

Notes for a Seminar, IGRS, 2008

Honneth on Reification

In this seminar I want to look at Axel Honneth's recent Tanner Lectures on reification in a recognition-theoretical framework. In the context of the series of "Denkanstoesse" I must say at the outset that the relation between German and Austrian developments in literature and philosophy since 1945 will not be my concern, but what I will do is consider developments in critical theory – so the German, more specifically Frankfurt, side, and what is surely one of the dominant discourses in the last 60 years.

As we know, that discourse is actually quite a bit older, and dates from the interbellum, with Horkheimer's seminal essay on critical and traditional theory. In the work of Honneth, whom I take for the moment as the current diadoche of the school, after Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas, we find a return to these days of the beginning of the Frankfurter Schule, a period extremely fertile in philosophical ideas. If I were to attempt to describe the development of critical theory between the 1930s and today, I would highlight a movement from a fundamental criticism of enlightenment rationalism as inevitably entrapped, or leading to, irrational barbarism because of the way in which rationalism denies that in reality which escapes the grip of the concept (and therefore is ultimately necessarily instrumental), through a phase, of which Habermas is the key figure, in which this totalising critique of reason which in the end fires back on itself (Die Postnationale Konstellation) is replaced by an idea of critical theory as the development of a discourse ethics in which the communicative basis of rationality is posed against the instrumentalising tendencies of rationality in history, to Honneth's theorie der Anerkennung, recognition, which tries to show that the understanding of communicative rationality as Habermas developed it remains tied to a more or less instrumental conception of rationality, or of interpersonal communication (because what is at

stake there are the reasons we have for our actions and views) and needs to be replaced by a more fundamental analysis of intersubjective recognition which would bring to light that prior to any rational exchange or rational discourse about the legitimacy of our claims, there is an affective disclosure of the world and of others, without which communication cannot be understood, without which communicative rationality cannot be understood and without which even the totalising critique of reason of the earlier Frankfurter Schule, especially Adorno's negative dialektik, cannot be understood either. Thus, the development of the Frankfurter Schule takes on the characteristics of a series of attempts to find adequate foundations for a critical appreciation of social and political practice, in which in earlier ideas are taken up in subsequent attempts to show that the earlier ideas were not fundamental enough. This characteristic stands in marked opposition to the anti-foundationalism that we have seen for a long time, a period which seems to be behind us now – and which in academic circles was called postmodernism. The resurgence of interest in the developments in the Frankfurt school seems to fit with the demise of postmodernism.

In the Tanner lectures, Honneth returns to one of the classical figures of pre-war Marxism, Georg Lukacs, an author, however, who never was part of the Frankfurt school. The same goes for the other authors he brings into proximity with Lukacs, Heidegger and Dewey. Lukacs gave the classical statement of the idea of reification, *Verdinglichung*. That idea has origins which go back to German idealism – to the idea that the world is, in some sense, epistemologically, creatively or processually connected to or dependent on the activity of the subject. In a way, the Kantian critique of metaphysics is a critique of the reification, objectification, of what is in the end a constitutive achievement of the subject - what we thought was independent of us and “out there” actually turns out to be intimately connected to our own constitution. In Fichte this idea is taken to its first absolute idealist statement, and in

Schelling we find the classical statement of reification: “forgetting the process over the product.” But also for Kant, metaphysics is a kind of forgetting – forgetting the constitutive activity of the subject as far as knowledge is concerned. Of course, and Honneth makes this very clear, for Lukacs our tendency to treat as a sphere of detached objects what is in fact a sphere of practical, emphatic and engaged involvement, results from the structure of capitalism. Because of the principle of commodity exchange which determines the economy, we acquire the habit of treating everything in our world – including our relations to others – as things, essentially disconnected from our innermost concerns and identities. The objective gaze of science and commodity exchange are akin. [quotation 96/7, A]

Honneth asks himself to what extent this notion of reification (and the notion of alienation is closely related to it) is of value today. He points out the many elements in contemporary discourse which seem related to it in some way: 1) literature invoking an aura of the “creeping commercialisation of everyday life” (e.g. Houellebecq, Jelinek, Silke Scheuermann); 2) an increasing tendency in society to pretend we have certain feeling, which in the end leads to an inability to distinguish between the real and the feigned – “emotional self-manipulation”, the “prostitution of experience and beliefs” that Lukacs held journalism to exemplify; 3) ethical or moral discourse (e.g. Nussbaum) talking about the objectification of people and personal relations; 4) the apparent appropriateness of using the concept of reification to analyse the contemporary social role and implication of brain research: [quotation 94 B]

In his analysis of reification in the work Lukacs, Honneth is, in my view, essentially concerned to show that the reasons Lukacs was dismissed by the early Frankfurt school are false and that, if we divest Lukacs of his idealist metaphysics, we are left with the bare fact that an affective disposition towards a world and others with which we are connected always

precedes an objectifying, contemplative (as Lukacs also calls it), neutral stance – in short, reification. As we know, for Lukacs, reification, or alienation, can never become total because human beings retain within themselves an experience of subjectivity – which is the other of reification – that cannot disappear simply because of who we are. There remains in Lukacs, certainly the early Lukacs, a romantic-revolutionary, idealist, pathos which he shared with Ernst Bloch, for a time his closest friend. This forms the basis of the critique of capitalism. As Honneth points out, for Lukacs, “all members of capitalist society” are being “socialized in the same manner into a reifying system of behaviour, so that the instrumental treatment of others initially represents a mere social fact, and not a moral wrong” (p. 100). But this can only mean that there is also a notion of “true human praxis”, moreover, one which is never totally eclipsed (this in contradistinction to Adorno: “Es gibt kein wahres Leben im Falschen”). Honneth describes it as follows: [quotation 101 C].

Lukacs grounded this idea of true praxis, however, in an idealist philosophy in which the object is thought of as the product of the subject, along Fichtean lines, which in Honneth’s view robs his ideas of “any chance of social-theoretical justification” – but, to be sure, for reasons distinct from the dismissal Lukacs had earlier received from Horkheimer and Adorno. Honneth also points to a connected naiveté in Lukacs, in that, with Habermas, we might say that he gravely underestimates the extent to which modern societies need “reified” structures of behaviour in the first place – behavioural structures which are, however prone to distortion, connected to the very project of emancipation from which Lukacs draws his inspiration.

I must note there that the short presentation of idealism Honneth gives is quite tendentious, and, for example, completely ignores the fact that whereas Fichte entertained a radical idea of the constitution of objectivity by subjectivity, he also recognised that “das Bewusstsein des Individuums is notwendig von einem andern, dem eines Du, begleitet und nur unter dieser

Bedingung moeglich" (Wissenschaftslehre 1797). Indeed, Honneth himself has investigated the traces of a theory of recognition back to Hegel's Philosophie des Rechts.

In the subsequent parts of the lecture, Honneth dispenses with the idealist basis of the rescuing of the fact of original affective engagement, the fact that we cannot "neutrally comprehend reality" – intersubjectivity – and seeks to align his Lukacsian inspiration to the philosophies of Heidegger and Dewey. Honneth recognises that Heidegger would not share Lukacs idea that the "privileging of the subject-object schema" can be related back to the capitalist form of society. He even says that Heidegger was completely alien to social-theoretical consideration (!). For Heidegger, the basis of the analysis is a phenomenological one, namely the basic structure of Dasein he calls "Sorge", and the distinction between Zuhandenheit and Vorhandenheit to which it gives rise. He also calls it "engaged activity" – in which "the subject no longer neutrally encounters a reality that still remains to be understood but is existentially interested in a reality that is always already disclosed as having qualitative significance. (...) Reification has not eliminated the other, nonreified form of praxis but merely concealed it from our awareness" (104-105). The "modus of existential engagement" (106) is primary and factually always already there. [quotation 107 D].

This engaged practice encompasses more than mere sensitivity to or respect for the perspective of the other – as we find it in Habermas' discourse ethics – for that remains an instrumental interest. The caring disclosure of the world always precedes it in an "affective disposition, a positive predisposition" (p.108). [quotation E, 109].

I will leave out the consideration of Dewey.

Honneth is now concerned to show that this phenomenological dimension of care, which he has equated with the sense of non-distorted, affectively engaged, positively pre-disposed, practice, or subjectivity, that Lukacs implicitly refers to in analysing the idea of reification, is both theoretically fundamental, and in all essential aspects equivalent to his idea of recognition, which has Hegelian roots. “Recognition comes before cognition” (p. 113)

Honneth does this by showing that the objectifying stance is grounded in the existential engagement to the world, and in particular by showing that the communicative stance given by the ability to assume the perspective of a second person is grounded in “an antecedent interaction that bears the characteristic features of existential care”.

From the consideration of validity and the structure of validity claims, we move to the genetic area and are reminded that the nine month revolution, in which a child realises his caretaker has a perspective on the world just like he or she, and thus shares a world with others, is dependent on the child having emotionally attached to the caretaker [quotations F and G 116/7] . An objective understanding of reality is acquired by a previous imitation, attachment, taking-over of the perspective of a loved one. The role of “love” here, or emotional attachment, lies in the fact that it implies, in distinction to epistemic attitudes, an “element of involuntary openness, devotedness”. In the ontogenesis, recognition precedes cognition.

A third approach lies in the criticism of the problem of knowledge of other minds. Here Honneth addresses Cavell’s and Sartre’s ideas that the skeptic about knowledge of other minds can never be refuted unless we come to see that our relation to others, and their consciousness, is not primarily cognitive. We are affected ourselves by the notion we take of the emotional states of others. Cavell speaks of sympathy – [quotation H1, H2; 121] This is

not an empirical, or psychological point, but a categorical one – a particular class of utterances can only be understood from the stance Cavell calls “acknowledgement”. 123:”the acknowledgement of the other constitutes a non-epistemic prerequisite for linguistic understanding”. And this involves more than understanding their reasons for acting , it encompasses an element of sympathy or care, it is more than what is normally called a “communicative stance”.

Here I must note that although it is certainly true that Habermas emphasises the dimension of reasons for acting in communication, he is not entirely blind to this preceding level of recognition. In my view, we find here an idea that owes at least as much to Lukacs as to the tradition of dialogical philosophy, which also goes back to German idealism, and in which Buber’s *Ich und Du* is a central text. In the theory of communicative action, Buber is mentioned only once, in a footnote, but in an interesting place, namely where Habermas refers to the work in dialogue theory done by Skjervheim in the 50s. Skjervheim recognised that understanding meaning is a mode of experience (not cognition). I quote from TCA: “What is of interest for us is that meanings – the meaning of others people’s expressions and behaviour, the meanings of written and spoken words – must be regarded as belonging to that which is given.” (p. 164) understanding meaning differs from the perception of physical objects, in that it is preceded by an intersubjective relation to a second person, a “you”, a relation Habermas here explicitly calls, following Skjervheim, a “non objectifying relation”. Skjervheim affirms “the fundamental ambiguity of the human situation: that the other is there both as an object for me and as another subject with me. This dualism crops up in one of the major means of intercourse with the other – the spoken word. We may treat the words that the other utters as sounds merely; or if we understand their meaning we may still treat them as facts, registering the fact that he says what he says; or we may treat what he says as *knowledge claim*, in which case we are not concerned with what he says as a fact of his biography only, but as something

which can be true or false. In both the first cases the other is an object for me, although in different ways, while in the latter he is a fellow-subject who *concerns* me as one on equal footing with myself, in that we are *both concerned with our common world*” (quoted in TCA, p. 166). Habermas even mentions that whereas Skjervheim places his analysis in the environment of the phenomenological analysis of intersubjectivity as given by Husserl (for whom intersubjectivity is in a sense derivative), his analysis is “actually closer to basic ideas of the philosophy of dialogue, going back to Buber and Rosenzweig” (n. 188). While the focus remains that of knowledge, the level of concern is implicitly recognised as preceding it. Habermas does not elaborate the point further and we may say that Honneth, in his work on recognition theory, has done so.

Reification as forgetfulness of recognition. [quotation I, 125, as a resume] Honneth goes on to say that for Lukacs all objectification is reification. This leads to very unwelcome results, for surely the ability to produce and use objective knowledge, cognition, is “rooted in recognition, and is not its opposite” (p. 126) – For Lukacs, reification is the result of a social process, one that can never become total because the genuine form of human behaviour is rooted deeply in who we are. But, as Honneth points out, the entire development of modernisation appears, for Lukacs, as a form of reification. Habermas made room for “reification” as the basic process of modernisation – the development of spheres of strategic action as opposed to communicative action. However, in the eyes of Honneth, he thereby placed the moral burden of proof on the domain of functional, strategic, reason which in practice means a criterion by which to judge the appropriateness of functionalisation cannot be given.

Honneth then proposes to make a distinction between attitudes and practices in which we cognise while at the same time not having forgotten that our objective stance is rooted in an antecedent, non-cognitive stance of empathetic engagement and recognition, and attitudes in practices in which we have forgotten the basis in recognition. There are “forms of knowledge sensitive to recognition” and “forms of knowledge in which every trace of their origin in an antecedent act of recognition has been lost” (p. 128). The former are not in opposition to conceptual thought – indeed they are the only way to understand the point of conceptual thought in the first place – and are rooted in the awareness of the gap between conceptual thought and the individual, affective, connected, realities and individuals they concern (Adorno). The latter form a stance in which we are no longer aware of the “feeling of connection” that is necessary for us to understand the expressions of others as making a claim to us that we react in an appropriate way (autism).

But how is the forgetfulness of recognition possible in the first place? For Lukacs, it was easy to affirm a social cause – the market. But for Honneth this is no longer possible, as reification is not the opposite of recognition, but a specific type of relation between recognition and objectification. Honneth mentions two forms of forgetting of recognition: 1) we get so absorbed in the independence of a practice or stance, we simply lose sight of its affective origin (the tennis player), 2) we entertain thought schemata which lead to a selective interpretation of practice (prejudice, denial). Interestingly, Honneth does not want to give an example, “because the case is so well known”--.

Critical theory has been concerned for three decades with a normative consideration of society in the light of principles of justice. The theory of communicative action is concerned with the process of legitimisation of practices and knowledge- and normative claims. But as Honneth

says, we have always known that societies can be normatively deficient in ways that have nothing to do with justice, and these are discussed in the public sphere under the various types of “ethics” that we see today. The recourse to the concept of reification is intended as a way to do justice to the intuition of Lukacs of the detrimental effects of a certain type of objectifying stance towards the world, and as a way to reformulate the concept in terms of a theory of recognition which affirms the primacy of empathy, engagement, identification in the relation between persons and their world. Honneth tries to follow Lukacs even in a reinterpretation of the idea of a reification of nature, this time not grounded in a more or less romantic philosophy of nature, but in the idea that recognition of the other involved an attachment, or openness for, the other, including a recognition of their subjective conceptions and feelings about non-human objects. This is the only basis Honneth sees for an environmental ethics, as the idea that the objectification of nature would harm the primacy of the caring stance seems closed off to us. We may consider whether Honneth’s assessment here is itself based on lingering subject-object dualism, or a dualism of society and nature – for why would we not include in the recognitional stance the physical, natural, sides of persons – they seem to belong as essentially to who we are, as our recognitional openness to others.

But more importantly, I want to point out that the reinterpretation of reification as a forgetting of recognition when used as way to both continue and correct critical theory itself meets a number of problems:

1. the analysis of care as the basic structure of Dasein, care understood as affective orientation on another, ultimately affirms a level of ontology, which appears as unrelated, and therefore always relevant, to any other social or psychological reality.

In Honneth's text we find an unreflected juxtaposition of empirical and categorical considerations, which could be read easily as a familiar move to obfuscated social realities by presenting them as "atemporal" (a word Honneth actually uses) states of affairs. This is what Heidegger does in *Being and Time*, and it is his answer to the question Honneth comes up with himself, but to which he has no really satisfactory answer, namely, how is *Verfallenheit* possible? For Adorno, this question does not arise in this way, because for him it is the very fact of the gap between concept and individual (the forgetting of *that* is identity thinking) which explains capitalism as well as the misleading discourse of *Verfallenheit* and, indeed, *Anerkennung* as rooted in a phenomenology of personal existence. Phenomenology itself retains its idealist, platonic, origin, and so does, we might argue, the recognition theory as developed by Honneth. What else than the realisation that our relations to others and to the world around us, the meaning of it, cannot be reduced to a general concept, is really given in this reformulation of reification, and what indeed, is that idea other than what Lukacs first raised by introducing the concept of reification? For reification is not just the objectification of persons or things, but with that necessarily also their equalisation, their complete subsumption under a category or kind (fascism). While Honneth may guard us against that trap, and indeed give us a handle on showing where our institutions are becoming "fascist" in the way they go about their business, there is little critical potential in a notion of reification that does not lay out the horizon of the full implication of recognition of the other (to limit myself to the interpersonal domain). Honneth's understanding of recognition remains tied to existing form of interpersonal relations, in a way, it reduces recognition to a social or socio-cultural relation and that is the price he has to pay for reinterpreting reification as a forgetting of recognition. For, along Lukacs original lines and, indeed, Adorno's, it is essential

most of all to not forget that we do not know yet what recognition of the other might, could or should be. That messianic dimension is certainly present in Lukacs and also in Adorno, and it is a constitutive for meaning as the interpersonal, Ich-Du relation – which indeed itself can also be only understood properly when we do not lose sight of its future-oriented dimension. When we do, to return briefly to Kant, we fail to see the infinite implication in the notion of human dignity, which cannot be reduced to the primordial openness to other at the basis of cognition. And when we do that, and I submit this is the structure of Honneth's reinterpretation of recognition, we lose the insight, as Adorno says in the *Jargon of Authenticity*, “the insight that dignity contains the form of its decadence within itself. The Kantian dignity finally disintegrates into the jargon of authenticity” – if we do not see that the appeal of dignity is infinite and that it refers to the whole of our being – personal and natural, and therefore ultimately involves a stance towards all of reality. *Recognition itself is not yet what it could be, even if we do not forget about it.*

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