

Work and the Struggle for Recognition

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Abstract: This paper examines a neglected but crucial feature of Honneth's critical theory: its use of a concept of recognition to articulate the norms that are apposite for the contemporary world of work. The paper shows that from his first writings on the structure of critical social theory in the early 1980s to the recent exchange with Nancy Fraser on recognition and redistribution, the problem of grounding a substantive critique of work under capitalism has been central to Honneth's enterprise. This answers the routine objection that the recognition paradigm fails to take into account economic or material realities. At the same time, Honneth's approach to the critique of work has undergone significant shifts, and it is yet to be fully developed. The paper traces these changes in direction, and it proposes an expressivist conception of work that builds upon the 'normative content' of the concept of work described by Honneth in his 1980 essay 'Work and Instrumental Action'.

Key words: alienation, critical social theory, division of labour, Honneth, recognition, work.

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I want to look at a feature of Axel Honneth's social theory which, while crucial for Honneth's own understanding of his project, has nevertheless been overlooked by most of his interlocutors in recent philosophical debates on recognition. This is his claim that critical social theory of the kind he defends has a conceptual structure capable of delivering substantive, philosophically robust criticism of the division of labour in capitalist society. In section one of the paper I consider Honneth's first extended formulation of this claim in his 1980 essay 'Work and Instrumental Action: On the Normative Basis of Critical Theory'.¹ As we shall see, here Honneth introduces the idea of a 'critical conception of work' the point of which is to make intelligible, at a suitable level of philosophical and sociological abstraction, moral disappointment experienced through work and morally motivated resistance to actual conditions of labour. Such a conception would clarify the basis on which work can be interpreted as a field of more or less satisfactory moral experience, or otherwise put, as a sphere of more or less satisfied legitimate (if rarely fully articulated) moral claims. It would also play a crucial part in social diagnoses of the 'degradation of work', which presuppose a strong evaluative contrast between work that is fulfilling, dignified, or well-suited to the working subject, and degraded, degrading work which is not. But this contrast, which is vividly present in 'Work and Instrumental Action', recedes into the background in Honneth's subsequent, now more widely known writings.² As I attempt to show briefly in section two of the paper, the division of labour continues to occupy a central position in Honneth's theory, but now not so much because of the quality of work it embodies, as on account of it being the locus of socially recognised 'achievements'. After reconstructing the rationale behind this shift, I question the role that comes to be assumed by the principle of

achievement in Honneth's theory of recognition, and I suggest that it should not be treated as a replacement for a critical conception of work.

1. A Critical Conception of Work

In many places, Honneth has argued persuasively of the need for critical social theory to retrieve, integrate and build upon the young Marx's insights regarding the moral and emancipatory significance of work, albeit in an up-to-date manner freed from the discredited philosophy of history which, in Honneth's view, spoils Marx's own formulations.³ But 'Work and Instrumental Action' contains the most sustained attempt at such a retrieval. The attempt revolves around a reconstruction of what Honneth called a 'critical conception of work'.⁴ By a 'critical' conception Honneth had in mind something quite specific. On the one hand, it would be a conception which contains a 'standard of correctness' (or 'validity') by reference to which the worth of a given practice of work could be tested. A critical conception of work would thus provide the theorist with a resource for distinguishing between what is 'good' and 'bad' by way of work, and this just on account of it being work: there would be no need to appeal to more general moral standards that apply to work only contingently, or that bear on work, so to speak, from the outside. In being a conception that enables us to talk intelligibly of valid and invalid work from a broadly speaking moral point of view, it would be one which, to use Honneth's preferred expression, possesses 'normative content'. This normative content would make work a fit object of moral reflection and, where appropriate, criticism. But a critical conception of work would not be just a normative conception. For in addition to having an explicated normative content, a 'critical' conception would show how that content is made manifest empirically. It would posit the norm as a kind of social fact, as a constitutive feature of the social world, and not just as an

ideal with no social reality. Of course if the actuality of work coincided with the normative content of work, there would be nothing to criticise. Assuming there is a need for criticism here (and the intuition that there is provides the pre-theoretical point of departure for the theorist), the social reality of the norm must be manifest in a potential for the ‘transcendence’ of actual work which is nevertheless immanent to work. This capacity for transcendence ‘from within’ means that work, according to its ‘critical’ concept, has what Honneth calls an ‘emancipatory content’ as well as a normative content. The crucial point is that the normative content of a ‘critical’ conception of work has a particular character: the discrepancy between it and actual work is not just the ground of moral criticism, but a real feature of the social world that has a role to play in the explanation of social change.

Even from this preliminary formal specification of the features of a critical conception of work, it is clear that many conceptualisations of work, including those that have been developed within the Frankfurt School tradition of critical social theory, do not pass muster as ‘critical’ conceptions in the sense introduced above. Most notably, a critical conception stands in contrast to all conceptualizations of work as norm-free complexes of instrumental action. Habermas’s social theory is a good example of macro-level instrumentalism about work.⁵ It construes work as the means by which human beings take control of their environment, which develops historically as a ‘system’ according to the requirements of instrumental rationality. Whatever theoretical advantages accrue from Habermas’s distinction between the functional rationalization of work and the communicative, norm-guided rationalisation of the lifeworld, they come at the price of a critical conception of work. Micro-level instrumentalism about work, which models the motivation to work on the utility it has for the individual worker, or on the ‘economic benefits’ it brings, is also at odds with the critical conception. But the critical conception of work

contrasts not just with instrumentalist conceptions. It also stands against conceptions which regard work not as morally neutral, as instrumentalism does, but as by its nature morally base or dehumanizing. The idea that work is essentially brutish activity, and that a properly human life is characterised by non-work-like action (such as self-governance), while no doubt a throw-back to pre-modern times, nevertheless continues to exert influence in contemporary thinking about work, and must be sharply distinguished from the critical conception.⁶ Future-looking visions of a world without work, which envisage liberation from the curse of work for all and not just the lucky few, still conceive work as an evil, and as such also depart from the critical conception. One more contrasting position worth mentioning accepts that work is norm-laden, as the critical conception does, but primarily on account of the validity of the contracts that regulate work. The normativity of work, on this view, concerns the justice of the exchanges that takes place in the labour market.⁷ Morality is at stake because work can be unfairly remunerated: some work is paid more than it is worth, much is paid for less than its true worth, and work that should be paid isn't paid at all. This approach thus criticizes the distribution of resources that arises from work activity.⁸ But while it is critical of work insofar as work is not justly rewarded, and defends redistribution as a corrective for these economic injustices, it does not do so by reference to a normative content immanent to the concept of work itself, and so once again does not possess a critical conception of work.

Having specified in schematic terms what a critical conception of work would involve, and with the contrast conceptualisations of work just listed in view, let us now look at the conception Honneth actually came up with. As I said, Honneth is guided by the young Marx's thought that work has not only an economic, but a moral and emancipatory significance. The moral significance of work lies, to put it bluntly, in the contribution it makes (when not distorted)

to a meaningful, fulfilled, dignified human life. Of course Marx was not the only one to view work as morally significant in this way, but he can be seen as the culmination of a cultural transition in which working life, or the life of production, comes to be regarded as worthwhile in its own right. To borrow a couple of Charles Taylor's terms, this shift involved an 'affirmation of ordinary (working) life', that is, a positive estimation of its moral or human significance, such that the life of production (and reproduction) became 'strongly valued'.⁹ But the modern notion of work as a vehicle of human self-realisation, in the sense that ordinary working life is held to be worthy of affirmation in its own right, is not just one interpretive horizon amongst others for Marx. Rather, it has anthropological roots, in the sense that the capacity for work distinguishes human beings from other species, and the proper exercise of this capacity is crucial for the development of properly human subjectivity. The key idea here, which Marx arrives at by a kind of synthesis of Hegel and Feuerbach, is that the embodied human being, which all humans are, reaches an understanding of its powers and a realisation of its purposes by externalising them in material form; that is, by instantiating them in external material objects. It is by working on their physical environment, and encountering their powers and hence themselves 'expressed' in external objects, that human beings develop their distinctive cognitive and practical abilities. According to the interpretation of Marx Honneth presents here, Marx's chief insight about the moral meaning of work consists in his identification of the educative, self-formative role of work; that is, in his understanding of work as 'a process of intellectual self-development [Bildung]'.¹⁰

For Marx, the dual moral and economic function of work – its role as a vehicle for the development and education of distinctively human capacities on the one hand, and as the source of 'value' and generator of capital that represses those capacities on the other - lends work an

emancipatory significance. But Honneth distinguishes two ways in which Marx builds this significance into his social theory, only one of which is suited to Honneth's purposes. He rejects the line of reasoning that lead Marx to construe the 'emancipatory surplus' of work in terms of the technical knowledge and discipline acquired by the industrial working class in the course of economic development, knowledge that would enable workers to emancipate themselves from the capitalist social order in a revolutionary act of collective self-assertion. More promising, for Honneth, is the idea that an emancipatory transformation of the organisation of labour can arise out of the negativity of the experience of work, where that experience is shaped by a certain stage in the education of labour. According to Honneth, Marx could point to craft labour as a form of work in which objects were produced that 'externalised' the purposes of the workers and through which the workers could recognise their distinctively human powers. This connection to the 'constructive and objectifying character of the labour process' was lost as capitalism developed, but the idea of 'unified work activity, autonomously planned and carried out by the working subject' - which was to an extent embodied in craft labour - continued to inform the moral experience of work under capitalism, albeit negatively in the alienation suffered by those contributing to the labour process.¹¹ According to this model, the emancipatory content of the concept of work arises from the discrepancy between the actual conditions of labour and the anticipation the worker has of performing a meaningful act of work, one which gave expression to the workers' distinctive productive powers. It is the educational, self-formative potential of work, its role in gradually revealing the capabilities of the subject by externalising them in an object according to a self-directed plan, that now explains its emancipatory character. While visible in craft labour, this potential lies hidden and repressed in the capitalist productive process.

Even in ‘Work and Instrumental Action’ Honneth concedes that the model he extracts from Marx only provides a starting point for a systematic attempt to recover the moral and emancipatory significance of work. It does not, for example, contain a sufficiently clear definition of work and it does not distinguish work from other kinds of activity – tasks which a systematic account should accomplish. Once these problems are solved, the model then has to be transferred to a world of work very different to the one Marx had in mind. The development of technology and the complexification of the division of labour in the twentieth century strongly suggest that craftwork can no longer, as it did for Marx, provide the paradigm for non-alienated work (nor the standard informing expectations of proper work). The universalisability of the normative content of work, its applicability to all different kinds of work, is another fundamental issue to be addressed. Nonetheless, in Honneth’s view, Marx’s diagnosis of the degradation of work under capitalism, brought up to date and supported empirically by (among other things) Harry Braverman’s research, retains a core of validity.¹² And at this point Honneth also thinks that Marx’s expressivist anthropology, especially the role it assigns to ‘externalisation’ and ‘objectification’ in the development of human capacities - indeed in the formation of the human personality as a whole - still provides a powerful framework for understanding the normative ground of this diagnosis. For the anthropology supports the idea that autonomous, engaged, object-oriented expressions of the subject’s own empirical knowledge characterise proper or ‘undistorted’ acts of work, which contrast qualitatively with the ‘fragmented instrumental operations into which social labour has been reduced by the process of rationalization’.¹³ The latter can then legitimately be conceived as a degradation of work, insofar as it systematically truncates, distorts or diminishes the subjectivity of workers by preventing them from expressing (and developing) their intelligence through self-directed, self-regulated, object-oriented action.

Of course if the degradation of work hypothesis is correct, and work does as a matter of fact, for the most part, fall short of its normative content, this would be manifest empirically in widespread experiences of alienation, disengagement, and broadly speaking moral disappointment with working life. We would expect people to express dissatisfaction not just about pay (which might be tainted with a bad conscience) but with more conviction about the quality of their working conditions. Workers would not get a sense of fulfilment from their work, on the contrary they would feel spiritually eviscerated by it. There would be widespread disillusionment with work as a source of moral meaning. People would find themselves lorded over by work, dominated rather than nourished by it. But these phenomena would also reflect the underlying persistence of the normativity of work. That is, they would reflect ongoing expectations - under the surface perhaps but enduring nonetheless - that work should be better, and ongoing 'pre-conceptions' that it matters. Just as, if Habermas is right, the corruption of contexts of communication by money and power does not prevent communicative actors from having to anticipate a counterfactual speech situation free from coercion, so, if Honneth is right, working subjects 'would always already counterfactually anticipate the features of a self-contained, self-directed work procedure which embodied the workers' knowledge' even in degraded working conditions.¹⁴ Furthermore, if an 'emancipatory surplus' can meaningfully be ascribed to the normative content of work understood in this way, we would expect it to inform resistance to the actual conditions of work, resistance which had the potential to transform work 'from within'. This would give the normative content of work the character of 'immanent transcendence' that befits a truly critical conception.

At this point in the argument Honneth draws on studies by the French sociologist Phillippe Bernoux that describe the cooperative strategies workers adopt to bring an externally determined

work process under their own control. Honneth interprets the workers as thereby pressing ‘a claim which is immanent to their activity’.¹⁵ In response to the ‘expropriation’ of their capacity to take initiative and use their own tacit knowledge, the workers undertake (often surreptitious) strategies aimed at their ‘appropriation’. The workers’ pre-reflective ‘no’ to expropriation, and their impulse to resist, contains the germ of a moral insight with no less claim to validity, in Honneth’s view, than the ‘no’ expressed by a participant in a fully fledged practical discourse. As Honneth interprets them, Bernoux’s studies show that in the negativity of their experience, workers can come to realise the critical role of autonomy, initiative, and practical knowledge in their work, which they then seek to embody indirectly.¹⁶ Honneth finds empirical support for his critical conception of work in Bernoux’s hypothesis that: ‘one of the most important dimensions of past and present conflicts emerges from the dimension of appropriation. Each of these conflicts expresses a will to organize and control production, to define itself as an autonomous group standing in opposition to the organization, to make itself recognised as having rights as an essential moment of production.’¹⁷

The last sentence of this passage strongly suggests that Bernoux’s observations concerning workers’ resistance to the external determination of their productive activity, and their efforts to take control of that activity through strategies of ‘appropriation’, provide tangible evidence of a struggle for recognition at work. Indeed, the pattern Bernoux describes seems to recommend itself as a model of what it might mean to engage in a struggle for recognition. And yet nowhere in this essay does Honneth thematise the idea of the struggle for recognition as such. Remarkably, the very idea of being ‘recognised’ appears explicitly only once, here in the quotation taken from Bernoux. What are we to make of this? One possible answer is that Honneth had not yet arrived at the idea of recognition that will go on to form the cornerstone of

his critical social theory. But while it is true that ‘Work and Instrumental Action’ is not a mature expression of Honneth’s theory of recognition, nonetheless many of the key features of the ‘recognition-theoretic’ approach – the rejection of atomism, instrumentalism, and functionalism in favour of the intersubjectivist but non-linguistic paradigm inspired by the young Hegel’s ‘Jena writings’ – are already in place and are clearly visible in the text itself.¹⁸ Furthermore, concepts bearing a resemblance to recognition are an important part of the argument, in particular the ‘affirmation’ the subject receives, which is crucial to its development, from the object that ‘externalises’ the subject’s capacities in an act of work.¹⁹ These considerations also count against another interpretation: that the critical concept of work reconstructed in this essay is a non-recognition-theoretic conception which Honneth later came to repudiate. It is true that Honneth subsequently amended certain aspects of the argument presented in ‘Work and Instrumental Action’, but there was no wholesale change of mind, no complete disavowal of a former position. So rather than supposing that the recognition-theoretic approach is simply absent in Honneth’s reconstruction of a critical conception of work, or that the two approaches exclude each other, it seems more plausible to say that the critical conception of work has an implicit recognition-theoretic character, albeit one that attracts even less explicit attention in Honneth’s subsequent articulations of the recognition paradigm.

By way of making this character more explicit, we can say that an ‘undistorted’ act of work involves recognition insofar as an affirmation of the subjectivity of the person who performs it is built into the structure of the act. An act of work is structured at once by the object to which it is directed and the social relations that determine which objects are produced and the manner of their production. This structure can be viewed as a mere constraint on the subjectivity of the worker, as a set of externally imposed limits on the subject’s will. But while there is some

truth in this, it is superficial from an anthropological standpoint. For it is just this structure that allows the subject to give expression to (at least some of) its powers and so to 'realise' itself. The mediation of subjectivity by objects lends the object-oriented structure of work activity a 'recognition' significance, since the performers of an undistorted act of work will be able to recognise themselves in a positive way in the object produced and the act of producing it. They will find their subjectivity expressed and affirmed there. Conversely, if workers cannot perform acts of work without fear of physical injury, or without exercising their practical intelligence in shaping and prosecuting the task at hand, or without being able to connect meaningfully with the objects that give their work its point, their subjectivity lacks affirmation or recognition. Of course, these matters which bear on the mediation of work activity by an object also concern the social organisation of work. Work is always socially structured activity: it is only through social relationships, and the norms that govern what is acceptable by way of human interaction, that objects get produced. It is obvious that the forms of human interaction that characterise work can instantiate relationships of recognition in more or less satisfactory ways. Social relations that systematically prevent a worker from showing any initiative, or that render her or his initiatives invisible, as counting for nothing in the process of production, hardly affirm or 'recognise' the worker's subjectivity.

Once the recognition-theoretic character of the critical conception of work is made explicit in something like this way its family resemblance to the classical concept of alienation becomes evident. On this conception, work falls short of its standard when it 'denatures' the subject who is forced to do it. The critical animus of the concept is directed towards practices that fail to affirm or allow the undistorted development of human subjectivity. Insofar as such work fails to recognise the subjectivity of the worker, it alienates the worker. Of course, this

would be a liability for the ‘recognition-theoretic’ conception if the expressivist anthropology that supports the classical concept of alienation has been superseded by a superior one. But if anything, the basic tenets of this anthropology - that the human being is an embodied subject engaged with the world, challenged by the world and having to cope with it - is more widely accepted now than ever before. And more significantly, in the work of theorists such as Christophe Dejours, this basic conception of the subject has been advanced precisely for the practical purpose of diagnosing the pathologies generated by contemporary regimes of work.²⁰ While I do not have space to consider the advances made by Dejours here, suffice it to note that they bring us to the threshold of a critical conception of work of just the kind that Honneth sought to retrieve from the Marxist tradition of critical theory.

2. The Struggle for Recognition

I have just offered a sketch of how the critical conception of work reconstructed by Honneth in ‘Work and Instrumental Action’ could be rearticulated so that it explicitly took on a ‘recognition-theoretic’ character. It suggests a direction of research framed by the diagnostic hypothesis that work is a locus of ‘moral injury’ on account of the ‘distorted’ or ‘denatured’ expressions of subjectivity which the actual world of work imposes. Such enquiry would rehabilitate the classical concept of alienation within a broad paradigm of recognition. However, this is not the direction Honneth’s own theory subsequently took. Although Honneth has continued to insist that the moral experience of work must be central to an acceptable critical social theory, and that the role of work in relations of social recognition must never be lost from view, his interpretation of where that moral significance resides, and his way of keeping it in view, has altered.²¹ This shift can be seen in the acknowledgement he made in his ‘Introduction’ to The Fragmented

World of the Social that the argument of ‘Work and Instrumental Action’ stands in need of revision.²² Here he seems to accept an objection to his earlier view that ‘the criteria of moral assessment’ that pertain to work ‘cannot be related to the internal character of the work process itself, but rather only to the institutional framework in which it is necessarily embedded.’²³ It did not follow, Honneth continued, that the concept of instrumental action was sufficient for explaining the genesis of normative expectations informing the experience of work. For when, as in modern times, ‘individual identity formation also depends upon the social esteem which one’s own work enjoys within one’s society’, the concept of work must be able to take into account this ‘psychic connection.’²⁴ Work is still to be conceived as a context of moral injury, but now on account of the historically variable schemes of cultural evaluation that determine whether a particular kind of work activity is worthy of esteem - indeed, as worthy of counting as work at all. The decisive consideration for understanding the link between work and recognition is now the patterns of social esteem associated with work, the injustices suffered on account of them, and the acts of resistance such experiences of injustice precipitate.²⁵ This view is elaborated in The Struggle for Recognition and is reiterated in Honneth’s contributions to Recognition or Redistribution?

And yet work occupies a curious position in the overarching argument of The Struggle for Recognition. That argument is an attempt to make plausible an ambitious historical claim: that modern society emerged from, and develops in a manner shaped by, social conflicts which have a moral content in virtue of being aimed at relations of mutual recognition. Insofar as The Struggle for Recognition presents a ‘theory of recognition’, it is a theory based around this hypothesis. It is important to bear in mind the very broad sweep of the hypothesis, and the matching sweep of the theories it opposes. Thus, at the most general level, Honneth’s ‘theory of

recognition' contrasts with social theories that reject the explanatory purport of human intentionality, as if the laws of nature, or of a system's adaptation to its environment, were sufficient for explaining social change. At the next level down, the theory contrasts with explanations of social conflict that invoke only one kind of intentionality - self-interest - as if social conflicts were always a matter of 'amoral' competition between individuals or groups over scarce resources. Bringing these two levels together, Honneth's hypothesis entails that social change admits of 'action-theoretic' explanation where the explanans includes not only the interest in self-preservation and competitive advantage, but action-motivating experiences with a moral or 'normative' content.

But it is only at the next level down from here, where the structure of the moral grievances that drive the conflicts characteristic of modern society is at issue, that the hypothesis at the heart of the theory of recognition really kicks in. At an anthropological level, it construes the moral content of experience not in terms of matter of fact pleasure or pain, but as social suffering - epitomised in experiences of humiliation and disrespect - which all human beings are vulnerable to on account of their dependence on the recognition of others for the 'practical self-relations' minimally necessary for a good life. But this anthropological structure takes different social forms. And in its modern form, Honneth's historical hypothesis runs, the radicalisation of the individuating process characteristic of modern societies involves a differentiation of the sources of these practical self-relations, which in turn provides the context for moral expectations of mutual recognition. The crucial development here is the separation of the basic social means by which the 'respect' an individual is due merely on account of being a 'person' is secured - namely, fundamental legal rights and equality under the law - and the social mechanisms by which 'esteem' is allocated to individuals in recognition of their particular achievements and

contribution to society. Social conflicts could then be generated around expectations of inclusion under the legal category of the person, or more concretely, around possession of basic legal entitlements which recognise the equal dignity of persons belonging to the excluded group. Such struggles are aimed at the mutual recognition that binds equals under the law and co-authors of law. On the other hand, social conflicts could also emerge over the social status accorded to members of particular groups. What these struggles aim at is recognition in the sense of social esteem, or due recognition of the worth of particular achievements or ways of life. The ‘individualization of achievement’ in modern society means that esteem has to be earned; it is not given in advance, on the basis say of the family one was born into, or as in previous times, one’s ‘estate’.²⁶ This gives rise to cultural conflicts over what it means to make a worthwhile contribution to society, that is, over the interpretation of the ‘achievement principle’. As Honneth put it: ‘In modern societies, relations of social esteem are subject to a permanent struggle, in which different groups attempt, by means of symbolic force and with reference to general goals, to raise the value of the abilities associated with their way of life’.²⁷

But this leads to a problem which, on Honneth’s own account, represents the most serious conceptual difficulty facing the theory of recognition, one which the pioneers of the theory (Hegel and Mead) both failed to solve.²⁸ For whereas the sense in which co-possessors of basic rights and co-authors of the law mutually recognise each other is relatively clear (as persons with equal dignity), it is harder to see how relations of mutual recognition are involved when social esteem is based on individualised achievement. That would seem to require a situation in which everyone enjoyed social esteem (or social standing) on the basis of their individual contribution to the collective goals of the society. If the mutuality of the recognition relationship is to extend to all, it must be on account of achievements that are generally acknowledged, or contributions to

goals that are shared. Given the intertwining of individuation and socialisation posited by the theory of recognition, this would simultaneously have to provide each individual with the basis of self-esteem, and bind people together in a more robust way than is possible merely on account of membership of the category of persons (that is, subjects with equal dignity). As Hegel and Mead saw, without social bonds that extend beyond the familial sphere, and which have greater binding power than those generated by the mutual recognition of persons under law, the social cohesion of highly individuated, modern societies is at risk. Social esteem through mutual recognition could in principle provide such cohesion, thus helping to secure the integrity of the society and individual identities in one stroke.

The problem, however, is that with the individualization of achievement, agreement about the ways of life that are worthy of social esteem gradually breaks up. In a context of value-pluralism, itself the ‘inevitable consequence’ of the individualization of achievement,²⁹ a crucial condition for social integration through mutual recognition seems to be lacking: namely a general consensus on what counts as ‘achievement’, a ‘valuable contribution’ to society, and so forth. Honneth’s way around this difficulty is to suggest that the potentially disintegrative effects of value-pluralism and the individualization of achievement are mitigated by a form of ‘societal integration’ in which individuals see themselves as having the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to society through the expression of their distinctive traits and abilities. Mutual recognition between such individuals does not require them to esteem each other’s contribution to society to the same degree - the individualization of achievement means that the degree of social esteem one receives depends on how successful one manages to be - but it does require that they all recognise each other as potential contributors, as having some chance of success. Although esteem is not given in advance to members of any particular group, no one is excluded

from the means of social esteem merely on account of their membership of a group. So long as ‘every subject is free from being collectively denigrated so that one is given the chance to experience oneself to be recognised in light one’s own accomplishments and abilities, as valuable for society’, relations of mutual esteem can be said to obtain.³⁰ This provides Honneth with a solution to the problem that threatened to nip the Hegel-Mead theory of recognition in the bud, namely a way of reconciling the demands of individualization (as expressed in the achievement principle) with those of social integration.

The social division of labour is relevant for this argument, of course, because it provides the dominant social framework within which individuals are able to express their particular talents and abilities. One undoubted advantage of this ‘recognition-theoretic’ conception of the division of labour is that it opens up a critical perspective on the moral injury suffered by individuals who are not able to have their talents and abilities recognised on account of belonging to a stigmatised or denigrated group. It also explains how such experiences can give rise to conflicts with the potential for bringing about progressive social change. Struggles aimed at the proper appreciation of the ‘value’ of certain kinds of work - such as the kind of work traditionally associated with women – have this role. Another advantage of this approach is that it is relieved of the burden of having to define, in general anthropological terms, what ‘properly human’ work consists in. Value-pluralism, driven by the individualization of achievement, makes it both unnecessary and inappropriate to specify the content of a ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ piece of work. What counts as such things is now a matter of the interpretation of ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ achievement, on which the theorist of recognition is in no position to pronounce. The theorist is in a position, however, to criticise arbitrary exclusions from the process of social interpretation, as well as one-sided or distorted prevailing interpretations of the achievement principle.

But there are also reasons counting against this line of argumentation. In the remainder of the paper I want to consider two. The first concerns the role the achievement principle plays in Honneth's solution to the problem of social integration; the second concerns the agenda it sets up for a critical theory of work.

With regard to the first point, it seems to me that Honneth is too sanguine about the integrative potential of social esteem based on individual achievement. In the scenario depicted by Honneth, in which social esteem becomes a matter of mutual recognition between individual achievers, enormous responsibility is thrown onto the individual which is liable to have disintegrative effects at both the individual and social levels. In the 'estate' based model of social esteem, there may well have been what we would now see as arbitrary limits on an individual's chances of successful self-realisation. But this was compensated by limits, as it were, on the individual's capacity to fail. If success is increasingly recognised as the result of individual effort (as a matter of what one freely makes of oneself, in contrast to some pre-given, 'natural' membership of an estate), failure proportionally becomes a matter of personal responsibility, and hence fault. This threatens to undermine more radically than was previously possible an individual's self-esteem. The intensification of the burden of failure, and of course fear of it, is only the reverse side of the individualized competition for social esteem, the negative effects of which are not at all dealt with by opening up entry to the competition to all groups on a more or less equal basis. These effects bear on the self, whose capacity for autonomy may seem like a curse in view of the responsibility it brings for non-achievement or failure; and they bear on social bonds, which are surely just as likely to be undermined as strengthened by the individualised competition for social esteem.

A now classic source of insight about the personal and social costs of a culture of individual achievement is The Hidden Injuries of Class by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb.³¹ The study showed how working class people who ‘made something of themselves’ typically felt profound ambivalence towards their achievements, whilst those they left behind often suffered poor self-esteem on account of the responsibility they felt for their lowly status. This is worth mentioning not only because of the caution it should teach about the kind of ‘solidarity’ a culture of individual achievement can generate, but because on several occasions Honneth himself refers to it as supporting his theory of recognition.³² And its fine-grained descriptions of the everyday moral experience of workers, characterised above all by subtle forms of disrespect and affronts to personal dignity, do fit the recognition paradigm well. The ‘hiddenness’ of these moral injuries, and their role in motivating resistance in the form of ‘countercultures of compensatory respect’, also lend weight to Honneth’s theory. As he wrote in his exchange with Fraser, the protagonists of Sennett and Cobb’s study were less concerned by their ‘material plight’ than the social recognition of ‘ways of life and achievements, which in their eyes were worthy of respect’.³³ But there is also something misleading in this representation of the The Hidden Injuries of Class. For it leaves out of the picture the resistance shown by workers to the very fact of counting as individual achievers. It does not reflect their degree of ambivalence towards participating in an achievement-driven ‘competition’ for social esteem. To put it bluntly, it is hard to imagine that the subjects of Sennett and Cobb’s study would feel anything but discomfort at the thought that their experiences of moral injury, and methods for coping with the hurt, amounted to a cultural conflict over the meaning of the ‘achievement principle’.

It is also revealing that Honneth takes the ‘moral injuries of class’ documented by Sennett and Cobb to be illustrative of a ‘denigration of forms of life’ rather than a withdrawal or lack of

recognition that arises specifically in the context of work. This is true of the way in which Honneth interprets the relevance of the historical writings of E. P. Thompson and Barrington Moore for the theory of recognition as well. These historians matter for Honneth's purposes because they show how working class revolt was driven by feelings of 'dishonour' and thus by denied recognition to a collective way of life. But no specific significance is attached to the quality of their working life, and how that context in particular provided a site for the struggle for recognition. Indeed, throughout The Struggle for Recognition, and even more so in Recognition or Redistribution?, the 'recognition-theoretic' significance of work emerges not from the lived quality of working, as it did in 'Work and Instrumental Action', but from interpretive schema which determine the worth of work as an achievement. This is why work occupies such a strange position in the argument of The Struggle for Recognition: the division of labour is crucial insofar as it provides the social framework in which individuals are able to find social recognition for their particular abilities and achievements, yet the struggle for recognition seems oblivious to the activity of working itself (as opposed to its estimation).

This brings me to my second, and final point. It is surely an unfortunate consequence of the 'recognition-theoretic' standpoint Honneth adopts in The Struggle for Recognition that the problem of the degradation of work falls off the radar. By subsuming the category of work under the category of achievement, it becomes impossible to articulate a contrast between dignified and undignified work irrespective of the social recognition the worker receives. According to Honneth's later position, if I have understood it correctly, such a distinction goes under with the rise of value pluralism and the individualisation of achievement. In a 'post-metaphysical' context, the argument runs, notions of fulfilling, meaningful, or non-alienated work can only be justified relative to particular ways of life or horizons of value. It all depends on what they

recognise, and the worth of work is constituted by such recognition. That is why the interpretive schema become the subject of struggle. But however important these 'struggles for recognition' may be, they by no means tell us everything about the 'moral grammar' of social conflicts arising from work, nor do they come near to encompassing the varied experiences of moral disappointment generated in working life. If we want a deeper understanding of those phenomena, we would be better off returning to the critical conception of work sketched by Honneth in 'Work and Instrumental Action'.³⁴

Endnotes

¹ See 'Work and Instrumental Action: On the Normative Basis of Critical Theory' in Axel Honneth (1995) *The Fragmented World of the Social*, pp. 15-49. Albany: SUNY Press. This is an English translation of 'Arbeit und instrumentales Handeln. Kategorale Probleme einer kritischen Gesellschaftstheorie' in A. Honneth and W. Bonss (eds) (1980) *Arbeit, Handlung und Normativität: Theorien des historischen Materialismus 2*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

² See A. Honneth (1995) The Struggle for Recognition, trans. J. Anderson. Cambridge: Polity; N. Faser and A. Honneth (2003) Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange, trans. J. Golb, J. Ingram and C. Wilke. London: Verso.

³ In addition to 'Work and Instrumental Action', see the essays 'Domination and Moral Struggle' and 'Moral Consciousness and Class Domination' both included in The Fragmented World of the Social. The emancipatory significance of the division labour is asserted more recently in A. Honneth (1998) 'Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today', Political Theory 26:6, 763-83.

⁴ Honneth (n. 1) p. 17.

⁵ See Jürgen Habermas (1984) Theory of Communicative Action, vol 2, trans. T. McCarthy. Cambridge: Polity. On the baleful influence of the instrumentalist/technicist conception of work on theories of the division of labour generally (and not just those in the Marxist tradition), see James B. Murphy (1993) The Moral Economy of Labor. New Haven, Yale University Press.

⁶ See Hannah Arendt (1958) The Human Condition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁷ This is often the focus of theories of the 'exploitation' of labour, particularly in analytical Marxism.

⁸ See the contributions of Nancy Fraser to Redistribution or Recognition? (n. 2).

⁹ See Charles Taylor (1989) Sources of the Self. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Honneth, (n. 1) p. 19.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 18, 22.

¹² See Harry Braverman (1974) Labour and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century. New York: Monthly Review Press. Of course we are talking here of a view formulated in the late 1970s.

¹³ Honneth (n. 1) pp. 45-6.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁶ Actually this point is subtle but rather opaque. Honneth writes: ‘The valid normative claim which thus comes to expression [in the act of reclaiming the ‘the meaningful work content of instrumental action out of the social forms established through domination’] results from a moral vulnerability which grows ... from the expropriation of the workers’ own work activity. The moral knowledge which is constructed on the basis of such experiences is embodied in acts of work which claim their autonomy even in the organizational reality of externally determined form of work’. Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁷ P. Bernoux (1978) ‘La resistance ouvriere à la rationalisation: la reappropriation de la travail’, *Sociologie du Travail*, 4, p. 80, quoted by Honneth, *ibid.* p. 48.

¹⁸ In the introduction to The Fragmented World of the Social Honneth retrospectively reconstructs the motivation behind ‘Work and Instrumental Action’ as if it were a logical step that leads from a merely negative critique of the Marxist tradition of critical theory to a positively conceived ‘recognition’ paradigm. For the critique of historical materialism opens up

‘the question of how the experience of work might appropriately be located in the envisaged conception of moral struggle’, that is, moral struggle conceptualised as a struggle for recognition (p. xvii).

¹⁹ In another early work, Social Action and Human Nature (co-authored with Hans Joas and first published in 1980), Honneth at once praised Marx for the insight that capitalism made it ‘impossible for the labouring subjects, the workers, to recognise themselves in the products they themselves have made’, and chastised him for neglecting the social, inter-human relations of recognition that capitalism imperils. (See A. Honneth and H. Joas (1988) Social Action and Human Nature, trans. R. Meyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 24.) This tension between admiration of Marx’s expressivist anthropology, and hostility towards the neglect of social interaction this anthropology seems to lead to, is evident throughout Honneth’s writings.

²⁰ See for example Christophe Dejours (1998) *Souffrance en France*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, and now in English C. Dejours (2006) ‘Subjectivity, Work, and Action’, Critical Horizons, 7, pp ??? . In the same volume, see the discussion of Honneth and Dejours in Jean-Philippe Deranty, ‘Repressed Materiality: Recovering the Materialism in Axel Honneth’s Theory of Recognition’, 137-63.

²¹ See Honneth, Fragmented World of the Social, p. xvi.

²² *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ The paradigm case for Honneth is the lack of social esteem for unpaid housework: ‘Today it is above all the debate carried out within feminist theory concerning the problem of unpaid

housework that is relevant for the further analysis of the relationship in which work and recognition stand together' (ibid., p. xix).

²⁶ Honneth, The Struggle for Recognition (n. 2) p. 125.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 127. Such struggles are often at once struggles over redistribution. Since relations of social esteem are 'indirectly coupled with patterns of income distribution, economic confrontations are also constitutive for this forms of struggle for recognition'. (Ibid.)

²⁸ See ibid, pp. 91, 127, 178-9.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 125.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 130.

³¹ Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972) The Hidden Injuries of Class. New York: Knopf.

³² See for example The Struggle for Recognition (n.2) p. 124, The Fragmented World of the Social (n. 1) p. 218, and Recognition or Redistribution? (n. 2) p. 131.

³³ Honneth, Recognition or Redistribution? (n. 2) p. 131.

³⁴ Acknowledgements.