

## **TO BELIEVE IN HISTORICAL PROGRESS: ON AXEL HONNETH'S NORMATIVE GROUNDING OF CRITIQUE**

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### **Abstrak**

*Salah satu kontribusi paling ambisius yang Axel Honneth telah buat pada teori kritis terdiri dalam usahanya untuk mendirikan normativitas teori kritis di atas dasar yang melampaui rasionalitas komunikatif, yaitu dasar normatif kritik yang telah diusulkan oleh Jürgen Habermas, pendahulu Honneth di Institut für Sozialforschung. Mempertahankan sikap afirmatif terhadap kemajuan sejarah sangat penting untuk proyek Honneth yang berusaha memenuhi aspirasi awal Sekolah Frankfurt untuk terlibat dalam suatu bentuk kritik imanen yang kuat: dengan mempertahankan gagasan kemajuan memungkinkan Honneth untuk memperoleh validitas pengandaian normatif yang mendasari tatanan sosial yang ada, sehingga menjamin dasar normatif kritik tanpa mengandalkan prinsip-prinsip transenden atau transhistoris. Melalui pertimbangan aspek hubungan antara universalitas dan partikularitas yang masih kurang diteorikan oleh Honneth, esai ini mencoba mempertanyakan keberhasilan strateginya untuk membumikan normativitas teori kritis.*

**Kata kunci:** Axel Honneth, Sekolah Frankfurt, Teori Kritis, Dasar Normatif, Kemajuan Sejarah.

### **Abstract**

*One of the most ambitious contributions Axel Honneth has made to critical theory consists in his attempt to ground the normativity of critique beyond communicative reason—the normative ground of critique that had been proposed by Honneth's predecessor at the Institut für Sozialforschung, Jürgen Habermas. Defending an affirmative stance toward historical progress is critical to Honneth's project, which attempts to pursue the aspiration of the Frankfurt School to practice a robust form of immanent*

*critique: for preserving the idea of progress allows Honneth to derive the validity of the underlying normative presuppositions of the existing social order, thereby securing the normative grounds of critique without relying on transcendent or transhistorical principles. Through a consideration of an aspect of the relation between universality and particularity that remains undertheorized in Honneth's account, this essay attempts to question the success of his strategy for grounding the normativity of critique.*

**Keywords:** Axel Honneth, Frankfurt School, Critical Theory, Normative Ground, Historical Progress

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## INTRODUCTION

In the two decades spanning *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995) and his most recent major works, *Freedom's Right* (2014) and *The Idea of Socialism* (2017), Axel Honneth, the German philosopher and former director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, has made a number of significant contributions to contemporary critical theory. What stands out as the most ambitious among his contributions is his attempt to (re)found the normative ground of critique beyond communicative reason—famously elaborated by his predecessor at the Institute, Jürgen Habermas—which, qua a normative ground of critique, risks diverting critical theory away from the original aspiration of the Frankfurt School for a robust form of immanent critique. Maintaining that critique must abstain “from presenting a free-standing, constructive justification of norms of justice prior to immanent analysis” (Honneth, 2014: 5), Honneth thus proposes to normatively ground critique without appealing to either a transcendent tribunal reason or a set of transhistorical norms embedded in communicative reason that operate fully only under conditions that are strictly ideal. Rather, the norms and values on which Honneth's own “reconstructive” approach to critique is grounded are drawn from those immanent to the *existing* society (Holden, 2020). Justifying his reconstructive approach, in turn, compels Honneth to defend the moral validity of existing norms and values. His strategy for securing the moral validity of existing norms

and values appeals to an idea of historical progress, which is mobilized in order to validate existing norms and values by presenting them as morally superior to those of the past. The philosophical underpinning of this undoubtedly impressive—impressive for its theoretical ambition but also for risking the accusations of conformism, or even Eurocentrism, which it seems so easily to invite—proposition that Honneth begins to articulate is outlined in an essay whose title is a succinct assertion of its conclusion: “The Irreducibility of Progress” (Honneth, 2007).

Amy Allen, a key theorist working within the Frankfurt School tradition today and an acute reader of Honneth, has dedicated a sizable portion of her book *The End of Progress* (2016) to a close examination of Honneth’s reliance on the idea of historical progress to normatively ground critique. Summarizing the relation between the assessment of history as demonstrative of progress and the progressive change that a normatively grounded reconstructive critique tries to achieve under extant conditions, Allen designates the former “backward-looking” progress and the latter “forward-looking” progress. Honneth, Allen observes, “clearly roots the forward-looking idea of progress as an imperative in a backward-looking story about the process of historical progress or development that has led up to ‘us’” (Allen, 2016: 82). In other words, the affirmation of progress is, for Honneth, a “practical-transcendental necessity—an unavoidable commitment—whenever we take a certain stance with respect to political struggles in our own time” (Allen, 2016: 82).

The centrality accorded in Allen’s book to Honneth’s account of progress is understandable, for Allen’s objective therein is nothing less than to direct critical theory away from its Eurocentric tendencies by reading it through a postcolonial lens. Though partly inspired by Allen’s analysis, the present essay proposes to examine Honneth’s account from a different perspective, one that is shaped by a post-structuralist view on the relation between universality and particularity. The section that immediately follows further contextualizes Honneth’s project by considering the motivations for

accepting historical progress as a practically necessary postulate. In particular, Honneth's approach shall be contrasted with the "negativism" of the key member of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno. It will be shown that while Honneth's forward-looking account of progress promises a way out of the practical impasse witnessed in Adorno's thought, it is still possible to question whether Honneth's backward-looking account of progress is able to bootstrap the forward-looking one in the manner he intends. The difficulty, elaborated in the second and third sections, is that the backward-looking account of progress in Honneth is rendered implausible by a problematic assumption in Honneth's work concerning the relation between the universality of normative principles and particular struggles that appeal to them. The final part of this essay considers, with reference to Kant's reflections on "signs of history (*Geschichtszeichen*)," the possibility of a more modest thesis apropos historical progress that nonetheless could serve as a practical presupposition.

### THE DEPTHS OF PESSIMISM

In *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity* (1987), Habermas argues that if reason is so bound to power and domination over nature as Horkheimer and Adorno claim in their works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), then critique, which is necessarily an exercise of reason, must itself also be an expression of power and domination. Yet, Habermas points out that critique cannot but make some claim to validity and take its own propositions—both descriptive and prescriptive—as deserving acceptance because they are *true*, not because they, for instance, placate the will to power of modern subjectivity. However, Horkheimer and Adorno, according to Habermas, tear down the "barrier between validity and power," effectively prohibiting their own critique from making a claim to validity (Habermas, 1987: 118–119). In this respect, Habermas argues, Horkheimer and Adorno commit a "performative

contradiction” (Habermas, 1987: 119): they deprive themselves of the very ground of their critical practice.

The possibility of a coherent critical theory depends on saving reason from total subsumption under instrumental reason and contamination by power. Adorno, who either refuses or fails to do so, drags himself into a deeper abyss—or, at least, such is the Habermasian assessment that Honneth largely inherits. As damning as it is, this assessment is not entirely baseless. In *Negative Dialectics* (1990), the critique of instrumental reason is elaborated under the heading of “identity thinking.” Identity thinking, the analysis of which comprises the bulk of Adorno’s magnum opus, is no less totalizing than instrumental reason as conceived in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For Adorno seems to hold that all conceptualizing activity within the modern capitalist world is an exercise in identity thinking that violates—that is, *does violence to*—the unique particularity of an object.

The postulation of the pervasiveness of identity thinking inclines Adorno toward the tragic view that it is impossible to have a concept of the *good* in the modern world. For once the thesis of the pervasiveness of identity thinking is granted, then to possess the concept of the good could only mean that the good has already been subsumed by identity thinking (on the ineffability of the good in Adorno, see Finlayson, 2002). Yet, despite the difficult position in which Adorno places himself in relation to the normativity of critique, the thesis of the unknowability of the good does not immediately imply the complete expulsion of normativity and the possibility of ethics from Adorno’s philosophy. As Adorno notes on several occasions, even if it is impossible to possess a concept of the good, *evil* is knowable through the experience of suffering that it induces in human beings—the pervasiveness of suffering, one might say, is the flipside of a world characterized by the absence of good. And importantly, whereas the good, because it is absent, can only be conceptualized in thought, suffering, because it is experiential, delivers itself to knowledge in a way that is more immediate, prior to conceptualization and hence identity thinking.

“The physical moment,” Adorno asserts, “tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different” (Adorno, 1990,: 203).

Beginning from the thought that it is possible to know what *ought not* to be, contemporary Adornian scholars have made attempts to construct a “negativist” ethics whose fundamental injunction is to eliminate “needless suffering”; or, in the dramatic parlance of Adorno’s so-called “new categorical imperative”: to prevent Auschwitz from repeating itself (Adorno, 1990: 365). As Jay Bernstein’s groundbreaking study on Adornian ethics (Bernstein, 2001) has demonstrated, those who try to read Adorno as an advocate of negativist ethics concerned with the elimination of needless suffering will find abundant support in the Adornian text. But while it is plausible to conclude that Adorno’s philosophy, after all, does imply normative ethical prescriptions characterizable as negativist, arguing for the practical relevance of his negativist ethics is a more complicated task (see Freyenhagen, 2013). One complication shall be explored below.

As implementing positive social change even in the negativist sense of ameliorating suffering would frequently require efforts that exceed the capacities of an individual, advocates of Adornian negativism should, it would seem, present a feasible model of collective action in the Adornian vein if they wish to maintain the practical relevance of negativist ethics. The task is less straightforward than it might first appear, not least because of the skepticism displayed by Adorno towards the emancipatory potential of collective social movements. His skepticism is expressed most succinctly in “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (2005a), wherein Adorno contends that collective social and political movements of the twentieth century have tended to reinforce the purposive, instrumental rationality, and repressiveness that true praxis must aim to overcome (Adorno, 2005a: 269). But, for Adorno, this is not a surprising outcome. For, if the modern world is pervaded by identity thinking, attempts to transform the world, too,

cannot avoid its influence—theory and praxis are just as much products of the time as the humanity they strive to emancipate.

To be sure, Adorno appeals, at times, to a “global subject” capable of bringing about far-reaching social change (Adorno, 2005c: 144). However, such appeals to collective action often ring hollow, as Adorno provides no means to think the possibility of a collective subject of emancipatory action (Adorno is no Hardt and Negri), apart from a few sparse remarks on the power of critique to transform collective consciousness (Richter & Adorno, 2002: 16). Difficulties are compounded by the fact that Adorno’s thought contains scarce resources that could be mobilized to generate practical axioms applicable in concrete situations. For instance, Adorno’s philosophical commitments prohibit prioritizing or ordering particular instances of suffering in terms of their urgency—or, for that matter, by *any* criterion, since ordering requires various instances of suffering to be evaluated under some common standard that ineluctably violates the particularity of the particulars. But unless it is able to propose some way to think about how to proceed when confronted with a diverse plurality of particular instances of suffering, Adorno’s philosophy appears to offer little toward alleviating suffering through political and social practice.

The suggestion from Adorno’s defenders that he “championed radical change through collective action” (Cook, 2007: 140), while certainly true when taken as describing Adorno’s personal commitments, is, therefore, one that is profoundly ambiguous as a characterization of what his philosophy actually enables. Although several contemporary defenders of Adorno (most notably Freyenhagen, 2013) have sought to respond to the sort of challenges apropos the practicability of Adornian negativist ethics outlined so far, it is difficult to deny that Adorno himself remained extremely reluctant to propose what radical change ought to be in a positive sense or articulate in a concrete manner a form of collective action that is not merely “*Scheinpraxis* (illusory practice)” (Hammer, 2006; Skirke, 2020). It was indeed Adorno’s unwillingness—or inability—to entertain such practical alternatives that turned his former

student and prominent figure in the German student activism of 1968, Hans-Jürgen Krahl, against his teacher, whose thought the young radical would subsequently censure as a debilitating quietism (Krahl, 1984).

The gravity of an accusation such as Krahl's for a school of thought whose professed aim is to support emancipation and social change is not difficult to fathom. Hence, it is understandable that a key task taken up by the successors of the first generation of Frankfurt critical theorists had been that of lifting critical theory from the depths of quietism implied by Adorno's pessimistic assessment of the modern world. The question is whether Honneth, arguably the most important contemporary representative of the Frankfurt tradition, succeeds in that task.

### THE NORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF RECOGNITIVE PRINCIPLES

Unlike Adorno, for whom the good is unknowable, Honneth takes Habermas as a point of departure in postulating that some normative ideals are in fact knowable. In Honneth's approach, *autonomy* takes the place of the good that ought to be pursued. Supported by the argument for which he is perhaps best known, namely that recognitive relations between individuals and between institutions and individuals constitute the essential condition of the self-realization of individuals in the modern world, Honneth elaborates the possibility of historical progress towards the good—to be understood ultimately as the achievement of autonomy—in terms of the expansion of norms of recognition or “recognitive principles” that are, in some form, operative in the modern capitalist society.

The recognitive principles that Honneth identifies include the egalitarian conception of law, a merit-based conception of social esteem, and the individualism that affirms the positive qualities of individuals (in *Freedom's Right*, love is introduced as the fourth principle, but it shall be left aside in the present essay). That Honneth sometimes describes these principles as “normative



ideals” should not mislead one to confuse them with Kantian regulative ideals, which are deduced through the employment of ahistorical reason alone. On the contrary, Honneth’s principles of recognition are discerned from the recognitive relations that *already exist* in society. Since they would not be operative as recognitive relations unless they were accepted, if only implicitly, by the members of a given society, the principles can rightly be seen as constituting the underlying normative presuppositions of that society.

Needless to say, there is no reason to believe that the modern capitalist society fully realizes the potential of its own normative principles, be they explicit or implicit. While legal institutions of the modern state purport to operate under the principle of legal equality, for example, the professed endorsement of that principle does not preclude the existence of persons who are not recognized as equals before the law—as the American legal scholar Bryan Stevenson had aptly put, the American criminal justice system “treats you much better if you are rich and guilty than if you are poor and innocent” (The United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 2008: 6). Still, the modern society is such that in cases of felt injustice, individuals may appeal to the principle of legal equality, which is already endorsed by the existing society as one of its normative ideals, to make a legitimate *claim* to be recognized as equals. The principles that a society endorses—or must eventually concede that it does when pushed—provide the bedrock of normative force based on which claims for further expansion of recognitive relations could be articulated. In this respect, recognitive principles are said to possess a normative potential—or normative “surplus,” as Honneth sometimes puts it—that extends beyond their particular realizations and institutionalizations at any certain point (Fraser & Honneth, 2003: 186). It might be said, indeed, that its attentiveness to such yet-to-be-realized potential for effecting changes from within existing practices and institutions is what aligns the immanent form of *critique* with the brilliant definition

Marx had given to that term in 1843: “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age” (Marx, 1992: 209).

With the preceding understanding of what principles of recognition are and how they operate, it is possible to address the question, previously raised in relation to Adorno, of assessing the relative importance of social struggles. For Honneth, the following two results that may be achieved through the application of recognitive principles constitute progress in the forward-looking sense: (1) the expansion of mutually recognitive relations to encompass more individuals and (2) the recognition of positive qualities of individuals that have heretofore been unrecognized (Fraser & Honneth, 2003: 186). Such an understanding of what progress is legitimizes the evaluation of various social struggles in terms of their contribution toward social integration, understood principally as the expansion of recognitive relations that tendentially eliminate “social pathologies” such as reification and alienation (Honneth, 2009). The greater attention that certain struggles receive over others would be justifiable if the success of those struggles would expand recognitive relations to a greater extent compared to other struggles. Though evaluating the potential and trajectory of various social struggles might be difficult in practice, debilitating indecisions and rampant relativism would no longer be the direct outcome of a *theoretical* lacuna in critical theory. This is an implication of Honneth’s utilization of the idea of progress that is probably desirable, and one that is perhaps difficult to conceive within a strictly Adornian negativist approach.

Even so, there remains an outstanding task for Honneth’s approach. Since social struggles are undertaken through the application of and are evaluated in terms of, certain principles, it has to be possible to establish that these principles themselves are valid, that they can rightly serve as the standard by which normative expansion is evaluated. It is with respect to this task that the success of Honneth’s approach remains ambiguous. The ambiguity, it shall be shown, can be parsed out in terms of the tension between universality and particularity.

## UNIVERSALITY AS THE SITE OF STRUGGLE

“All struggles for recognition progress through a playing out of the moral dialectic of the universal and the particular,” Honneth claims, in the sense that “one can always appeal for a particular relative difference by applying a general principle of mutual recognition, which normatively compels an expansion of the existing relations of recognition” (Fraser & Honneth, 2003: 152). While Honneth’s claim that attempts or struggles to expand recognitive relations in a particular instance proceed by appealing to already-accepted universal recognitive principles is convincing, it might be asked whether Honneth adequately thematizes the relation between universality and particularity as an aspect of social struggles. For it could be argued, given the space of the social wherein different, often conflicting, struggles are present at once, the *struggle* in struggles for recognition must consist in the endeavor by different parties to reinterpret and renegotiate the application of the general principles of mutual recognition. A particular struggle for recognition, then, may be said to have succeeded when it transforms socially instituted recognitive relations. In this case, the *recognitive principles must themselves transform as a result of struggles*, since the recognitive principles are, to begin with, discerned from norms and relations immanent to society.

Indonesia’s state philosophy of Pancasila can serve as a useful example to elucidate the point. Pancasila represents one of the rare instances in which a modern state has explicitly adopted—and continues to refer to—a set of principles with considerable normative potential as its foundational philosophy (Bahar, 2010; Soekarnoputri, 2021). When redescribed in Honnethian terms, the five *sila* can be seen as establishing a social order within which certain recognitive principles operate to establish who counts as belonging to that order, that is, who counts as Indonesian, in some emphatic sense above and beyond that of merely holding an Indonesian passport. It is, however, undoubtedly the case that the specific realizations of Pancasila’s normative potential in Indonesia have shifted dramatically over the course of the country’s modern

history, which is marked by a break deep enough that the usual term for it, “Reformation,” is something of a euphemism. The kind of views and policies defensible in post-Reformation Indonesia is radically different from the views and policies that could have been advanced within pre-Reformation Indonesia (for example, see Ulum & Hamida, 2018)—despite the fact that the incongruent views and policies of *both* pre-Reformation and post-Reformation eras tended to be articulated as congruent with the “values (*nilai-nilai*)” of Pancasila, which itself never ceased to be recognized as the foundational philosophy of the Indonesian state throughout its modern history (Bourchier, 2015).

What Pancasila means, what can be credibly argued to be congruent with its values, and who are recognized as belonging within an order purported to be founded on Pancasila all have historically undergone series of transformations. It should be asked, in this case, whether *Pancasila as such*, qua a set of fundamental principles of great normative potential, has remained the same, or whether it too has transformed. The Hegelian—and Honnethian—response is, of course, the latter. If, as Honneth rightly affirms, normative principles are anchored in existing society, radical social change in Indonesia implies that Pancasila itself—and what is achievable by appealing to it, that is, its normative potential—had transformed radically in the course of Indonesia’s modern history. And if one were to search for factors that contributed to the transformation of Pancasila in this sense, one would only find a plurality of competing social forces that have attempted to interpret and use Pancasila differently. Far from being an unchanging foundation from which some particular order of the Indonesian state and society is derivable, then, the universal principles of Pancasila themselves constitute a site of struggles between different social forces and their interpretations, struggles through which the meaning and application of the five *sila* are contested and transformed (this status of Pancasila as an “empty signifier” in Indonesia is further explored in Kim, 2022). This dynamic, ineliminable because there is no such thing as a transcendental

guarantor of meaning, is also that which keeps Pancasila, or indeed any ideology, alive.

That the universal itself is the site of struggle, in fact, is the powerful insight systematized by the “post-foundationalist” (Marchart, 2007, 2018) political thought of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2000), which also informs the Lacano-Hegelian critical theory of Slavoj Žižek (2006, 2009). For these thinkers, the “solution” to the intractable problem of conceptualizing a universal normative ground against its contamination by heterogeneous influences of particularity, power, and contingency—the same problem the Honnethian account, too, invites—is to finally accept that the universal is not a tranquil reservoir from which principles and norms embraced by all parties can be drawn, that no particular order flows directly from the universal. Rather, whatever particular interpretation of the universal that prevails, and by extension the particular order that is actually realized, is the outcome of the struggle between a plurality of competing projects to institute an order. Once this “agonistic” (Mouffe, 2013) view of the relation between universality and particularity is accepted, it must also be accepted that the particular struggles that have transformed social reality by appealing to the universal must have concurrently transformed the meaning and normative potential of the universal itself. Such is the ultimate import of the thesis, endorsed by Honneth, that the universal is grounded in existing social reality.

In as much as the recognitive principles conceived by Honneth are universals in the modern capitalist state in the way comparable to Pancasila that operates as the universal normative ground in Indonesia, the recognitive principles, too, must be regarded as subjected to the potentially radical transformations through the plurality of competing projects to realize them concretely in a particular social order. Consequently, a strict conceptual distinction between the recognitive principles and the claims by particular projects and groups that attempt to reinterpret these principles to their ends cannot be maintained. For, if the

universal truly is “immanently grounded in social reality” (Stahl, 2013: 539), there is no point of reference outside the competing attempts of reinterpretation to make that distinction: the very reality of the social is that of a struggle to realize the universal in a particular way that necessarily would repress the realization of other competing particulars.

By extension, the manner in which general principles are understood and applied at one moment is already the consequence of a succession of particular attempts that have successfully reinterpreted their meaning and application. Because the social is an uneven terrain on which power—including symbolic power—is always-already distributed unequally among different entities, it often will be the case that one interpretation of recognitive principles stand out as having stronger claims to legitimacy (or as more convincing) compared to other interpretations (Laclau, 2014). But the outcome of any such struggle must be postulated, in the last instance, as *contingent* (to the extent that the very idea of struggling for change would make no sense if a state of affairs were taken to be a necessary one, the thesis that the being of any particular order is finally contingent may be said to be the “practical-transcendental” commitment at the basis of all practice). Accordingly, it cannot be assumed that the struggle that appears to be the most legitimate and urgent will necessarily succeed in reinterpreting the recognitive relations of the society in its favor. An assumption to the contrary would likely be the indication of an idea of progress that is parasitic on the very sort of Hegelian objective teleology of history that Honneth rightly wishes to avoid.

Regression and diminishment of the normative potential of principles are possibilities properly ineliminable from an understanding of history that does not appeal to an objective teleology. But if this is the implication of the relation between universality and particularity, it is one that threatens to undermine the capacity of Honneth’s idea of historical progress to secure the normative ground of his reconstructive critique. As Allen has shown, what anchors the normative ground of critique to historical

progress in Honneth's work is the claim that "the norms that are embedded in our practices and institutions deserve our allegiance," not because they are required by an abstract tribunal of reason (or "the demands of public reason, or discourse ethics, or the right to justification"), but "because we can, indeed, must, understand them as the outcome of a historical learning process" (Allen, 2016: 108). The strength of the normative ground of critique, as well as the persuasive power of propositions articulated therefrom, would depend on the degree to which the norms of the present—such as recognitive principles immanent to the modern world—can be regarded as deserving allegiance. However, if recognitive principles themselves are, as argued above, reinterpretable in ways that are not conducive to the expansion of autonomy, there is no reason left to hold any particular principle as deserving one's allegiance *sans* qualification. The historical learning process of which Honneth speaks, namely the path that has led up to the standpoint of the present, may have been, to borrow Hegel's apt expression in the *Phenomenology*, "a pathway of doubt," or "the way of despair" (Hegel, 1979: 49). What is learned from the learning process that one has undergone could have been that the norms and values one had assumed to be liberating all along were shackles in disguise. That one *can* regard the norms and values of the present as the outcome of a historical learning process says nothing about whether they *deserve* one's allegiance.

Doubts raised thus far with respect to the validity of norms and values, of both the past and the present, do not imply that a society can exist without norms and values or that it is impossible to discern recognitive principles from the existing society. The doubts should, however, give weight to the possibility that Honneth's assumption that one *must* regard existing universal recognitive principles as deserving one's allegiance may not be tenable. Moreover, they also suggest that the thesis that backward-looking progress is a "practical-transcendental necessity" — that the affirmation of historical progress is a practically necessary commitment—may have been formulated too strongly. In fact,

relinquishing that strong formulation concerning progress would not necessarily run counter to Honneth's Hegelian view that any persuasive claim for recognition and autonomy must find some ground in, or appeal to, principles already accepted within a given society. There is no practical contradiction when those engaged in socially transformative practice do not accept or fully embrace the principles on which they rely to construct a persuasive case for their cause, as the principles themselves are part of what they are attempting to change, through offering new interpretations and new applications. Indeed, as the archival studies of Jacques Rancière (1989, 1998) suggest, the realization that existing principles do not yet deserve allegiance may precisely be that which gives rise to struggles toward the potentially radical reinterpretation of those principles. If what actually matters, in the end, is expanding mutually recognitive relations (or autonomy), then the recognitive principles themselves may be regarded primarily as instruments that command merely a conditional allegiance, in as much as they possess the normative potential that could be mobilized under a particular, highly contextualized situation.

There is, however, one concern motivating Honneth's reinstatement of the idea of historical progress within the Frankfurt tradition that the somewhat pragmatist conclusion reached here does not adequately address. Without an assurance that the struggles of the present will have contributed to the realization of the good in the long run, without a reason to believe that the struggles undertaken within the confines of a particular historical circumstance are not entirely misguided, a debilitating quietism—which Habermas and Honneth wish to dispel—may easily be allowed to return. *Some* idea of historical progress, after all, does appear to be, as Honneth insists, “irreducible,” in as much as the pessimistic view of history wherein theory (critique) and praxis (activism) would be in vain could hardly be endorsed by those who take “a certain stance with respect to political struggles in [their] own time” (Allen, 2016: 82). As shall be seen in the final section of



this essay, Kant, too, found the possibility of historical progress to be a desideratum.

## **SIGNS OF HISTORY**

Nothing, it seems, should exempt the recognitive principles as understood by Honneth of the following quality of normative principles discerned by Adorno: “a moral norm,” which “does not as such prescribe out of itself how it should be socially applied,” can “be transformed as a result of imperceptible shifts of meaning, so that, in the end, it loses the normative kernel that originally justified its development” (Honneth, 2009: 53). The view that the chasm of uncertainty separates a normative principle from its application is one with which Michael Oakeshott—one of the last great British conservative philosophers—would not have disagreed. It could not be expected of the limited power of human reason, Oakeshott argued, to reliably guide political practice, let alone conjure extensive and concrete blueprints and ideals that must be realized in a society. “Men sail a boundless and bottomless sea,” writes Oakeshott, wherein “there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting place nor appointed destination” (Oakeshott, 1962: 127).

Projects of radical social change—great, revolutionary politics—are out of the picture for Oakeshott, who opines that, given the limitations of human capacity, practice ought not stray too far from “judgments already in some degree affirmed” by the community (Oakeshott, 1933: 19). But although Honneth’s Hegelian thought that recognitive principles are principles always-already operative in existing society bears some resemblance to an aspect of Oakeshott’s conservative communitarianism, it would be contrary to the socially transformative aims of critical theory if it were made to simply align with the latter in practice. The question, therefore, is whether a stance that affirms projects of (potentially radical) social change without having to commit to an unfeasible account of historical progress is conceivable. While a full exploration of an alternative to Honneth’s idea of progress goes beyond the scope of

this essay, hints toward that direction found in the works of Immanuel Kant nonetheless deserve some consideration.

In his reflections on the possibility of humanity's progress found in *The Contest of Faculties* (*Der Streit der Fakultäten*), Kant suggests that if an event in which morality is "causally active" can be identified, it is permissible to extrapolate that under similar circumstances in the future, the same moral cause will again motivate people towards morally progressive activity. This proposition concerning present and future progress, Kant contends, may be "extended to the history of the past" (Kant, 1991: 181), and serve to support the postulation that the "human race has always been progressively improving and will continue to develop in the same way" (Kant, 1991: 185). Kant gives a name to the kind of event from which moral progress can be extrapolated: *Geschichtszeichen* (rendered in English as "sign of history" or "historical sign"). Owing partly to an influential reading by Jean-François Lyotard (2009), the notion of a historical sign qua an event in which morality, or the good will, of humanity can be identified as causally active, has attracted some attention in the scholarship on Kant and political thought. What is of interest in Kant's notion of historical sign in relation to Honneth's discussion of progress is that Kant, not unlike Honneth, considers the sense in which historical events contribute to the learning process of humanity.

The event that underpins Kant's thinking on historical signs, as is well known, is the French Revolution—a monumental event whose long-term consequences were unclear at the time of Kant's writing. As Kant would explain, one of the irreducible dimensions of the French Revolution is *that it happened*, that it in fact aroused the enthusiasm of the masses, who then attempted to do something that had hitherto appeared impossible: the abolition of absolute monarchy. Those who are enthusiastic, those who perceive the French Revolution as an event of historical significance, are enthused also by the glimpse into a better future made visible by its occurrence. Kant conjectures, however, that an event that becomes a historical sign comes to possess a significance for even those

separated spatially and temporally from the event itself. In other words, historical signs, in addition to dimensions of *demonstrativum* and *prognostikon*, also have an aspect of *rememorativum* by which the event affects those who are not directly engaged in it.

Kant is not so naïve as to think that what presents itself as a morally progressive event could never unfold in a direction that even its initial proponents can no longer endorse. Despite this sober acknowledgment, Kant maintains that even if the Revolution were to end ultimately in a failure, that is, even if everything were restored to a pre-Revolutionary stage, his reflections on the possibility of progress opened by events such as the Revolution would lose none of their force (Kant, 1991: 181). This is because an event in the magnitude of the French Revolution cannot be “forgotten”: it is an event “too intimately interwoven with the interests of humanity and too widespread in its influence” (Kant, 1991: 185). The Revolution *will have made* a mark in history as a momentous event whose traces are indelible, *even if* it were to falter and fail to realize its original aspirations. This means, for Kant, that sometime in the future, when circumstances similar to that which gave birth to the Revolution transpires, future generations will be able to look back on the Revolution and “rise up and make renewed attempts of the same kind as before” (Kant, 1991: 185). Kant speculates thus that a historical sign possesses a dimension of *rememorativum*, a potential to inspire future generations to repeat within their specific context the event that it signifies.

The unity of three moments—those of *demonstrativum*, *prognostikon*, and *rememorativum*—in a historical sign, for Kant, implies that if an event is capable of being remembered, what is remembered in the memory of the event will also evoke the other two moments, that the event is tied to the conditions suffered by the people and that it made thitherto unknown alternatives possible. Comparable thoughts on the *eventness* of certain historical events are also glimpsed in Walter Benjamin’s theses on history (Benjamin, 1969) and, more recently, in Alain Badiou’s works on radical politics (Badiou, 2010, 2012). The lesson, in the writings of Kant as well as of

Benjamin and Badiou, is that the historical significance of a social struggle lies not just in its success in bringing about what it aspired to bring about. Even if a struggle towards an ideal, such as autonomy, ends in failure, the historical experience of injustice and suffering that stem from the violation of autonomy, the popular resistance against those conditions, as well as people's hopes and shared fervor underpinning acts of resistance, are still capable of being inscribed in collective memory. This is what allows a failed struggle at the present moment to inform a future struggle, so that—as in a line from Beckett often cited by Badiou (2002)—the latter might “fail better.”

Those invested in struggles of the present cannot but regard themselves as belonging to a part of the cumulative process of learning—this already is Honneth's view. Kant's reflections on historical signs allow for a slightly different rendition of the nature of the said learning: those who are invested in a struggle cannot but look back upon the history of struggles and attempt to understand the conditions under which people suffered and what they hoped to attain given those conditions in order to approximate what should be the aim of present struggles. Even though a clear knowledge of the good may forever remain elusive, a struggle is able to proceed with the knowledge of afflictions and aspirations that previous struggles tried to address and realize. To access these attenuated kinds of knowledge, however, struggles *must have taken place* in the first instance. This places an obligation, weak as it may be, on those of the present to engage in struggles so that future generations *will have learned* from them, including from their failures. If there is nothing to be known of the good except in its adumbration through signs of history accumulated through past struggles, those who strive towards its attainment cannot but look back upon those past struggles—paying attention to their achievements and shortcomings alike—and engage in the struggles of the present, with the hope that the present struggles too will have become inscribed in history as events from which future generations seek guidance. Although historical progress may not be asserted as

*Faktum* in the highly nuanced sense Kant uses that term (see Rauscher, 2015), it may still be hoped that humanity's struggle for progress will not entirely be in vain, that history does offer itself to a collective learning process in the sense outlined here. Such hope, as this author has suggested elsewhere (Kim, 2018), perhaps is the practical-transcendental prerequisite of all practice.

## CONCLUSION

The present essay has examined Honneth's appeal to the idea of historical progress in founding the normative ground of critique. While his thesis that there are principles already operative in the modern world that can serve as the foundations of critique and practice toward future progress promises a way out of the practical impasse encountered in Adorno's thought, it is difficult to dispel the impression that Honneth neglects precisely that aspect of Adorno's assessment of the modern world which makes it so powerful: that theory and practice are deeply intertwined with the conditions of the modern world, wherein power—the power, to use the Adornian term, of identity thinking to impose itself onto all dimensions of human experience—goes, as it were, *all the way down*. It would not be entirely misguided to suggest that this is the condition that brings Adorno's thinking in close proximity to certain post-structuralist insights, on which Laclau and Žižek, whom this essay has cited in the course of elaborating the relation between universality and particularity, base their reflections on socially transformative practice. The final section of this essay turned to Kant's reflections on signs of history and considered whether the postulation of historical progress could be regarded as a kind of redemptive hope—a prominent theme, in fact, within Adorno's own writings on "damaged life" (Adorno, 2005b; Sonderegger, 2021). Whether the alternative idea of historical progress hinted therein could finally help to secure a viable normative ground of critique is a question that shall, for now, be left open.

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