

THE ENDURING SIGNIFICANCE OF AXEL HONNETH'S CRITICAL CONCEPTION OF WORK

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This essay explores Axel Honneth's 1980 essay "Work and Instrumental Action" with a view to revitalising its argument about the value of a critical conception of work activity. In his early essay, Honneth sought to reconstruct this critical conception of work, inspired by the philosophy of Marx, in an effort to generate a critique of Habermas's communicative social theory. Honneth doubted whether Habermas's core epistemological category of instrumental rationality could capture the normative significance of individual work activity. This generates uncertainty over whether a critical theory with a communicative framework can locate the contribution of individual work activity in the process of social emancipation. After the publication of "Work and Instrumental Action", Honneth's philosophy itself retreated from the critical conception of work in favour of the recognition-theoretic social theory that culminated in his influential 1992 work *The Struggle for Recognition*. My essay draws on evidence of the benefits of individual worker autonomy to argue that Honneth's theory of recognition itself could be enhanced through a reassessment of the critical conception of work activity that he proposed in his early essay.

More than a decade before the publication of his influential text *The Struggle for Recognition* (1992), Axel Honneth was interested in exploring the normative potential of work as a category of human activity, while avoiding the Marxist notion of labour as the central category of social emancipation. The 'critical conception of work' outlined in his essay "Work and Instrumental Action" (1980) performs a dual function, serving to salvage the normative value of work as an activity performed by an individual in modern society, while also highlighting the limitations of Habermas's category of instrumental action. Honneth's critical conception of work distinguishes between instrumental acts in which the subject freely controls the nature and output of its labour, and those in which individual freedoms are restricted by imposed regimes and expectations. This conception is justified by the implicit claim that Marx's own early interpretation of Hegel and

Feuerbach, which defines the ideal of work as a means of shaping individual identity, is still valid, as suggested by recent sociological case studies.

Honneth's critical conception of work can be viewed as a preliminary argument that advocates a broadening of contemporary critical theory to better acknowledge its materialist origins. This essay highlights the influence of Habermas's intersubjective turn on Honneth's own ideas, but it also suggests that in 1980 Honneth himself was already exploring the idea of an alternative social theory whose normative power did not solely rely upon strictly *communicative* intersubjective exchanges.

Honneth maintains that Marx's complicated and problematic social theory eventually succumbed in the unfolding of twentieth century industrial expansion. Habermas provided a theoretical alternative that demonstrated Marx's 'categorical error' in naming social labour as the determining factor of social emancipation. However, Honneth contends in his 1980 essay that Marx's obsolete social theory contains a convincing argument about the normative significance of individual work activity; one that the linguistification of critical theory has, to its detriment, failed to retain.

While Honneth's theory of recognition makes some ground in retaining the normative significance of work at the level of social analysis, the model cannot perform the function played by the critical conception of work in highlighting the importance of work activity at the level of the individual subject. The argument contained in "Work and Instrumental Action" can also be used to critique Honneth's category of recognition, on the basis of its over-reliance on

intersubjectivity as *the exclusive source* of work’s normative significance. The category of recognition itself does not exhaust the normative potential contained in the critical conception of work, which points to the need for workers to remain completely autonomous in their activity *regardless* of whether their contribution is recognised by others or not. As a result, the theory of recognition is unable to critique situations in which work structures ensure that workers are recognised for their labours, but deny them the autonomy to organise their work processes. This is an important omission from Honneth’s theory of recognition, which can regain ground by acknowledging the importance of subject-to-object interactions both in the process of individual identity-formation and in the generation of intersubjective norms.

In “Work and Instrumental Action”, Honneth presents a story of the slow demise of traditional Marxism, and the resulting burden on critical theory to respond to trends in capitalist production processes that rendered Marxism increasingly unpopular. As a result of this net failure, and in spite of the work of the first-generation critical theorists, social philosophy experienced a trend whereby the social contribution of the work realm was described as irrelevant, or even detrimental to the individual and to social morality. Honneth discusses in some detail the theories of Arendt and Scheler, both of whom consciously attempted to “dispute and dismantle by various means the special, emancipatory status of the nineteenth-century concept of work” (1995c, p31).

The consequent rejection of ‘instrumental action’ by Jürgen Habermas as the central category of social emancipation contributed to a movement in critical theory in which the normative potential of self-directed work activity was all but lost. For Habermas, the fundamental concept through which social emancipation is revealed is ‘communicative action’, supplemented by the secondary

category of instrumental action which encompasses all human activity directed toward nature. This formulation strips subject-to-object action of any normative content. Honneth finds this particularly troublesome, arguing that "Habermas has given up the categorical means for analytically grasping this systematic dissociation of all work content from instrumental modes of action" (1995c, pp45-6).

"Work and Instrumental Action" demonstrates Honneth's belief that the concept of work, taken strictly as a form of individual human activity, could inform a critical social theory that embraced a 'linguistified' intersubjective shift in its flight from the Marxist tradition. This conception could reveal the limits of restricting the formation of social norms to the process of communicative exchange alone.

Beginning with an interpretation of Marx's philosophy that emphasises the category of work as an individual activity, Honneth carefully delineates the early Marx of the *Paris Manuscripts* from the Marx of his later economic writings (*Capital, Grundrisse*). While in the *Paris Manuscripts* Marx was principally concerned with emphasising the potential of work activity in developing the subject's identity, he was concerned in his economic writings with providing a negative analysis, describing the role of capital in repressing this aspect of work activity.

The suggestive force which proceeds from the notion that the human species becomes conscious of its own needs and capacities through the very process of social labor by which it reproduces its own existence permits the concept of work to become the categorical paradigm of Marx's historical materialism. According to [his early *and* later writings], world history is defined as the self-generation, self-preservation, and self-emancipation of society through work (p19).

The historical importance of social labour is not what Honneth wishes to retrieve from Marx's philosophy. He is interested only in the normative potential of work activity itself, which Marx left at best only partially developed.

Nowhere in his writings ... does Marx explicitly describe the categorical limits which differentiate [his] model of social labor from other types of activity. Nor does he discuss the limits within which his conception of work can or should be applied to the explanation of individual or collective behavior. Instead this paradigmatic concept appears in all of his works as an accompanying figure of thought which takes different shapes during the various stages through which his theoretical project is worked out (p19).

The conception of work that Honneth himself outlines stresses the importance of an individual to be completely free in the nature and means by which his or her work is undertaken. This creates the grounds for a critique of existing work norms and structures. Marx's early social philosophy took the concept of social labour through at least two different theoretical models. In his own conception, Honneth draws on the expressivistic potential that Marx attributed to work activity at the level of the individual subject, which was dealt with most thoroughly in his early writings. Marx borrowed this aspect directly from Hegel's conception of work as the objectification of one's personality. For Hegel, who was himself influenced by the theory of Johann Herder (Taylor, 1975, pp13-27), work acts as the means by which a subject comes to understand itself and the world. The act of manipulating physical objects transforms those objects in a way that gives the contents of one's consciousness a physical presence. In this way, work serves the individual as a means of self-expression, and also of personal development (Hegel, 1977, pp211-35).

Through Hegel, Marx had a starting point for his own theory of social emancipation. While Hegel explained the process through which work gained importance on an individual level, he did not provide a means through which it could take on a *collective* emancipatory significance – a step that was crucial to the concept of social labour. The means for expanding Hegel's

individualist notion came by way of Hegel's student Feuerbach, whose anthropological materialism could explain the importance of work expression as a natural need of *the human species*. Marx used this thesis to identify social labour not only as the driving force behind the economy, but also as the factor through which social morality could be understood. Marx also used this conception to support his analysis of world history, in which humanity struggles to achieve absolute freedom. Rejecting Marx's notion of world history, Honneth also notes his failure to adequately define the type of activity that falls under the category of social labour. This rather glaring shortcoming allowed Marx to freely mould the concept of social labour into two distinct action-theoretic models of social revolution, both of which ultimately failed to secure the legacy of Marxism.

Marx's first model, appearing in the *Paris Manuscripts*, took the Hegelian understanding of work as the process through which the working classes form a conception of themselves as the agents of the historical process of human emancipation. In this sense, workers become the representatives of humanity in general, given that the activity defining them in a social context is a natural, and therefore normatively significant, activity of human beings. The impasse of capitalism can be understood as a world-historical equivalent of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic, in which the ruling classes seek to alienate workers from their product, and thereby hinder both the process of human self-realisation and the natural progression of history. Honneth highlights the conceptual dilemma resulting from this model, generated by the logical inconsistencies between Hegel's dialectic and Marx's own social model. The dilemma leaves Marx unable to identify the collective consciousness that is directed from its inception towards the demise of capitalist production processes. There is, in other words, no sufficiently developed

collective identity that views capitalism as a negative process. If the master (the ruling classes) supports the alienating production process, and the slave (the workers) only forms a consciousness through the product of their work – from which the ruling classes alienate them – then neither class forms the attitude towards capitalism that is required for revolt against it.

Marx’s later model of social labour, appearing in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, concentrated on the capitalist production process itself. Here he argued that the negative experience of alienation from the product of their labour somehow educated and disciplined workers to the point where they would eventually revolt as the chosen agents of social emancipation (1995c, p24). But this conception ultimately failed to explain how workers could come to understand themselves as the decreed agents of social change in the first place, given that the capitalist process is what provides the proletariat with this self-image. The model also suffers through Marx’s underdeveloped dualistic characterisation of work activity: one side modelled on the ideal of the completely autonomous craftsman, and the other defined through the oppressive process of production that alienates the worker from the material results of his or her activity (1995c, p23). Marx attempted to apply this dual conception to a historical narrative detailing the devolution of work practices under the influence of capitalist processes. Unfortunately, he was unable to conceptually account for this degeneration, and eventually abandoned this line of argumentation. Honneth argues that if he had persisted with it, Marx would eventually have been forced to acknowledge that, at the social level, workers must “counterfactually anticipate the features of a self-contained, self-directed work procedure which embodied the worker’s knowledge (1995c, p24). In other words, Marx would have realised that the social norm of craftsman-like activity

and the capitalist process itself both find their origins in the intersubjective realm of communication.

In “Work and Instrumental Action”, Honneth was most interested in retaining Marx’s expressivist conception of work as a normatively valuable activity for individual self-development. This conception presented itself in full opposition to other notions of work, informed by the contributions of Arendt and Scheler (both of whom were to varying extents reacting to Marx’s own conception), and in the midst of which Habermas developed his non-normative concept of instrumental action. Honneth seems to attribute some significance to the Hegelian theory of self-development through labour, which reveals the social organisation of work as a normative issue, even if it does not, as Marx argued, *exclusively* determine the normative structures of society. With this argument, Honneth turns to contemporary sociology for empirical support. Picking up where Marx abandoned his first model of social labour, Honneth turns to an essay by Phillippe Bernoux, describing an empirical study of an industrial work environment in which workers “systematically violate and subvert the rules of production that were determined by management and embodied in the technical organisation of work” (Honneth, 1995c, pp46-7). These studies reveal not only that workers are often better able to direct production than their superiors, but are, most importantly, also willing and capable of challenging imposed forms of work organisation. Bernoux himself states that the actions of the group “express ... a will to organise and control production, to make itself recognized as having rights as an essential moment of production” (cited in Honneth, 1995c, p48).

It is through this line of thought that Honneth builds the justification to challenge Habermas's theory of communicative action as *too* communicative. The splitting of action between communicative and instrumental spheres gives Habermas's theory an attitude to work that resembles the negative depictions in Arendt. According to Honneth (1995c, p40), Arendt's splitting of human action into the Aristotelian concepts of *praxis* (meaningful, intersubjective human action) and *poiēsis* (non-social actions towards nature) prevents her from realising the contribution that work can make towards social change. Habermas's communicative theory suffers the same problem.

[Habermas] applies the concept of instrumental action in the tradition of those recent social-philosophical conceptions which have so completely neutralized the normative concept of work, that they subsume under it uncritically every form of activity which has anything to do with the handling of an object (p46).

The reasons for this reconceptualisation are clear when we consider the theoretical difficulties found in Marx. In creating a divide between communicative and instrumental action, Habermas divides the potential of human rationality into two modes: one directed at the normative structuring of society, and the other in securing its material survival. Honneth acknowledges the benefits of this division in its clarification of the dubious connection that Marx attempted to establish between social labour and social liberation. For Habermas, it is labour that secures society's survival against the brutish effects of nature, while communicative rationality is the means to society's liberation from itself.

But this reconceptualisation leads to new problems. For instance, Habermas's category of instrumental action constitutes a rejection of the Hegelian notion of work as a process of self-realisation and development. Along with this important omission comes an inability to distinguish, as Marx did with his underdeveloped 'craftsman-abstract labour' dichotomy,

between positive and negative conceptions of work organisation. In addition, Habermas’s category of instrumental action is excluded from any normative input in the workings of society because, by definition, it does not involve linguistic exchanges, which alone are the means by which social norms are both created and understood. This was Honneth’s principal objection to Habermas’s social theory in “Work and Instrumental Action”. Honneth is clear in his contention that Habermas succeeds overwhelmingly in pointing out the integral role that intersubjectivity, in the form of linguistic exchange, plays in the formation of social norms. However, what Habermas fails to realise is that distinctions can be made within his category of instrumental action that generates a way of distinguishing between subject-to-object actions that also impact on normativity, and those that do not. This is what the critical conception of work serves to demonstrate: *that human normativity should not be constituted solely within the horizon of intersubjective exchanges.*

“Work and Instrumental Action” emphasises Habermas’s underlying epistemological distinction between communicative ‘moral’ knowledge and instrumental ‘technical’ knowledge, which “is the foundation of Habermas’s conception of historical materialism” (1995c, p46). In the theory of communicative action, the emancipatory potential within society is achieved completely through communicatively generated moral knowledge. Honneth argues that Habermas’s theory fails completely to account both for the ability of workers to develop an awareness of the injustice that they face in their work environment, and also to describe the process through which they can achieve freedom for themselves in the workplace. Honneth contends that since the injustice of worker alienation takes place in the instrumental realm, so too must the workers generate their normative expectations within it. But the instrumental realm operates under the amoral logic of

technical knowledge, which by definition cannot provide moral norms. Therefore, Habermas's model contains either an implicit argument that worker alienation does not occur in modern society, or that it does not make a normative contribution worthy enough of theoretical explanation: "[Habermas's] basic concepts are laid out from the beginning as though the process of liberation from alienated work relations, which Marx had in mind, were already historically complete" (Honneth, 1995c, p49). Honneth introduces the empirical account of Bernoux to demonstrate that social theory *does* in fact need to account for the phenomenon, and devises the category of 'appropriation' in an attempt to show how it can be theoretically accounted for.

A decade after he wrote "Work and Instrumental Action" and not long before the publication of *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth conceded to Habermas that the theory of communicative action *was in fact able* to describe how workers could develop the norms to support their revolt against work regimes (Honneth, 1995a, pp xvii-xix). For Habermas, the communicative realm is where all questions regarding the structure of society are debated and altered; those moral questions concerning the spheres of instrumental action being no exception. The norms, therefore, develop communicatively with regard to the institutional framework in which work activity is mediated, and not through some mysterious process located within the instrumental realm itself. But by this time it is clear that Honneth had lost all interest in the critical conception of work, and was working toward a recognition-theoretic model of social morality.

The Struggle for Recognition takes as its starting point an insight implicit in the work of Habermas himself: that recognition is the fundamental moment of intersubjective exchanges. Honneth argues that recognition itself forms the normative basis for the structure of society, and

not communicative action, as Habermas contends. This is a significant development because it allows Honneth to explain how society develops a *sui generis* normative consciousness through intersubjective interactions, without restricting its genesis to purely linguistic exchanges. One benefit of this approach is that the intersubjectivity present within work activity can be shown to contribute to the normative processes of society. Work can then become a normative *social issue* on the basis that individual workers possess a need to be recognised by others in their contribution to the material reproduction of society. The category of recognition therefore presents a serious challenge to Habermas, not least because it creates a way of reinstating the normative potential of certain human activities that need not involve strictly linguistic exchanges.

A comparison of "Work and Instrumental Action" with Honneth's later work on recognition reveals a shift away from the idea of work as a subject-to-object activity with normative value for the individual subject, and towards an extrapolation of its value at the social level. Work activity is only alluded to in *The Struggle for Recognition*, but was further discussed in Honneth's later writings, most significantly in his collaboration with Nancy Fraser, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (2003), and in the 2005 Tanner Lectures. In *Redistribution or Recognition?*, workers become adequately recognised under what he terms the 'principle of achievement', through which they learn to expect acknowledgement from others in their work 'successes'. In the Tanner Lectures (Honneth, 2008), the 'struggle for recognition' has been replaced by what Jean-Philippe Deranty has called 'affective recognition' (2007, p153), which emphasises the point made in *The Struggle for Recognition*, that, in the context of intimate relationships, "a recognitional stance enjoys a genetic and categorical priority over all other attitudes toward the self and the world" (Honneth, 2008, p36). It is therefore only through the

primal intersubjective link with another that we generate any normative awareness in the first place.

But for work to be successfully thematised as a normative issue consistent with the critical conception of work, *the relationship that arises between the subject and the object in the activity of work* needs to be acknowledged as a normative process *in itself*, externally to intersubjective exchanges. This is the only way to complete the process through which truly unfettered work activity can be shown to develop as a critical norm in society. Honneth's failure to consider this aspect of work activity renders the concept of recognition incapable of normatively compensating for the critical conception of work, which is *unconditional* in the prioritisation of "instrumental act[s] in which the working subject structures and regulates his own activity on his own initiative, according to his own knowledge, in a self-contained process" (Honneth, 1995c, p46).

At this stage it would perhaps be helpful to examine the content of Honneth's critical conception of work again, to determine whether it retains any practical relevance for modern society. Modern individuals have many considerations other than the nature of their own work. Hegel's notion in which work performs an integral role in individual self-expression seems an appropriate basis for a utopian model of society. But the challenge can easily be made that this norm is not overly applicable today, given the complexity of modern society and the many resulting avenues, other than work, through which an individual's identity can be asserted and developed.

However, many features of modern society can also serve as a rejoinder to this claim. Bernoux's study is one documented incidence of worker frustration regarding the imposition of work

regimes; their subsequent appropriation of work processes is evidence not only of the extent to which they regarded their autonomy as important, but of the need for a critical social theory to account for this aspect of normativity. Other studies, such as Christophe Dejours's research into the 'psychodynamics of work', offer empirical support for the crucial role of work in the relationship between individual subjectivity and collective action. The trends in neo-liberal work structures can affect individuals to the point where the degeneration of individual mental health becomes a widespread social concern (Dejours, 2007, p60). The position of 'vocational guidance counsellors' in modern schools demonstrates the acknowledgement of society, at an *institutional level*, of the need for young people to be placed on a career path that suits both their given talents, and also their personal identity. Also of note are the communities of would-be actors, painters, writers, musicians, and other artists who must work menial jobs to support themselves; most of whom fail to attain a lifestyle that allows for meaningful material investment in the activity they recognise as a means of self-expression. The failure to adequately engage in their vocation is frequently devastating to the individual, who will experience identity crises and depression. Such problems exist in other occupational sectors as well, especially where the industry in question is structured to minimise the number of people required, without consideration for the multitudes who wish to be included. These numerous social phenomena demonstrate not only the wide permeation of norms related to the critical conception of work, but also the repercussions when society fails to acknowledge them. One can therefore argue that work activity remains normatively relevant even from the perspective of a recognition-theoretic social theory.

Deranty argues that while Honneth's theory of recognition is a valid model through which to critically analyse modern society, it refrains from utilising the normative potential of its key

concept. With the introduction of Feuerbach's notion of the object as the 'quasi-I', Honneth could attribute to his key concept the ability to perform the task of his critical conception of work. This notion describes the process through which an inert object becomes like a fellow subject to its perceiver, based upon the shared materiality of the object and the perceiver's body. The ensuing encounter serves as a substitute for a genuine intersubjective exchange, providing the subject with a feeling of recognition in the absence of other 'real' subjects (Deranty, 2007, pp154-7). This explains how a normative consciousness can develop in the subject through its direct interaction with nature, independently of the rest of society. It would attribute to the theory of recognition the ability to provide an account of the normative expectation of fully autonomous work conditions of the kind demanded by the critical conception of work.

Honneth's critical conception of work, as outlined in "Work and Instrumental Action", proves effective in arguing for a re-examination of the normative potential of work in the context of social theory originating from Marx's revolutionary writings. The conception helps to isolate and expose the normative restrictions of Habermas's communicative social theory, and offers an activity of normative significance that demands inclusion in critical social theory. Honneth's subsequent theory of recognition itself failed to account for the full normative potential contained in work activity. The critical conception of work can therefore serve to direct his own recognition theory by stressing the norm through which workers require the freedom to participate in the occupation of their choice, without the type of imposed expectations found in modern societies.

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