

Axel Honneth, Laudatio, Ludwigshfen Nov. 20th 2015

- The Lord Mayor: Dr. Eva Lohse

- The President (Chair(wo)man) of the Award-Committee: Prof. Dr. Cornelia Reifenberg

- The speaker of the Jury: Dr. Klaus Kufeld

When Klaus Kufeld wrote to me to request that I give a laudatio speech on the occasion of Axel Honneth's Ernst Bloch award, my reaction was a double surprise. The first surprise was about the award and the awardee. Without ever thinking about it, I had assumed Axel Honneth had received this and other awards long ago, for Axel Honneth is not just an outstanding scholar, like other recipients of the Ernst Bloch award, but already a part of the philosophical canon, certainly of the twentieth-century canon, on a par with Jurgen Habermas or John Rawls, themselves already classics. My second surprise was that I had been chosen to give the laudatio speech, because although Axel Honneth's work has been a long standing inspiration for mine, I belong to a different intellectual discipline, I am a sociologist. But after I thought about it for a while, my two surprises dissipated. I have known Axel for more than a decade, enough to remember and to realize

that since I have known him, I have always seen him busy helping deserving scholars, so much so that he probably had neither the time nor the attention to properly focus on his own awards (although Axel Honneth did get some outstanding awards). Moreover, in the best tradition of the Frankfurt School, Axel Honneth's philosophy is social and critical, combining the normative and the empirical, and is therefore engaged in an intense dialogue with the social sciences, and sociology in particular. So let me start by thanking you Mr. Kufeld, for inviting me to give this laudatio speech: to be given the opportunity to honor a great scholar and human being constitutes in itself an honor.

David Brooks, the NYT commentator, sometimes comes up with astute distinctions. One of them caught my attention: he distinguishes between the resume human being and the eulogy human being; the resume human being is the one defined by his CV, his achievements; the eulogy human being is the human being others pay homage to and want to witness for when they have died. Philosophers are typically human beings in which you should not detach the eulogy human being and the resume human being. We have the intuition, the right intuition I believe, that for philosophers, thinking and living are somewhat connected, that ideas emerge out of an embodied concrete human being and his experience in the world, that ideas emanate from one's *character*. One writes

and thinks with (or without) a set of virtues and a way of engaging in and engaging the world. I would like to offer here to quickly brush a portrait a philosopher with towering intellectual achievements which grew, I believe, from the qualities of a concrete human being. A laudatio is a form of eulogy said in the presence of a living person.

To describe Axel Honneth's philosophical oeuvre is impossible here, it is too large and diverse; instead of summarizing this oeuvre, let me choose, the one supreme quality that makes his writing and thinking unique in the landscape of social philosophy today. It is an intellectual quality that is evoked by another man we are also implicitly honoring tonight, Ernst Bloch. In his Introduction to the *Principle of Hope*, Bloch discusses the kind of thought that generates hope. He states:

"Only thinking directed towards changing the world and informing the desire to change it does not confront the future as embarrassment and the past as spell."

Bloch describes here a peculiar form of thinking, geared to changing the world, and this thinking has an emotional and energetic texture, it is a concrete and emotional activity, an activity that not only explains and analyzes, but also that has the capacity to open up to the future where the future is defined by Bloch as

“the unclosed space for new development in front of us.” Such capacity to confront the future, of giving us the resources to understand the failures of the present without despair, of confronting with wide open eyes the misery of the world and yet calling on us to seize the future without embarrassment, as a place to develop and flourish, demands qualities that are at once intellectual and moral. One does not write and does not think with the mind only, but rather with the entirety of one's being, with one's whole inner resources, at once intellectual and moral. Axel Honneth's oeuvre accomplishes the feat called on by Bloch, this feat of giving hope through a special form of thinking.

Hope Through Critique. First and foremost, perhaps, to be able to give hope, one needs to be able to display an ability to criticize the present, to understand what is wrong with our current condition, to diagnose the ills of the present. An optimist cannot give hope. Optimism is effortless and is often a kind of automatic, reflex-like bet on the future. An optimistic is a gambler, the kind who is convinced that a good angel of history is always on his side. That is why optimism is close to negligence. An optimist doctor is one who will spare you a difficult medical test, because he trusts all is OK. But a great doctor will run the full battery of tests and if he finds out a difficult disease, will know to give the patient hope by tapping in the patient's own resources. To give hope is thus not to be optimist. Rather it is to

have a particular moral strength that comes from elucidating the nature of our suffering.

My medical metaphor is not fortuitous, and not because Axel's father was a doctor, but rather much of Axel Honneth's critical philosophy is conceptualized as a diagnostic of social pathologies. In a series of works, books, lectures, and articles Honneth has offered powerful descriptions of these social pathologies such as: Social Invisibility; self-organized individualism; false recognition; instrumental rationalization; and reification. Just to give you a few examples of the pathologies identified and elucidated by Axel.

Social Invisibility A Major form of social pathology has to do with the gaze, with the ways in which one looks through someone else, without seeing him or more often her, seeing past someone, rendering them invisible. Social Invisibility is no less than inequality a corrosive of social membership and solidarity. Resonating with and changing a Marxist sociology of labor, the accent on invisibility thus asks what in the labor power, hurts and damages the self.

Another pathology is **organized self-realization**. The demand for individual self realization became itself an economic force, playing an important functional role in neo-liberal economic market and consumer culture.

Reification is yet another, third, pathology, particular to capitalism, which tends to convert relations and people into things. But whereas for Lukacs capitalism treated everything as discrete, commensurable, interchangeable units, priced objects including which include things as varied as raw resources, human beings, art, ideas, in his 2005 Tanner Lectures, Honneth introduces a theory of antecedent recognition, which, even prior to the processes described by Lukacs makes us fail see others properly as human beings. These are only examples of some of the pathologies of modernity and suggest the range and depth of the diagnostic skills of Axel.

But of course, philosophy is not medicine (although the Stoics used the metaphor of medicine for the activity of thinking and viewed philosophy as therapy).

Rather, what enables the philosopher to engage in diagnostics and symptomology is **critical Theory** whose task is to identify, name and explain the symptoms of social pathologies. Keeping with the medical metaphor and quoting one of Axel Honneth's commentators we may say that the 3 tasks of Critical Theory are symptomology; epidemiology; etiology. Symptomology consists in naming, diagnosing and seeing what we have no words for (for example invisibility as a social pathology); then we need to establish how pervasive the pathology is (

minorities, people who are uneducated, immigrants, people who work in menial jobs, such as cleaning our streets, women in many situations, children in many situations, etc.), and by offering an etiologie, establishing a diagnosis of social pathologies, which must supply convincing explanations for their social causes. So the critical philosopher is deeply involved with the naming and understanding of social pathologies and takes his intellectual legitimacy from clarifying the norms and moral resources that govern implicitly the lifeworld.

Thinking as Hope 2. The second way in which Honneth's thought gives us hope is that it is not a utopian thought. Hope is anti-utopian. It draws on immanent resources, in our life world, in what we have in us and did not know we did. In that, Honneth continued Habermas' major anti-utopian shift away from the first generation of critical theory. Habermas's critical theory fulfilled the mandate of critical theory much better than his predecessors, for whom critique was to emerge from the interplay between immanence and transcendence, and to find a pretheoretical resource which contains and reveals emancipatory potential. Habermas has famously argued that we could find normative anchors in the universal need for cooperation/ social coordination, which generates from within language pressures toward reaching agreement, thereby unleashing the rational potential of communicative action.

Habermas was of the generation which, in the words of Joel Anderson, (another interpreter of Axel Honneth) had a deep anxiety about the possible regression of Germany, and who thus felt the need to find grounds against deep rooted authoritarian and xenophobic traditions in Germany and thus put a strong emphasis on constitutional principles, on the law, and on human rights and which also for the same reason turned to the international philosophical tradition (Dewey for example for Habermas). But Honneth's work belongs to a different historical period, in which Germany was far more busy with multi culturalism and with feminism. In a significant shift away from Habermas, Honneth's philosophy is premised on the acknowledgement of conflict between social groups. This interpretation of the social was the focus of *The Critique of Power*, his first book, which really marks and makes Honneth as a social philosopher, far more attuned to the social than his predecessors. This is why for Honneth the goal of Critical Theory is to explain how society reproduces itself through conflict. That Honneth paid attention to the agonistic character of social life was due to the historical moment in which Honneth was writing and was probably connected to the fact German society was more pluralistic and more contentious. History for Honneth is the history of the social struggles of social groups and in that is very different from Adorno or Habermas. But agon/struggle is also different from the ways in

which Bourdieu understood social struggle, a kind of zero-sum game competition between groups which vie for dominance. Agon, for Honneth, as for Hegel, has a normative character and is different from agonistic philosophies as those of Hobbes, Marx or Bourdieu for Axel sees moral resources in agon. The theory of recognition which made Axel famous is nothing but a theory of the resources found in our life world and institutions to struggle for the achievement of norms such as freedom. The struggle for recognition itself is a moral resource. For example, capitalism generated the worker's movement, their own struggle for recognition and thus made the state recognize the rights of workers. Thus recognition is the central cornerstone of Axel's view of history, of his social psychology, and of his normative theory. Such view of history corresponds to Ernst Bloch's view that when we think of the future, we should not view the past as a spell.

At the heart of such normative theory of struggle is **Recognition**. From Hegel's Jena lectures, Habermas, psychoanalysis, George Herbert Mead, he elaborated theory of recognition. Morality grows out of the very infrastructure of social relations, since one can become a full competent member of a group through a complex process where one takes on the perspective of others, and is recognized by them.

Honneth distinguishes three forms of recognition which cover 3 essential spheres of social life:

- 1) Love – mother-infant – is a form of recognition, one comes to know oneself and be oneself through a specific kind of emotional support. In other words, early and later bonds determine different practical self relations.
- 2) The second major form of recognition is to be found in legal relations. Individuals gain, self-respect through the legal sphere, when one is granted the recognition expressed through the rights granted to his/her community. Having legal rights means to feel one is deserving of legal rights and has thus an impact again on the practical relation of the self to the self.
- 3) A third form, in addition to love and legal rights is solidarity with others, in friendship or in civil associations. These three forms of recognition have practical implications for the self, how we relate to our self and to the world simultaneously.

Love gives self-confidence

Legal Sphere gives self respect

Solidarity gives self esteem.

You see immediately that this theory is psychological and social, historical and philosophical, institutional and emotional, all at once. Very few theories, in my opinion do all of this at once, and the theory of recognition does. Let me give you an example how such theory can explain in a powerful way phenomena that are as important as they seem mysterious.

Two researchers, Ann Case and Angus Deaton (who was recently awarded the Nobel award in economics) show that, after 1998, there was a marked increase in the morbidity and mortality of middle-aged white non-Hispanic men and women in the United States, especially for white workers with less education.

The changes are dramatic. While mortality rates in other rich countries have been declining (as were the rates for Hispanic and black Americans), in the U.S. white non-Hispanic mortality rose by half a percent per year. As they observed, "No other rich country saw a similar turnaround." And, while their focus is on middle-age, their results still hold valid for all 5-year groups between 30 and 64.

According to Case and Deaton, the three causes of death that account for the mortality reversal among white non-Hispanics are not lung cancer (which is declining) or diabetes (which has remained relatively constant), but drug and

alcohol poisoning, suicide, and chronic liver diseases and cirrhosis. We see an increase of all three forms of deaths after 1998.

The question is, why? Why have the rates of mortality and morbidity for white non-Hispanic Americans risen so dramatically in the past 15 years?

Case and Deaton argue that the epidemic may have been caused by the increased availability of opioid prescriptions for pain as well as growing economic insecurity. Indeed, the effects of globalization and job insecurity have been felt long before the 2007-08 crash. But as David Ruccio, a Marxist commentator of public affairs suggests, what Case and Deaton don't mention are the role of jobs. Most Americans are forced to sell their ability to work to someone else—and they suffer both when they have a job and when they don't. As Ruccio puts it: When they're fortunate enough to have a job, they're working in Walmart stores, Amazon warehouses, and fast-food restaurants and suffering the physical and mental pains and indignities imposed by their employers. And when they don't have a job—when they've been discarded by their employers—they're suffering from the jobs they once held and from the struggle to find another job. As a consequence of both having jobs and joblessness, an

increasing number of middle-age Americans are dying, committing suicide, and are the victims of pain, poor health, and psychological distress. A colleague of the two economists, Princeton sociologist [Paul Starr](#) suggests we may be witnessing a "dire collapse of hope."

I suggest that theory of recognition explains the form of suffering they are suffering. *Suicide, drugs, and alcohol in the white midlife mortality reversal bear witness to the impossibility for them to find a social basis for self-respect and for recognition.* We need a theory at once psychological and sociological to explain these phenomena and Axel's theory provides a very powerful to account of what may be going on here: workers with no education, working in dead end jobs, or who are jobless suffer from chronic invisibility, when they work in places like Walmart, they receive no or little recognition, they work in workplaces in which efficiency is very carefully monitored and measured, and are thus likely to be an extreme example of reification, being on the same plane as the objects they move and organize all day long; and when the family itself has been disrupted, and many cannot get the essential support, love, from others. Perhaps this is why this is less the case among African Americans and Latinos, who are more embedded in communities that provide solidarity, the third form of recognition Axel identified. It is possible white working class men experience a deficit in all three forms of

recognition which according to the theory of recognition are essential to human beings. The theory of recognition explains this phenomena extremely well.

Honneth's thought show then is deeply relevant to our present times. It understands the moral deficits of our epoch and yet, it draws on resources contained in our life world to address the central predicaments of the present. It is a theory that is political in an oblique way.

Thinking as Hope 3. Finally, to give hope, one needs to not only to criticize what is wrong with our lives but also to transcend its structure by clarifying and furthering its core moral resource. This Honneth has accomplished in his magnum opus, *Freedom Right*.

The point of departure of this major book, is Hegel's claim that we understand all the varieties of the right in terms of the way they actualize freedom. This is the root of Honneth's theory: an institution or practice takes its legitimacy and determinacy in terms of how it actualizes freedom in better or worse fashion.

Honneth gives an analytical and historical overview of three conceptions of freedom he takes to have been at work in (at least Western) history. Negative freedom (freedom from interference by others) and reflexive freedom (self-determination, making one's own choices). However, interesting and important as those two versions of freedom are, it is only when he turns to the third form, social freedom, that his theory connects back to all his previous work. Social freedom which, unlike the first two, is an individual's freedom that can only be made real by his or her relationship to others. Social freedom is prior to all our other activities of detaching ourselves from that social reality, and negative and reflexive freedom turn out only to make sense when viewed as embedded in

social freedom. This makes all the difference for a conception of justice and even enables us to go back to the precedent example:

Justice must entail granting all members of society the opportunity to participate in institutions of recognition. This means that certain normatively substantive and thus 'ethical' institutions requiring legal security, state authority and civil support shift to the center of our idea of social justice. (p. 61)

In such a system of justice, negative freedom and reflexive freedom are required so that individuals may and can act on their unreflected preferences, that is, a sphere where there is good reason not to require us to give reasons for our acts when we are asked, or where we can at least focus on our own aims. The first two entitle us in delimited circumstances to retreat from the social world in order to explore the meaning and aims of our individual lives. The third, on the other hand, throws us squarely back into the social arena to give us a sphere of communicative action. In social freedom, we encounter each other in mutual recognition such that, when the practices are going well, each is recognized as a condition of the other's freedom.

Through his relentless analysis of the pathologies of capitalist modernity, his capacity to draw on the resources of our life world, and to further our normative horizon through freedom, Axel Honneth's thought offers that supreme quality of making the future a place we can inhabit.

Since Socrates we think of philosophy as a way of life, We cannot help evaluating philosophers by their life, by who they were. Socrates' serenity when he drank the hemlock did much to convince us that he lived through his death the same love of truth and reason he taught his disciples. Conversely, despite the fact *Emile ou de l'éducation* is a strikingly original and brilliant treatise, we cannot help wonder about the force of its message given the fact Rousseau gave away his 5 children to orphanage. Philosophers, more than writers, poets, or artists, are accountable to their ideas. And few philosophers embody a philosophical life more than Axel Honneth.

I met Axel Honneth in 2000; I was invited at the last minute at a conference on love organized by [Israelis](#); someone was sick and I was the person they called for as a last minute replacement. I was still an untenured assistant professor, and found myself in a conference in Elmau with Axel Honneth, Zizeck, Jean-Luc Marion, and other stars of philosophy I cannot remember right now. I was too self-conscious of my untenured status to approach or speak to any of them, but it was Axel who came and spoke to me after I delivered my paper, which was a presentation of my research on love and consumer culture. Axel thought this research might be relevant to the agenda of the group he was supervising in Frankfurt. **Not only did he speak to me, but he subsequently** invited me to deliver

a lecture at the Institut für Sozialforschung, in the library where the venerable figures of Adorno and Horkheimer had given so many seminars, and after that lecture, he decided to translate my first book *Der Konsum Der Romantik* in German, and engaged me in an intellectual dialogue that has not stopped to this day. My point is not me, of course, and not all the intellectual accomplishments I owe directly to Axel, rather my point is this: when I met Axel, I was teaching – I am still teaching-- in a highly militaristic society overwhelmingly controlled by Ashkenazi Israeli men. As a young woman, as a foreigner, and as an untenured professor, I had made a powerful experience of invisibility in Israel, the kind of invisibility that makes you feel always less important, valuable, or relevant than almost any other man around. It was a deluxe invisibility of course, since I was not working in Walmart but it was a powerful invisibility nonetheless. Axel Honneth played a crucial, major philosophical and therapeutic role in my biography, because he helped me name the invisibility that was ailing me. For reasons I will not get into, the concept of “recognition” helped me more than feminist theory understand my predicament. Axel and his theory of recognition helped me understand that invisibility is crucial to a theory of justice and to the good life, that it is essential to what it means to be at least moderately happy. The recognition Axel gave me was not the kind of casual “oh what an interesting book

you've written" one is sometimes fortunate to get. It was the recognition of a man oblivious to his stellar status, oblivious to my then untenured status, beyond the reification and mechanisms of invisibilization which academic hierarchy creates. It is to *his* recognition, I believe, that I owe the possibility of being here tonight to recognize, with you ladies and gentlemen the oeuvre of a human being whose impeccable morality, uncanny capacity to see and recognize others entirely pervades his thinking.

Conclusion:

Let me conclude with Ernst Bloch again, with Bloch and Honneth, of course. The best of philosophy, might be, as Bloch himself suggested "to bring philosophy to hope, as to a place in the world which is as inhabited as the best civilized land and as unexplored as the Antarctic." Axel Honneth has explored unexplored Antarctic territory – in forging so many new concepts, recognition, invisibility, social freedom—. But he helps us no less seize those resources to reconstruct civilized humanity from within the debris and havoc wrecked by capitalism. More than many Honneth enacts Bloch's dictum that *Philosophy will have conscience of tomorrow, commitment to the future, knowledge of hope, or it will have no more knowledge.*

