Disrespect

The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory

Axel Honneth

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Acknowledgments

Preface

I'm pleased that this volume of essays can finally appear in English after years of preparations that were not always easy. Although most of the essays are more than ten years old, nevertheless they give a clear sense of the direction in which I have sought to develop further the concept I had outlined in *Struggle for Recognition*. Though I initially conceived of the concept of recognition as a normative groundwork for a critical theory of society, it soon proved solid enough to be applied in the contexts of social philosophy in general, as well as moral philosophy and political philosophy.

It was not merely for reasons of language that we decided not to publish the English edition under the original German title. Though it is certainly true that the Hegelian formulation "Other of Justice" presents difficulties for English-speaking readers, we also had systematic reasons for opting for the current title. After all, what we might conceive of as a striving for social recognition initially appears in a negative form, namely as the experience of humiliation or disrespect. Only after undertaking a closer analysis and laying bare the normative points of reference that remain mostly unarticulated in everyday reality does it become apparent that these negative experiences are based implicitly on a demand for a previously withheld type of recognition. If we express these experiences of disrespect in positive terms and distinguish among them with regard to their moral content, then it becomes generally apparent that they are linked to the typical principles of recognition institutionalized in that respective society. Subjects only experience disrespect in what they can grasp as violations of the normative claims they have

come to know in their socialization as justified implications of established principles of recognition. In my view, therefore, "disrespect" constitutes the systematic key to a comprehensive theory of recognition that attempts to clarify the sense in which institutionalized patterns of social recognition generate justified demands on the way subjects treat each other.

The essays collected here represent but a sort of preparation for the solution to these difficult and complex issues. By delving into the three complementary disciplines of practical philosophy, social philosophy, and political philosophy, these essays tentatively explore the possibility of adjusting these disciplines' central normative categories to the concept of recognition. This question does not stand in the foreground of every essay; in some essays I have merely reconstructed the current situation prevailing in the respective discipline in order to make systematic preparations for the corresponding adjustment. Occasionally other authors stand in the center of the discussion; here the aim is to test out the extent to which their lines of argumentation can be reformulated in terms of recognition. But without a doubt the common bond shared by all these essays is the attempt to embark on a recognitional grounding of practical philosophy.

I'd like to express my gratitude to Polity for enabling the publication of this volume in English, and I'd especially like to thank John Thompson for his competent advice and understanding in the choice of a title. Most of all I'm indebted to the translator, Joseph Ganahl, who in a short time succeeded in taking a conglomeration of starkly diverging and partly abridged translations and turning them into a unified whole.

<div style="text-align: right;">Axel Honneth</div>

Part I
The Tasks of Social Philosophy

1
Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy

Like all areas of theoretical investigation over the past two hundred years, philosophy has undergone a process of differentiation that has led to the development of a number of subdisciplines and specializations. Although the classic threefold division into theoretical, practical, and aesthetic philosophy continues to determine philosophical curricula and introductory texts even today, new specializations barely fitting the old pattern have long since emerged in philosophical academia. Especially in the field of practical philosophy – originally a discipline comprising only ethics, political philosophy and the philosophy of law – this new development has given rise to a multiplicity of disciplines, and the lines dividing the individual subspecialties are beginning to become increasingly blurred. Indeed, there are few who could say with any great certainty just where the lines are drawn between moral philosophy, political philosophy, the history of philosophy, and cultural philosophy.

In this complex terrain, social philosophy in the German-speaking world has become an increasingly residual discipline. Indeterminate in its relation to neighboring fields of study, it functions by default as an overarching organization for all practically oriented subdisciplines, a normative supplement of empirically oriented sociology, and an interpretive diagnosis of present socio-economic circumstances.[1] Going back to the early days of utilitarianism in the Anglo-Saxon world, on the other hand, an understanding of social philosophy has been developed

that is greatly similar to what is considered "political philosophy" in Germany: the study of the normative questions that arise wherever the reproduction of civil society depends on state intervention (the preservation of private property, the punishment of criminals, healthcare, etc.).[2] Although this undertaking has the advantage of clearly defining the task of social philosophy, it inevitably causes the latter a certain loss of identity, for social philosophy no longer consists in an independent object domain or a distinct set of questions, but is reduced instead to a marginal strain of political philosophy.

If we take these two developments together, it isn't difficult to notice that social philosophy currently finds itself in a precarious situation. In the German-speaking world, it is on the verge of degenerating into an awkward discipline while, in the Anglo-Saxon countries, a restriction of its theoretical domain has already rendered it a subdiscipline of political philosophy – so much so that it hardly seems to possess any independent features at all any more. In order to counteract both these dangers, I argue that social philosophy is primarily concerned with determining and discussing processes of social development that can be viewed as misdevelopments (*Fehlentwicklungen*), disorders or "social pathologies."

In what follows I will attempt to specify the claims and tasks inherent in this conception of social philosophy so that its relation to neighboring disciplines will become sufficiently clear. First of all, I will reflect on this discipline's history, in order to lay bare the outlines of the tradition in which it has been assigned the task of diagnosing social misdevelopments. This variety of social-philosophical reflection has its origin – if not in name, then at least in subject matter – in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's critique of civilization. In its analyses, it employs concepts such as "bifurcation" and "alienation" as ethical criteria for

determining specific modern processes of development to be pathologies (I). This tradition underwent a significant enrichment with the emergence of sociology, inasmuch as philosophical reflection was hereby compelled to ground its claims on the results of empirical research. Drawing on the founding fathers of sociology, I will investigate how social philosophy in the twentieth century developed into grand philosophical systems which sought to come to terms with the historical experiences of fascism and Stalinism (II). Finally, this historical reflection will allow us to give a rough outline of the theoretical claims and specific questions characteristic of social philosophy. Since its primary task is the diagnosis of processes of social development that must be understood as preventing the members of a society from living a "good life," it relies upon criteria of an ethical nature. Unlike both moral and political philosophy, therefore, social philosophy can be understood as providing an instance of reflection (*Reflexionsinstanz*), within which criteria for successful forms of social life are discussed.

I   From Rousseau to Nietzsche: the emergence of social-philosophical inquiry

Even if Thomas Hobbes gave the discipline its name in the middle of the seventeenth century,[3] it wasn't until a hundred years later in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau that social philosophy truly came into being. Under the title "social philosophy," Hobbes sought the legal conditions under which the absolutist state could gain the stability and authority necessary for pacifying religious wars. The contractual solution he proposed in *Leviathan* derived solely from the question of how the bare survival of state order could be secured under social conditions in which

there is an ever-present conflict of interests. But as Rousseau started work on his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* in the middle of the eighteenth century, this question had all but ceased to be of any interest to him. He was less interested in the conditions under which civil society could be preserved than he was in the causes leading to its degeneration. In the hundred years that transpired between these two works, the process of capitalist modernization had made so much progress that a sphere of private autonomy was able to emerge in the shadow of the absolutist state. Within the early bourgeois public sphere, which included the enlightened representatives of French royalty and was still without any possibility of political influence, modes of interaction developed that would later provide the life-world framework for capitalist commodity exchange.[4] This in turn gave rise to a form of social life that would have been unrecognizable to Hobbes. Under the increasing pressure of economic and social competition, practices and orientations arose that came to be founded increasingly upon deception, dissembling, and jealousy. It was upon this form of life emerging along with these modes of behavior that Rousseau, with the acute perception of an isolated loner, set his sights. What primarily interested him was whether this form of life still retained the practical conditions under which humans could lead a good and well-lived life. With this theoretical change of stance, Rousseau got modernity's project of developing a social philosophy under way. Unlike political philosophy, it would no longer seek out the conditions of a correct or just social order, but instead would attempt to ascertain the limitations that this new form of life imposed on humans' self-realization.

Rousseau had already taken such a social-philosophical approach in a text published in Geneva five years previous to the publication of *Discourse on Inequality*. A question

posed by the Academy of Dijon, "whether the restoration of the sciences and arts has contributed to the restoration of morals," offered him the opportunity to sum up his critical reflections on civilization for the first time.[5] Filled with pathos, but lacking conclusive argumentation, the text contains a rough sketch of all those observations that would later make up the substance of his finished theory. According to Rousseau, the process of civilization is accompanied by another process in which human needs become increasingly refined – a process relegating humans to a position of dependency upon artificially constructed desires, thus robbing them of their original freedom. Humans' loss of their natural feeling of security leads further to a decline of public morals, since the emerging necessity of a division of labor is accompanied by the need to attain social distinction, which causes pride, vanity and hypocrisy to predominate. Both the arts and the sciences ultimately take on the role of reinforcing authorities in this context, since they provide the individualizing inclination towards boasting and bragging with new possibilities of expression.[6] In his negative answer to the Academy's question, however, Rousseau makes hardly any reference to the criteria he employs in his critical assessment. Although the text makes it unmistakably clear that the spheres of individual liberty and public morals are what provide the standard for evaluating the ethical quality of social life, it remains mostly unclear how we are to conceive the ideal forms of both these spheres. Without a conception of these forms, we are unable to ascertain processes of "loss" or "decline." Wherever Rousseau laments the decline of public morals, his standard of comparison remains the very same political public sphere that he, like many of his contemporaries, believed to have been realized in the ancient polis. Yet wherever he criticizes humans' cultivation of ever-increasing needs by claiming that this process has

been accompanied by a loss of individual liberty, he invokes the ideal of a pre-historic state in which humans supposedly lived in natural self-sufficiency. This theoretical conflict marks Rousseau's writings up until his *Discourse on Inequality*, in which he provides a significantly expanded and theoretically more substantial version of his critique of civilization.[7] In this text, likewise composed as an answer to a question posed by the Academy of Dijon, Rousseau resolves the tension between historical and anthropological standards of evaluation in favor of the second option; a specific, natural form in which humans relate to themselves functions here as the critical reference point in his diagnosis of the modern way of life.

This time, even though the Academy's question concerned the causes leading to "unequal conditions among men," Rousseau took advantage of the opportunity in order to formulate a critique not only of social injustice, but of an entire form of life. Even the formal construction of the text makes clear that he had come to take a significantly more differentiated view of the methodological problems facing a critique of civilization. In the first part of his analysis, he sketches a powerful image of the state of nature with numerous references to empirical observations. This sketch then serves in the second part of his analysis as a contrasting background, against which the pathologies of the modern form of life clearly come into focus. The mere outline of the text makes it apparent that Rousseau draws the criteria for his critical diagnosis from a state that must have existed before the development of society. Yet to this day, it remains unclear how he intended the methodological claims supposedly bound up with this sketch of the natural form of life to be understood. Given the many contemporary research findings referred to in the first part of his analysis, we might be tempted to see Rousseau as having set himself the scientific aim of developing an

empirically substantial theory. However, the one-sided and highly exaggerated result of his investigation supports the assumption that has come to be held by the majority of Rousseau scholars, namely that the text instead constitutes an attempt at a methodically conscious idealization, primarily intended to provide a striking, contrasting background for his critique of the times.[8] His sketch of the state of nature focuses on two primal human characteristics whose existence is in no way substantiated by the sources he draws upon. According to Rousseau, before the process of socialization causes the human subject to emerge from its natural form of life, it is characterized by a drive towards self-preservation, as well as by a capability for sympathy. The first characteristic, *amour de soi*, signifies little more than the minimum of narcissistic self-preoccupation required for individual survival in a hostile environment, whereas the second characteristic, *pitié*, indicates the natural compassion with which both humans and – to a lesser degree – animals react as soon as they see their own kind suffer. According to Rousseau, these two drives limit each other in such a way that the struggle for survival in the state of nature can only take on the more moderate form of an all-sided concession of autonomy. In opposition to Hobbes, Rousseau insists on the fact that our stirrings of compassion constantly impose moral shackles on our survival impulse, yet without entirely suffocating the latter's necessary reproductive function.[9]

However, this impulse-guided morality is not what Rousseau takes to be the central particularity of the state of nature he has constructed. As his often used expression "natural morals" indicates, it is sympathy that, on an anthropological level, now plays the same role previously filled on an historical level by the ethical community within the "polis." By this point his social-philosophical diagnosis has become so completely anchored in humans'

prehistorical existence that even "public morals" have become a fact of nature. But what Rousseau really holds to be the core of his image of the state of nature doesn't emerge until the end of the text, where in a stylistically masterful summary he points out that prior to civilization, man lived "in himself."[10] This inconspicuous formulation constitutes the key to Rousseau's image of the state of nature, as well as to the ethical aim of his critique of civilization, because it outlines the kind of individual self-relation that he sees as having been inverted in the bourgeois society of his day.

What Rousseau has in mind when he remarks that a human life is lived "in itself" follows directly from his methodological premise that the state of nature consists in deepest isolation. Since in this bygone state humans supposedly lived without any partners in interaction, they acted solely on the basis of motives that arose and existed completely independent of the expectations of other persons. Put in positive terms, this means that in the state of nature, subjects moved in the security of their own willing and desiring (*Wollen*). They remained undistracted by any performative orientation and lived their lives in the calm certainty of always wanting only what their natural needs recommended to them. How much this ideal of existence tells us about Rousseau's own private life shall not be discussed here[11] – what is instead important for our purposes is the fact that this completely monological self-relation provided Rousseau with the ethical standard according to which he could then go on to evaluate the process of civilization. Here we need to distinguish between this critique's external layer and its innermost social-philosophical core. On the first, "official" level, which contains his answer to the question posed by the Academy of Dijon, Rousseau outlines with the acuity of an early sociologist the ways in which the abandonment of the

natural human way of life necessarily led to the emergence of social inequality. At the same time, however, he interprets this process of abandonment on a second, rather concealed level as the starting point of a process that drives humans into a situation of self-alienation. In both cases, a rupture of the monological self-relation paves the way for this development, while the status of this event changes according to the respective point of view taken up by Rousseau in his critical diagnosis.

Considering the description that he gives of the state of nature, it is only fitting that Rousseau sees its end as coinciding with the first steps of civilization, for if the natural human way of life is indeed characterized by a form of self-relation that lacks any intersubjective orientation, then this state will necessarily begin to disappear once elementary communicative relations arise in the form of the family or the tribe. However insufficient Rousseau's elucidation of the development of these early forms of society may be, he certainly sees them as marking the definite end of the human state of nature. He presents and explains the consequences on the individual's behavior in an analysis whose negative focus is not totally free of personal affect. He holds that as soon as subjects are compelled to relate to each other in their activity, as is the case in the emergence of the earliest relations of interaction, the reference point of their action gets shifted to an external position: instead of following what their own needs recommend to them, their actions come to be guided by the expectations of others. The place previously occupied by the certainty of their own desires comes to be occupied by the unrest of permanent self-exhibition (*Selbstdarstellung*). Fearful of being unable to fulfill intersubjective expectations, subjects strive to present themselves in a way which promises more than they could ever actually redeem in action. As soon as this stage of

socialization has been attained, a social dynamic emerges that ultimately ends in an incessant craving for admiration and prestige. Individuals then encounter one another with the sole intention of feigning talents and strengths in order to gain a greater measure of social recognition.

In what thus seems a bitter irony, Rousseau's conclusion simply inverts the scheme of human development presented in Hobbes' doctrine. Whereas in Hobbes' state of nature a situation of all-sided fear and threat predominates, Rousseau's state of nature is characterized by the tranquility of mutually conceded autonomy. For Rousseau the emergence of society is what gives rise to the anxiety-ridden strife that Hobbes assumed to have been overcome through the contract to form a state. In actuality, of course, these two conceptions cannot at all be compared with one another, since Rousseau asks a completely different question than the one Hobbes attempts to solve with the theory of the contract. Whereas the latter has the practical intention of finding the legal conditions under which humans could exit the state of nature and create a stable state order, the former is concerned with how the abandonment of the state of nature qualitatively affects the individual's life. Thus in fact, the first point of view from which Rousseau examines the consequences of this development process is of merely secondary importance to him. The all-sided struggle for prestige ensuing from the rupture in our monological self-relation necessarily results in social inequality, since the artificial need for increased prestige – *amour propre* – is accompanied by the compulsion to acquire private property, which in turn paves the way for the formation of social classes.

However, it was not until he transitioned to the second viewpoint of his critical diagnosis that Rousseau was truly in his element. The central question here concerns what the development described above tells us about humans'

chances for attaining a well-lived or fulfilled life. In order to empirically support his critical assertions, Rousseau again refers to the same processes of decline he already cited in his *Discourse on Sciences and the Arts*; the answer with which he concludes his discussion of the issue possesses the same blunt straightforwardness characteristic of his earlier text. With the criterion he had meanwhile found in the ideal of a monological self-relation, however, Rousseau also possessed the theoretical means to sharpen his critical diagnosis into a single thesis: if the natural manner of existence in which we are certain of our needs gets ruptured at the moment in which we enter into regulated relations of interaction, then we will become victims of the process through which our behavior comes to be guided by an external authority. For with the gaze that we henceforth direct towards our own person from the perspective of our partners in communication, we become constantly compelled to present a false image of ourselves. Rousseau thus regards the modern loss of liberty and the increasing decline of morals as two sides of the same process – one which has its origin in a life that is ordered from without. In the unrest of such self-presentation, both our *individual independence* and our original virtue of compassion are steadily eroded. This is why Rousseau could conclude with the thesis lying at the heart of his critical diagnosis: "The savage lives inside himself; the man accustomed to the ways of society is always outside himself and knows how to live only in the opinion of others."[12]

By drawing this conclusion, Rousseau can doubtlessly be said to have been the founder of social philosophy. It might not be the content of his critical diagnosis that paved the way for this discipline, but both the type of investigation and the methodological form of his answer were indeed capable of bringing a new kind of philosophical investigation to life. By attempting to grasp the social life

of his day as something that had become alienated from an original form of existence, Rousseau gave birth to the philosophical idea of "alienation" – if not the concept itself, then certainly the issue it describes.[13] This enabled social philosophy to go beyond the mere investigation of a social form of life with regard to its political-moral legitimacy, and to look into the structural limitations it imposes on the goal of human self-realization. However, this undertaking still called for a standard against which one could identify what counted as a limitation and therefore as a misdevelopment. Rousseau quickly became a pioneer in this respect as well, for by suggesting that the original form of human existence should serve as this sort of comparative standard, he created one of the few possibilities henceforth open to social philosophy. No matter how much social conditions might be subject to change, one of the alternatives for their future theoretical justification would always consist in pointing out an ideal form of human activity embedded in the anthropological constitution of the species.

As Hegel was writing his first works at the beginning of the nineteenth century, he stood no less under the spell of Rousseau's problem than did the young Karl Marx forty years later. Admittedly, the empirical material upon which the early Hegel and even more so Marx founded their discontent with bourgeois society had changed significantly. They were not only reacting to the French Revolution and its consequences in their theoretical undertakings, but also to the rapid advance of industrialization accompanying it. Rousseau arrived at the central notion of his social philosophy through his painful experiences with the social life of an early bourgeois public sphere in Paris, and traced all the pressures of competition, the compulsive desire for prestige, and the craving for distinction he observed back to the loss of liberty and the decline of virtue. By making use of the interpretive models

of "inversion" and "alienation," he interpreted these processes as being in turn the necessary consequences of a rupture in an anthropologically given initial situation. Hegel, by contrast, regarded the society of his day as being characterized by nothing less than a loss of subjective freedom. Unlike Rousseau, Hegel saw the destructive effect of the massive increase in individual particularism as being pathological; the empirical phenomena so vividly apparent to him consisted in social isolation, political apathy, and economic impoverishment. But like Rousseau, Hegel was convinced that the social danger embodied in these historical misdevelopments consisted in the fact that they imposed excessive limitations on the conditions of a good life. It is due to this basic ethical problem that Hegel's work can also be said to constitute an essential stage in the development of modern social philosophy.

Hegel consistently viewed the formation of a social sphere in which citizens relate to each other solely through the lifeless bonds of legal regulation as being the central problem of his time. Both his reading of the effects of the French Revolution and his view of the political circumstances in Germany are marked by his conviction that the legal freedom of individual subjects is accompanied by the danger of an atomization of the whole community. Although the individual in "civil society," who possesses the abstract powers of a rights-bearing person, enjoys a previously unknown measure of subjective freedom, the merely negative definition of this liberty no longer produces a social bond that extends beyond purely instrumental orientations. However, it was not until Hegel saw more than a mere policy problem in this loss of community that he became a social philosopher in the sense discussed here. His historical-philosophical convictions instead enabled him very early on to see in these developments a crisis enveloping social life *as a*