The dialectic of recognition: A post-Hegelian approach

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Abstract

This article aims to make two points. First, seeking and granting recognition is an ambivalent process that may lead to results completely the opposite from what was intended. Certain social pathologies, including reification, develop because of the way the desire for recognition is expressed and satisfied. Nevertheless, the concept of recognition remains central to critical theory. A normative concept of recognition is needed in order to identify these pathologies. Second, a critical theory of society that understands itself as *praxis* must justify the possibility of its 'reception' by members of society. The theory's addressees must 'recognize themselves' in the theory. They must recognize in it the conceptual expression of their own experience of society. Therefore, social theory must account for the emergence of a critical standpoint on society. These two main points are addressed by means of a 'dialectical' approach. The tensions and interactions between global society, states, and value-communities – the dialectic within and between these spheres – account for the diverse and conflicting meanings of the concept of recognition. At the same time, such a dialectic makes it possible to understand the emergence of a critical viewpoint on society.

This article's aim is to make two connected points. First, recognition is not merely a response to social pathologies or disrespect, it is a process that generates its own pathologies. In particular, the search for recognition may paradoxically contribute to a process of reification. In order to make this point I will use the distinction between

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'objective' and 'intersubjective' recognition. Objective recognition is the recognition of the individual's professional achievements. It is obtained through social competition. When it becomes the individual's main principle of conduct, it leads to reification within the social mechanism. Intersubjective recognition develops within a community of values. According to Axel Honneth, this is notably the case of social recognition – the third of Honneth's three patterns of intersubjective recognition, along with recognition through love and legal recognition (Honneth, 1995). However, value-communities form around a complex of traditions and require loyalty to these traditions. Intersubjective recognition within this framework may go hand in hand with the reification of community identities.

Second, the *normative* concept of recognition nevertheless remains indispensable. Michael J. Thompson rightly insists on the 'constitutive power' of society, which he defines as the power to shape the individuals' social practices and forms of consciousness (Thompson, 2016: 29). Intersubjective recognition is not immune from such power. It does not prevent individuals from being infused with the standardization of thinking required by society. Therefore, social theory must focus on the dialectic between existing social reality and the formation of consciousness. However, critical theory still needs a normative concept of recognition in order to identify the pathologies that occur in the process of seeking and granting recognition. Moreover, a critical theory that understands itself as *praxis* and not only as a theoretical activity must give a reason for the possibility of its reception by members of society. Individuals must 'recognize themselves' in the analysis of their social condition that the theory proposes. Consequently, the theory must account for the emergence of a critical standpoint on society, in spite of society's 'constitutive power' to shape its members' forms of consciousness.

In order to make these two points, this article will use a 'dialectical' approach. However, the notion of dialectic will not be used in any heavy ontological sense. Nor do I understand it as an immanent logic that leads to a predictable future. I take dialectic to be the understanding of the real in its diverse and conflicting meanings. In this sense, dialectic is a way of analysing the ambivalences of social facts and processes, an analysis that applies in particular to the diverse aspects of recognition. I also understand dialectic as an approach that comprehends the real as a whole and accounts for the very possibility of such comprehension. This idea is in line with the Hegelian tradition. If we apply this approach to the project of a critical theory of society, we arrive at the idea that the theory must account for the structure, dynamics and contradictions of society, but also for the possibility of a critical standpoint on society.

We start with Hegel because the idea that recognition is an ambivalent process may be traced back to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Then, we analyse the concepts of 'objective' and 'intersubjective' recognition. Finally, we draw on Eric Weil's political philosophy in order to make some remarks regarding the emergence of a 'critical subjectivity'. A thorough discussion of Honneth's and Thompson's theses, as well as the examination of other debates – the Fraser/Honneth debate, the debates between Butler and Honneth, Honneth and Rancière,[1] etc. – would be illuminating but obviously is beyond the scope of this article. Therefore, I will merely explore the possibility of a 'dialectical' treatment of the two issues mentioned.

Recognition envisaged in a post-national framework

There are many ways of seeking recognition: conquering, seducing, taking the lead in the revolt against society, trying to convert society to pure ethical norms, doing personal work, engaging in a common cause, etc. and Hegel analyses them in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 1977: IV. A, V. B., V. C). In the course of his analysis, the main problem that arises with respect to recognition is the complex relationship between action and judgement. Recognizing the others' achievements is no simple matter because it is an act of power. Making a judgement about any achievement is a way of taking hold of it, both literally and symbolically. As Honneth points out, achieving recognition through one's accomplishments is a decisive part of the human person's development. But granting as well as denying recognition is also a way of asserting oneself. It is a way of reaching self-satisfaction by affirming one's judging power. Speaking of the appraisal of others' work by the judging consciousness, Hegel says:

> If it gives it the stamp of its approval and praise, this is meant to imply that, in the work, it praises not only the work itself, but also *its own* generosity and moderation in not having damaged the work as work, nor damaged it by *its* censure. In showing an interest in the work, it is enjoying its own self; and the work which it censures is equally welcome to it for just this enjoyment of its own action which its censure provides. (Hegel, 1977 [1807]: 250–1)

There are many such passages in Hegel's *Phenomenology* and they sound as a warning. Recognition should not be taken as a normative pattern for human relationships before the ambivalences of the very process of granting as well as seeking recognition have been identified and submitted to critical examination. The core problem of the search for recognition derives from the opposition between acting and judging, between doing something and judging what is being done, which is anything but a simple and innocent relationship.[2] As a result, there is no clear-cut separation between relations of recognition, on the one hand, and power relations, on the other. There is always some sort of contamination of the former by the latter. The problem is not confined to the master–servant dialectic. As Chapter V of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* shows, it affects the search for recognition through the accomplishment of a personal 'work' or the contribution to a common cause. Hegel's analysis of these various cases shows that power, namely, the power of self-assertion, is at play in every possible way of seeking and granting recognition.

Therefore, the criterion for authentic recognition must be carefully defined. Hegel sets up this criterion in the following way. Recognition in the strictest sense means that individuals '*recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another' (Hegel, 1977 [1807]: 112). Such a formula is noteworthy because it shows that reciprocity is not the sole criterion for true recognition. The fact that I recognize the other at the same time as he or she recognizes me does not suffice to define authentic recognition. Recognition in the fullest sense means that I recognize the other as someone *who recognizes me* while they recognize me as someone *who recognizes them*. This is why Hegel says that recognition is the first manifestation of the Spirit (Hegel, 1977 [1807]: 110). Fully

achieved recognition reveals the actual presence of a common spirit of mutually granted autonomy.

From there, a new line of analysis develops. For Hegel, recognition between individuals, genders, social groups, etc. is mediated by the patterns of recognition that inhere in the form of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) that characterizes the community. Different patterns of recognition specify different types of society and Hegel's criterion for recognition calls these patterns into question. In fact, Chapter VI of the *Phenomenology* shows that all societal patterns of recognition are plagued with contradictions. The societies that have developed in the course of history have all failed to grant full recognition to their members and constitutive groups. For recognition to be fully achieved, society as a whole must recognize the corresponding pattern. Intersubjective recognition only happens in a society whose members recognize each other: (1) reciprocally; and (2) as partners in a social and political process that achieves freedom for all of them.

This is precisely the subject of the *Philosophy of Right*: achieving freedom for all citizens considered as autonomous persons. In the Hegelian state, actual freedom requires recognition at every level of the social and political structure: the family, civil society, and the state. Civil society and the state mediate their members' mutual recognition so that citizens recognize each other as participants in social and political institutions that achieve freedom for everyone. The state recognizes the citizens inasmuch as it states and enforces their basic rights. Reciprocally, citizens recognize the state as *their* state inasmuch as it realizes freedom for all – for all of them seen as autonomous human beings, not merely as members of the same ethnic group. The unity and cohesion of the state rest on the reciprocal recognition between state and citizens or, more precisely, on the reciprocal recognition among citizens mediated by the recognition between state and citizens. When analysing the kind of relationships that make for the state's cohesion and endurance, Hegel replaces Rousseau's social contract with the concept of social and political recognition.

However, social recognition mediates the political. In order to participate in the political process, individuals must be recognized as useful members of civil society. The parliament, for instance, represents the different social activities that constitute civil society: the agricultural, industrial, commercial activities, etc. Conversely, social exclusion – exclusion from the labour market, the inability to make a decent living, to lead an independent life – engenders political misrecognition. Herein lies one of the modern state's crucial problems, for the *Philosophy of Right* also shows that civil society is plagued with a widening gap between social groups whose wealth increases while a mass of impoverished people develops (Hegel, 1991 [1821]: §§ 243–4). For this mass, the process of social and political recognition falters. Such a breakdown of social recognition is a threat to the state's cohesion. Therefore, it must be prevented. In this view, Hegel counted on: (1) 'corporations', that is, on social solidarity provided for by worker organizations; and (2) the state administration. As Axel Honneth says, 'The author of the *Philosophy of Right* is convinced that in the absence of government intervention, the labour market will bring forth a constantly growing mass of impoverished and undernourished people' (2014: 223).

Hegel's conclusions are for the most part still valid. For us, however, the conceptual setting of the *Philosophy of Right* is in large part obsolete. The main reason is that

Hegel's framework of reference is the self-sustaining nation-state (Hegel, 1991: § 332). According to Hegel, *Sittlichkeit* is an all-encompassing sphere. It constitutes the whole sphere of ethical life, the sphere in which a meaningful life may be consciously lived. All other aspects of human life – basic rights, individual moral norms, the economic system, the state administration – are subordinated to this idea of a meaningful life that is more or less realized in the state and its institutions, in people's ways of life and collective representations. However, the Hegelian state corresponds to the typical pattern of the nation-state, which may be characterized by the congruence, within the limits of one and the same territory, of: (1) a society, understood as the collective organization of labour; (2) an ethical community (defined by its historic traditions and a sense of belonging); and (3) a political organization (a state).

In our present situation, such congruence is no longer possible. In contrast to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, the three spheres conflict with each other and do not cohere into a single concrete whole, the historic state. In place of the Hegelian inclusive ordering of family, civil society, and the state, we are now dealing with a situation where society and community are decoupled so that we have three conflicting spheres: (1) modern society; (2) different communities formed around their traditions (cultural, religious, linguistic, etc.); and (3) the state. Of course, the picture is even more complex. Communities develop at different levels: local, national, transnational. In Weber's terms, processes of 'community formation' (*Vergemeinschaftung*) also develop within society, for instance, among co-workers in workshops, in schools, etc. (Weber, 1978: 41). In any case, the congruence of the three spheres is no longer possible in an ever more globalized world. While states and national communities remain particular entities defined by delimited borders, modern society expands as a global, universal, society. This new configuration of the socio-political field – the 'postnational constellation', using Habermas's (2001) phrase – raises the question of the very possibility of political action. What is at stake is the possibility of submitting the process of globalization to the political control of a plurality of states.

The tensions and interactions between the three spheres – their 'dialectical' relationships – account for the manifold and opposed meanings taken by social and political institutions. For instance, the decoupling of the political, economic and cultural spheres leads to a decoupling between the various functions of the state. On the one hand, the state may be seen as a tool for the management of society in the context of globalization. On the other, it also represents a certain idea of national identity. The tensions between these two ways of seeing the state are reflected in the diverging political mind-sets that express themselves in public debates. However, my point is that the concept of recognition takes different and conflicting meanings according to the spheres within which it makes sense. In particular, the contrast between modern society and value-communities manifests itself through the difference between 'objective' and 'intersubjective' recognition. Objective recognition develops within society conceived of as a system of cooperation, while 'intersubjective' recognition is grounded in the ethical values that are proper to historic communities – i.e. to communities that represent a certain form of ethical life and share in a collective narrative. In other words, we may say that there are two kinds of social recognition – the word 'social' being understood in a larger sense that covers all sorts of human interaction. One kind of social recognition is linked to

competition and develops within society; the other is linked to solidarity and happens within the framework of value-communities.

Objective recognition

In advanced modern societies, the process of acculturation brings all individuals and social groups to develop a more or less explicit idea of the rational functioning of society and, at the same time, the feeling that society is *not working* according to its own principles. The main features of contemporary capitalism – skyrocketing inequalities, the suicidal exhaustion of natural resources, etc. – are perceived as 'abnormal' in the moral sense, but also objectively or factually. Such features contradict the idea of a society that is based on constant and deliberate rationalization. In contrast with the 'ideal-type' of modern society, they are perceived as irrational. By ideal-type, I mean the basic norms of modern society as it is *supposed* to function. Society as it actually functions never fully conforms to the norms. Nevertheless, in advanced societies the ideal-type is at least implicitly present in most people's minds, in such a way that it creates expectations. Finally, calling it an 'ideal-type' is also a manner of saying that it is not a matter of 'ideology'. What is at stake is not 'capitalist society' in the Marxian sense – which, in Marx's view, becomes at some point an obstacle to society's further progress – but rather the very idea of a rationally organized society. Modernization and exploitation, rationalization and class domination, are distinct, although interconnected, issues.

We need only recall the basic features of the ideal-type. The starting point is the process of rationalization. In classic, Weberian terms, the process consists in the setting of objectives, the calculation of means and the rational assessment of achievements. The calculation of means must satisfy the criterion of maximum efficiency. The differentiation of social functions belongs to the process, which finds meaning and orientation in the idea of progress. Applied to individual life-plans, the principle of rational calculation implies that individuals must have a personal project and make their way in society through a process of constant competition (Weil, 2000b [1956]). In order to yield optimal results, competition must be coupled with social mobility: individuals must have access to whatever kind of trade, profession or social function they prove most fit to perform. The competition must be fair, which means that all members of society are supposed to have the same rights to property, personal freedom, job opportunities, etc. In order to optimize the exploitation of human resources, one must recognize individuals' performances and prompt them to develop their skills, regardless of other considerations, such as, for example, gender or religion.

In a word, legal and social recognition are part of such a society's functioning. Civic, political, and social rights must be accorded to all members of society. However, legal recognition is not the recognition of the individual as such. In this case, the individual is being recognized as a spouse, a bus-driver, a citizen, etc. Individuals are being recognized as performers of social roles (Ikäheimo, 2014). Rights and obligations are attached to these roles, not to the individuals as such. With respect to the individual's singularity, recognition is achieved through rule transgression. Committing a crime is a way of seeking recognition for one's idiosyncrasy. Complying with the law does not make an individual stand out from the crowd, whereas breaking the law is a means of making

one's original features publicly recognized – in courts of law and the media – because the transgression needs an explanation that is to be found in the individual's psychology or life story.

More precisely, we must distinguish between the points of view of the individual and of society. From the individual's point of view, enjoying legal recognition as a performer of various social roles – including the role of citizen – is, as Honneth (1995) points out, part of personal development and contributes to self-respect. From society's point of view, however, individuals are interchangeable inasmuch as they perform the same social roles. All of them are being recognized, paradoxically, as interchangeable performers of these same roles. Such recognition requires face-to-face relations or at least direct communication in order to become truly intersubjective. In the course of social interactions, for instance, individuals recognize each other as subjects of rights when negotiating contracts. The recognition is intersubjective for the length of time that they deal with each other in person. But apart from such cases of face-to-face relationships, legal recognition is not intersubjective, properly speaking. Legal recognition makes intersubjective relationships possible. Positive law defines a network of *potential* intersubjective relations that need to be actualized through personal interactions.

Similar remarks may be made about social recognition. Social recognition, understood as the recognition of the individual's achievements, is crucial for the individual's self-esteem. However, as long as we understand society as the organization of labour, social recognition indicates the positive evaluation of the individual's contribution to this society's welfare. Within modern society conceived of as a progress-oriented system of cooperation, social recognition is 'objective'. It is not 'intersubjective' in the proper sense of the word. From the individual's point of view, social as well as legal recognition is crucial for building a sense of self-worth. Honneth is right in pointing that out. In relation to society's mode of functioning, however, both forms of recognition have an objective and impersonal dimension. They are part of the dynamic of the social mechanism.

Such 'objective recognition' takes two distinct forms. The individual must be recognized: (1) as an individual who performs well (relative to other individuals); and (2) as a member of a professional group that occupies a rank in the hierarchy of social functions. The recognition is 'objective' in the sense that it translates into terms of revenue, living standards, and social influence. The individual's achievements are supposed to be ascertained on the basis of measurable results – a method that, according to Dominique Girardot, transforms merit into 'objectified' recognition (Girardot, 2001; Elmgren, 2015). However, the ranking of a profession on the social scale is a matter of collective representations. Consequently, the fairness of the ranking is constantly called into question. It is constantly debated and leads to social conflicts about the redistribution of resources. When it is a matter of redefining or readjusting the social hierarchy, the conflicts can equally be described as struggles for social recognition and struggles for social justice. In such cases, redistribution and recognition must not be seen as two distinct paradigms of justice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). With respect to socio-professional groups' ranking within the social hierarchy, recognition and redistribution are two names for one and the same process. In any case, the core idea is that individuals are supposed to be recognized as professionals who perform a useful social function and

who perform it well. And the point is: such recognition does not prevent them from being considered as interchangeable individuals, that is: (1) as bearers of the same rights; and (2) replaceable by any other person performing the same function and capable of similar accomplishments.

Recognition thus understood does not run counter to 'reification'. In fact, social recognition is part of the very process of reification. The notion of reification is multi-layered and has had a long history since Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). However, if we understand reification as the commodification of the individual's skills and competences, social recognition is clearly part of the process. As such, it does not contradict the logic of the system – notably the logic of competition – and it does not have to, since the social system is the basis for all other achievements regarding affective, cultural, moral or political dimensions of existence. Nevertheless, recognizing individuals' achievements and the usefulness of their social function is part of the process of reification. This is most obvious when it comes to the recognition of the individual's work performance. Under the pressure of constant competition, individuals are conditioned to sell themselves. Self-marketing and personal branding have spread into all social spheres, into spheres of cultural and scientific activity as well as into the economic sphere. Individuals learn how to translate their personal aptitudes into cash value. Under the constraint of competition, they also undergo a discipline that concerns their manner of thinking and speaking as well as their behaviour. Individuals identify to some extent with their social function and consider themselves to be a factor that has its price. They are trained to use the language of calculative rationality when communicating in all spheres of human life. Thus, objective recognition does not suffice to prevent such a process, because it is part of it. In a society where competition is a powerful incentive, social recognition works as a 'positive reinforcement' – to use the behaviourist term – that leads individuals to develop their aptitudes and consent to the maximal use of their time and competences.

However, reification itself is an ambivalent concept. Or rather, reification in the negative sense (*Verdinglichung*) should be distinguished from 'objectivation' (*Vergegenständlichung*). In fact, the individual's objectivation, the externalization of their abilities in the form of objective accomplishments, is precisely what self-realization is about. In Hegelian terms, a process of *Entäußerung* is part of freedom's realization, a process that also runs the risk of *Entfremdung*, of individuals becoming estranged from themselves. In Marxian terms, the individual's self-realization is conceived of in terms of *Vergegenständlichung*, not to be confused with *Entgegenständlichung*, which is the fact of being deprived of one's objective expression when labour is imposed instead of being self-activated.[3] In modern society, the individual's objective self-realization is a process of objectivation that must be distinguished from the negative process of reification. However, both are linked to the fact that individuals perform a given function within the social system. Consequently, the question is whether individuals identify fully with their function within the system. Objectivation turns into reification when the individual's identification with their 'objective' function is total, when it becomes the unique dimension of existence, when all other dimensions (affective life, culture, etc.)

are negated, set aside as unimportant, or envisaged according to the same pattern of social competition and calculative thinking.

Competition and the effects of competition on people's behaviour and ways of thinking are central. However, what is at stake is the possibility for individuals to conceive of themselves as autonomous subjects. One might say that in order to do so, they should be recognized as such, that is, be recognized as subjects by others. In this view, reification results from the 'forgetting of recognition', as Axel Honneth (2008) says. But language comes first. What is needed is a language that enables individuals to speak of themselves and of others as autonomous personalities (Weil, 2000a [1950]: Chapter IX). Honneth contends:

> As long as we have no empirical evidence that the concerned parties themselves experience particular practices of recognition as being repressive, constricting or as fostering stereotypes, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between ideological and justified forms of recognition in any reasonable way. (2007: 327)

But as has been said above, the problem is not a matter of ideology and domination. It is a matter of systemic functioning. The problem would remain the same in a classless society, that is, in a society displaying maximal social mobility for professional groups as well as individuals, in a social system where no social group could stabilize a position of dominance. Here the point is that a certain type of 'language' is needed in order to articulate the experience of not being considered as an autonomous subject. If the only language that individuals have at their disposal is the language of calculative rationality, they may enjoy 'objective recognition' and draw from this a sense of self-realization. But reification is inescapable if the only form of language they can speak compels them to conceive of themselves in a way that leaves no room for the idea of free subjectivity. In this case, the individual's sense of self-realization and self-confidence is nothing but the sentiment of being among the best at playing the social game. Individuals may have the *feeling* that calculative rationality does them violence, but such a feeling may stay mute and express itself, in its turn, through violent means. We will return to this point in the last section of this article. In any case, the 'monolingualism' or 'one-dimensionality' of modern society becomes the problem. The question is: what alternative forms of language (or discourse) are individuals able to speak? This may be the language of love, of moral philosophy, of human rights, etc. More broadly, it may be the language of a philosophical, ethical, religious or cultural tradition, provided the tradition makes room for the concept of fully achieved intersubjective recognition.

Intersubjective recognition and the dialectic between society and community

The traditions that are proper to communities and account for the sense of belonging found in them make it possible to develop intersubjective relationships, inasmuch as they do not consider human beings as mere factors in the social mechanism or mere players in the social game. In this view, the idea of human solidarity sustained by ethical, philosophical, religious, traditions opposes the ever-extending logic of competition.

Within this context, the issue of recognition appears in two connected but different ways: on the one hand, the recognition of different communities' identities; on the other hand, the patterns of recognition that are proper to the communities' traditions. The desire for recognition, when it concerns the community as such, that is, when it concerns the very existence and identity of the community, raises the problems of multiculturalism and international relations. In most of the cases, such a desire comes from the experience of being despised, humiliated and discriminated against or from the threat of extinction. However, the recognition of identities may be a trap for the individual. People may identify with their community to the point of forsaking individual autonomy. They may identify with a definite interpretation of their tradition to the point of renouncing the possibility of dissent and critical thinking. When cultural reification and ideological reification result from such recognition of identities, inter-individual recognition does not rely on a common spirit of mutually granted autonomy. Rather, in such cases, individuals recognize their cultural or ideological similarities and the common spirit that binds them is a spirit of unconditional loyalty to the community. In fact, the promise of recognition – as a believer, a member of a glorious nation, of a so-called prominent race, etc. – is the means whereby ultranationalist leaders and preachers of fanaticism can manipulate their followers. One of the most efficient ways of reducing people to the status of mere tools for a political project is to manipulate their desire for recognition.

At the same time, the historic – cultural, religious, ethical, etc. – traditions of communities provide a response to the search for meaning. It is a response to the process of reification within the social system, to the meaninglessness of a life entirely dedicated to social competition. Cultural, religious, ethical, aesthetic, traditions are the source of inspiration to lead and invent meaningful ways of life within modern society. The communities formed around these traditions appear as communities of value that make intersubjective recognition possible. However, the patterns of intersubjective relations that are proper to each tradition – national, subnational, trans-national, etc. – are also at stake. Traditional models of human relationships inhere to these ethical, religious, cultural, traditions. Inequalities of status between men and women, between social groups, ethnicities, castes, etc. are part of many traditional ways of life and sets of beliefs. Different patterns of recognition within the family, different conceptions of gender relations characterize various traditions. Such inequalities of status 'block' the potential for truly intersubjective recognition inherent to these traditions. Conversely, there is a close connection between intersubjective recognition and equality. The more a community of values promotes effective equality among all of its members, the more it makes intersubjective recognition possible. In concrete terms, intersubjective recognition and solidarity develop within a moral, cultural, religious, political tradition as the tradition submits to self-reflexive criticism the relations of dominance that it reproduces by 'justifying' them, most of the time, as so-called 'natural' inequalities.

Such a process of self-criticism and transformation aimed at the reduction of status-based inequalities may be called the 'modernization of tradition'. The process is not merely a matter of theoretical dialogue. It occurs within a context of complex interactions between modern society and value-communities. These 'dialectical' interactions may have negative as well as positive consequences. On the one hand, we are faced with another kind of reification: in the same way that 'objective' recognition does not suffice

to counter the logic of reification, the recognition of cultural identities may contribute to the reification of these very identities. In this case, reification means the solidification of a living reality – that of a historic community that renews itself from generation to generation – or the formulation of the individual's desire for meaning in terms of unconditional loyalty to a collective identity. Paradoxically, one kind of reification may lead to the other, when making allegiance to a tradition is a way of escaping a society perceived as nonsensical, immoral, godless, etc. In both cases, reification develops through the mediation of a desire for recognition: the desire for social recognition, in one case, for identity recognition, in the other. In a less dramatic way, the negative aspects appear when the status-based inequalities that are part of a community's world-view interfere with the functioning of society. The interference of traditional hierarchies with society's functioning generates injustices because it contradicts the principles of equality and social mobility that belong to modern society's self-understanding. On the other hand, a positive aspect of the dialectical interactions between modern society and value-communities is the 'modernization' of traditions. New ways of understanding traditions develop under the pressure of society's modernization. The process of social rationalization reveals the arbitrariness of pseudo-natural inequalities. It pushes for the reduction of purely traditional relations of dominance and makes the demand for equal rights possible. In this context a value-community makes authentic intersubjective recognition possible, because it extends such recognition to all members of the community. Then we may speak of another type of 'social recognition' – social in a larger sense that does not merely concern the organization of labour – that is based on a community of values and, as Honneth says, fosters a sense of solidarity. In more precise terms, value-communities provide the context for *potential* intersubjective relations of recognition that must be brought into being through direct communication. Whatever this may be, the process of rationalization, for all its ambivalences, plays in this case a positive role. Under the pressure of modernization, the traditions that define communities are provoked to develop self-interpretations that tend towards the reduction of traditional inequalities of status.

Critical subjectivity. Feelings of injustice and of meaninglessness

How do individuals experience such dialectics between state, society, and community, between the economic, cultural, and political spheres? Members of society must recognize themselves in the discourse of critical theory. In order to understand itself as *praxis* and to have some kind of influence within society, the theory must account for its potential reception by members of society. It must form into a coherent discourse its addressees' social experience. In this view, the core idea is that both the theorist and his or her readers share in the same social condition, a condition that gives way to feelings of injustice and of meaninglessness. As Eric Weil points out, these two kinds of feeling must be distinguished (2000b [1956]: §§ 26–7). The feeling of injustice develops because modern society does not function according to its own 'ideal-type'. The feeling of meaninglessness develops when the ideal-type itself is called into question. My claim is that these feelings account for the emergence of a critical standpoint on society as a whole. In other words, society's contradictions engender a 'critical subjectivity'.

However, what is important is that this critical view *on* society appears *within* society. It is linked to the way individuals experience their social condition.

The feeling of injustice springs from many sources. As we have seen, it develops when individuals are being denied their rights (legal recognition) or the fair recognition of their achievements (social recognition). Feelings of injustice develop when traditional prejudices or inequalities prevent members of society from being considered as equal partners in society, when they suffer misrecognition because of their gender or their belonging to a religious, linguistic or ethnic minority, etc. In other words, feelings of injustice develop when the status-based hierarchies that are inherited from a given tradition or worldview interfere with the rational organization of society, which implies gender equality and the elimination of racial or religious discrimination. Finally, feelings of injustice develop with respect to the hierarchical ordering of social roles and functions, which is at the core of the social organization of labour. In this respect, the main fact is that, ideally speaking, a high level of social mobility should characterize modern societies: not only the mobility of individuals, but also that of social groups. Consequently, the sentiment of injustice develops when social mobility is restricted or made impossible. This is the case when social groups – defined by their profession – feel they are not being recognized, that is, they feel they should have a higher position in the social hierarchy. Reciprocally, the sentiment of injustice arises when other social groups benefit from a position in the hierarchy that maximizes their advantages while their contribution to the social wealth is seen as minimal or at least decreasing. An example would be the enduring power of the landed aristocracy in a society that has entered the process of industrialization. Another would be the power of patrimonial capitalism in advanced modern societies, where social recognition is supposed to be attained through innovation, personal efficiency and organizational competences rather than inheritance. In general terms, certain social groups feel they are being denied the position they deserve in the hierarchy. Other groups feel their position in the social hierarchy is being unjustly called into question. They feel threatened by social downgrading. Such feelings lead to the polarization between upper and lower social strata, a polarization that is brought about not only by the increase of inequalities, but also by the sentiment of injustice (Weil, 2000b [1956], § 26). They generate conflicts that are struggles for both recognition and social justice.

But there is more to it. What is at stake is the progress of all social groups and strata, the least advantaged included. Modern society is based on the notion of progress. Therefore, to be a member of such a society means participating in the overall progress of society. It means being entitled to expect a betterment of one's standard of living. Such betterment is not only a matter of social mobility. Even the lower social strata, should they remain at the bottom of the social ladder, must have a future. They must benefit from the progress of society as a whole. In other words, social justice is not only about redistribution or recognition. It is also about the *pace of progress*. The upper strata benefit more rapidly from technological progress. They have more rapid access to new products, new medical treatments, new learning methods, etc. The lower strata, however, must also benefit from new advances in technology and standards of living, whatever their contribution to the social wealth (Weil, 1991 [1970]). The difference is supposed to be only a matter of time. It lies in the speed of access to the continuous improvements

that a progress-based society is supposed to achieve. Such a principle of justice is embedded in the structure of modern societies. Inasmuch as all social strata have in mind an idea of what it means for a society to be modern, this principle of justice manifests itself in the form of an expectation. People expect to 'have a future'. They expect to see their living standards improve over the course of their life. They expect that their children and grandchildren will have a better life than they do. In this respect, the sentiment of injustice increases when there is a widening gap between the speed of progress imparted on the different social strata. And the sentiment is unbearable when the upper strata continue to progress when other strata come to a standstill or even regress.

Feelings of injustice lead to conflicts – struggle between social strata, conflicts between religious or linguistic communities, etc. – that in advanced societies tend to take non-violent forms. As the 'network of social interdependencies' grows thicker, society as a system of cooperation tends to be seen as a common good whose functioning is in large part unfair but must nevertheless be preserved. However, this is only true up to a given point. In many ways, feelings of injustice come from the fact that society does not function in accordance with its own alleged principles, that is, with the idea of a progress-based society and a rational system of cooperation. At some point, a feeling of meaninglessness develops that engenders a protest against modern society and, at the limit, against modernity as such. In other words, the feeling of meaninglessness develops when the ideal-type of a rational system of cooperation itself is called into question. Such a feeling may develop in consequence of repeated injustices and denials of recognition. The reason why people are against the idea of a society based on individual and collective competition is not only the consequences of the calculative mind-set that the competition fosters, such as lack of solidarity, for example. It is also the fact that they feel the competition is loaded from the start. People end up losing faith in the very idea of the rational organization of society. The struggles for social justice and recognition are not enough to solve the problem, because they develop within the paradigm of modern society. Moreover, social conflicts are part of individuals' social experience, not only in the sense that many of them take part in the conflicts, but also in the sense that the conflicts are a prism through which individuals perceive the society they live in. Individuals do not experience society as a mere system of cooperation. They perceive society through the prism of the struggles for social justice and recognition. The struggles are led by social and political organizations that function according to the principles of strategic calculation. Thus, rationalization is a process that affects not only the production and exchange of goods, but also the functioning of social institutions, worker organizations and political parties. For reasons of efficiency, all such institutions tend to adopt modern methods of organization. Hence, the feeling that there is a process of instrumentalization at work in the economic system, but also within the organizations that take the lead in social and political conflicts. In this context, a sense of distrust of the notion of rational discourse and organization spreads in more or less acute forms across all spheres of society. At the limit, the whole idea of rationalization appears as a mystification. Such distrust expresses itself in different ways. It gives way to populism, seen as a revolt against state institutions and the so-called social and political elites. It may lead to political apathy. At the opposite end, it may lead to political radicalization – of the

nationalist or religious type – and the development of irrational projects that resist mere common-sense arguments. In quite a different direction, the same distrust expresses itself in grassroots movements based on the rejection of any kind of 'vertical' organization, on the idea that democratic movements can only develop in the form of 'horizontal' mass mobilization.

The feeling of meaninglessness must be distinguished from the feelings of injustice and social misrecognition. Therefore, the problem is not merely a matter of better redistribution and recognition within society. It is a matter of distrust for society as a whole. The feeling may express itself through violence, especially gratuitous and self-destroying violence: revolt against social institutions, violence done by individuals to others (random killings, terrorism) or to themselves (addictions). Apart from such 'social pathologies', a possible way of dealing with the distrust of society is to make a partition between social and private life. The workplace, and society as a whole, require rational behaviour, behaviour that is in large part framed by social competition. In contrast, the private sphere, the sphere of love, family care and friendship, appears as a sphere in which traditional ethical values may be prominent. One might extend this idea to the spheres of civil society that are dedicated to non-productive activities such as cultural activities, social aid, etc. However, the core of the problem is a matter of politics envisaged as the progressive transformation of society as a whole. It is a matter of subordinating the social system to ethical norms discussed and agreed upon within democratic debates. In pluralist societies these norms must be discussed among the different traditions. In any case, the problem is one of subordinating the socio-economic infrastructure to the ethical values of a common democratic culture. A task that is, at best, just beginning and might never be achieved, since the condition for submitting the global society to this political process is the development of an 'international community' within which the logic of partnership counterbalances the logic of competition.

The preceding analyses started from the fact that the very process of seeking and granting recognition is ambivalent. Recognition is not only a cure for social pathologies, it is also a process that generates its own pathologies. One of the reasons for this is that power relations are always at play in the process of seeking, but also granting recognition. As Hegel shows in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, granting recognition is as much an act of power as struggling for it. Therefore, love, friendship, legal, and social recognition are relationships in which power relations can never be totally excluded, even though they may be reduced. However, we must envisage the normative value and ambivalences of the different patterns of recognition in a post-Hegelian framework. These patterns of recognition can no longer be considered within the 'family-society-state' Hegelian framework, which corresponds to the traditional nation-state concept.[4] The patterns of recognition – especially legal and social recognition – must be examined in the post-national context of the 'dialectics' between global society, value-communities and historic states. These dialectics within and between the socio-economic, cultural and political spheres account for the ambivalences of the process of seeking and granting recognition, a process which, under specific conditions, goes hand in hand with reification.

What consequences must we draw from these ambivalences? Should we give up recognition as a crucial normative concept? My answer would be that the *concrete patterns* of recognition must be critically examined within the various and conflicting spheres in which they make sense. However, the formal criterion for true recognition – the partners *recognize* themselves *as mutually recognizing* one another – remains indispensable in order to scrutinize social interactions. Moreover, at the minimum, critical theory needs a weaker concept of recognition in order to account for its own possibility and potential influence. If the theory understands itself as effective *praxis* and not as a mere academic exercise, it must explain how a critical vantage point on society is possible. The theorists and their addressees must come together in the same critical standpoint. Otherwise, the possibility of the theory and its potential effects remain unaccounted for. In other words, the addressees must 'recognize themselves' in the theorists' critical standpoint. Reciprocally, the theorists must recognize, in the emergence of a 'critical subjectivity' within society, the origin and condition of possibility of their own practice. Whether this is recognition in the fullest sense must here remain an open question.[5]

In any case, the theory must account for the emergence of such a 'critical subjectivity' in spite of the reification processes that develop within society. If it fails to do so, it relapses into abstract idealism because it takes for granted the existence of a bird's-eye view on society, as if the thinker 'hovered' above it. In fact, the very society that we need to critically understand is also the society that makes possible and provokes, through its inner conflicts, the development of critical theories. It is also a society in which these theories may be 'received' and help groups and individuals to elaborate the feelings of discontent that structurally grow out of the functioning of society – feelings of injustice and meaninglessness – into a coherent political discourse. Eventually, the task of social and political thinking is precisely to make it possible for groups and individuals to elaborate into a coherent discourse the feelings that reflect their social experience.[6] that is, to overcome the stage of violent revolt or political apathy, in order to engage in modes of action based on a comprehensive view of society.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Notes

1. See Fraser and Honneth (2003), Butler (2008), Honneth and Rancière (2017).
2. This dialectic is one of the guiding threads of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, from the master–servant dialectic all the way down to the dialectic of evil and its forgiving. See Canivez (2011).
3. I am following Franck Fischbach's illuminating introduction to his translation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* into French. See Fischbach (2007).

4. This certainly does not mean that nation-states will soon disappear. It merely means that nation-states face a 'constitutive problem' – a problem that defines what they are now – which is the problem of ensuring the political control of their transnational, trans-border, social infrastructure. What defines today's nation-states is the tension between state and society. It no longer can be the 'ideal-typical' congruence between state, national community and society.

5. I leave aside the question of whether there may be authentic recognition – especially according to Hegel's criterion – between the theorist and their interlocutors, between writer and reader, etc. Considering Rousseau as one of critical theory's forefathers, it is evident that we cannot dissociate his critique of society and his longing for recognition through his autobiographical writings. Rousseau speaks and writes as an authentic self – *l'homme de la nature* – and may only be recognized as such if he succeeds in awakening his readers' sense of their true, free and authentic, self. The possibility of finding the right readers depends on the degree of moral corruption attained by society. Reciprocally, finding such readers also conditions the possibility of reversing the trend of corruption, or at least, of creating 'islands' of freedom and sincerity – such as the community of Clarens in the *New Heloïse*, or Emile's family circle – within the framework of a globally decadent society.

6. The process of elaborating these feelings into a coherent political discourse is two-dimensional. On the one hand, it formulates a critical approach to society. On the other, the process entails – or should entail, from a normative point of view – a *self-critical* dimension. By requiring these sentiments to 'give reasons' for the way they are being expressed and the political orientations that ensue, the process puts their legitimacy to the test of justification within the framework of public debates.

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