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## **Towards a cognitive sociology for our time: Habermas and Honneth or Language and Recognition...and Beyond**

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### **Abstract**

This article argues that Habermas and Honneth's respective critical social theories contain elements which, although largely concealed, can be unearthed, consolidated and developed for the purposes of constructing a timely kind of cognitive sociology. The proposed departure attempts to draw out and build on the strengths of both authors, however divergent and opposed their social theories might appear. Amidst all the differences between them, the common core elements in their respective language-theoretical and recognition-theoretical versions of critical theory provide the means for devising a theoretical innovation that goes beyond both, yet remains within the metatheoretical parameters of critical theory encapsulated by its key concept of immanent transcendence.

Key words: cognitive sociology, critical theory, Habermas, Honneth, language, normativity, recognition, social theory, system

### **Introduction**

One of the most important intellectual developments of our time, if not the most important, is the cognitive revolution and the resultant emergence of the cognitive sciences which are in the process of redefining the relation between the natural and the social sciences. It is due to this development that what has been called 'the cognitive turn in sociology' (Knorr Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Fuller 1984) is perceived by a small yet growing minority as the sign of the times for the sociological and social theoretical community. So far from being just another intellectual fad with little or no grounding in contemporary experience, this general development is a response to the increasing vulnerability of modern society and civilisation and the question this vulnerability poses regarding our own contribution to the generation of the seriously crisis-ridden, if not disastrous, historical situation in which we currently find ourselves.

As the variety and scale of the risks we are facing (Beck 2009) suggest, the challenges with which our historical situation is confronting us are of a planetary nature in an ecological and a cosmopolitan sense, both of which have marked local ramifications and implications. These challenges have compelled us to become increasingly reflexive. From becoming aware of our orientations, practices, institutions and cultural models; through having to acknowledge the negative consequences and side-effects they spawn as well as their limitations making sustainable relations with internal and external nature as well as intercultural and inter-civilisational dialogue and learning difficult; we have arrived at the stage where it has become necessary to inquire into our modes of perception, cognition and knowledge production and the role they play in the local and global worlds we are bringing into being. The cognitive revolution, including the cognitive turn in sociology, has been

necessitated by this deepening reflexivity which locates us at the crossroads. We have become aware of occupying a place not only between the natural and social sciences and between science and experience, but also between society and nature; the West and the East; the nation-state and cosmopolitan world society; Christianity, Islam and Buddhism; system and lifeworld; different culturally integrated and institutionally based social groups; the self-interested, morally mature and aesthetic individual; and between the 'I' and the 'me'. Of all the intellectual developments of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, the cognitive turn is the one that is most closely attuned to the problems and prospects of our seriously fraught historical situation.

Rather than offering either a general overview of the currently emerging cognitive sociology (Strydom 2006, 2007) or particular conceptual developments and applications of it (Strydom 2000, 2002, 2009), I propose to focus in the following paragraphs on a particularly interesting and currently highly topical theoretical juncture which, in my view, has the potential for furthering and enriching cognitive social theory. What I have in mind is the relation between Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth in which a rich, yet thus far unexplored and untapped, cognitive potential is deposited. Habermas' thinking was basically shaped by the cognitive revolution and the different – cognitivist, connectionist and action-oriented – developmental stages of the cognitive sciences, with the result that significant cognitive theoretical insights are to be found in his writings. Due to his very strong and no doubt very important normative emphasis, however, the cognitive dimension not only did not receive the systematic attention it deserves, but it even got demoted to a submerged theme in a vast oeuvre. Since Habermas tended to confuse the cognitive and the normative or, at least, on many a vital occasion did not discriminate sufficiently between them, the task needed to be done is the release of the cognitive sociology trapped in his overwhelmingly normative approach. This is not the way Honneth approaches the appropriation and development of Habermas' work, however. He reacts to what he regards as an abstractive leap in Habermas' thinking from concrete social life to high-level processes transpiring above the heads and behind the backs of the members of society. Instead of language or linguistic communication, the abstract process of communicative rationalisation and consensus, therefore, he reverts to recognition relations, the moral experience of those involved in their establishment and the social conflict required to do so. Although Honneth stresses the normative dimension and polemically opposes it to the cognitive dimension which he seeks to marginalise, there is nevertheless a conspicuous cognitive element to his work.

Now, when one considers the respective ways in which Habermas and Honneth seek to theoretically articulate the social domain, an interesting insight dawns on the mind. It becomes apparent that far from being irreconcilable opposites as they appear from the way in which Honneth establishes his position vis-à-vis Habermas', language and recognition have a common element which allows the development of a theoretical conception of the social beyond both these authors. This is the core of the argument I intend to develop in this essay. To unfold it in an intelligible manner, three steps will be required. To begin with, it will be necessary to offer an outline, however brief, of the essentials of Habermas' position with special reference to the fate of its cognitive potential (1). Against this background, it will become possible to present Honneth's appropriation and development of Habermas' thought and to understand the tension-laden way in which the cognitive dimension figures in his work (2). Finally, the consideration of Habermas and Honneth will have paved the way for a cursory statement of the core insight driving the cognitive sociology which is partially hidden in their ideas yet lies well beyond the reach of both, but more so in the case of Honneth than of Habermas (3).

## **1 Jürgen Habermas: confusion the cognitive and the normative**

It goes without saying that in his re-founding in the 1960s of Frankfurt critical theory, Habermas continued sharing the basic parameters of the social theory tradition to which he belongs. These limits are defined by the metatheoretical framework of history-theory or 'immanent transcendence'<sup>1</sup> which lays down the basic structure of this type of social theory – that is, the basic assumption that there is a historically accumulated rational potential in the form of socio-practical ideas or cultural forms which calls on the orientations, actions and practices which gave rise to such accumulation in the first instance to continue pursuing the actualisation and realisation of that potential in social life in keeping with changing historical conditions. Where Habermas did drastically depart from his predecessors was in the particular theoretical articulation of this theory of society.

### *Communicative rationality: normative or cognitive?*

Instead of adopting labour as the one and only key concept, as did Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno following Marx, Habermas created a new version of critical theory by expanding the theory of action in a way that did not simply include interaction but gave it priority over labour. This prioritisation accounts for the consistent line running from his early work on the public sphere, via his inaugural address on different action-oriented relations to the world and his famous essay on labour and interaction, to his theories of communication-led social evolution and of communicative action. In their light, the development of society as well as of its members appeared very differently than in the case of his predecessors. On the one hand, the material reproduction of society, rather than being dominant, is dependent on social interaction or communication in which societal goals and meaning are collectively constructed. On the other, identity formation can by no means be regarded as being determined by the exercise and development of labour competences alone, since the mature individual is characteristically in possession of interpretative, reflexive and critical competences which, moreover, are a prerequisite for the adequate development of society. Although having a foot in and transforming historical materialism, this entire development stretching over a period of some twenty years was basically shaped by the cognitive revolution which, according to historical accounts, started in the late 1950s. Key figures like Chomsky, Searle and Piaget without whom this revolution is inconceivable played different yet equally prominent roles in this development, as is indicated by such characteristic Habermasian concepts as 'communicative competence', 'communicative action' carried by the illocutionary force of speech acts, and the development not only of formal-operational thought but also and especially of 'post-conventional moral consciousness'. Their contributions were reinforced and specified by the impact of Garfinkel, Cicourel and Goffman, the first sociologists to join the cognitive movement, who isolated the formal properties and reflexive rules which emerge from social activities so as to form a meta-level interaction order commonly shared and taken-for-granted as cognitive background, called the 'lifeworld'.

Habermas' idea of communicative understanding and agreement which he eventually proposed as the paradigm of the social was so radically opposed to Horkheimer and Adorno's position that in its early form of the theory of the public sphere it cost him very dearly – being humiliated by having his habilitation thesis, one of the most influential books

in the social sciences, rejected out of hand. Be that as it may, this idea of the social domain depends on centrality being given to language. Already at an early stage, Habermas made reference to language as the medium of mutual understanding and agreement – which means that he appreciated its internal structure making possible the mediation and coordination of social relations. It is this conception that allowed the social world to be seen as having its own internal structure, logic and meaning – what Habermas called 'communicative rationality' (1987a: 2) – which excludes the possibility of its being completely dominated by instrumental rationality, as Horkheimer and Adorno claimed or, for that matter, contemporary variants represented by Foucault, Baudillard, old conservative nihilism theorists and the like. Given that communicative action is the primary mechanism of social integration, the latter is a state which cannot be attained and maintained otherwise than by the participation and interpretative, reflexive and critical achievements of the members and by the concomitant mediation of their orientations by the formal properties or second-order reflexive rules emerging from social activities.

It is at this very juncture where Habermas' innovation made all the difference that his confusing or short-circuiting of the cognitive and normative also becomes visible. Rather than appreciating fully that social integration is in the first place cognitively enabled, he treated it directly as a normative phenomenon. Classification systems, the formal properties of social orientations, actions, practices and relations or the second-order reflexive rules emerging from them which constitute the social world are of a cognitive nature and, while indeed having normative significance, do not admit of being reduced directly and without residue to something normative. More generally, this constitutive dimension can be said to be neither interpretative nor conventional (e.g. Bohman 1991: 99; Eder 2007), for it in the first instance makes possible or constitutes interpretations and conventions in that it is commonly shared and taken for granted and thus presupposed by all interpretations and conventions. This is the case since interpretations and conventions are but particular uses of the cognitive order.<sup>2</sup> Habermas, to be sure, is absolutely clear about the cognitive order although, of course, his description is of necessity not comprehensive. His reconstructive theory of 'universal pragmatics' (1979: 1-69) provided the occasion for its elaboration. For him, the rational potential of linguistic rules consists of principles such as a common external objective world, secondly an interpersonally well-ordered social world, thirdly an abstract and flexible practical ego-identity free from psychopathological manifestations, and finally communicative processes allowing the unhampered and thus undistorted use of linguistic rules. These principles, actualised through what Habermas calls 'validity claims' (1987a: 26), are the formal properties or second-order reflexive rules which are generated through embodied actions and practices by the array of cognitive competences of the members of society and which then, in the form of the cognitive order, both generate and regulate the continuing exercise and development of those very competences, actions and practices. Despite this admirable degree of cognitive clarity, however, Habermas nevertheless tends to treat the cognitive order as something directly normative. His employment of the concept of validity claims suggests this much, but it is his direct translation of the cognitive order into the 'normative content of modernity' (1987b: 336) that bears out this tendency.

### *Laying conflict to rest*

A pernicious consequence follows from the confusion or lack of proper discrimination between the cognitive and the normative for Habermas' conceptualisation of the social domain. Since the cognitive dimension provides the common point with reference to which different interpretations and conventions are propagated and defended, it is the abiding

object of competition, contestation and conflict. But as soon as the distinction between the cognitive and the normative is obliterated, the possibility of registering such competition, contestation and conflict vanishes. To identify the normative with the cognitive leads to the impression that the normative is about consensus without leaving room for competing, contested and conflicting interpretations, conventions, uses and projects. It is for this reason that Habermas, to his own chagrin, is widely perceived as emphasising and even over-emphasising consensus.

Along with the virtual predominance of consensus, a further sociologically significant deficit is created. If there are no distinct cognitive and normative orders, then there is a possibility of identifying and analysing neither the lower level cognitive structures of collective agents – for instance, a social movement, the state, industry, science, and so forth – who engage in competition, contestation and conflict, nor the networks they form, and even less the dynamics or process of mediation of the different sets of cognitive structures which, under favourable conditions allowing learning, could lead from conflict to mutual understanding and cooperation, if not agreement. Habermas' confusion of the cognitive and the normative thus pretty much precluded the possibility of a viable cognitive sociology for him.

#### *System: functionalist or cognitive?*

There is a related aspect of Habermas' position which further impedes the possibility of arriving at a cognitive sociology via his work. It concerns the way in which he substantiated the communication paradigm in terms of his theory of society. At the root of the problem is his theoretical decision regarding the dynamics of societal development which effectively displaced conflict at the micro- and meso- levels to contradiction at the macro-level. Whereas his early innovative distinction between labour and interaction (1974: 142-69) still accommodated conflict as a relation between social actors, groups or classes, his subsequent transposition of the labour-interaction conceptual pair onto the higher level system-lifeworld (1987a) conceptual pair instead not merely laid conflict to rest by displacing it to the contradictory relation between the material and symbolic dimensions of society, but it also introduced a problematic concept of system.

Habermas mistook systems theory as having as its object substantive action systems devoid of the internal structure, logic and meaning of the communicatively reproduced lifeworld.<sup>3</sup> The capitalist economy and the bureaucratic administrative state are purposive-rational action systems shorn of all normative orientation and regulation, and as such contrast with the purely communicative sphere of normal, ordinary everyday action free from any vestiges of power. What we witness here is Habermas misunderstanding system in a way that compounds the confusion of the cognitive and the normative. By contrast with the indefensible idea of a normatively barren, substantive action system, it needs to be appreciated that the systems concept is a cognitive one (e.g. Leydesdorff 2007).<sup>4</sup> As socially constitutive, it stakes out a field of action in which normative regulation is by no means absent, but instead of consensus it is characterised by competing, contested and conflicting as well as of course cooperative interpretations, conventions, uses and projects. This cognitive systems concept can be illuminated by reference to the modern cognitive order. The concept of system captures the phenomenon of the emergence of second-order reflexive rules in a variety of domains which then come to represent the prevailing meta-level cognitive order of a field and, more generally, of the time. As regards modernity, in the sixteenth century Jean Bodin registered the emergence of the concept of state and its standard of sovereignty, and Adam Smith followed in the eighteenth with the concept of the

economic system with its standard of efficiency. During the next number of years, Immanuel Kant canonically formulated in his three critiques dealing with pure reason, practical reason and judgement respectively the meta-level cultural rules which had emerged in the by then autonomous intellectual, moral and aesthetic domains – a development Weber sociologically confirmed. Together, all these systematically related sets of meta-rules, from sovereignty and efficiency to truth, rightness and appropriateness, form the taken-for-granted and therefore generally shared – but contested – cognitive order of modernity.

With his concept of system, then, Habermas effectively went in a direction that leads away from cognitive sociology. Instead of the socially constitutive cognitive dimension which by no means excludes the normative yet does not coincide with it either, his thought tended to follow the classical yet by now misleading dual track of the normative and non-normative, or purposive-rational, contrast. Due to his small toe being in the cognitive camp and the rest in the normative one, however, a severe tension runs right through his work, from early to late. Habermas made an unparalleled contribution to the conceptualisation of social learning processes and their indispensable role in the dynamics of the development of society, yet on this cognitively central matter his theoretical imagination nevertheless faltered. There can be no doubt about the fact that this failure can in large part be attributed to his misunderstanding of the concept of system. The reason for this is that it is well nigh impossible to theorise social or collective learning processes without a proper cognitive systems concept. After all, social or collective learning crucially involves the cognitive phenomenon of 'systemic learning' (Miller 1986, 2002).

To conclude, Habermas participated in the cognitive turn in sociology which left its indelible marks on key aspects of his social theory – from the differentiated embodied competence action theory, through the lifeworld as the background order of interaction, to the universal pragmatic account of the cognitive order of modernity. Due to his overwhelming concern with the normative problematic,<sup>5</sup> however, the cognitive dimension got largely covered over, and this debilitating loss of discrimination was then compounded by the introduction of a non-normative, functionalist concept of system. From the current perspective, therefore, Habermas' legacy consists of the intricate task of having to release the cognitive sociology which is imprisoned behind the many layers of his work.

## **2 Axel Honneth: cognitive gerrymandering**

As in the case of Habermas, Honneth (2003, 2007a) locates himself within the metatheoretical framework of Frankfurt critical theory as expressed by the key concept of immanent transcendence. This is not all he shares with Habermas, though, as is indicated by the fact that he on several occasions since the late 1970s lauded Habermas for his recovery of the social domain which had been virtually snuffed out by Horkheimer and Adorno's Marxist functionalism and Nietzschean-Weberian moral scepticism. What he more specifically shares with Habermas within these metatheoretical parameters is the communication paradigm as distinct from Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno's labour or production paradigm. But this is where the similarities end. In order to compensate for the one-sidedness and negative consequences of Habermas' version of the communication paradigm as he perceives it, Honneth found it necessary to change tack – indeed, to introduce his own new theoretical version of critical theory. Instead of focusing on social relations of understanding, as does Habermas, he shifted the attention within the communication paradigm to social relations of recognition or, more concisely, he moved from language to recognition.

### *Appropriation and criticism of Habermas*

Honneth's concept of recognition in fact has its original reference point in a submerged theme in Habermas' work, and in the 1980s and 90s he received encouragement for its development from the wave of interest in identity and identity politics which was stimulated, among other eventualities, by the multicultural consequences of globalisation. Charles Taylor, who spent some time in Frankfurt during the period while Honneth was Habermas' assistant, undoubtedly played an important role in impressing the significance of the concept of recognition on him. The argumentation which led to its eventual adoption, however, followed a far from direct route. The trajectory Honneth travelled took off from his own early concern with the experiences of injustice suffered by subordinate classes and suppressed groups (1982; 1983). Next it took him through a critical reconstruction of the tradition of Frankfurt critical theory in his doctoral thesis which, in its published form (1985), concluded with a thorough criticism and, in a certain crucial respect, a distancing from Habermas. It then culminated in his main recognition-theoretical work, his habilitation thesis of 1992, which ever since he has been labouring on refining.

In the context of his criticism, there is no evidence at all that the cognitive dimension of Habermas' work attracted Honneth's attention. His focus is exclusively on Habermas' working out of the communication paradigm in terms of his theory of society. The aim of his analysis was to establish that and how Habermas made a fateful theoretical decision which determined the direction his work would henceforth take. Habermas was faced with alternative theoretical models of the relation between the communicative generation of society and its material conditions. It was a matter either of the dynamics of different social groups or classes conflicting and cooperating over the prevailing form of social organisation or of a supra-individual developmental mechanism and, in Honneth's judgement, he mistakenly went for the latter. It took the form of Habermas generalising his innovative distinction between labour and interaction into the distinction between system and lifeworld. The emphasis on the macro-level relation of a contradiction between the material and symbolic dimensions of society effectively emasculated the conflict between social groups or classes. It is remarkable, however, that Honneth saw the misguided marginalisation of conflict exclusively in the relatively superficial terms of the transposition of labour-interaction into system-lifeworld, rather than appreciating that it more fundamentally goes back to Habermas' confusion of the cognitive and normative dimensions, as made clear earlier on.

In his inaugural address of 1993 at the Free University of Berlin which he devoted to distinguishing his own new recognition-theoretical version of critical theory from Habermas', Honneth (2007a) reinterpreted Habermas' mistake in terms of the adoption of language as key concept. To match the abstraction and generalisation of conflict to a high-level contradiction, Habermas was compelled in a parallel way to shift from interaction to an abstract and general articulation of language. The result of this leap is Habermas' universal pragmatic analysis which places all the weight of the achievement of social coordination and social integration on linguistic rules. This emphasis on the centrality of linguistic rules not only refocused critical theory on the restrictions imposed on the application of those rules and the consequent distorted communication, but it made emancipation dependent on the process of communicative rationalisation in the sense of the critical elimination of barriers to communication. Communicative rationalisation, however, is an abstract high-level process which transpires above the heads and behind the backs of social actors, with the result, according to Honneth, that Habermas' version of critical theory is incapable not only



of linking up with the experience of the members of society, but by the same token also of diagnosing social pathologies. Honneth's response is not, as might be expected, to abandon the communication paradigm or even reconstructive theory, but rather to theoretically construe the paradigm differently and to give the theory a different focus. Instead of linguistic rules, he emphasises 'moral experience', and instead of impediments in the way of the use of such rules in communication, he demands that attention be given to instances of 'disrespect' in the sense of the 'violation of identity claims' acquired in the process of socialisation (2007a: 70). Language is thus displaced at the centre of the stage by recognition. As regards reconstructive theory which he shares with Habermas due to the fact that critical theory must have an immanent anchor point in social life for its context-transcendent critical perspective, he differs from Habermas in his conception of what needs to be reconstructed. Earlier we have seen that Habermas reconstructs the rational potential of linguistic rules in the form of the principles of a common external objective world, an interpersonally well-ordered social world, an abstract and flexible practical ego-identity, and finally unhampered communication processes. For Honneth, by contrast, it is the rational potential of recognition relations that must be reconstructed. It is in this way that he arrived in his habilitation thesis, following Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit*, at the 'formal concept of the good life or concrete ethical life' (1992: 275). Rather than the abstract principles of an objective world, a social world and a subjective world all mediated by communication, as in Habermas, it consists of the three more individually tailored recognition patterns of 'love' or 'need', 'law' or 'autonomy' and 'solidarity' or 'achievement' (1992: 148; 2003: 258) which are underpinned by the constant maintenance of the memory or basic awareness of the intrinsic value of others as human beings (2008).

Although Habermas confused the cognitive and normative dimensions, as a participant in the cognitive turn he on occasion still acknowledged that his universal pragmatic world models were cognitive frameworks (1987a). Honneth, by contrast, not only does not acknowledge the same in respect of his recognition models, but on the one hand vociferously rejects the cognitive in presenting recognition as a normative matter (2007a; 2008), while on the other nevertheless continues trading on cognitive assumptions (Strydom in press). The result is the impression of gerrymandering and thus incoherence which is conspicuous in his rather equivocal treatment of the three recognition models or patterns. On the one hand, he regards them as normative principles or even moral ideals, yet on the other he insists that they are not institutional arrangements or – we may say – normative expectations, but instead are 'only general behavioural patterns' and as such formal 'structural elements' (1992: 279) of all particular human forms of life. The mention of general patterns or structural elements is an unmistakable invocation of the cognitive order – a perception which is strengthened by the fact that he on occasion understands these patterns or elements as second-order, reflexive or what he conceives as basic orienting 'synthetic' rules (1992: 125; 2008: 62-3). His far too narrow traditional conception of the cognitive coexists with his failure to realise that he in fact presupposes and therefore depends on certain basic cognitive concepts and insights. His appeal to the modern cognitive order of love, legal relations and solidarity is but the most obvious instance. He himself effectively presents the very concept of 'recognition' as properly conceivable only in cognitive terms – that is, as 'memory' (2008: 57).<sup>6</sup> Sociologically crucial, however, is the question of how he would be able to theoretically account for social conflict or the struggle for recognition as central to social theory if he has no recourse to the cognitive dimension. And this is not yet to mention accounting for the learning processes stimulated by conflict which make possible the mediation of what he calls 'mechanisms of mutual recognition' (2009b: 180) and eventuate in the end of conflict in coordination, cooperation and social integration.

Another aspect of Honneth's position relative to the cognitive dimension is his response to Habermas' introduction to the systems concept. Central to his analysis of Habermas' work, as we have seen, is Honneth's criticism of the shift from labour and interaction in which social groups and classes are engaged to the distinction between system and lifeworld involving the macro-level contradiction between the impersonal material and symbolic dimensions of society. In this context, he was clearly disturbed by Habermas' recourse to the systems theoretical vocabulary. It was not just the resultant splitting of the social domain into a normatively barren, goal-oriented action system and a power-free sphere of communicative action which attracted his opprobrium, but more particularly the concept of system as such. His reaction to Habermas' move is instructive. Habermas, as we have seen, mistook systems theory as dealing with substantive action systems which are devoid of the kind of normative regulation pervading the communicatively reproduced lifeworld. Honneth's (1985) immediate reaction to the dualistic conceptual pair of system and lifeworld was to reject out of hand systems theory and, hence, the concept of system. While this reaction dates from the early to mid-1980s, it is a position he explicitly retains right up to a recent interview (2009a). The important point is now that rather than seeing through it, his rejection of systems theory indicates that he in effect shares Habermas' misunderstanding of the concept of system. Instead of appreciating the cognitive status of the concept, also Honneth conflates system with some functionalist notion referring to substantive action systems which from the observer's point of view appear as non-normative. The consequence is a severe loss of social theoretical power to account for the constitution, developmental dynamics, transformation and normative advancement of society.

On the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, Honneth offered an illuminating retrospective statement regarding the guiding idea of his project which is inspired by a combination of Habermas' insistence on communicative action as the primary mechanism of social integration and a restored concept of social conflict: 'the members of society are only integrated in society through mechanisms of mutual recognition – mechanisms, however, which are always contested and therefore the object of a struggle for recognition' (2009b: 180). Following this circumscription, there are two areas that are vital to his social theory and should be scrutinised for the way he handles them – his concept of 'mechanisms of mutual recognition' and the process of mediation of these mechanisms.

### *Mechanisms of mutual recognition*

As regards the first, it comes as a surprise to find that Honneth's writings do not contain a theoretically thought through and elaborated presentation of his key concept of mechanisms of mutual recognition. What precisely are these mechanisms? Although having distanced himself from Habermas' focus on language in favour of moral experience in order to bring emotion and motivation into the picture, Honneth nevertheless suggests that semantics provide these mechanisms. For instance, the 'collective semantic' of a social movement serves as a 'bridge' (1992: 262) which allows not only the integration of individuals into the movement, but also the integration of the movement into society in a way that transforms the latter (2003: 263). Semantics are undoubtedly of importance in making available the symbolic means for the communicability of a movement's message, yet the question is whether it is an adequate mechanism of mutual recognition. Just as Habermas' account of linguistic rules did not provide for the necessary structure formation, so Honneth's recourse to semantics does not offer sufficient bridging. How do semantics link up with the emotional-motivational structure, on the one hand, and with the shared socio-

cultural patterns of society, on the other? Surely, both this structure and these patterns are more structured than mere semantics? When the various bridges are successfully crossed so that transformation does occur, what undergoes transformation – only words and meanings? Honneth's further tightening of this conceptual approach by confining semantics to moral ideas and doctrines does not improve matters either.<sup>7</sup> This is where it becomes apparent that Honneth's animus against the cognitive approach is counterproductive.

Far from being exhausted by goal-oriented, explicit knowledge, as Honneth (2007a; 2008) holds, the cognitive refers in the first instance to mechanisms, competences, structures and processes which make the generation, organisation and diffusion of knowledge possible. Moreover, such mechanisms, competences, structures and processes as well as the resulting knowledge are by no means of a purely intellectual kind. This is borne out by the fact that the particulate or compositional cognitive – as distinct from the traditional holistic – concept of culture embraces the differentiated intellectual, moral and aesthetic orientations and cultural spheres.<sup>8</sup> In the most specific sociologically relevant sense, the cognitive concerns human generative competences of an intellectual, moral and emotional-motivational kind, developed over millions of years of species evolution, whether through communication or struggle, that bring the socio-cultural world into being by effecting the emergence of second-order reflexive rules which, in turn, come to play a generative and regulative role in the further exercise and development of those competences as well as the actions and practices in which they are embodied. From this perspective, it would be more profitable to begin the search for Honneth's mechanisms of mutual recognition, not in semantics, but rather in his reference to 'intersubjective interpretative frameworks' (1992: 262). While such frameworks are indeed articulated by semantics, they are of a much more encompassing nature, consisting of sets of dynamic cognitive forms or structures of different levels and scope – from being in the body and head, via collective actors and entities like social movements, organisations, institutions and even objects,<sup>9</sup> to a variety of cultural manifestations big and small. They have been theorised in the cognitive sciences under different titles, including categories, prototype, schema, script, frame, cultural schema, connectionist network and cognitive models.<sup>10</sup> Some of these concepts have had quite an impact on social theory, but many a sociologist employing them are not aware of their origin nor of the theoretical approach of which they form a part. Similarly in Honneth's case, although his work can be linked directly to the sociology of social movements where the impact shows graphically, for instance, it does not seem to have been touched in any way by the cognitive turn in sociology. From this cognitive perspective, it is evident that what Honneth refers to as a general 'frame of reference' or 'intersubjective interpretative framework' (1992: 124, 262), which is nothing else than one of his 'mechanisms of mutual recognition' (2009b: 180), is a cognitive phenomenon. It consists of second-order reflexive rules which emerged at the dawn of modernity and came to represent its cognitive order in the form of an internally differentiated, generally shared, classificatory framework which brings order into social life through its generative and regulative impact on intellectual, moral and ethical orientations and corresponding actions and social arrangements. Honneth's recognition models of love, law and solidarity are but particular dimensions of the taken-for-granted cognitive order of modernity.

There can no longer be any doubt about the fact, then, that the general intersubjective interpretative framework or cognitive order with its different structural elements represents the mechanism of mutual recognition which, as Honneth says, is 'always contested and therefore the object of a struggle for recognition' (2009b: 180). It figures as the object of conflict since it is common to all, on the one hand, yet gets systematically actualised in competing ways by culturally and institutionally different actors, groups and collective agents.<sup>11</sup> This implies, importantly, that the mechanisms of mutual recognition which

Honneth has in mind must involve more than just the contested cognitive order as such. This is the case since the contestation or struggle over the cognitive order can be carried out in the medium of conflict only through competing cognitive frameworks which are themselves distinct actualisations of the overarching cognitive order. Such competing cognitive frameworks are embodied, presented and defended in the course of the conflict by the different participating groups or collective agents who seek to actualise and realise the potential of the cognitive order each in its own way. In the outline of his theory of group- or movement-based social conflict, he adverted to such actor-specific cognitive frames in an under-theorised manner by referring to the 'collective identity' and 'collective semantic' (1992: 261, 262) of a social movement. The collective agents targeted by or opposing a social movement who must also be taken into account in order to grasp a sequence of social conflict are, of course, similarly endowed with distinct cognitive frames. The conflictual dynamics of 'disrespect and resistance' (1992: 256) driving this process is certainly motivated by moral feelings, as Honneth emphasises, but both the resistance offered by a social movement and the offending disrespect showed by some other collective agent or agents must of necessity be couched in cognitive frames characteristic of the relevant participants. In addition to the cognitive order, then, the respective lower-level cognitive frames of each of the participants in a social conflict can be regarded as the mechanisms of mutual recognition Honneth has in mind yet leaves theoretically unclear.<sup>12</sup>

### *Process of mediation*

Honneth conceives the interrelation or mediation of the various mechanisms of mutual recognition in the first instance rightly as a process of social conflict in order to bring the participating actors and their experience into view. Yet to stay on such a descriptive level would not be sufficient to capture the constructive achievements of the process. For this reason, he speaks also of a 'developmental process' (1992: 269) which under propitious conditions can even be regarded as a 'moral learning process' and thus as 'progress' (1992: 270, 272; 2007b). Going beyond direct experience, such development and learning carry the general logic of expansion of recognition relations characterising the process of mediation. Honneth offers an example of such a logic. Given the attainment of a new, general socio-cultural level, for instance the modern configuration of recognition patterns of love, law and solidarity, the potentials contained in them are released and their actualisation pursued through different kinds of struggle and social movement seeking to universalise and materialise the law and to incorporate individualising and equalising normative structures into the ethos of the community. What he does not do, however, is to theoretically clarify this positive dimension of the process in terms of structure formation. The outcomes he describes undoubtedly entail reconstituted and newly articulated cognitive frames at different levels. But such achievements are possible only if the respective cognitive frames of the actors – say, a social movement and its opponent – have gone through a phase of conflictual and competitive interrelation which then gave way to a phase of mutual learning, convergence and overlap or even fusion in certain respects. Only along such a trajectory which involves the broadening of the cognitive frames of each and making them orient in a new way toward the cognitive order could the actors arrive at the better understanding of the other and of themselves presupposed by mutual recognition. To follow this dynamic process and the sequential moments of structure formation through their unfolding in time must be what is implied by Honneth's insistence on 'the analysis of social mediation' (1985: 41). For such an analysis, however, one requires a theory of cognitive frame construction devices, structural (intellectual, moral and ethical) elements of cognitive frames, actor cognitive frames, modes of interrelation of different actor frames and, finally, both the

emergence of transformed actor frames and of new meta-level cognitive structures within the cognitive order shared by the erstwhile opponents. The lack of a cognitive sociological approach deprives Honneth of theoretical means of this kind and causes further problems down the line.<sup>13</sup>

One such problem is Honneth's (2008) conceptualisation of recognition as an elementary form of intersubjective relation between two actors. If it is a matter of 'social mediation' (1985: 41), however, then one cannot stop at mediation confined to the double contingency relation between ego and alter since there is a third dimension, the third point of view,<sup>14</sup> involved. While it enables evaluation and judgement and is therefore normatively significant, it should not directly be reduced to a norm or something normative, since it is strictly speaking of a cognitive nature. Two actors are able to relate to one another only through reference to the cognitive order and the employment of the intellectual, moral and emotional-motivational classificatory categories it provides. Sociologically, therefore, mediation is not a dyadic but rather a triadic relation. Failing this more complex theoretical approach, neither the consequent transformation of the different micro-, meso- and macro-level cognitive structures can be sociologically grasped nor the learning they undergo and the development this generates.

As regards the nature of the process suggested by its directional indices, finally, Honneth describes social mediation as a 'developmental process' as well as a 'moral learning process' (1992: 269, 270, 272; 2007b). This is an important distinction for the achievement of his aim of a full restoration of the social dimension embracing both conflict and social integration, yet the necessary theoretical clarity on the relation between societal development and moral learning is not readily available. While effectively making the distinction, he nevertheless tends to obliterate it by speaking globally of stages of a moral learning process which step-by-step broadens recognition relations. The general logic of expansion of recognition, it should be stressed as against such an apparently reductive tendency, involves not only the filling out of potentials intentionally and actively targeted, but also drifts over time in the structural elements of the cognitive order or even a shift of the latter itself which have the effect of broadening the conditions and possible meaning of recognition. While such structural transformations and changes allow further moral learning processes by enhancing the available potentials and stimulating their still fuller realisation, they are irreducible to moral learning processes. It is sociologically crucial not only to avoid collapsing evolution into moral learning, but also to be clear about distinct kinds of learning.<sup>15</sup> The problem Honneth encounters in conceptualising the nature of the process has both general and particular roots. Generally, it can be attributed to his inadequate position on the distinction between the normative, which he prioritises, and the cognitive, which he casts in a far too narrow purposive-rational and explicit epistemic mould. In particular, however, it goes back to his effective sharing of Habermas' misunderstanding of the cognitive concept of system.

### **3 In lieu of a conclusion: a timely cognitive sociology?**

The principal line of argumentation in this essay is that there are cognitive elements contained in Habermas' language-based and Honneth's recognition-based social theories which, although largely concealed, can be unearthed, consolidated and developed for the purposes of constructing a timely kind of cognitive sociology. As such, it represents a new departure that lies well beyond what they intended. Since it nevertheless is a departure from within the framework of the tradition of the critical theory of society which both

authors represent, it does not entail surrendering the normative dimension in favour of adopting the cognitive one instead, as is lamentably all too often the case with social scientists who turn to the cognitive sciences.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, an important motive for constructing this cognitive sociology is precisely to get the largely confused relation between the normative and cognitive dimensions theoretically cleared up and to embed the normative in the cognitive framework in its proper place. There are signs that Habermas was aware of this problem, but he never resolved it in a manner that proved meaningful for social theory. Honneth, by contrast, seeks to deal with it by maintaining a sharp divide between the normative and the cognitive, with impoverishing results for the articulation of social theory. The proposed cognitive sociology is an attempt instead to draw out and build on the strengths of both authors, however divergent and opposed their social theories might appear. Amidst all the differences between Habermas and Honneth, the common core elements in their respective language-theoretical and recognition-theoretical versions of critical theory provide the means for devising a cognitive sociology that goes beyond them, yet remains within the metatheoretical parameters of critical theory encapsulated by the history-theory or, more specifically, the immanent transcendence complex.

In the present context, it is not possible to attempt an outline of the cognitive sociology intended here. In the course of the critical comparison and contrast of Habermas and Honneth in the body of the essay, a whole range of indications were given of what such a cognitive sociology would entail – from human cognitive competences and the orientations, actions and practices in which they are embodied, with their characteristic sets of micro- and meso-level cognitive structures; via the process of their mediation through which second-order, reflexive or meta-rules and hence the sociocultural world at the macro-level are generated; to the recursive generative and regulative role of these rules in the exercise of those embodied competences and the resultant learning and evolutionary processes. Instead of attempting the impossible task of a fuller development of these indications here, I propose to close with a brief restatement of a core aspect of the cognitive sociological approach which at the same time also makes clear a possible place for it in the critical theory tradition.

The single most important point to be made is that cognitive sociology differs fundamentally from other approaches in that it is most basically stereoscopic. Rather than studying its object *intentio recta* in its empirical givenness, it approaches social reality as a process which is dynamically structured or generated and regulated by meta-rules which themselves emerge from and are modified by that process. The simultaneous reference to social reality as concretely available and as receiving form and shape from its own projections which nevertheless point beyond itself – that is, from something counterfactual – is of vital importance. Methodologically, it means that social reality is approached in the attitude neither of the external observer who treats it as an object nor of the hermeneuticist who deals with it as a text-equivalent to be interpreted, but rather as a reality which has objective features yet is given form and structure from out of itself experienced as something which both exists under particular conditions and has a range of unfulfilled potentialities and possibilities. Theoretically, it means that social reality, the sociocultural world or society – of which we are a part – is a cognitive phenomenon.

The meta-level rules which harbour the counterfactual nature of social reality and play a dynamically structuring or generatively regulative role in relation to it are obviously of central significance. What has to be insisted upon is that such rules are neither interpretative nor conventional, but cognitive. This means, first, that they are not dependent on interpretation so that they stand and fall with a particular reading of the signs. It means, secondly, that they have not been set arbitrarily by a group whose members accept them

until such time as they decide to replace them by some equally arbitrary functional equivalent. Being of a cognitive nature, these rules are rather constitutive of social reality by providing an internally differentiated, historically emerged classification system according to which social reality is ordered in the first instance. As such, they serve as the basis of interpretations and conventions which are but different uses of the cognitive order.

Piaget, to take a contributor to the cognitive revolution as example, was acutely aware of these cognitive structures. In his early sociological period during which he investigated the development of moral judgement vis-à-vis Durkheim's tendentially authoritarian account, he identified the second-order reflexive rules, what he called the 'ideal norms immanent in the human spirit' which are 'at the back of all rules' (1968: 285), that is, of first-order rules resting on interpretation or convention. They emerge when a general awareness of all the different points of view develops through the mediation of those points of view, so that a classification and a corresponding ideal standard making judgement possible become established. According to him, such a cognitive structure does not demand identification in the sense of everyone having to internalise the same content, but obliges reciprocity in the sense of everyone having to take each other into account without allowing the obliteration of their own points of view. As suggested earlier, the kind of development Piaget describes can be clarified in terms of the example of the modern cognitive order. Key authors from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century canonically encapsulated the emergence and establishment of second-order reflexive rules in different areas of social activity which then came to represent the cognitive order of modernity.<sup>17</sup> The beginnings of social theory itself coincided with the registration of the emergence of the state and its standard of sovereignty, the economic system with its standard of efficiency, the legal system with its standards of legality and legitimacy, civil society with its standards of freedom, equality and solidarity, and finally the autonomous intellectual, moral and aesthetic domains of culture with their standards of truth, rightness and appropriateness. To this day, they for the most part still represent the taken-for-granted and generally shared cognitive order of modernity which figures everywhere at different levels as the object of the competition, contestation and conflict among different orientations, interpretations, uses, projects and practices. They even allow what has come to be called 'multiple modernities'. But there is something related which should be of increasing interest to cognitive sociology. Considering the tension-laden intermediate position in which we find ourselves today, for instance between West and East, the structural properties of the current historical situation may well be caught in a drift or perhaps even a shift.<sup>18</sup>

This social-theoretically central cognitive dimension is of vital importance to sociology. It allows the investigation of the constitution of society – today the emerging world society – and the temporal practical attainment of social coordination, integration and order in any of a variety of areas at different levels by analysing the diversity of competing, contested and conflicting, but also learning and cooperative, attempts to actualise and realise the potentials and possibilities staked out by the whole range of structural components of the cognitive order. That the proposed cognitive sociology could, moreover, fulfil a core role in the critical theory of society is evident from the fact that its concern with human competences and the corresponding cognitive order articulates precisely critical theory's metatheoretical structure expressed by its key concept of immanent transcendence. The immanent anchorage of the capacity for transcending the status quo is to be found neither in language alone, as in Habermas, nor solely in recognition, as in Honneth, but rather in what is common to both. The various theoretical components and matching methodological features of cognitive sociology which fill out this metatheoretical structure place it in a promising position to enable critical analyses and explanations of the unjust, deformed and pathological manifestations which appear in the course of the constant series of attempts to

actualise and realise under specific social conditions the counterfactually available, historically accumulated, rational potential generated by social relations and stored in the cognitive order.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Habermas (1991) introduced this concept in the late 1980s and Honneth (2007a, 2003) took it up in the early 1990s. A detailed analysis is offered in Strydom (2011).

<sup>2</sup> This point is well understood by, for example, Bourdieu (1986: 467ff.) who in turn, however, mistakenly strips all uses of normativity.

<sup>3</sup> Eder (2007) discusses Habermas' 'misapprehension of the systemic nature of the social'.

<sup>4</sup> Luhmann (1995) operates with a cognitive concept of system, yet its origin – the last autopoietic version extrapolated from Maturana's biology against the latter's advice – misled him into adamantly denying whatever normative significance might follow from it.

<sup>5</sup> A whole army of academics followed Habermas in this, thinking that they are critical theorists if they engage in exercises of normative justification.

<sup>6</sup> Recognition provides the foil against which Honneth identifies reification as a form of 'forgetfulness' (2008: 56).

<sup>7</sup> At this point, the question arises as to what exactly Honneth retains of Mead's naturalistic underpinning of Hegel's theory of recognition which he stressed in his main work (1992), since here it seems completely abandoned. It would in any case need to be upgraded in line with contemporary cognitive scientific findings.

<sup>8</sup> This threefold concept of culture is not only central to Habermas' universal pragmatics (1979) and social theory (1987a), but also lies behind Honneth's formal model of the good life and its structural elements – but he stresses only the moral and the emotional-motivational moments.

<sup>9</sup> The significance of objects is well illuminated by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991).

<sup>10</sup> D'Andrade (1995) gives an excellent broad, social-scientifically relevant overview of the development of the cognitive approach in anthropology.

<sup>11</sup> This idea of conflict – or classification and legitimation struggles – over what is generally accepted is central to the work of both Bourdieu (1986) and Touraine (1988).

<sup>12</sup> Instructive is to contrast Honneth with McCarthy who proposes to refine Habermas by incorporating insights from ethnomethodology and conversational analysis regarding 'shared schemes of intelligibility and accountability' (1994: 70) – a proposal which could be taken as pointing toward a cognitive extension of critical theory.

<sup>13</sup> Different proposals for such theoretical developments are made, among others, by Miller (1986), Snow et al. (1986), Gamson (1988), Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), Eyerman and Jamison (1991), Howard (1994), Eder (1996), DiMaggio (1997), Boudon, Bouvier and Chazel



(1997), Borzeix, Bouvier and Pharo (1998), Strydom (2000, 2002, 2009), Cerulo (2002), Conein (2005) and Ridgeway (2006). For a general systematised overview of different cognitive directions in sociology, see Strydom (2007).

<sup>14</sup> This aspect is developed in terms of the concept of 'triple contingency' in Strydom (1999, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Eder (1988, 1999) draws a distinction between evolution and learning, and different kinds of learning are analysed in Miller (2002), Trenz and Eder (2004) and Strydom (2008, 2009). Honneth (2004: 347-9) offers a general account of the place and conceptualisation of learning processes in the tradition of critical theory.

<sup>16</sup> Cognitivistically inspired normative abstention is to be found, for example, in ethnomethodology's notorious 'indifference', in rational choice theory's as well as Bourdieu's one-sided strategic interest calculations, and in Luhmannian sociology's ultra-liberal view of the normative approach as 'paradigm lost'.

<sup>17</sup> In their identification of 'orders of worth' (*les grandeurs*), Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) proceed from a comparable assumption which in these authors their latest works each seeks to critically strengthen beyond conventionalism. See Thévenot in this volume.

<sup>18</sup> It is in view of structural transformation and change of this kind which we are not yet quite able to fathom that it may be short-sighted to denounce the concept of cosmopolitanism as being of no relevance to critical theory, as Honneth (2009b: 182-83) does in answer to a question about Beck's view that the concept could open a new chapter in the history of this tradition.

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