expect citizens to be competent deliberators if they have not acquired that competence in underlying social institutions. As I have argued, there are reasons to believe that personal relations within the family are not unproblematic as breeding grounds for civic competence, and schools seem an important institution in which to add a decisive correction to the parochialism and mechanism of inclusion and exclusion bound up with the family. If Honneth were to accept this, he would effectively conclude that his rigid Hegelian threefold distinction of social spheres has blinded him to the importance of an intermediate institution of social integration that is to be placed somewhere between these spheres: formal schooling.

In a recent article on education and democratic publicity Honneth stresses that this subject has been neglected in much of liberal-democratic political philosophy (see Honneth 2012). Following Immanuel Kant, Emile Durkheim and John Dewey, he argues that public formal schooling should be understood as the central institution for the social reproduction of democratic societies. However, both in political theory and in contemporary schools, Honneth fears that the climate for a renaissance of formal schooling as a breeding ground for a democratic ethos is negative. On the side of political theory, reservations that stem from the principle of state neutrality stand in the way of a moderate civic perfectionism in schools; the social imperatives of the economy are such that many schools today are rather organized as breeding grounds for integration into the market and its requirements than as breeding grounds for democratic competence. The analysis is compelling, but it is not explicitly connected to Honneth's current project. Perhaps a later edition of *Das Recht der Freiheit* will contain an extra chapter that extends the consequences of the normative reconstruction of the ethical substance of society to matters of formal education.

## III. Safe Havens and the Status Quo

I would claim that Honneth's strong focus on existential issues enables a reading of his book that he probably would not welcome. It would accept,

with Adorno in *Minima Moralia*, that the wrong life cannot be lived rightly, but that, if there is a place in which we can at least try to make sense of our being in the world in meaningful relations with others, it must be the social sphere of personal relations. According to such a reading, this sphere provides the systemic room that the market and modern state capitalism gladly leave us to make sense of our lives in a relatively undisturbed – and politically pacified – way. Indeed, this could help explain why modern personal relations seem to live up to the demanding normative requirements of modern social freedom more successfully than the other two social spheres do. The utopian hope of a society of self-governing citizens living together in freedom, equality, and fraternity may be shattered; the non self-governing clients of the capitalist constitutional order, and consumers and employees of the capitalist economy, can experience an unprecedented level of freedom, equality, and fraternity in personal relations as long as this does not threaten the status quo.

#### IV. *Das Recht der Freiheit*: Political as much as Philosophical?

Finally, Honneth's normative reconstruction of modern personal relations is not a description of a present state of affairs that has been actualized in all personal relations. Since his is a *normative* reconstruction, this is not a real objection. Honneth does a remarkable job of articulating an attractive and, at the same time, existentially adequate account of many personal relations. But I have two questions. First, does he see room for alternative, perhaps much more conservative, accounts of personal relations that still count as modern and in some sense legitimate? Perhaps accounts that stress, more than Honneth's account does, values such as the acknowledgement of parental authority, perhaps even a special caring role for the mother, a less deliberative account of the structures of legitimacy in the family, etc.? The lives of many more conservative families seem structured that way. Such conservative members of society – think of orthodox Christians and Muslims – lead different lives from many of us, but are they somehow failing to live up to the normative core of personal relations in modern society? If we would grant room for alternative accounts of personal relations, should we not, secondly, be open to the

suggestion that Honneth's reconstruction of social freedom is in the end not an objective philosophical one but rather deeply political in nature? Perhaps there are multiple modernities with regard to developing conceptions of personal relations. And perhaps Honneth's project is a philosophical articulation of the normative structure of one of these, but not of all modernities.

Honneth makes substantive proposals as to how to order our social world that, to put it with John Rawls, are likely to be controversial even among reasonable, cooperating citizens. He states, for instance, that it should be relatively easy to find a political consensus regarding the financial and temporal space that the state has to create through social rights for engagement in family activity. This is a variation on an old theme in his work, that of paid housework. But this is a hotly debated political issue. It seems unlikely that Honneth's reconstruction of the normative functionalism from which he assesses the health of social spheres gives all citizens *rationaly binding* reasons to follow such far-going political proposals. I rather think that here the philosopher Axel Honneth becomes the citizen Axel Honneth. Perhaps the starting points of his normative reconstructions are more often chosen against the background of an always already political assessment of states of affairs in society. That would make of his work a philosophical articulation of a social-democratic political program as much as a philosophical articulation of the normative structure of democratic *Sittlichkeit* as such.

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<sup>1</sup> See Honneth's reflections on the pathologies of freedom, Honneth 2011: 157-72, 206-18.