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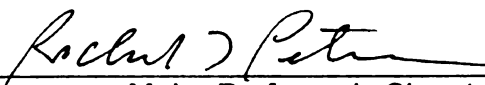dissertation entitled

MUTUAL RECOGNITION AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

presented by

JAMES ERIC LAMBERT   ,

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of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

MUTUAL RECOGNITION AND SOCIAL CONFLICT

By

James Eric Lambert

It has long been assumed that people engage in social conflict for distributive and

utilitarian reasons. Social thinkers have often explained social conflict by assuming that

people are motivated to engage in social struggle by economic self-interest, a view I call

economism. I propose an alternative interpretation of what prompts people to enter social

conflict, arguing that people are motivated by recognition demands at least as often as by

economic interests. To illustrate, I examine an economistic account of why many whites

in the U.S. oppose race-conscious social policies. To argue that whites oppose such

policies because they threaten white economic advantage *vis-à-vis* blacks is untenable. It

is ahistorical and hampered by a narrow notion of reason. Economism is better construed

as itself a form of identity or form of agency. Identities, relations, norms, and institutions

are constituted by historically contingent recognition relations. In the U.S., *whiteness* is a

form of agency and social relation, a form of identity constructed historically and infused

with privilege, authority, and status. Thus if whites rankle at social welfare or affirmative

action, I contend that such indignation is better interpreted as a recognition struggle than

as a defense of economic self-interest. The claims that some whites feel marginalized,

victimized or aggrieved should be taken seriously. But the threat they perceive, the

discomfort they feel, has its origin not in economic usurpation by blacks, but in the

increasing visibility of whiteness, as well as a growing awareness of its pretensions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The slave is a subject, subjected by others; the slaveholder is a subject, but he is the author of his own subjection. There is more truth in the saying, that slavery is a greater evil to the master than to the slave, than many, who utter it, suppose.

> Frederick Douglass
> *My Bondage and My Freedom*[1]

...It is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but...groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

> Martin Luther King
> "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

For the oppressors...it is always the oppressed (whom they obviously never call "the oppressed" but..."savages"... or "subversives") who are disaffected, who are "violent"...when they react to the violence of the oppressors.

> Paolo Freire
> *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*[2]

Over the past 30 years, the concepts of recognition and identity have achieved a

growing prominence in politics and social-political philosophy. Usually grouped under

the rubrics of multiculturalism and identity politics, theories of difference and putatively

new conceptions of subjectivity have been developed by postmodernists, post-

structuralists, feminists, critical race theorists, and critical social theorists. According to

the literature on, and the self-understanding of proponents of, multiculturalism and

identity politics, the 1960s and 1970s mark the decisive historical moment when identity

and demands for the recognition of difference gained salience as political and theoretical

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[1] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover, 1969), 105.
[2] Quoted from excerpt reproduced in David Barash ed., *Approaches to Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 142.

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concerns. [3] Second wave feminism, the Black Power movement, Stonewall, and anti-colonialist wars of liberation are important historical struggles over the meanings of race, gender and sexuality, no less than freedom and equality. Not surprisingly, the work of G. W. F. Hegel provides a theoretical touchstone for many attempts to understand and to justify moral and political claims articulated in the language of identity and recognition. While such theorists as Brian Calhoun, Axel Honneth, and Charles Taylor dispute this chronology[4] – arguing that 19th century labor struggles, as well as the Enlightenment effort to establish legal rights and equality, involved distinctive recognition demands as well – it is hard to deny that many contemporary theorists and social movements *understand themselves* to be concerned with identity and recognition in a way that is historically new.

The increasingly self-conscious focus on identity and recognition relations is, to a degree, underscored by recent political events. Consider the Supreme Court ruling (as well as continued legislative efforts in many States) aimed at restricting a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy; ongoing attempts to gain legal recognition for same sex marriages; and national demonstrations in April 2006 over immigration reform. In light of such conflicts, a mere glance at a newspaper is enough to convince oneself that identity and associated struggles for recognition constitute a significant source of social conflict. At stake in these struggles is not only, and perhaps not most importantly, a more just distribution of economic resources. Nor is each of the forms of conflict just cited

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[3] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princton University Press, 1990); Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Nancy Fraser, "Recognition without Ethics?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 2001 18:2-3, 21-42.

[4] See Taylor, ibid; Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995).

finally reducible to an appeal to be treated "just like everyone else," i.e., a traditional appeal to equal treatment on the basis, say, of human nature. The motives and goals of these different forms of conflict are complex (not simple and unitary) and not easily disentangled.

Of course, it would be a naïve oversimplification to construe forms of sexism, racism, or xenophobia as uniquely "cultural" or identity-based. Economic interests are involved as well. Corporations lobby to maintain a supply of cheap, exploitable labor, even as (some) American workers condemn immigrant laborers for "driving down wages." Economic interests and concerns with identity and justified forms of recognition overlap and intermingle to such a degree that the effort to characterize conflicts disjunctively, definitively as "about" one or the other, often seems artificial and reductionistic. The way economic interests and recognitive demands intersect can be further illustrated by reflecting on so-called "wedge issues." For just as journalists have noted the perpetual pique and indignation of the Religious Right in the U.S., so have activists and watchdog groups criticized the media for dwelling on "fluff" stories and "culture wars," stories which purportedly divert attention from and therefore obscure more substantial issues such as global warming, environmental degradation, militarism, and growing economic inequality.[5] Since social conflicts implicate and have consequences for both the economic interests and the self-understanding and value orientations of social agents, it is best to qualify the intersection of the economic and the recognitive with a cautious "to a degree."

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[5] See Al Gore, *The Assault on Reason* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007); Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter With Kansas?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2004)

In many cases, it would be difficult to conclude whether the actions of a social group or movement were motivated by economic interests, demands for recognition, or some combination of the two. Illegalizing abortion would have both economic and social consequences for women, just as a punitive immigration policy would have both economic and cultural consequences for Hispanics in the U.S. And so it is neither helpful nor necessary to divide the terrain of political practice and reflection into two exclusive categories: the economic-distributive on one side, the identity-recognitive on the other.

Yet it is toward such a bifurcation that debates between proponents and critics of identity theories have tended. Brian Barry and Todd Gitlin charge[6] theorists of identity politics and multiculturalism with neglecting questions of economic justice, egalitarianism, and universal values. Focusing so heavily on social identity and on the discourses, curricula, and practices that affect identity, they claim, ultimately obscures the reality of economic inequality. This criticism is not unwarranted. The ambivalent legacy of Foucault and post-structuralism is a case in point. While such theories illuminate various non- or extra-economic ways that social power conditions subjectivity, the tendency to focus exclusively on social structure and to reject subject-centered theory left these approaches normatively rudderless.[7] Theory *described* how individuals were "subjectified," "positioned" as racial or gendered subjects, but lacked the resources to evaluate those social processes. Similarly, Iris Marion Young's criticism of liberal

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[6] Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1995).

[7] Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), Chapter 1 "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions"; Susan B. Hekman, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Michel Foucault* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996) Chapter 2 "Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory"

theory's commitment to the "distributive paradigm" combined a re-conception of subjectivity with analysis of the ways in which social subjects experience oppression. On her view, examining questions of justice in solely distributive terms veils the oppressive features of social relations and institutions. Part of the reason that debates over how to understand (and how to understand the value of) identity and recognition relations reach an impasse is an overly narrow conception of identity. While theories of identity may have failed rigorously to confront economic inequality *in practice*, there is no reason *in principle* to think that they cannot do so. To insist on the significance of identity and mutual recognition, from the standpoints of morality and justice, in no way entails sacrificing a commitment to egalitarianism and economic justice.

One of the main contributions of identity theory to social-political thought has been to provide a conceptual framework with which to identify various forms of injustice or oppression experienced by persons, *insofar as* they are members of particular social groups. A feminist demand of equal pay for equal work is not simply a demand for fairer economic distribution, or a demand to treat likes alike. It is this, of course; but such a demand has cultural implications as well, inasmuch as women *as women* are paid unequally. To be demeaned or denied recognition because of one's membership in a social group, i.e., because of an aspect of one's public identity, is to be denied a form of treatment to which one is normatively entitled. Such experiences affect concrete individuals emotionally because they signify a rejection of or threat to one's self, one's individuality, and thus jeopardize a person's ability fully to participate in society. The focus on identity highlights the way that mutual recognition promotes or inhibits a person's ability freely to develop her identity, as well as the way that people, *qua*

members of social groups, experience justice or injustice, privilege or oppression. Because experiences of disrespect, humiliation, or exclusion directly threaten the sustainability of the identities of those affected, people who are disrespected or denied recognition are motivated to resist, that is, to engage in struggles aimed at gaining recognition or altering harmful forms of recognition.

Theories of identity and recognition in this way contribute to an understanding of an inadequately examined aspect of social conflict, namely, the motivation for participating in such struggles. They gesture at an answer to the question, Why do people protest injustice? Why do they join social movements to resist discrimination, challenge stereotypes, strike? Empirically, it seems undeniable that many social conflicts turn on identity claims and demands for recognition. Identity matters, and it matters in both a positive and a negative manner. Positively, the abilities, values, and traditions with which a person identifies are central to, largely constitutive of, her individuality. To be denied recognition – say, to be marginalized because of one's race – affects a person in an immediate, emotional way; can be experienced as an insult or form of humiliation; and can prompt distrust, shame, or defensiveness. Negatively, the abilities, values, and traditions with which a person does *not* identify, but which are imposed on or ascribed to a person, are also constitutive of individuality but (to use an existentialist locution) are so in a mode of *one's-not-being-so*. Even when recognized in a hurtful way, e.g., slighted because of one's race, a person may feel more independent, may define herself *as* a concrete individual, by rejecting given roles or challenging objectionable stereotypes. Thus the refusal to identify with ascribed qualities or imposed values can be liberating. Whether a person (or a social movement) struggles for or against the preservation of

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some value or practice, theories of identity suggest that the motivation to enter and participate in such struggles emerges from a person's (or persons') experience of, and judgments about, the quality of institutionally secured recognition relations.

My aim in this study is to develop an account of how struggles for recognition motivate social conflict. People are led to social conflict because of perceived threats to their identity; that is, they are motivated to social or political resistance when exposed to violence, humiliation, or exclusion. I want to note that I do not intend this to be a universal claim about motivation – an unqualified claim about what motivates each and every case of conflict. Instead, the conception of motivation I propose is meant to provide a theoretical framework for what theories of identity usually only suggest: namely, that many conflicts are, in reality, best conceived as struggles for recognition. My goal is to understand how it is that perceived threats to identity, either personal identity or a person's identity as a member of a group, can lead a person to participate in social resistance. I formulate my argument through an interpretation and critical appropriation of the identity-recognition social theory of Axel Honneth. Because Honneth provides a comprehensive framework for examining the link between social conflict and experiences of disrespect and denied recognition, and because that framework at the same time appreciates the weight of concerns about egalitarianism and distributive justice, his identity-recognition theory is more compelling than alternative identity political and multicultural theories.

I contrast my position with a conception of motivation that assumes the self-interested and economic character of social conflict. In what follows, I will call *economistic* the view that employs methodological individualism to explain social

interaction, and that conceives of motivation, action, and social struggle in terms of economic interests. Economism is a theory of motivation which maintains that self-interest, specifically economic self-interest, underlies and governs individual preferences and decisions as well as social interaction and struggles (e.g., the labor movement, the civil rights movement).[8] I noted above that identity theories are sometimes criticized for ignoring economic conflict. Assessing the merits of this criticism is important. Yet it seems to me that prominent strains in both classical liberalism and modern political thought have assumed that economic interest is not merely one of many possible motivations for conflict, but is instead the most fundamental and important motivation. There is a widely accepted social-ontological assumption, perhaps clearest in Hobbes and Locke but also in contemporary rational choice theory, that human beings are by nature self-interested, and that the nature of this self-interest is economic. There is a strain of liberalism that assumes that life plans, relationships, and decisions are motivated above all by self-preservation, or rather, by the pursuit of personal economic well-being. So, the aim of my project is not only to show that disrespect and denials of recognition motivate social conflict, which in itself is not an especially provocative claim; but, equally important, to show that an identity-recognition conception of motivation provides a *better understanding* of social conflict than an economistic account. Hence, I argue that the motivation for engaging in social conflict is *better conceived* as a struggle for recognition, than as a self-interested pursuit of economic well-being.

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[8] I use *economism* as a term of criticism. The thinkers I describe as *economistic*, e.g., David Wellman, whose theory I examine in chapter 3, do not employ the term *economism*, or describe their positions as *economistic*. My usage of the term is intended to pick out reductionist assumptions and tendentious reasoning. In this way, the use of the term *economism* parallels the use of the term *scientism*, which aimed, not to criticize the totality of scientific inquiry and practice, but to question a particular conception of scientific practice that relied on hypertrophic assumptions.

Liberalism is not monolithic, of course, and I do not mean to imply that economism is an unavoidable feature of liberal theory. One would be hard pressed to find a contemporary theorist who unqualifiedly embraced "atomic individualism" or a Benthamite utilitarianism. It is not my intention to criticize liberalism as such, or the Enlightenment ideals associated with it. Insofar as I argue against a position, it will be against the specific social-ontological presuppositions and mode of thinking about personhood characteristic of economism.

In arguing that the motivation for social conflict is often better understood as a struggle for recognition than as a pursuit of economic self-interest, I follow the line of thought developed by Honneth in his *Struggle for Recognition*.[9] It is here, chiefly by returning to the early work of Hegel, that Honneth elaborates his recognition-based social theory. As do theorists of identity politics and multiculturalism, Honneth affirms that individuality requires socialization, or rather, that identity formation presupposes reciprocal recognition. But, going beyond the bare assertion that socialization and recognition are necessary for identity formation, Honneth argues that social reproduction itself is the result of recognition relations.

Social institutions stabilize consensual norms, and in this way structure and govern the processes of socialization and interaction through which persons develop identities and become concrete individuals. For Honneth, the norms embodied in social institutions are the results of prior struggles for recognition (say, demands to be recognized as a moral equal, a rights-bearing individual, a member of a community). Once these norms have gained practical force through social consensus, social agents

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[9] Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: the Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996). Hereafter referred to as *SR*.

subsequently experience them as justifiable expectations to be recognized. There is a dialectical relation between individual and collective demands for certain forms of institutional recognition and, on the other hand, the type of individuality made possible by existing institutions. A society's normative and institutional framework, then, is grounded in recognition relations as well as reproduced through processes of socialization and social conflict.

By social conflict, I mean forms of interaction wherein norms, values, practices, and social meanings and expectations are publicly examined and either defended or contested. While conflict can manifest as violence or coercive force, I use the term to refer to communicative and nonviolent efforts to alter public perception, to criticize power relations, or to question or change laws, policies, or economic practices. A conflict involving a demand to be recognized (or to be recognized less disrespectfully) thus possesses both a material and symbolic character. Although part of the purpose of a struggle may be to eliminate stereotypical language or demeaning media representations, these symbolic forms of disrespect are not easily separated from the material settings and practices that permit or even encourage them. Because recognition relations are structured institutionally and sustained by regulations, laws, practices, and so on, it is through institutional change that recognitive demands must be resolved. Thus, recognition relations and correlative conflicts exist in a reciprocal relation with institutions. Institutions codify forms of recognition and identity, while recognitive demands, insofar as they challenge customary forms of recognition, generate an impetus for institutional change.

Honneth maintains that historically contingent recognition relations structure a person's identity. The self is not a metaphysical given, existing prior to and independent of experiences, relations, and institutional settings. Instead, a person's identity is structured relationally; or more precisely, structured by forms of recognition relations that have emerged as a result of historical change and the institutional codification of norms. Two implications follow from this claim. First, not only is it mistaken to think of identity as pre-given, but it is inappropriate to think of identity as unitary, transparent, or "atomic." To conceive identity as historical and structural is to acknowledge that the self is complex, plural, or, as Honneth commonly says, "differentiated." Of course, to reject a conception of identity as unitary does not entail denying that identity is *unified* in some manner. In fact, the claim that identity is "differentiated" implies the opposite: that the different traits and abilities that comprise a person's sense of self must be integrated, or actively unified, before a coherent and distinctive identity is achieved.

The second implication is that there is no *ahistorical* and *a priori* structure of selfhood or identity. Honneth's assertion that the *modern* structure of identity is differentiated into three forms of self-relation – confidence, respect, and esteem – is to be taken as an historical (i.e., contingent) rather than as a metaphysical (i.e., necessary) claim. This implies that a person's demand to be recognized as a moral equal, or to be treated with *respect* in the Kantian sense, is not justified on metaphysical grounds (say, because she is a rational entity who freely determines and wills the principles on which she acts). Rather, Honneth argues that modern conceptions of autonomy and moral respect grew out of actual historical struggles (e.g., the French Revolution) and gained intellectual as well as normative legal force as a result of communicatively mediated

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institutional change. Consequently, one cannot speak of *the* structure of identity in abstraction from social practices, roles, and relations, a society's institutional organization, and so on.

The type of social conflict I examine in this paper is racial conflict in the U.S., or more exactly, anti-black racism among whites. I develop my thesis concerning the motivation for engaging in social conflict by contrasting economistic and recognitive accounts of what prompts white resistance to race-conscious social policies and practices. In this way, I show that the recognitive account offers an understanding of racial conflict that is more nuanced, historically sensitive, and philosophically defensible than the economistic alternative. My purpose, however, is neither to develop a theory of white racism nor a theory of racial identity.[10] Race and racial conflict instead serve as examples of social conflict, which I examine from the perspective of motivation. While it will be necessary to venture substantive claims about white identity and about race relations, such claims are intended only to elucidate more general conceptual points about the nature of motivation, points which could equally well be fleshed out through analyses of gender, religious, ethnic or class identity (and concomitant relationships and social struggles).

My reasons for analyzing racial conflict, in particular, are historical. The social and legal construction of race and racial categories in the U.S. has not only been central

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[10] Valuable works on the construction of white identity include the following, some of which contribute to the relatively recent field of Whiteness Studies: David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991) and *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (London: Verso, 1997); George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006); Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, ed., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Bernard Boxill, ed., *Race and Racisim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) "Introduction," 1-42.

in shaping cultural notions and ideals of what it means to be "an American" but, equally important, has influenced legal reasoning, political decision-making, and economic policy. Although race and racial categories are social constructions and not natural kinds, they have nonetheless obtained social objectivity, i.e., have become part of the fabric of modern societies. In the U.S. especially, it is hard to deny that the categories "white" and "black" shape how people experience their physical abilities, occupational skills, political values and cultural activities, as well as the social relations and conflicts that involve blacks and whites as social groups. Examining racial conflict with a view to linking disrespect (or denied recognition) and motivation to engage in social conflict thus allows me to illuminate the way recognitive expectations emerge historically, are internalized by subjects through processes of socialization, and achieve social efficacy, commonly as forms of conflict. While the same points could be explored *vis-à-vis* other social categories, the specific color-based system of racial classification so entrenched in and definitive of social reality in the U.S. – according to which whiteness has long been taken to exemplify personhood and blackness non-personhood – provides a localized, isolable topic of research.

David T. Wellman's *Portraits of White Racism*[11] provides an example of an economistic explanation of racism. His thesis is that white racism is a defense of racial privilege, where "privilege" is shorthand for economic advantage, so that racism at bottom is alleged to consist of efforts by whites to maintain their access to and control over "scarce resources." For Wellman, racial conflict arises when proposals for social change aim at remedying racial inequality, and in this way threaten (or are perceived to

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[11] David T. Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Hereafter referred to as *PWR*.

threaten) the economic well-being of whites. This account is economistic because it assumes that economic self-interest is the wellspring of social relations, interaction, and conflict. Concrete individuals, and groups *qua* aggregates of such individuals, are said to be motivated to engage in social conflict not by moral considerations, but by the more basic imperative of self-preservation and material well-being.

By contrast, I argue that what motivates social interaction and conflict is the need to achieve and sustain the integrity of identity. In chapter 2, I will explicate what I mean by the important concept, integrity of identity. For present purposes, the integrity of identity refers to the precarious and contingent ability of a social agent to establish a relatively stable, unified, and autonomous relation to self. As I elaborate later, such a self-relation involves conceiving of identity as a reflexive subjectivity with self-understanding. Because identity formation requires reciprocal recognition, successful individualization – or the degree to which persons are able reflexively and coherently to develop their identity – is bound up with the quality of recognition relations. A corollary can thus be argued: to humiliate or systematically disrespect a person is to assault that person; the terrain of the assault may be psychological (e.g., slurs) or physical (e.g., violence), but the object of the assault is the person's self-experience as a social and moral agent. Disrespect is experienced by the affected as an attack on her social existence, her integrity as a subject. For that reason, disrespect typically generates in the victim aversive emotions (shame, anger, etc.), reactions which motivate resistance against the source of misrecognition. Returning to the question of anti-black racism among whites: an identity-recognition account of motivation suggests that if whites resist social welfare, affirmative action, or reparations, it is because they experience such policies as

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threats to their identity, or take them to embody norms and practices that would deny them forms of recognition to which they feel justly (as well as morally) entitled.

In this light, I want to explain why I began this Introduction with quotes from Douglass, King, and Freire. Frederick Douglass's observation that "slavery is a greater evil to the master than to the slave" is provocative, counterintuitive, and insightful. The claim shifts attention from the obvious injustice experienced by those persons held as slaves, to the ways in which the slave system also harmed slave owners. As a social group, whites inarguably benefited from slavery. But as Douglass carefully details, the cultural and political privileges as well as the economic advantages enjoyed by whites came at a cost. Familial relations were poisoned by violence and mistrust; religious beliefs were disfigured in an attempt to rationalize blatant injustice; economic inequality among whites was sustained by stoking resentment of freed slaves. The social world created by (and for) whites *as a group*, effectively planted the seeds of their own cultural and moral depravity. While congratulating themselves for their status as the world's first modern democracy, as well as for their Judeo-Christian moral rectitude, white Americans discovered themselves bound, *legally* bound to the degradation and oppression of other human beings. And, as Douglass reminds us, those chains were all the more durable for being self-imposed.

The subjection of whites to a racist institutional framework is therefore internal, self-imposed, a result of their own volition and action. In this way, Douglass gestures toward a conception of an intersubjectively constituted moral community. By pointing out that whites were morally harmed by slavery even as their economic and political interests were satisfied, he intimates that values, meanings, and expectations are not

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purely internal and private matters that social agents pursue independently of others; and, moreover, suggests that moral experience is not exhausted by the category of self-interest. On the contrary, he illuminates the fact that well-being and a sense of social belonging are contingently linked to embodiment, to the exercise of agency, and to the types of social institutions and practices in which social agents participate.

King makes a similar point when he notes that morally acceptable behavior and norms differ relative to the perspective adopted: "groups tend to be more immoral than individuals." A person may privately feel that a joke, tradition, or law is offensive and unjust. But when that individual views or discusses the custom or law as a member of a group, as a white, say, he may suppress his previous misgivings or find a justificatory rationalization. Douglass illustrates such moral dissonance in his recollection of Sophia Auld, who, when first directly exposed to slavery, treated her slave with kindness and compassion; but, after being rebuked by her husband for not upholding the norms and customs of the slave system, grew increasingly embittered, morose, and detached from her husband as well as her slave (i.e., Douglass). As an individual, Sophia Auld was warm, magnanimous; as a member of the social group, slave-holding whites, she was curt, quick to anger, and ungenerous.

But King also expresses lucidly a proposition at the heart of my project: namely, that moral progress is achieved through struggle. People who belong to, or are members of, socially dominant groups – whether as white, male, or heterosexual – experience social reality primarily, though not solely or exhaustively, through historically conditioned categories, meanings, norms, and practices. But those values and practices are not typically apprehended as contingent and historical. More often they are regarded

and *lived through* as merely given, the way "things always have been" – or rather, as "natural." When racist categories and practices systematically privilege and advantage one social group *vis-à-vis* another, and when such inequality structures social institutions, relations and practices, then what is perceived as unjust from the first-personal perspective can be hidden from view, rendered invisible from the third-personal perspective. In spite of personal qualms, then, people who belong to dominant social groups can (and, I assume in this project, typically do) perceive demands made by subordinate groups for greater equality or freedom as signs of ingratitude, or as self-evidently unjust, threatening, or "unnatural."

Consequently, King's assertion that privileged groups rarely surrender their privilege *voluntarily* need not be interpreted to mean that the members of such groups clearly apprehend, or that they explicitly understand, that the preservation of their status and power *depends on* the oppression of others. Such an interpretation would be question-begging and implausible, since it would assume that whites were self-consciously aware that their privilege required inequality and oppression. A more plausible interpretation, I contend, is that dominant groups do not give up their power because they perceive the demand to do so as unjust, as an unwarranted "power grab" by minorities. On this interpretation, if they do not voluntarily surrender their privilege, it is because their social world has been historically shaped so as to allow them *merely to assume* that their privilege, power, and economic advantage are the result of a natural social order. Put differently, members of dominant groups generally view the social world as justified (even if it is cavalierly conceded that "no society is perfect") and view challenges to or encroachments on the norms and practices of that social world as suspect

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and impetuous. It is unlikely, therefore, that members of a dominant group will reform themselves. As I have argued, it is quite plausible that, typically, they fail to see the need for change. So it falls to the oppressed to insist on social change. In any case, members of subordinated groups are more apt to perceive and feel the need for social change, since it is they who cope with injustice as a matter of course.

And yet, as Paolo Freire points out and as I argue below, when members of subordinated and oppressed groups demand social change, their claims are frequently met with derision and distrust by members of the dominant group. I allude to the reason for such suspicion above: from the standpoint of the dominant group, the constellation of social practices, expectations, roles and norms that constitute their way of life has been suddenly disrupted, so that what was previously taken for granted is now called into question and rendered problematic. But because the social status quo was experienced as "natural" – and, thus, as "justified" – challenges to the norm arising from groups claiming to be demeaned or marginalized are likely to be regarded as unjust, insulting, or even incomprehensible. Or to return to Freire's observation above: when the oppressed confronts the oppressor with his responsibility for perpetuating (or benefiting from) oppression, the oppressor, rather than concede his complicity, is apt to turn the tables and assume the posture of aggrieved victim, accusing the oppressed of laziness, criminality, etc. A perverse consequence of this phenomenology is that, in societies marked by oppression, it should come as no surprise that members of the dominant group feel morally justified in contemning members of subordinated groups for resisting their own oppression. Indeed, when the oppressed speak or act against oppression, the oppressors commonly experience *themselves* as the wronged party.

It is this phenomenon that I examine in my project, specifically by developing an account of why white Americans oppose such policies as social welfare and affirmative action. I contend that white resistance to race-conscious social policies stems less from utilitarian concerns about economic distribution and more from an historically established sense of political, cultural, and moral entitlement. The importance of such an interpretation, in part, is that it helps to explain why members of dominant groups, purportedly those best served by unequal and unjust social arrangements, can nonetheless experience themselves as morally wronged or threatened (say, as victims of discrimination or exclusion) when those arrangements are questioned. My thesis, that what motivates people to engage in social conflict is perceived disrespect or denied recognition, in this way gains a rather novel hue. For while there is ample literature examining how members of subordinated groups experience social disrespect and exclusion, and are thereby motivated to resist such injustice, there are few studies that analyze the experience of members of dominant groups in the same way. And this is the analysis I aim to provide by reflecting on race relations in the U.S. More exactly, I want to understand white opposition to affirmative action and social welfare, not as a disguised means of protecting economic advantage, but as a reaction against what many whites take to be a political and moral wrong. So, my study examines the experience of injustice from the perspective of the dominant (racially dominant, in this case) group.

Seen in this light, my thesis constitutes a specific contribution to understanding the white backlash against the political gains of the civil rights movement. In "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect,"[12] Axel Honneth notes an increase in the number of neo-

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[12] Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect: Situating Critical Theory Today," in Peter Dews, ed., *Habermas: a Critical Reader* (Malden.: Blackwell Publishers, 1999)

Nazi youths in Germany and wonders what experiences of disrespect or exclusion drove them to participate in such a group. Correlatively, he muses about the type of recognition that would be required to restore to them a sense of social belonging. The question I formulate here is similar. But instead of asking why disaffected youth turn to violent subcultures, I ask why members of the racially dominant group, who may be culturally mainstream and who belong to the social group historically regarded as the moral and political norm in the U.S., would express such opposition and sometimes hostility to race-conscious political policies. Put more summarily: why a white backlash to the civil rights movement, a struggle that embodies political and moral progress in a country scarred by racial oppression? The answer I propose is consonant with the conclusions of Charles Mills: that white resentment is fueled, not principally by conflicts over economic interests, but by an entrenched sense of "white skin privilege," of the entitlements and social status conferred solely by virtue of being white.[13] Distributive struggles are undeniably an aspect of such struggles. But economic self-interest does not capture the basic motivations underlying racial division. Racial conflict in the U.S. is better understood, specifically, as a struggle over the meaning of personhood.

While perhaps counterintuitive, my approach aims at understanding, not excusing, forms of injustice such as racism. By construing social conflicts as struggles over recognition, I hope to illuminate the moral dimensions of social struggle and historical change. If it is plausible to understand white resistance to race-conscious policies as motivated by perceived disrespect or unfair treatment, then – even if that perception is flawed or demonstrably false – the full *moral* intricacies and depth of the struggle can be

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[13] A claim frequently argued for in Charles Mills, *From Class to Race: Essays in White Marxism and Black Radicalism* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003) and *The Racial Contract*.

brought into view. There are good political reasons why this is desirable, among them the goal of identifying precisely what moral and political issues are at stake in order to develop more effective political strategies. Aside from the value of forming a more lucid and pointed public discourse concerning race than currently exists, there is the additional (strategic and moral) value of enriching the self-understanding of members of the dominant group. If it is plausible to argue that whites are suspicious of race-conscious policies, not primarily because of the economic threat but because they apprehend, however vaguely, that the policies threaten their privilege and status, then heightening awareness of their complicity in a racial hierarchy would force them – or afford them the opportunity – to engage in a truer and more transparent moral reflection about the values, norms, and principles they claim to honor.[14]

In chapter 2, I discuss the distinction between recognition and redistribution. I begin by reviewing various attempts to understand the connection between social conflict and the reasons and motivation for engaging in such struggles. After examining classical liberal and Marxist approaches, I introduce the identity-recognition social theory of Axel Honneth in order to demonstrate, at least in a preliminary way, its advantages in addressing social conflict.

In chapter 3, I present David T. Wellman's theory of racism, which exemplifies the view I call economism. For Wellman racism is a structural phenomenon ensuring that white economic advantage is maintained at the expense of blacks. Racial conflict is

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[14] My suggestion is consonant with Bernard Boxill's when he argues that social programs designed to alleviate the poverty and isolation of blacks should be defended on moral grounds, not strategic ones. Public discussion should appeal to principles of justice, in other words, rather than to self-interest. See Bernard Boxill, "The Underclass and the Race/Class Issue," in Bill E. Lawson, ed., *The Underclass Question* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 19-32.

conceived as a struggle over economic resources. Given the fact of scarcity, Wellman avers that whites resist race-conscious forms of social change because the latter would threaten their economic security. In this context, I define the concept of economism, identify the features that make Wellman's theory of racism economistic, and conclude the chapter by developing internal and external criticisms of the theory.

In chapter 4, I present the identity-recognition alternative to economism on which the defense of my thesis rests. The aim of this chapter is expository. I begin by discussing the historical and conceptual genesis of recognition theory in two early works by G. W. F. Hegel, then trace the development of the concept of recognition through the work of the early Frankfurt School and Jurgen Habermas. The relevance of Hegel's conception of mutual recognition to the question of motivation for engaging in social conflict is given its clearest formulation in the social theory of Axel Honneth. So, in effect, I interpret and defend a thesis that Honneth has been developing for nearly two decades. But I do not accept the latter's conceptual framework whole cloth. Rather, I critically appropriate Honneth's theory with a view to illuminating features of racial conflict in the U.S.

In chapter 5 I defend my thesis that the motivation for entering social conflict is better conceived by recognition theory than by economistic theory. I critique economism by showing that it is not only inadequate as a theory of motivation but is conceptually untenable as well. The strategy I employ consists in linking race relations in the U.S. to the complex structure of modern identity, as well as to the recognitive expectations underlying and normatively governing identity formation. I draw on contemporary sociological studies about white attitudes concerning social welfare in order, on the one

hand, to dispute the assertion that white opposition to race-conscious social policies has little to do with identity or prejudice; and, on the other, to support my claim that such opposition is motivated by white fears that affirmative action, social welfare, and so on, would deny them rights and privileges to which they feel morally entitled.

To defend the claim that social programs intended to benefit blacks are perceived by whites as forms of disrespect, and thus motivate opposition, I focus on the forms of recognition Honneth calls *legal* and *solidaristic* relations. Given the history of racial domination in the U.S., which includes inherited social privilege and economic advantage, programs such as social welfare are perceived as threats to white identity to the extent that they jeopardize privileges to which whites feel entitled. It is the perception that race-conscious social policies violate the expectations underlying legal and solidaristic relations that explains why whites *as whites* feel threatened by such programs, and explains why they are motivated to resist them.

In chapter 6, I reply to objections and discuss political implications. As I mention at various points in the following chapters, Honneth is not always the clearest expositor of his own views. As a result of his sometimes incomplete or obscure argumentation, commentators have posed objections that, on a clearer rendering of Honneth's position, do little to unsettle his basic claims. Uncharitable or inaccurate interpretations notwithstanding, I identify arguments and concepts that require more rigorous explication, and suggest argumentative strategies that would strengthen the force and persuasiveness of Honneth's insights. In chapter 7, I offer concluding remarks.

Chapter 2

Situating the Identity-Recognition Conception of Motivation

The aim of my project is to develop a conception of what motivates people to

engage in social conflict. I argue that social conflict should be understood as a struggle

over recognition. The thesis that social conflict is motivated by demands to be

recognized, or in some cases to be recognized differently, provides a sorely under-

appreciated alternative to a more widespread way of thinking about social struggle in the

liberal tradition. Specifically, the thesis challenges and offers a better, more flexible

mode of analysis and interpretation than economism. Economism is the view that a

person's principal motivation for participating in social life, whether economic

competition or political activity, is best explained in terms of the calculation of economic

self-interest. By contrast, I propose that people are motivated to engage in political

action, which at times includes social protest or opposition, as a consequence of having

experienced systematic disrespect or of having been denied forms of recognition to which

they feel morally entitled. Put differently, what often motivates social conflict is the

demand by people to have their identity recognized, or the demand to be recognized

differently, as when, say, members of minority groups resist practices or laws felt to be

degrading or insulting. My intent is to demonstrate that in many important cases, an

identity-recognition theory is more attuned to what prompts social dissent than an

economistic account, and for this reason is better able to speak to the question of

motivation.

Towards the end of the chapter, I introduce Honneth's identity-recognition theory and try to show that it possesses a greater interpretive breadth and flexibility than other social theories. In this context, I augment Honneth's position by explicating a conception of identity, which I then use to shed light on the normative content of the concepts of motivation and recognition. Although the concept of identity formation is central to Honneth's argumentation concerning the structure of modern identity, he neglects directly to explicate a conception of identity. In order to strengthen the conceptual links between identity, recognition, and motivation to enter social struggle, I develop a conception of identity that is consistent with Honneth's argumentation. In the meantime, I discuss two prominent social theoretic traditions, namely classical liberalism and Marxism, with a view to identifying their limitations in grasping the sources of social conflict. More exactly, I want to show that often, though not unavoidably, both classical liberalism and Marxism remain too wedded to economistic presuppositions, and that consequently their understanding of what motivates social struggle is overly tendentious and one-dimensional.

Classical Liberalism and Marxism

In order to show that an identity-recognition theory affords greater flexibility in making sense of *what actually drives people* to enter social struggle, and that such an analysis constitutes an under-appreciated alternate understanding of social struggle, I begin by examining conceptual tendencies in classical liberalism and Marxism. My aim is not comprehensively to critique either liberalism or Marxism. Rather, it is to sketch a

composite, against which I can later contrast and identify advantages of an identity-recognition approach.

Before developing this contrast, it is necessary to clarify what I mean by liberalism and Marxism, and what my expository aims are with respect to them. As tempting as it is to speak sweepingly about liberalism and Marxism, neither social theory is monolithic, so neither yields to summary characterizations or categorical pronouncements. To switch metaphors: each form of theory is polyvocal, comprising a variety of theoretical positions, which may share basic assumptions and concepts but nonetheless differ in important aspects. On the side of liberal theory, while the individual remains the unit of analysis for conceptualizing rights and duties, it is clear that the Hobbesian individual is only distantly related to the Hegelian "I that is a We." Indeed, under the title of liberalism fall the various figures of Hobbes and Kant, Mill and Nozick, Hayek and Habermas, and such positions as libertarianism, multiculturalism, and welfare liberalism. On the side of Marxist theory, though a form of analysis focused on social groups and power relations remains fundamental, it is clear that an Althusserian conception of ideology only tenuously resembles a Lukacsian concept of reification. And, as with liberalism, there is such a panoply of thinkers and intellectual points of view grouped under the title of Marxism that it can become a challenge to state exactly what features establish a viewpoint as Marxist. As a result, any attempt to speak about liberalism or Marxism, in general terms, must rely on a certain idealization of those theories, or on a distillation of features relevant to one's expository aims.

Moreover, I do not intend to formulate criticisms of liberalism and Marxism. Although part of the tangential interest of my project is the way that it relates to

contemporary debates in political theory over how best to frame concepts of justice, and *inter alia* conceptions of injustice and oppression, I will not enter into debates about the merits or weaknesses of rival conceptions. My goal in examining liberalism and Marxism is rather to illuminate some of the ways in which an identity-recognition theory better captures the phenomenological core of putative experiences of injustice. And so, far from constituting a rejection or a criticism of other political theories, my argumentation can be viewed as complementary to liberalism and Marxism, or as an enrichment and deepening of the ability of these theories to think about social conflict with resources less committed to the utilitarian-inflected vocabulary of interests.

I should note that this argumentative strategy is consistent with Honneth's approach, which has long consisted of an engagement with rather than a rejection of liberal theory. In a recent essay,[15] Honneth and Anderson contrast identity-recognition and rights-based conceptions of justice and argue that the latter provides an inadequate basis for meaningfully protecting the autonomy of embodied subjects. While acknowledging the importance of rights for a theory of justice, Honneth and Anderson maintain that an identity-recognition theory offers a fuller and more finely-grained understanding of the vulnerabilities of human beings, and in this way sheds light on the capabilities, competences, and needs that underlie and support autonomy. This contrast between identity-recognition and rights-based conceptions of justice further articulates the work begun in Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition*, where he juxtaposed recognition theory to the atomistic and strategic model of social interaction formulated by Hobbes

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[15] Joel Anderson and Axel Honneth, "Autonomy, Vulnerability, Recognition and Justice," in John Christman and Joel Anderson, ed., *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism, New Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77-100.

and Machiavelli. In *SR*, Honneth explicates[16] the thesis that social conflict should be seen as a moral struggle for recognition and not merely as a strategic effort to ensure self-preservation; and it is that thesis that I want to develop and defend. More precisely, in the remainder of this chapter I will show that strains of classical liberalism and Marxism are too committed to an economistic conception of social interaction and conflict. In classical liberalism especially, the model of self-interested individualism, while not ubiquitous, is nonetheless a recurring assumption, which, if too swiftly or uncritically accepted as a unit of analysis, can incline social inquiry to misconstrue and in some cases even distort the nature of social interaction and conflict.

It is almost a commonplace to associate classical liberalism with the values of personal freedom, human rights, legal and political equality, and distributive justice. On this view, a view standardly associated with thinkers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Mill, the concrete individual is regarded as the relevant political agent. Rational, volitional, morally equal to each other *qua* human, concrete individuals are conceived as rights-bearing moral agents whose autonomy is honored by means of a social contract, which ensures the universal observance of such rights as freedom of speech and belief, property acquisition, participation in political decision-making, and so on. Social justice is measured by the degree to which persons are able to pursue their own conception of the good, choosing in accord with personal preference and interest, and free from interference by others. Politically this requires institutions that allow free and equal participation in political life and public will formation; and economically it requires

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[16] Axel Honneth, *SR*, 7-10.

institutions that secure the fair (which is not to say equal) distribution of opportunities and resources.

It has become equally commonplace, on the other hand, to critique classical liberalism for its conception of atomic individualism, its formalistic and abstract understanding of freedom and equality, and its commitment to a distributivist notion of justice and social struggle. Political and social theorists, as well as social movements, have urged a reevaluation of some of the central tenets of political liberalism. While personal freedom is often cited as a core liberal value, it has been argued by Marx,[17] critical social theorists, and C. B. MacPherson that the liberal conception of freedom is inflected economically, so that the value of liberty is effectively assimilated to the freedom to secure one's material (i.e., economic) well-being. The assimilation of freedom to the economic is shown by the normative value attached to property rights in liberal theory – from Hobbes to Locke, and Hayek to Nozick – and constitutes the core of MacPherson's thesis of "possessive individualism."[18] Yet, as feminists, race and multicultural theorists have pointed out, not all forms of injustice translate into a distributive grammar or have a distributive solution; the propensity to interpret social conflict in distributivist terms risks obscuring or distorting the various ways that persons experience social oppression and marginalization.[19] The concept of rights continues to evolve, also, in part as a result of the dialogue between liberalism and identity theorists.

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[17] To give only one summary example, see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Signet Classic, 1998), 65-74.

[18] C. B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[19] Iris Marion Young, for example, proposes a complex concept of oppression in order to acknowledge economic inequality differs in fundamental ways from sexist subordination or racial exclusion.

Honneth and Ingram[20] detail how rights have been extended inwardly, on one hand, as

the range of freedoms and protections to which people are entitled has increased; and

outwardly, on the other, as already recognized rights are extended to new groups.

But as I mentioned above, liberalism is not monolithic. If the Hobbesian

individual is conceived as "springing up like a mushroom" and the Lockean as unusually

prepossessed and self-reliant, the Hegelian individual is relational and the Rawlsian

importantly reliant on "self-respect," which is viewed as an inherently social "primary

good." In fact, studies by Anthony Appiah[21] and Uday Singh Mehta[22] argue that the

image of the liberal subject as an hermetically self-contained interest-calculator does not

properly apply even to those prototypically classical liberals, Mill and Locke. A brief

review of their main theses will provide me an opportunity to highlight the basic

limitations of classical liberalism's ability to disclose and yield insight into the

motivations underlying social conflict. Interestingly enough, I propose that even if we

grant Appiah and Mehta's chief claim, namely that Mill and Locke conceived of

personhood in a more psychologically complex and relational manner than is commonly

acknowledged, the conceptual commitments that limit liberalism's ability to grasp

intersubjectivity, or to theorize the social as a field of relations, remain unaltered at the

level of social premises. Classical liberalism's concept of the subject, of self-interest as

universal motivator, and of justice as fair distribution of social goods, collectively

diminish its ability to identify and speak to the wellsprings of social struggle.

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[20] See Young, ibid, for what is, in my view, still the best exposition and defense of such views. A more recent work that addresses the same body of issues, though in a tone more conciliatory toward liberalism, is David Ingram, *Group Rights: Reconciling Equality and Difference* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

[21] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)

[22] Uday Singh Mehta, *The Anxiety of Freedom: Imagination and Individuality in Locke's Political Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992)

To spell out the conceptual difficulties of a standard liberal conception of individuality, I begin by reflecting on Appiah's argument that Mill was more of a social, i.e., relational thinker than is commonly supposed.[23] He attempts to do this by pointing out that Mill well recognized and emphasized the human need for socialization. Because he recognized this, it is not true that he was an atomic individualist or believed that people were born as already individuated persons. Mehta makes a similar point with respect to Locke.[24] She argues that Locke fully acknowledged that humans needed the sort of cultivation afforded by institutions – indeed, Locke, like others during the 17th century, distrusted the passions and the undisciplined imagination. One was not born an individual; rather one became one, principally through education. It is arguable, in fact, that Hobbes was less rigidly individualist than is usually thought, since he affirms that the natural passions have to be restrained by a centralized state power and system of law. In forfeiting one's natural rights, on condition that others do likewise, everyone equally secures her self-interest; but the important thing to note is that one did this in relation to others. In short, then, the case can be made that three of the most prominent classical liberals understood that human beings needed certain forms of socialization, required cultivation and habituation through a well-structured set of institutions.

In her study of John Locke, for example, Mehta observes that, like other Enlightenment figures, Locke viewed persons as naturally free, equal and rational. It is a mark of the rationality of persons that they be capable of apprehending and governing their behavior (as well as their relations with others) in accord with the "laws of nature," among which are the rights of private property and ownership of one's labor power. But

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[23] Appiah, *op. cit.*, see especially "The Ethics of Individuality," 1-35 and "The Demands of Identity," 62-113.
[24] Mehta, *op. cit.*, see especially "Molding Individuality: Direction and Compromise," 119-167.

Locke also appreciated that humans are not unerringly rational; the "untutored" imagination is subject to whim and fantasy, and the passions are often unpredictable and capricious. For this reason, part of the political problem for Locke consisted of identifying institutional norms and structures suitable for the cultivation and training of social agents. Humans required habituation and shaping – the inculcation of rational patterns of thought and action – which was to be achieved by liberal education and institutions. Appiah argues that John Stuart Mill, too, stressed the need for socialization in human development. As is well known, happiness for Mill includes more than the presence of pleasure and absence of pain. Enfolded in happiness, i.e., originally a *means to* happiness which subsequently becomes *part of the end* of happiness, are such goods as friendship, meaningful relationships, creativity, and the experience of autonomy. But self-determination is not the purely private experience of a social monad. Rather, it presupposes a social world, that is, institutionalized practices, customs and norms, relations and roles, within which milieu a human being articulates her individuality and learns to exercise autonomy. Since Mill appreciates the human need for socialization, he construes the concrete individual, not as a monadic isolate, but as a social, dialogical subject.

My purpose is not to dispute these characterizations of Locke and Mill. For one thing, the argumentative aims of Mehta and Appiah's works differ from my own. For another, my present concern is with the distinction between socialization and intersubjectivity, which is a key distinction for appreciating the force of the concepts of recognition and identity and which tends to be collapsed in discussions of the social (or relational) nature of individuality, identity, and so on. Simply put, the concepts of

socialization and intersubjectivity are not equivalent. The latter concept tries to explicate the conditions of the possibility of a subject's independence and social objectivity *as* an individuated subject. The normative force of the concept of intersubjectivity concerns the genesis of reflexive subjectivity and the capacity of a subject to *take itself* and *to be taken by* others (i.e., to be recognized) as an agent, a type of being with a distinct status in the social world. The point of Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic, the *locus classicus* of this body of arguments, is that for a "consciousness" (or what I refer to below as *prepersonal subjectivity*) to become a "self-consciousness" (or a *reflexive subjectivity*) it must, through mutual recognition, experience itself as an independent "center of experience," as a "standpoint on the world" whose abilities and competences, self-understandings and values, possess validity only insofar as they are *taken up* (i.e., accepted or rejected) by other subjects. The argument parallels Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument: there, too, the less compelling claim is that language use assumes an already existing background language; the more compelling insight is that communication is a type of social action, and that linguistic competence and the meaningfulness of language involve a type of transformation in the agency of the subject.

The concept of socialization trades on the rather unenlightening fact that a human being requires a pre-existing social setting within which she acquires a language, these or those beliefs and behaviors; learns to think of herself *vis-à-vis* social categories (e.g., gender, race); and so on. Whether the individual is viewed as a "blank slate" whose identity is dialogically "filled in" by available social content, or as a slack muscle whose individuality is exercised and shaped by social norms and institutions, the concept of socialization unavoidably presupposes a concept of intersubjectivity, since what remains

unanalyzed by the former concept is how a human comes to be, or is transformed into, the type of agent *capable of having* self-experience (of *her* intentions, beliefs, traits, emotions). Yet, as I mentioned above and explain more fully in chapter 4, it is at the level identity and agency formation, or at the level of mutual recognition, that the motivation for entering social conflict is most fruitfully examined.

The conflation of the concepts of socialization and intersubjectivity brings into view the problem with the category of self-interest. To be clear, my argument concerns the category of self-interest and the way in which, when linked principally with economic activity and relations, it inflects reflection on social interaction and conflict. I do not, therefore, mean to indemnify the category of interests, as such. For my purposes, I define an interest as a good or resource the acquisition of which is advantageous to a person.[25] An interest is advantageous to the person whose interest it is, even when a person fails to realize that something is to her benefit, which is why interests are readily associated with rationality: if a good or resource is in one's interest, or is "an interest of" human beings generally, then it is rational to pursue that interest. By contrast with the putative subjective variability of emotions and desires, then, interests appear to be less multifarious and incorrigible, or, put differently, appear more susceptible to rational reflection, identification, and generalization. Since interests can be identified with what is advantageous to a person, they can be viewed as motivating in a way that other,

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[25] Albert O. Hirschman's *The Passions and The Interests* is an outstanding monograph on the concept of interests. He traces the historical development of the concept from early modernity to the end of the 18th century, and makes a compelling case that, over time, the meaning of "interests" came to be reduced almost entirely to considerations of self-interest and, especially in the latter half of the 18th century, with *economic* self-interest in particular. Also see Albert O. Hirschman, "The Concept of Interest: From Euphemism to Tautology," in *Rival Views of Market Society and Other Recent Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 35-55.

contingent ends are not.[26] Thus, to stress the self-interested character of action involves the generalization that social interaction consists of the nexus of actions of persons motivated to pursue their individual advantage. But the fundamental difficulty with this conception of self-interest is that it presupposes a developed subjectivity for which things already qualify as advantageous.

When one begins with, or accepts as a basic premise, the individual *qua* person-to-be-cultivated, any subsequent relations that that person enters into will be conceptualized as external relations. External relations are relations in which subjects are conceived as existing *alongside* one another: perhaps cooperating with and dependent on one another, but as persons already capable of assuming attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Internal relations are relations in which subjects are conceived as *co-constitutive* or *co-generative* of one another's subjectivity. External relations, into which one either freely enters or merely finds oneself, may well be described as formative or even constitutive of concrete individuality, since humans are individuated through socialization. But they will not be viewed as conditions for the possibility of a subjectivity that apprehends itself reflexively. Given an individualist ontology and the correlative conception of external relations, however, any such putatively universalizable interests acquire a flavor of mere givenness; and, because of the combination of individualism and externality just alluded to, tend to be conceived on the model of self-interest. Yet because there is no reflexive subjectivity – no person or "self" – prior to reciprocal recognition, the category of self-

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[26] Hirschman notes that when the concept of interest was first, rather unmethodically being articulated in the 17th and 18th centuries, it was regarded as a type of action-guiding norm: one should act in his self-interest *in order to* ensure personal well-being and the diminution of social strife. But in contemporary rational choice theory, e.g., the concept of self-interest gets pushed back into human nature, as it were; and comes to be regarded as the most universalizable *motivation* for behavior.

interest should rather be regarded as subsidiary to, or as a derivative of recognition relations and identity formation.

Drawing these various threads together sheds light on why reflection on social conflict in classical liberalism gravitates more naturally (which is not to say invariably) toward the model of a conflict over interests, specifically, over self-interest. I next discuss how this presumption of self-interested behavior is coupled with a proclivity in classical liberalism to conceive of justice, and so struggles against injustice, in distributivist terms. As stated above, my purpose is neither to critique nor suggest alternatives to (some version of) a liberal conception of justice. Thus my aim, while similar in some respects to that of Iris Marion Young in her influential *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, is also importantly different from that work. Like Young, I contend that attempts to evaluate political and moral conflict primarily in distributive terms risk either failing to perceive some forms of conflict or, in other cases, distorting what in fact motivates a conflict. Unlike Young, however, my concern is neither with developing a theory of oppression nor with questioning the adequacy of a liberal conception of justice in general.[27] The focus of my work is trained more specifically on the question of how to conceptualize the seeds of social struggle, or rather, on what spurs resistance to what people perceive to be immoral or unjust treatment. And so, despite some overlap between our concerns, the projects pursue different goals.

In discussing distribution, I mean to call attention to the prominence in classical liberal theory of economic activity, both as a social practice through which persons were presumed to develop and exercise their freedom, and as a basis for personal agency, such

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[27] Iris Marion Young, *op. cit.*, "Displacing the Distributive Paradigm" and "The Five Faces of Oppression," 15-65.

that individual interests and well-being were gleaned from and secured through economic means (e.g., rights to private property, contractually governed work relations, etc.). My claim that Hobbes and Locke (and, to a lesser extent, Hume and Bentham) linked the political value of freedom with economic activity and sometimes explicitly identified justice with the fair distribution of social resources, is not intended to be an indictment of liberalism *en toto*. If in the work of some liberal theorists freedom is understood in large measure to consist in pursuing self-interest, and if both freedom and interests are given an economic shading, I do not propose that these emphases are intrinsic, inescapable features of liberalism as such. I intend only to point to certain conceptual strains (excessively utilitarian strains) that seem continually to recur in liberal political reflection, and that collectively form a predisposition, a settled inclination to view social struggles through the lens of economic self-interest. Given space constraints, as well as the modest, uncontroversial nature of my few observations, I will refrain from detailed arguments and exegesis. Instead, I present certain themes and motifs, with a view to sketching a composite of how some liberal thinkers have conceptualized economic activity, self-interest, and the nature of justice.

In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*,[28] Hume avers that the most valuable social virtues are benevolence and justice. What makes these virtues superior to others is that they promote social utility, which Hume defines as usefulness in promoting stability and well-being. But although benevolence is regarded as a "natural sentiment," which can grow into a mature sense of empathy as humans increasingly communicate and interact with others, justice is defined in purely conventionalist terms. Justice, that is,

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[28] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983)

is an institution that exists solely for the fair distribution of property: "The USE and TENDENCY of [justice] is to procure happiness and security, by preserving order in society."[29] In conditions of desperate scarcity, Hume insists that people would be justified in forswearing "a scrupulous regard to what, in other situations, would be the rules of equity and justice";[30] likewise in conditions of abundance: with all needs provided for, people would have no need of justice: "the cautious, jealous virtue of justice would never once have been dreamed of."[31] Hume continues:

> Why give rise to property, where there cannot possibly be any injury? Why call this object *mine*, when, upon the seizing of it by another, I need but stretch out my hand to possess myself of what is equally valuable? Justice, in that case, being totally USELESS, would be an idle ceremonial, and could never possibly have place in the catalogue of virtues.[32]

To be sure, Hume does not advance the idea of "enlightened self-interest"; in fact, he persuasively argues against that idea as a moral position. Yet he unmistakably conceives of justice in a quasi-utilitarian way, as an instrumental necessity that is justified in terms of utility. Later in the 18th century, Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham[33] would employ a similar *style* of argumentation in defending both a market economy and the idea of "enlightened self-interest." Bentham, despite his admirable commitment to animal rights, social welfare, and educational and penal reform, nonetheless maintained that the most reliable way to secure the greatest overall good was for each person rationally to pursue what was in his or her own best interests. As a utilitarian, of course, Bentham was concerned with the collective good; but as a utilitarian, of course, he conceived "utility"

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[29] Hume, *op. cit.*, 23.

[30] Ibid, 23.

[31] Ibid, 21.

[32] Ibid, 21.

[33] Jeremy Bentham, "Selections from Bentham's Principles of Morals and Legislation," 1-91, in *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill*, John Troyer, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003)

in quantitative and additive terms, so that as individual stores of pleasure were increased and pains decreased, at a higher, more collective level, the overall social happiness would be maximized as well. Adam Smith argued in a similar fashion that it was not benevolence that motivated economic interaction but "self-love,"[34] the self-interest of economic agents. Now, Amartya Sen advises us that Smith's view of human nature was more expansive, had more room for sentiments and motivations besides self-love than is sometimes recognized. But what is notable here is Smith's conception of the "invisible hand," according to which self-interested economic behavior leads *vis-à-vis* unintended consequences – i.e., is guided as though by an invisible hand – to the greatest overall good: the butcher, brewer, and baker act with a view to their own self-interest; and we, the lucky consumers, get a burger and a brew.

These observations about Hume, Bentham, and Smith are few and selective. But they do exhibit a pattern of reasoning that relies on the three features of classical liberalism I have been discussing: namely, an individualist ontology, an emphasis on the category of self-interest, and an assimilation (by contrast with a reduction) of freedom and well-being to economic activity. These features emerge more starkly in the work of Thomas Hobbes and, to a lesser extent, John Locke. Hobbes's account[35] of the transition from the state of nature to civil society is an oft-told tale: in the state of nature, every human being has a natural right to everything required for self-preservation. Since the human machine is fundamentally motored by desire and aversion, any relations and interaction between persons in the state of nature will be predicated on ubiquitous competition over resources, fear of attack or encroachment by others, and simple vanity,

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[34] Amartya Sen, *op. cit.*, and Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests.*
[35] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Richard Tuck, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

which insists that others regard me as highly as I regard myself. The continuous conflict or threat of conflict to which competition, fear, and vanity give rise can be subdued, according to Hobbes, not by fellow-feeling or moral reflection, but rather by and in the name of self-interest. Reason allows us to see that if each forfeits her "right to everything" needed for self-preservation, on the condition that everyone else forfeit his right to everything, then a transition to civil society (i.e., a legal system, codified rights and mutual forbearance, and private property) is possible; and, more importantly, that by consenting to be bound by the social contract, people secure the (relatively) peaceful pursuit of self-interest.

Hence, Hobbes remarks that: "The final cause, end, or design of men, who naturally love liberty, and dominion over others, in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves…is the foresight of their own preservation." As Hobbes lived through a civil war and at the end of more than a century of warfare across Europe, surely his understanding of "self-preservation" includes more than property rights. Yet his account of the state of nature, of the main sources of conflict, largely revolves around the invasion of other people's property, so that one of the great advances gained by the transition to civil society is said to consist in the institutionalization and protection of economic relations, more specifically, of private property accumulation *vis-à-vis* the pursuit of economic self-interest. Indeed, here again is a version of Smith's "invisible hand." For Hobbes, the formation of a centralized institutional framework will enable each person to pursue her self-interest, within certain constraints, in a way that reproduces and reinforces the greatest overall good, namely, a stable, more or less peaceful social order within which individuals compete to ensure their self-preservation.

Locke has no proto-conception of the invisible hand; and, by contrast with Hobbes's, his portrayal of the state of nature is of a somewhat kinder, gentler place. And yet, among the many concerns addressed in *Two Treatises*,[36] ranging from punishment to slavery to the justification of representative government, he spends a considerable amount of time formulating conceptions of property, a labor theory of value, the conditions for and limits of private property, and the affect of money on property acquisition. Accordingly, the state of nature for Locke is underwritten by natural law: because every person is free and equal to every other, not only are there no natural hierarchies, rational reflection reveals that there is a universal obligation to respect the rights of others "in [their] life, health, liberty [and] possessions" – for, Locke adds a little lower, humans are the "property" of nature's creator. And since nature was given to humans for their benefit, it is every person's natural right to acquire as much unclaimed property as he can "improve," so long as he does not let such property go fallow and is sure to leave "enough, and as good" for others. Nature (i.e., natural resources) is "improved" when a person has "mixed" his labor with it, so that a person's mental and physical exertion – i.e., his labor power – is taken to confer on objects the normative status of possessions. In embryo, then, Locke has formulated a conception of the commodification of the human body and capacity for creative, practical agency, and in this way naturalized private property rights as well as the sort of economic relations predominant in a capitalist market system.

Articulating a labor theory of value and naturalizing private property rights is not *all* that Locke has accomplished or intended to accomplish, of course. His affirmations

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[36] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, C. B. Macpherson, ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980)

of natural liberty and equality, as well as the manner in which he later deploys them in defense of a representative system of government, are surely advances on the conception of an authoritarian state (Hobbes) or an absolutist monarchy (a view of some of Locke's contemporaries). Yet my concern here is with Locke's understanding of what motivates people to interact and organize socially and, more specifically, what prompts (or threatens to prompt) conflict. An important clue is provided by the following comment, in which Locke (quite like Hobbes) explains why people are motivated to consent to the social contract. It is the ever-present possibility of "invasion [by] others" that

> makes [a person] willing to quit [the state of nature]...and it is not without reason, that he seeks out, and is willing to join in society with others...for the mutual *preservation* of their lives, liberties and estates, which I call by the general name, *property*.[37]

From here, Locke states what he takes to be the purpose of civil society:

> The great and chief end, therefore, of men's uniting into common-wealths, and putting themselves under government, *is the preservation of their property*.[38]

As is evident in these passages, Locke includes more in his conception of property than money and possessions. Yet by grouping personal freedoms and rights into the economic category of property, his language suggests that rights and capabilities are divisible properties (or qualities) of a human being rather than intersubjectively produced norms and relationships. Although such argumentation does not entail conceiving of social relations and action in an individualistic and self-interested manner, the assimilation of "life" and "liberty" to the category of property does, I submit, obscure the various human vulnerabilities, dependencies, relationships, and, importantly, forms of social conflict presupposed in the concept of a social contract.

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[37] John Locke, *op. cit.*, 66.

[38] Ibid, 66.

To reiterate: I am attempting to demonstrate a tendency or settled inclination in classical liberalism to view social conflict as arising from, or as motivated by, struggles over economic self-interest. To the extent that that tradition conceptualized the purpose of the social contract and interaction as the preservation of the material well-being of social agents, it contributed to a diminished and unduly narrow understanding of individualization, as well as of social struggle and change. It seems clear, for example, that important strands of the civil rights movement, feminism, and the labor movement challenged uncritically held cultural assumptions, meanings of social roles and expectations, and definitions of fairness and merit, in addition to (not at the expense of) conflicts over just distribution. In a similar way, contemporary efforts to undermine affirmative action, to outlaw abortion, and to exclude gays and lesbians from legal marriage are forms of social conflict that revolve around moral beliefs and conceptions of the good, at least as much as (if not more than) economic interests.

What's more, not all forms of social conflict possess public visibility or organization. Inconspicuous, everyday actions and behavior can constitute resistance, as when minorities or women in hostile institutional settings act in subtle ways to protect their dignity, preserve their independence, or affirm their cultural beliefs. Although such actions may pass undetected or fail to be regarded as instances of social conflict, there is good reason to interpret them as signs of resistance to conventional social expectations and mores. Social struggle includes more than economic motivations and ends, and appreciating the experiential sources of and motivations for engaging in social struggle requires attention to the intersubjective processes through which social relations,

practices, institutions, and, indeed, social agents themselves are constituted and reproduced.[39]

Marxist and socialist positions, though often presented as alternatives to a market-based liberalism, often share some of the economistic commitments of classical liberalism. Prominent contemporary thinkers such as Slavoj Zizek, Nancy Fraser, and Richard Rorty maintain (to differing degrees and in different ways) that stating questions of social justice in the vernacular of identity politics and multiculturalism constitutes a type of distraction, a diversion from what really matters, which is economic justice. As Honneth observes: "Some proponents of [redistribution]...insist that identity politics is a counterproductive diversion from the real economic issues, one that balkanizes groups and rejects universalist norms. For them, the sole proper object of political struggle is the economy."[40] Honneth's point here is not that economic justice is less important than identity-recognition demands; nor is it that struggles for economic justice are by definition crudely utilitarian and economistic. The point is rather that historical conflicts commonly involve both economic and recognitive demands, which means that attempts to understand and evaluate the sources of a conflict cannot be a matter of abstract stipulation or reduction of heterogeneous phenomena into a Procrustean bed. Or, as I suggested above, the social-diagnostic question should not be formulated as an exclusive disjunction, *redistribution or recognition?* but rather as an inclusive disjunction: *redistribution or recognition, or both?*

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[39] In fact, this type of argument can be discerned even in *The Communist Manifesto*, where Marx lists a number of liberal-capitalist criticisms of communism, then proceeds to show not only how capitalist society subverts the very values its proponents profess to cherish but, more importantly, how historical processes – e.g., transformations in institutions and economic practices – gave rise to those values and normative commitments in the first place. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), pp. 67-73 especially.
[40] Honneth, *RR*, 15.

In this light, I want to identify some of the ways that the Marxist tradition has drawn on economistic presuppositions. But before doing so, I need to make the same qualifications as I made in respect to liberalism. In the first place, there is no *single* Marxist tradition; instead there is a plural and diverse field of Marxist theorists and positions, all of which may seek to preserve "the spirit" of Karl Marx's philosophy and social theory, but which differ nonetheless in politics and theoretical interpretation and emphasis. Thus, to any generalization about Marxist theory or goals, there is sure to be an exception or counterexample. In the second place, Marx himself was too complex and prolific a thinker to summarize neatly and accurately. Even if we bracket the socialist and Marxist traditions, Marx's writings are so fertile that it should come as no surprise that there are, across as well as internal to his texts, countervailing arguments and insights. To offer only one example – although, for my purposes, an important one – Hirschman notes that "Marxism has in fact thoroughly habituated us to the possibility of believing at one and the same time that historical forces move inexorably toward a certain outcome *and* that those who wish for that outcome had better devote all their energy to bringing it about."[41]

It is for these reasons that, in what follows, I aim only to sketch a composite of Marxism, based on a winnowing of concepts and assumptions drawn from the tradition(s) engendered by Marx. As with liberalism, my goal is not to criticize or urge a rejection of Marxist theory. On the contrary, my intent is constructive: by pointing out economistic strains in appropriations of Marx's thought, and by demonstrating how these strains lead

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[41] Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 99-100.

to tendentious interpretations of social conflict, I hope to illuminate the ways that an identity-recognition theory can speak to both economic and recognitive concerns.

According to the Marxist theory of historical materialism, historical change results from a conflict between the forces and relations of production. When the forces of production (i.e., the productive capacity consisting of technological advances and an increasingly organized division of labor) exceed the integrative function of the relations of production, social conflict ensues and a society's economic practices and relations are "burst asunder." Leaving aside mechanistic or teleological interpretations of historical materialism, a charitable interpretation of this model of social change would emphasize the function of labor as a mode of social reproduction and socialization.[42] For Marx, the labor process constituted the foundation of social reproduction, integration, and socialization. It was through their location in the division of labor that members of the working-class would share experiences, communicate about working conditions and expectations, and ultimately gain the awareness that *as a class* they were being exploited. Class-consciousness – or the understanding of one's self and one's life not as a social isolate but as a member of a group – emerged from practical activity, or, more exactly, emerged from one's participation in common tasks, commitment to shared goals, and experience of collective deprivation, insecurity, and powerlessness. And so, with the cooperative skills acquired from working in modern industry, the working-class would (as a group) organize politically in order to contest, indeed to overturn, the political dominance of the capitalist class.

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[42] Benhabib, *op cit.*; Axel Honneth, "Domination and Moral Struggle" and "Work and Instrumental Action," in *The Fragmented World of the Social*; Jurgen Habermas, "Marx's Metacritique of Hegel" and "The Idea of the Theory of Knowledge as Social Theory," in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 3-9.

Importantly, the reason the working-class is putatively well-situated[43] to transform society is that, given its position in the capitalist mode of production, the interests of the workers, as a group, are at once the interests of human beings in general. Stated differently, the interests of the capitalist class are *particular*, they represent only a small segment of society; whereas the interests of the working-class are *universal* – the emancipation of social labor[44] from the constraints of the commodity form would allow humans to order social relations and projects in a rational, reflective way. Although it is unfair (and inaccurate) to accuse Marx and Marxists of presupposing a *homo economicus* model of human action, there are nonetheless pronounced economistic tendencies in the intellectual legacy of Marxism as a social theory.

The premise that economic activity is the basis of social interaction as well as the lever of historical change is one such tendency. While not grounded in social ontological assumptions about innate self-interest, the premise presupposes that identity, social relations, and forms of life are essentially shaped by labor, or, more specifically, by a person's position in the division of labor. And although the concepts of *class-consciousness* and *proletariat* capture the social and relational nature of social agents, the formative aspect of this group-belongingness is predicated on struggles over material resources and group interests. To be clear, I am not denying that there are social groups, that groups have interests, or that material resources are important interests. The dispute

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[43] Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), 11-24; also see *The German Ideology* ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970).

[44] In *The German Ideology*, Marx insists "'Liberation' is an historical and not a mental act, and it is brought about by historical conditions, the development of industry, commerce, agriculture, the conditions of intercourse..." 61.

concerns whether the formation of groups and group interests should be theorized fundamentally as a function of economic agents, relations, and practices.

Moreover, the assertion of a tight link between social change and economic relations is reductionist. If the only important form of social conflict is assumed to be economic, such that feminist or anti-racist political activity is construed as derivative, "superstructural," or merely a veiled manifestation of economic struggle, it would follow that the sole agent of social change is an economic actor: namely, the working-class. But to view racism as an initially non-apparent manifestation of class struggle, for example, would be question-begging, on one hand, and, on the other hand, would be inadequate fully to grasp the political and phenomenological specificity of racial injustice.[45] As with tendencies in liberalism, the tendency in Marxism to examine forms of social oppression as, in reality, disputes over economic interests either narrows or distorts the concrete experience of injustice, and assumes the primacy of economic interest (whether self-interest or group interest) in social interaction and identity formation. By limiting the range of social conflicts that appear on the diagnostic register, Marxism at the same time limits its ability to evaluate and understand the heterogeneity of motivations underlying struggles, which includes access to social goods and resources, to be sure, but also includes demands to be treated with dignity and accorded moral worth.

Of course, as I did with classical liberalism, I have underscored certain economistic aspects of the orthodox Marxist tradition. It can properly be rejoined that

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[45] Bernard Boxill argues against the claim that racism should be understood primarily as a means of disciplining a labor force in Bernard Boxill, "Introduction," *Race and Racism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-43. And Charles Mills proposes that although there may be a link between capitalism and racism, inasmuch as racial division minimizes economic unrest, the relation is historically contingent. In other words, although racism may serve the interests of the capitalist class, it was not "invented" for that purpose. See Charles W. Mills, "European Specters," *From Class to Race*, 147-171. See 164-171 especially.

Marx does not *have to be* interpreted in this way. And that is correct. Between the 1930s and 1950s, Gramsci, Adorno, and Merleau-Ponty each critically examined Marxism, and produced interpretations more alive to the intersubjective and cultural potentials of Marxism, which have been too often ignored in more orthodox accounts. More recently, Habermas and Honneth have done the same, neither uncritically accepting nor rejecting Marxist theory, but rather refining and enriching its social-theoretic concepts and insights. In the next section, I introduce Honneth's identity-recognition theory and, in a preliminary way, indicate some advantages that approach offers in understanding the motivation underlying social conflict.

Critical Social Theory: Main Concepts

My project is an exercise in critical social theory, [46] and the conceptual framework within which I develop and defend my thesis is provided by the identity-recognition theory of Axel Honneth. Critical social theory is a theory of society that combines philosophical reflection and social scientific research for the purposes of the analysis and normative criticism of social norms, practices, relations, and institutions. As a form of critique, critical social theory attempts to identify and conceptualize the conditions for the possibility of society. That is, it attempts to illuminate, and develop a theoretical conception of, the forms of human interaction grounding and enabling social change and reproduction, a conception that provides a standpoint from which to assess the normative

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[46] Excellent background on the Frankfurt School is provided in Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, as well as Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989) and Rolf Wiggerhaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

character of social relations, practices, and institutional arrangements. This conception rests on two premises: that society is oriented toward the ends of socializing and individuating human beings as well as securing the material conditions for their freedom and happiness; and that a society can be evaluated normatively by the degree to which it realizes these ends in its norms, practices, and institutions. The standard that legitimates such criticism is derived from the identification of a form of action that serves as a condition for the possibility of society, and which thereby possesses a type of universality.[47]

A form of action is "universal" in this sense if social organization and reproduction is possible only through, or by means of, that activity. Marx argued that labor was a universal form of human agency in that political thought, religious speculation, legal rules, were derivative of and conditioned by a society's productive capacities. Habermas, by contrast, contends that labor is not foundational insofar as economic activity presupposes communication regarding the goals and techniques of production, as well as discursively achieved agreement about the expectations, values, and norms that co-habitants accept as valid. And so communicative action is universal, in that any extant society presupposes linguistic interaction among its members. In Honneth's view, mutual recognition and identity formation are universal so far as labor and communication are internally oriented toward the individuation and autonomy of social agents. Said differently, mutual recognition possesses universality because it is a necessary condition for society, or is a form of interaction that is necessarily presupposed by social organization.

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[47] In the following discussion, I draw especially on Axel Honneth, "The Dynamics of Disrespect," Steven Seidman, ed., *Jurgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader* (Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1989), and Jurgen Habermas, *Theory and Practice*, trans. J. Viertel (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

But the sense of "universality" conveys more than simply "being an essential feature of" social organization and reproduction. While critical social theory draws on the social sciences, it is not a descriptive and explanatory science and does not aim at ferreting out the necessary and sufficient conditions of society. Instead it conceives of society as the product of human agency, a totality that shapes and is shaped by the reflective and purposive practical freedom of human beings. "Universality" thus refers to a basic form of human freedom and agency, namely, that form of reflective agency through which society is reproduced. Since universality is in this way linked with freedom, critical theorists can speak of an "emancipatory interest" that is internal to society and, for that reason, can claim to have found a normative standpoint for social criticism. As mentioned above, for Marx this basic form of human agency consisted in labor, for Habermas in communication, and for Honneth in mutual recognition. But whatever form of action is taken to be basic, a society can be evaluated according to whether it promotes or inhibits freedom. So, just as Marx identified the commodity form as a product of human agency that nonetheless inhibited the productive capacity of social labor, Habermas has decried the encroachment of strategic-technical imperatives into the lifeworld as a product of discourse that, in fact, threatens the communicative resources of persons in their everyday life. For this reason, critical theorists have often described their endeavor as the "diagnosis of social pathologies." A pathology is an abnormality or disease that attacks the structure or normal functioning of an organism. To the extent that social institutions, practices, or norms undermine or repress freedom, they can be judged unjustifiable, since what they imperil are the conditions requisite for human freedom.

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In Honneth's view, mutual recognition and identity formation constitute the foundation of social reproduction, integration, and socialization.[48] For conceptual and empirical reasons, he asserts that it is only insofar as a person is recognized by others that she becomes an individuated subject capable of exercising autonomous agency. Identity, on this view, refers to a person's ability to establish basic self-relations, which are taken to be constitutive of agency. To establish such self-relations presupposes recognition from others: intersubjective recognition is a condition for identity formation as such, as well as for the maintenance of a reflexively shaped identity through ongoing recognitive relations. Linking the concepts of intersubjective recognition and identity formation enables Honneth to identify certain basic conditions for personal agency and freedom. To deny another recognition or to recognize her in degrading ways is condemnable (and is commonly experienced as a moral harm by the person affected), because it threatens the person's normative standing or status, restricting her agency and impeding her ability to develop skills and abilities, to express desires or attitudes, and so on. Thus individual freedom, agency, and the integrity of identity depend on mutual recognition, on one hand, and imply, on the other, that the specific historical forms assumed by recognitive relations, social institutions and practices, are grounded in struggles over recognition, struggles between and among individuals and groups to have their identities recognized by others.

My thesis concerning motivation draws on the identity-recognition theory of Honneth and focuses specifically on the connection between recognition and social

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[48] I examine Honneth's identity-recognition theory, as well as the relation of his theory with the communicative theory of Habermas, in chapter 4.

struggle.[49] Although I examine in closer detail the connection between motivation and identity formation in subsequent chapters, it is worth noting at the outset certain distinctive features of Honneth's conception of motivation. The concept of motivation in Honneth's identity-recognition theory is descriptive as well as normative. Honneth argues that people are impacted emotionally when disrespected or denied recognition. An insult or experience of ostracism can evoke feelings of shame, anger, or indignation; and it is these aversive emotions that "signal" (or indicate) that a person has been treated unjustly. People experience disrespect and denied recognition in an immediate, "pre-reflective" way, only subsequently gaining the reflective distance required to reflect on, evaluate, and articulate the source of their shame or anger. The motivation to resist disrespect or denied recognition is thus viewed as the result of an immediately felt threat or perceived harm to one's identity when one is faced with disrespect, cultural marginalization, or institutional exclusion.

Yet without further qualification, the assertion that disrespect provokes aversive emotions that spur social resistance sounds merely empirical and descriptive, as though the premise linking disrespect and motivation for social conflict were no more than a claim about the psychological causes of human behavior. But Honneth does not argue that disrespect functions as an *efficient cause* that mechanistically produces the *effect* of social struggle. To argue that acts of disrespect invariably cause negative emotional states, which in turn reliably produce acts of resistance (e.g., a causal psychological

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[49] I analyze Honneth's conception of motivation more closely in chapter 4. I want to point out here, however, that in his social theory the concept of motivation is addressed differently than in traditional approaches. In moral theory, the question of motivation usually arises with a view to answering, Why should I be moral? The aim is to ascertain why a person would honor her moral duty. For Honneth. by contrast, the question of motivation is examined from the perspective of the victims of moral wrongs or injustice, and tries to understand their motivation in resisting or reacting against moral transgressions committed by others. So, rather than ask Why should I be moral?, Honneth's aim is to illuminate why such violations prompt demands for the restoration of normatively justified moral relations

account) would leave a gap or separation between the premise concerning motivation, on one hand; and the claim that recognition relations aim at self-realization,[50] that is, at the autonomous exercise of personal agency, on the other. What is needed to avoid a merely descriptive account of social conflict is a way conceptually to link the normative concept of self-realization and the aversive emotional reactions that prompt resistance to disrespect, such that the concept of motivation gains normative content and is not merely a theory of moral psychology.

Honneth establishes this link by arguing that identity is structural and historical. I offer my own conception of identity below; at present, I will examine Honneth's position in order to clarify the sense in which his conception of motivation is normative and not merely descriptive. A person's identity is not an unchanging given. The ability to form and sustain the self-relations on which identity depends is an intersubjective, recognitive, and socially mediated achievement, which implies that as the material conditions constituting one's social milieu change, so changes the structure of identity. The criteria of moral personhood, legitimate expressions of value, expectations of and demands for personal freedom and fulfillment, are themselves results of historical change. As evolving, historically new ways of thinking about and experiencing individuality are institutionalized, i.e., as new dimensions of identity become possible and attain social objectivity through their codification in legal, political, and economic institutions, they at the same time acquire a normative status. Thus, the normative character of identity formation is constitutive of agency: that identity is historical means that *what it means to*

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[50] Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition.* See chapter 9, "Intersubjective Conditions for Personal Identity: A Formal Conception of Ethical Life," for Honneth's arguments linking recognition, identity, and self-realization.

be an individual is structured by and grounded in historically established social norms, or rather, in intersubjective agreement concerning social organization.

It is here that the normative quality of Honneth's conception of motivation comes into view. Human beings become concrete individuals through socialization, which to a considerable extent involves the internalization of the norms and expectations underlying a society's practices, relationships, allocation of rights and duties, and so on. For this reason identity formation, or the personal agency achieved through successful individualization, is properly conceived as socially mediated. For Honneth, social interaction, in general, and identity formation, in particular, are underwritten by normative expectations *to be recognized*, since it is by virtue of recognitive norms and practices that persons are assured the freedom to determine their personal idea of the good, to develop and act according to their own life plan, or, more simply, to shape their identity autonomously and reflexively.

The putative link between recognition, identity formation and personal agency constitute, in Honneth's view, the intersubjectively secured basis of both social reproduction and normative criticism. Violations of recognitive norms (i.e., disrespect, denials of recognition) are commonly experienced as types of assault, threats to the coherence and sustainability of a person's agency and social presence. But the aversive reaction to disrespect is not solely affective. The negative emotions felt when a person is disrespected or ostracized presuppose a type of judgment, an apprehension by the person affected that a morally justified recognitive expectation has been violated. The motivation to enter social conflict, then, while in important respects pre-reflective and

affective, nonetheless possesses both a normative and cognitive character, and is in no way conceived as an innate property of human psychology.

People are harmed by disrespect because it diminishes their freedom to develop their identity and truncates their ability to exercise agency. Although the autonomous development of identity presupposes recognition by others, denials of recognition, degradation, disrespect, and so on effect precisely the opposite, inhibiting freedom and self-realization. Yet since the structure of identity is governed by recognitive norms, or normative expectations to be recognized in the fullness of one's identity, disrespect both is, and is *experienced as*, a moral transgression.[51] When recognitive norms are violated, persons are motivated to resist, to struggle against disrespect, not only by the need to sustain a coherent identity, but by the perception that forms of recognition to which they are rightly entitled have been transgressed. The motivation to enter social conflict is therefore connected with the normative end of self-realization, which, like Honneth, I take to be the autonomous formation of identity and exercise of agency.

Having argued that the concept of motivation is normative as well as descriptive, insofar as motivation is internally linked to the preservation and to the further, freer development of identity, I now need clearly to explicate what I mean by identity. To reduce ambiguity, I will use the term, *identity*, to refer to both "self-identity" and "social identity." In my view, the concept of identity is essentially dialectical, such that it includes an implicit reference both to the subject whose identity it is ("self") and to the

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[51] It is worth mentioning that not every act of disrespect need be characterized as a *moral* transgression, even if a particular action violates an agreed upon normative rule. Sometimes, for example, a rule of decorum or etiquette may be violated, and the offending act may insult or embarrass, e.g., a host or guest. But unless a person's rights, needs, safety, and so on are endangered – or, alternatively, unless a person is disrespected in a systematic way – the act may qualify as disrespectful but would not count as a specifically immoral or unjust action.

constellation of relations and practices in which the subject is situated (social). Although there may be good analytic and heuristic reasons for distinguishing between these two aspects of identity, the reasons usually consist of added emphasis or nuance. Similarly, although I do not intend them as technical terms, I will use either the term *person* or *subject* and will generally avoid the terms "ego," "the Self," "partner to interaction," and so on. Here, too, my aim is to try to reduce ambiguity and vagueness.

A further note: I take the definition of identity I develop momentarily to be compatible with Honneth's understanding of identity. I say "compatible with" because, although Honneth offers a tripartite conception of the structure of modern identity and indicates corresponding recognition relations needed to establish an identity, he fails to provide a close analysis of a term that appears repeatedly in his work, namely "self-identity." The closest he comes to a definition of self-identity is the quasi-circular formulation "self-relation." Self-identity, therefore, consists of a person's ability to relate to herself in three characteristic ways: as an embodied subject; as a rights-bearing moral agent; and as a concrete individual, unique or at least different from others, and whose traits and achievements are socially valued and affirmed. By virtue of reciprocal recognition, one gains the ability to relate to oneself so as to achieve a sense of self or concrete individuality. The difficulty with this conception is that it is too schematic. The strengths of Honneth's account are that it links identity with recognition, so that identity is regarded as an accomplishment rather than as a metaphysical given; and, moreover, that it construes identity as differentiated, which entails thinking of identity as *integrative*, as a continually renewed process requiring the integration of affective experience, cognitive capacities and competences, physical abilities, and so on. But a

more detailed account is needed to grasp the dialectical character of a subject's ability to "relate to self," or rather, to unify the components of its experience.

By identity, then, I mean reflexive subjectivity, where reflexivity is understood to be an aspect of subjective experience that emerges from the integration of bodily functions, affective sensations and reactions, and linguistic and cognitive capacities. When the various elements of a human being's conscious experience acquire a sufficient degree of unification or integration; and when that human being has, through recognition, experienced itself as a normative subject, i.e., a subject whose emotions, utterances, and actions possess social validity and meaning; then what is often called a *self* coalesces. Put more simply, recognition produces reflexivity, the capability of a subject *to take* itself *as* an "object" of reflection. Before reflexivity, a subject has what may be described as pre-personal experience: there is motility, perception, sensation, consciousness; but not the apprehension of these experiences as *mine*. The pre-personal only becomes personal, only coheres as a "self," subsequent to recognition and reflection. Although the content of a person's identity, i.e., the raw material out of which a concrete individuality is fashioned, will be culturally and historically variable, depending on traditions, forms of technology, languages, and so on, the presupposition of reflexive subjectivity is not variable but, instead, is necessary so that a human being can organize and integrate her affective and cognitive capacities, potentials, and experiences. Thus, to the formulation given above should be added *a conception of self*, so that identity is defined as reflexive subjectivity, which, through the integration of bodily and mental experience, produces a (relatively stable) self-understanding.

Understanding identity as reflexive subjectivity with self-understanding has advantages for my thesis concerning motivation, for Honneth's recognition theory, and for thinking about identity generally. Consider once more the inclination to distinguish between self-identity and social identity. For the sake of simplicity, I will regard theories of self-identity as variants of a "narrative theory of self" and theories of social identity as variants of a "social category theory of self." Each of these approaches possesses a "moment of truth"; each, that is, contains valuable insights about the meaning of identity and how subjects experience themselves as concrete individuals. The narrative theory of self captures the sense in which identity is ineliminably self-referring, or is always the identity *of* someone. In immediate, unreflective experience, it seems to me that Sartre is (qualifiedly) correct: the Cartesian cogito *seems to be* an irrefutable datum, a certainty. To conceive identity in primarily categorial terms, to bracket the way that concrete individuals *take up* or *assume* an identity thus risks divorcing the concept from the experiential content of the persons living that identity.[52]

On the other hand, the social category theory of self speaks to the way in which identity is largely socially conditioned and structured, and not fundamentally volitional, introspective, or "the way I see myself." People often deceive themselves, pursue pipe dreams, and misjudge the value of their abilities and accomplishments. But more relevant, on this view, is the manner in which social categories organize the social terrain (i.e., roles, expectations, etc.) and classify persons by ascribing meaning to such contingent traits as biological sex or skin color. To create meaning in this way – to select and classify and position – is a function of social power, and so it is typically members of

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[52] This objection to conceiving of identity in overly conceptual or categorial terms is akin to Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel.

subordinate or oppressed groups who experience themselves as not being who they are supposed to be. Jean Amery offers an illustration of such alienation in "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew,"[53] as do W. E. B. Dubois in his concept of "double consciousness"[54] and Simone de Beauvoir in her observation that "one is not born a woman."[55]

I grant that I have presented the narrative and social category theories of identity in broad strokes. But to the extent that my sketch picks out central assumptions of those views, it allows us to identify their one-sidedness and incompleteness, as well as the conceptual virtues of a recognition theory. In thinking about identity, emphasizing too strongly either the volitional and introspective aspect, or the socially constructed and imposed aspect, serves analytic purposes but also occludes an important dimension of identity formation: specifically, the integrative process through which a subject becomes *this person*, a determinate and concrete individual.[56] And it is likely the case, though I cannot fully probe the question here, that the above-mentioned theories fail to illuminate this process because they frame the concept of identity wrongly: on one hand, presupposing a "self" substantive enough to "tell its own story"; on the other, rejecting notions of a "core self" but at the same time diminishing the agency of subjects who interpret, appropriate, and transform social categories. As stated above, the chief weakness of such conceptions is that they are insufficiently dialectical, too unmediated.

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[53] Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld, trans. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), "On the Necessity and Impossibility of being a Jew"

[54] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989)

[55] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H. M. Parshley, ed. and trans., (New York: Vintage Books, 1989)

[56] For example, some post-structuralist theories, as well as tendencies in the work of Michel Foucault, have been criticized for emphasizing social structure or power *at the expense of* a conception of agency and subjectivity. Such is the gist of Nancy Hartsock's argument in "Postmodernism and Political Change: Issues for Feminist Theory," in Susan J. Hekman, *op. cit.*

By contrast, Honneth's identity-recognition theory examines the intersubjective origin of identity formation, connecting the institutionalization of recognitive norms with the process of individualization, through which subjects struggle to establish the self-relations necessary for a coherent self-conception. If we bear in mind the explication of identity I offered above, i.e., that intersubjective recognition is the genesis of reflexive subjectivity, then Honneth's use of the term "self-relation" loses its question-begging flavor. Instead, it redirects attention back to the way in which identity formation requires the ongoing, continual integration and mediation of the inner and the outer, the subjective and the objective. In Honneth's view, the "subjective" consists of the ability of a subject to relate to itself as a physically autonomous moral agent, whose abilities and traits receive social esteem. The "objective" consists of social relations and practices that, at an institutional level, correspondingly protect a person's bodily security, ensure her status as a rights-bearing equal, and accord worth to her projects and commitments. And it is in this light that a novel implication of Honneth's theory surfaces.

Not only is it a mistake to think of identity as a property of persons or as a category for classifying or marking them; in fact, it constitutes a category error. Identity is not a thing, a property of things, or a category circumscribing a certain type of thing. Rather, identity can be constrained or cultivated, impeded or supported, such that identity should be understood as co-extensive with agency. The demand to be recognized, or to be accorded the conditions necessary to develop one's identity freely and with as few constraints as possible, should be interpreted as a normative demand for autonomy. Systematic disrespect or denied recognition, on the contrary, should be viewed as restrictions on personal agency; more than this: they should be viewed, as Honneth

frequently suggests, as real injuries or impairments. Disrespect impairs the ability of a person to integrate the various physical and mental functions, capabilities, and competences that comprise the raw material out of which identity is fashioned. It is for this reason that Honneth speaks of "the integrity of identity" and frequently draws a strict (i.e., not a merely metaphorical) analogy between physical and psychological injury. It is for the same reason, moreover, that the thesis linking motivation to violated recognitive expectations gains plausibility. Struggles for recognition are struggles for greater freedom, struggles to institutionalize the conditions required for increased personal autonomy and agency. Disrespect and denials of recognition diminish and truncate a person's agency, at least, and threaten to incapacitate it, at worst. Yet, because forms of disrespect are typically experienced as harms, even as assaults on a person's social-ontological security, such normative transgressions motivate resistance.

I have argued that identity is co-extensive with agency and that identity formation should be conceived as a basic form of practical autonomy. Because identity formation is constitutively linked with recognition relations and the corresponding recognitive expectations sedimented in institutional norms, both identity and practical autonomy are relational, vulnerable, and subject to moral and political conflict. The nature of such conflict can be primarily distributive; or it can be recognitive, that is, a dispute over the meaning of dignity, moral worth, or personhood itself. In this way, it becomes clear that the indignation experienced when people are disrespected not only motivates resistance, but links recognitive struggles to the end of self-realization. Hence, the critical promise of an identity-recognition theory is that it can elucidate this intersubjectively engendered

sub-layer of meanings, dependencies, expectations, and experiences more acutely than an alternative economistic account.

Identity-Recognition Theory as Diagnostic Tool

An advantage of identity-recognition theory consists of its social-ontological insight concerning the openness and the multiplicity of the social. The Honnethian approach used here resists the economistic tendency to privilege a single agent, social location, or mechanism as the locus of social conflict and change, and so refuses to accord ontological or motivational priority to, for example, economic interests. Critics worry that identity theories encourage particularism and embrace contingency, and in this way invite sectarianism, polarization, and the rejection of universal norms.[57] The worry is that formulating questions of social justice in the language of recognition relations will diminish efforts to achieve distributive justice; and that if, in fact, there is no priority accorded to the economic, distributive commitments will lose their centrality and come to seem neither more nor less important than other forms of struggle.

But to deny that a society's economic structure forms the basis of social organization, or, put differently, to refuse to accord social-ontological priority to economic practices and relations, does not *entail* that a social theory is neglectful of or indifferent to distributive and egalitarian concerns. Even if some theorists and activists have stressed the need to recognize particularist forms of life, and have thus seemed to abandon universalism or to undervalue economic justice, it does not follow that every identity-recognition theory must similarly eschew universalist or egalitarian

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[57] I have in mind here the above mentioned positions of Barry, *op. cit.*, and Gitlin, *op. cit.*, as well as Nancy Fraser "Recognition Without Ethics?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 18(2-3): 21-42.

commitments. An identity-recognition theory like Honneth's possesses the resources to address distributive as well as recognitive concerns. Moreover, as Barrington Moore, E. P. Thompson, and Craig Calhoun have shown,[58] the history of the labor movement involves more than efforts simply to protect economic interests or improve economic well-being. Workers have experienced and resisted capitalist control over workers' time and effort, threats to traditions and community relations, and disregard for local customs. Hence, the alternative "redistribution *or* recognition" is a false dichotomy. To underscore the centrality of recognition relations in social interaction, including economic activity, provides a standpoint from which distributive patterns can be linked to, and evaluated in light of, patterns of granting or denying esteem to persons and to social groups.

These considerations shed light on why an identity-recognition theory is well suited to grasp the motivation for engaging in social conflict. While economism assumes that concrete individuals merely happen to have given interests and preferences, and that the goal of every person is to satisfy as many preferences as possible, identity-recognition theory conceives of identity as intersubjectively constituted. To theorize identity in this way implies that interests and preferences are not given facts of nature, but are influenced and shaped by social relations, practices, and institutions. Similarly, a society's economic structure is not a fact of nature but the result of human agency, an historically contingent way of organizing social relations and power. Certain types of choices, desires, interests, and so on are *made possible* for agents in a particular social order, so that "self-interest," as a putative action-guiding motivation, is itself the result of

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[58] Craig Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995); Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1978); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Gollancz, 1963).

contingent material conditions and not a self-evident property of "human nature." The implication for economistic approaches is that economic self-interest, in particular, is neither a feature of human nature nor a universal motivation underlying social interaction, but is rather a contingent way of experiencing identity and organizing agency.

Honneth thus proposes that economic conflict be seen as a type of recognition struggle, arguing that wealth and resource distribution in capitalist societies reflects value judgments about the worth of certain kinds of occupations. Jobs judged to contribute to growth and efficiency are esteemed and amply rewarded, whereas those judged to contribute little are devalued and poorly remunerated. Decisions to reduce regulatory oversight, automate labor, or outsource jobs turn on value judgments – for example, that increased profits are more important than worker safety and economic security, community stability, and ecological sustainability. Put another way, human beings make decisions that affect the distribution of opportunities, power, and wealth, and they decide freely, in light of some system of values, and not solely as a result of economic necessity.

Moreover, the harm of inequality is not reducible to unequal distribution, is not solely a matter of some having more resources and wealth than others.[59] Much of what is wrong with economic inequality consists of the blame and near contempt heaped on the choices, practices, and social circumstances of the poor, working poor, and working-class. Similarly, efforts to unionize are not always about workers trying to protect their economic interests, but often are motivated by the desire for workplace autonomy, grievance procedures, and time management – measures intended to acknowledge the

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[59] See Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1973). For another moving and eloquent reflection on the emotional injuries of poverty, see Dorothy Allison, "A Question of Class," in *The Meaning of Difference: American Constructions of Race, Sex and Gender, Social Class, and Sexual Orientation*, Karen E. Rosenblum and Toni-Michelle C. Travis (New York: The McGraw Hill Companies, Inc., 1996), 184-192.

dignity and independence of the workers. And since class identity is not unitary and neatly separable from other forms of identity, but is shot through with religious beliefs, ethnic customs and traditions, experiences of discrimination, and so forth, the harm of economic inequality can be experienced in multiple ways (e.g., the violation of religious beliefs, eradication of cultural tradition, public shame).

For these reasons, and for reasons to be elaborated in chapter 4, Honneth's identity-recognition theory can speak to concerns about economic justice as ably as it can address those issues usually associated with multiculturalism and identity politics. But I should note that his remarks on economic relations and conflict are too fragmentary and incomplete to be wholly satisfying.[60] For while he correctly notes that economic decisions are prompted by values, and are not mere reflexes triggered by "market fluctuations" and "volatility," his cursory comments stress the volitional aspects of economic activity almost to the exclusion of structural elements. To acknowledge structural elements of economic inequality, e.g., the transfer of property and wealth in the U.S. under the long history of slavery and Jim Crow segregation, is consistent with Honneth's conceptual framework and, in fact, would only strengthen its critical force.

I critically examine the details of Honneth's argumentation in chapter 4. For now, it is worth recalling that his (and my) reflection on classical liberalism and Marxism is aimed at an enrichment and defense of the normative commitments of these theories, which requires sifting out economistic traces so that the moral character of the motivations for social struggle can be properly disclosed and appreciated. When successful, recognition struggles lodge in a society's institutional framework the

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[60] Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*

recognition of identity and protection of those recognition relations that support identity

formation – including economically oriented policies and programs. In this way,

successful recognition struggles increase freedom both intensively and extensively,

serving as stepping-stones for further recognitive demands and thereby enabling the

meaningful pursuit of self-realization. A conception of social progress thus takes shape:

social progress results from recognition struggles, which are motivated by experiences of

(perceived) disrespect and directed toward the expansion of social protections for

autonomous agency.[61]

Thus, the advantage of critically appropriating Honneth's identity-recognition

theory is that it offers a comprehensive, flexible, and internally complex conceptual

framework for social analysis and criticism. Although his argumentation sometimes

needs to be supplemented and sharpened, the intersubjective framework he takes over

from Hegel, Marx, and Habermas yields the resources necessary to disclose and

understand the crux of social change: namely, struggles over recognition. Because

identity is co-extensive with agency, or rather, because reflexive subjectivity with self-

understanding is best conceived as a form of action, identity formation constitutes a locus

of political and moral conflict concerning practical autonomy and equality. Insofar as

disrespect imperils a person's ability to unify her somatic and cognitive competences,

functions, and so on, disrespect is often experienced as a threat to a person's ontological

security, an assault on her personhood and freedom. For this reason, the experience (or

perception) of disrespect commonly motivates resistance, not solely or primarily as a

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[61] Honneth argues that a conception of progress is discernible if one assumes that "[modernity's] normative constitution is the result of past directed development" (RR, 184) towards greater freedoms in the development of identity. Thus, for Honneth the "two criteria" for measuring a society's legitimacy are whether it provides increased opportunities for individualization, and whether it becomes more inclusive of differences (RR, 187).

means of protecting one's economic self-interest, but as a means of sustaining one's coherence and integrity as a subject.

In the following chapter, I present and criticize David T. Wellman's theory of racism, which exemplifies an economistic explanation of social conflict. Aside from internal conceptual difficulties, Wellman's theory trades on the questionable presuppositions concerning economic agency and interests that I discussed in connection with classical liberalism and Marxism. After concluding the chapter with an external critique of Wellman's economism, I examine Honneth's identity-recognition theory in chapter 4.

Chapter 3

An Economistic Theory of White Racism

My thesis is that recognition theory provides a more tenable account of what

motivates people to engage in social conflict than does economistic theory. In this

chapter I present, analyze, and criticize one well-known economistic account, namely,

David T. Wellman's view in *Portraits of White Racism* that anti-black racism is best

conceived, not as prejudice, but rather as an effort by whites to defend racial privilege.

Against Wellman's claim that his theory of racism is novel – since it rejects the idea that

racism is marked by prejudice or hostility, and thus is intractably subjective and

psychological – I argue that his sociological and "objective" account presupposes a

common assumption about human nature, dating back at least to Hobbes, that people are

motivated to act principally, if not solely, from economic self-interest.

Even if Wellman relies on traditional assumptions about human nature and

motivation, his theory of racism may still be more compelling than alternative views. Yet

this is what I deny. Construing racism as a struggle over scarce resources returns social

theory to untenable notions of subjectivity and action, and reduces our understanding of

the ways in which racism constitutes (in part) personal and social identity. A view that

focuses on utilitarian calculations of economic self-interest fails to address the moral

logic, as well as the motivation, governing much of human interaction. By contrast,

identity-recognition theory begins with the reciprocity of sociality, a starting point which

more clearly illuminates the moral structure and motivation of interaction.

I begin this chapter by explicating the concept of economism. As there are numerous theoretical and historical sources to this conceptual strain of liberal theory, ranging from Hobbes to utilitarianism and modern rational choice theory, I draw on various sources and try to distill what I take to be the core features of the concept. To sketch my conception of economism I examine its roots in liberal political theory, starting with Hobbes. Hobbes is an important figure historically because he so decisively broke with Aristotelian teleology and set about developing political theory on a modern, scientific basis. He is important philosophically because such a break demanded radical changes in notions of social ontology, subjectivity, the role of the state, and the nature of politics. More important, Hobbes is perhaps the first influential social contract theorist and his arguments about the rationality of and motivation for forming civil society, i.e., for consenting to the social contract, remain a striking illustration of the conceptual style I call economism. Another important historical figure to assume an economistic view of sociality is Kant. Like Hobbes, in his political writings Kant was a social contract theorist who maintained that people should consent to the contract for ultimately self-interested reasons. Against this background, I examine the contemporary sociological view called rational choice theory, which is a direct descendant of the self-interested individualism frequently found in classical liberalism.

In the next section, I present and analyze Wellman's theory of racism, and then develop both internal and external criticisms of the view. As noted above, Wellman's theory of racism is marred by the assumption that social action is fundamentally motivated by economic self-interest, or, in the case of anti-black racism, by the "defense of racial privilege." Near the end of this chapter, I criticize Wellman's interpretation of

the qualitative data with which he supports the claim that when whites oppose policies like affirmative action, what they are *really* doing is telling a story that allows them to maintain the (racially unequal) status quo, without thereby appearing to be prejudiced and without obviously contradicting the "American Creed" of egalitarianism. I then proceed to demonstrate that Wellman relies on economistic assumptions about motivation and action, and critique his project both for its instrumentalization of social relations and its distorted conception of individuality. The latter arguments constitute my external criticism of Wellman's theory.

Defining Economism: Concepts and Assumptions

In this section I define the concept of economism. I do not formulate an independent criticism of economism in this chapter. I reserve that task for chapter 5, where I try to show that identity-recognition theory is better able to understand phenomena like racial conflict than is economistic theory. After developing the conception of economism, I propose internal as well as external criticisms of Wellman's theory.

Economism is a theory of motivation, a theory about what motivates individual and collective social action. In the liberal tradition, it is commonly assumed that action should be evaluated in terms of rationality. Social contract theorists, beginning with Hobbes, have long argued that the motive for consenting to the social contract is to establish a framework within which conflict arising from human nature can be constrained; and economic self-interest, which, in conditions of scarcity, involves

competition, can be pursued in a peaceable, law-governed way. For Hobbes,[62] consent to the social contract was rational, even if this meant that persons had to forfeit their natural "right to everything," because universal adherence to the social contract would end the fear, insecurity, and rampant lawlessness characteristic of the state of nature. Leaving the state of nature and establishing civil society would therefore provide people a peaceable environment in which to enjoy the rights they retained, including the right to acquire and accumulate private property. Hence, the motivation to enter civil society was assumed to be the preservation of self-interest. And for Hobbes, at least, this was deemed a matter of rational calculation, not of empathy or of moral reason.

Similarly, in the contemporary social sciences the notion of practical reason commonly assumed is *rational choice theory*, which combines a thin concept of subjectivity with strategic reason.[63] By "thin concept of subjectivity" I mean a way of conceiving a subject's, i.e., a social agent's, action and rationality by reference to goals, preferences, motivations, or interests. By "strategic reason" I mean a type of reason utilized by individual subjects in isolation from other subjects, which consists of determining the means necessary or adequate to achieve given ends.[64] On this view, *action* is conceived as the intentional behavior of subjects *vis-à-vis* objects, whether those

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[62] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); chapters 13-15 especially. Also C. B. MacPherson, *Possessive Individualism*, section II, "Hobbes: The Political Obligation of the Market," 9-107.

[63] In the following account, I draw heavily on Stephen K. White, *The Recent Work of Jurgen Habermas: Reason, justice and modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Hereafter referred to as *RWH*. Other works that critically examine rational choice theory are David Schmidtz, *Rational Choice and Moral Agency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), and Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*.

[64] Strategic reason is a type of reason utilized by a single subject and evaluated in terms of success in matching means to ends. Communicative reason, by contrast, is a type of reason that is intersubjective, i.e., that presupposes interaction between subjects and is evaluated in terms of reaching mutual understanding. See Jurgen Habermas, "Social Action and Rationality," in Steven Seidman, ed., *Jurgen Habermas on Society and Politics: A Reader* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

objects are things or other subjects. *Rationality* is the determination or calculation of actions necessary to achieve given goals. Rationality, then, consists of linking means to ends, where *means* are actions and *ends* are goals (choices, interests, preferences, etc.). Thus, subjects are conceived as acting on or manipulating objects in order to attain subjectively given ends, and the rationality of their action is evaluated in light of their success or failure in doing so.

Rational choice theory therefore presupposes subject-object dualism. This is a social ontological presupposition about the way subjects relate to themselves, to other subjects, and to objects. If one subject can be used as a means to another subject's ends, it follows that subjects are at once subjects and objects. Further, if the rationality of a subject's action is determined by success in matching means to ends or manipulating objects to achieve given goals, without regard to the ends, purposes or understanding of the other, it also follows that subjects can relate to one another strictly as objects. Were subjects to communicate about mutually acceptable norms or the meanings of proposed actions, they would be engaging one another as subjects. But when a subject deliberates without regard for how others (particularly those who might be affected by possible decisions or actions) might understand or interpret an action, those others are effectively treated as props, as means to an end. In this way, social relations can assume a purely instrumental character, so that subjects are related only externally to other subjects.

Rational choice theory abstains from normative judgments about the ends of action. Unlike Hobbes, who made successful self-preservation a criterion of rationality, rational choice theory does not posit specific ends or actions as *a priori* rational. What matters, given certain ends and regardless of their content, is how successfully a subject's

actions achieve them. Yet if ends are regarded solely as subjective givens, it is a tempting step to construe such ends as self-interested. In a trivial sense, it is practically a matter of definition that a person's interests are *hers*, and are thus self-regarding. But more significantly, self-interest is assumed to serve as a motivation as well. As White observes, "This assumption is made because self-interest seems to be the most easily universalizable motivation, that is, it can explain a larger fraction of collective behavior than any other single motivational assumption."[65] Rational choice theory thus seems to have predictive power for collective and individual action. Even if people in a pluralist society have different values and goals, the logic of individual and collective behavior can be reliably forecast so far as choices and actions are governed by self-interest. Collective interests would consist merely of the aggregate or combination of the interests pursued by discrete subjects.[66]

To assume that action is motivated by self-interest does not entail that there are not or could not be other motivations, e.g., moral considerations. Nonetheless, many liberal theorists have identified self-interest as a basic motivation: Hobbes, Kant (in his political theory), and countless utilitarians among them. In any case, a strong reductionist claim is unnecessary. It suffices for my purposes to note that many contemporary social scientists, like their theoretical forbears, assume that self-interest is "the most easily universalizable motivation."

I have not yet shown that self-interest is specifically *economic*. The assumptions of rational choice theory acquire an economic hue when situated in the liberal-capitalist

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[65] Stephen K. White, *RWH*, 10-11.

[66] Consider in this regard Kant's argument in "Perpetual Peace" that, in republics, self-interest would reduce the likelihood of war. Since citizens would have to finance and fight in any war they authorized, self-interest would make them reluctant to ever do so. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace, and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983).

tradition. I mentioned Hobbes' assertion that consent to the social contract is motivated by economic self-interest. While Hobbes is perhaps the least embarrassed by this feature of "human nature," he is far from alone. In economic theory, the beliefs that people have "infinite needs," that freedom is tied to satisfying such needs by maximizing utilities, and that this is best accomplished in market economies are hardly questioned. Even as sensitive a critic of utilitarianism as Amartya Sen argues that economic exchange is fundamental to human freedom.[67] I am not claiming that Sen is an economistic thinker. On the contrary, he conceives of freedom in terms of "capacities to function," which involves a thicker understanding of action and personhood than is characteristic of economistic theory; and he attempts to show that the economic freedoms created in market economies have a value independent of utility-generation. But the assertion that the rights to choose employment by "freely" agreeing to a labor contract, to participate in market-based economic transactions, and so on, are intrinsic to human flourishing is nonetheless colored by an economistic assumption, namely, that contractually regulated economic exchange is essential to personal agency and interaction. And so, if *economic* self-interest is not the only type of self-interest, it is often assumed in the liberal tradition to be the most universal human interest.

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[67] "But the more immediate case for the freedom of market transaction lies in the basic importance of that freedom itself. We have good reasons to buy and sell, to exchange, and to seek lives that can flourish on the basis of transactions. To deny that freedom in general would be in itself a major failing of society." Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 112.

Economism, then, is the view that action is motivated by economic self-interest, and that the rationality of action is strategic, a matter of calculating the means necessary to achieve self-interested ends. Such are the presuppositions and arguments that provide the economistic account of personal agency and the agency of groups and movements.

Wellman: Racism as Defense of Economic Privilege

Wellman's theory draws on economistic premises in three ways. While an elaboration of these connections will have to follow my presentation of Wellman's theory, the gist of it is this: Wellman repeatedly affirms that racism consists of whites protecting their *self-interest*, where the nature of that interest is assumed to be *economic*. Moreover, his view relies on the subject-object dualism as well as linking of strategic reason with action characteristic of economism. To demonstrate these economistic assumptions, I reconstruct Wellman's arguments.

Wellman asserts that white racism consists of "culturally acceptable beliefs that defend social advantages that are based on race" and "today remains essentially what it has always been: a defense of racial privilege."[68] Proposed first in the late seventies, Wellman reaffirms the truth and usefulness of this understanding, or rather, this alternative model of white racism in the early nineties, on occasion of the re-release of *PWR*. In the preface to the second edition, he maintains that because racism still advantages some at the expense of others, and because current sociology of racism continues to minimize the "structural impact of race," his position not only "remains

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[68] David T. Wellman, *PWR*, 4.

relevant [but] an update is in order."[69] More exactly, Wellman's thesis is that "racist beliefs are culturally sanctioned, rational responses to struggles over scarce resources...sentiments which, regardless of intentions, defend the advantages that whites gain from the presence of blacks in America."[70] White racism should therefore be "analyzed as a strategy for the maintenance of privilege."[71]

A number of things should be noted about this thesis at the outset. The focus of *PWR* is anti-black racism among whites, i.e., white racism against blacks. Unanswered is whether the definition of racism developed therein can or should also be used to explain white racism against Native Americans, Hispanics, Arabs, and Asians in the U.S. And the scope of the book is racism in the U.S., specifically. So, although Wellman states that he arrived at his theory of white racism partly due to his reflection on colonial societies, he never discusses whether or the degree to which his model of racism might be applied to post-colonial societies or, say, to the nations comprising the European Union. A further question pertains to the historical nature of the theory. Wellman denies that attitudinal prejudice typifies contemporary white racism; whites no longer speak in overtly hostile or demeaning racial terms, indeed it is now regarded as socially and politically unacceptable to so. This is a key premise in his argument. Yet it is hard to deny that overt, often hateful prejudice existed in America for centuries; and so, modifying the earlier statement, it might be said that attitudinal prejudice no longer characterizes white racism. But, aside from the empirical dubiousness of the claim, this presents a problem: namely, whether or not Wellman considers prejudice ever to have

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[69] Ibid, ix.
[70] Ibid, 29.
[71] Ibid, 60.

been part of the meaning of racism. While the answer seems clear, since he states that racism "has always been a defense of racial privilege," it seems to me that he never directly confronts the issue of prejudice, historically or conceptually, and therefore fails to justify the claims that racial prejudice has largely dissipated and that, in any event, prejudice is incidental to racism, which is after all essentially a defense of privilege.

By denying that prejudice forms part of the meaning of white racism, Wellman does not mean that whites are generally oblivious to racial inequality in the U.S. Some whites deny racial inequality; but others acknowledge it and admit it to be a social fact. Rather he means that even when whites acknowledge racial inequality, they no longer try to explain the inequality in terms of racial superiority and inferiority. To define racist beliefs as "culturally sanctioned, rational responses to struggles over scarce resources" means that racist beliefs are based neither on prejudicial beliefs toward blacks nor on irrational assessments of social reality. Instead, the beliefs are based on the material self-interest of whites *qua* members of the group whites.

Modern racist beliefs receive "cultural sanction," according to Wellman, insofar as they attempt to explain racial inequality by reference to the American principles of individualism, equal treatment, and opportunity.[72] Acceptable explanations of inequality would focus, not on the "nature" of blacks or whites, but rather on vestigial forms of job and housing discrimination, lack of educational opportunities and resources, and so on. On this view, aiming at color-blind anti-discrimination policies in social and educational institutions would ensure that blacks are treated as individuals and as equals, and would

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[72] Consider some of the stock objections to affirmative action: that it fails to respect individual achievement by giving "special preference" to the unqualified; that it reverses invidious racial discrimination by treating whites, not as moral equals, but as members of a racial group; that it distributes opportunities, not to individuals, but to persons *qua* members of racial groups; and so on.

thereby enable them to shirk the yoke of social inequality. The belief that inequality is the result of differences in education and employability serves to justify the fairness of American institutions, since the implication is that, given equal opportunities, there are no structural impediments to social advancement. The failure to achieve social equality can thus be blamed on individuals or on their racial or ethnic communities, rather than on the basic structure of American society. Racist beliefs are types of rationalization, then, that at once explain racial inequality and justify the rectitude of American institutions, while leaving intact the image of America as a just society.

The definition of modern racist beliefs as "rational responses to struggles over scarce resources" requires elaboration. Note that Wellman describes racist beliefs as rational. This follows a long tradition in social theory of evaluating human behavior, individual and collective, almost exclusively in terms of rationality. By rationality, I mean the calculation of those actions needed to attain specified goals, or, put differently, the determination of means necessary to achieve given ends or interests. Rationality consists of linking means to ends, where means are actions and ends are goals or interests. According to Wellman, a longstanding assumption in the sociology of racism is that racism is essentially irrational, the product of ignorance about social facts or about the group discriminated against, of overly rigid and authoritarian personality types, or of hatred of certain social groups. A Marxian variant is that white racism among the working-class is irrational since it creates division and conflict between working-class whites and blacks and, in this way, contradicts their shared class-interests. Wellman, by contrast, argues that racist beliefs are rational, or rather are "rational responses." This does not mean they are moral or just; instead, it means that the beliefs are of instrumental

value in attaining some goal. Racist beliefs, in other words, are "responses" that help whites to achieve a desired goal or to satisfy an interest.

What these "goals" or "interests" are, is both readily apparent and brings us to the nub of Wellman's theory. Racist beliefs are responses "to struggles over scarce resources"; by "scarce resources," Wellman means economic resources. The idea is a familiar one in liberal-capitalist societies: the normative justification for private property and economic competition is predicated on the assumption of scarce resources, i.e., the assumption that there is not enough stuff to satisfy peoples' "infinite needs," nor even their more basic necessities. And so, when Wellman defines racism as a defense of "social advantage" or "privilege," he has in mind economic advantage, the superior economic opportunity, access, and security whites enjoy *vis-à-vis* blacks. In the U.S., while there is clearly a class hierarchy in general – a class system of the poor, the working poor, the working-class, and so on – it is nonetheless true that whites have historically received social, economic, and political privileges *vis-à-vis* blacks, in particular. Although there have been class-based distributive struggles, it is also true that whites as a group have been the beneficiaries of a racial hierarchy. So, on this view, white opposition to social policies aimed at benefiting blacks economically is intelligible, indeed rational, insofar as whites collectively perceive redistributive efforts (correctly, Wellman thinks) as threats to their economic security.

The argument, then, is that whites oppose social changes aimed at benefiting blacks, not because of malice or ignorance, but from a sense of self-preservation: when scarcity is assumed, extending benefits to blacks cuts into or threatens the share of resources historically controlled by whites. Given the social structure of the U.S., this is

a real conflict and white resistance to such change is rational. Yet the fact of racial

inequality still needs explanation. Admitting that inequality results from a racial

hierarchy is out of the question, Wellman claims, both because it would force individual

whites to admit their complicity in a racially oppressive social system and because it

would clearly contradict the core American values of individual freedom and equality.

To avoid such dissonance, whites rationalize racial inequality by fashioning culturally

sanctioned explanations that, in effect, shift the blame onto blacks.

It is these beliefs and explanations that Wellman depicts as "sentiments which,

regardless of intentions, defend the advantages that whites gain from the presence of

blacks in America." The idea that beliefs defend racial privilege by explaining and

justifying inequality "regardless of intentions" is worth examining more closely. One of

the reasons that Wellman's thesis is notable is that it attempts to develop a structural

account of racism. By "structural account," I mean an account that explains some social

phenomenon, in this case racism, in terms of the organization of institutions. The

arrangement of social institutions governs how goods and resources, forms of access and

opportunities, are allocated in that society. To affirm that racism is a structural problem

implies that the way that race advantages some and disadvantages others is independent

of, or only incidentally related to, personal attitudes or prejudices. Wellman therefore

states that "prejudice is not what makes race such a salient category. Rather, race is

important because white Americans continue to experience advantages based on their

position in the American social hierarchy."[73] So, when asked about the causes of social

inequality in America, it should come as no surprise that few whites explain them in

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[73] Ibid, 4.

terms of, say, biological differences between whites and blacks, the innate superiority of whites, or outright denials that there is inequality.

For Wellman, white prejudice against blacks is not the problem. On one hand, he claims that the Archie Bunker stereotype is just that: a stereotype, an exaggeration of the extent of white (especially working-class) prejudice. By contrast, several of the whites interviewed by Wellman voiced universalist attitudes about race, expressing a belief in abstract equality and a desire for color-blind social policies – because "race shouldn't matter." Even if the sincerity of these self-reports is suspect, it is nonetheless worth noting that overt prejudice is regarded as, and evidently felt to be, socially unacceptable. On the other hand, whether or not individual whites have prejudicial attitudes is beside the point for Wellman, since the actual source of racial inequality in the U.S. is the institutional framework. And this point casts light on the novelty of his theory: for the denial that prejudice is the problem, or that many whites in the contemporary U.S. remain prejudiced, does not exculpate or exempt whites from criticism. On the contrary, to affirm that whites explain and justify inequality in ways that maintain the status quo (i.e., that maintain the racial hierarchy in the U.S.) effectively deepens the complicity of whites in perpetuating racism, because it is those rationalizations that obscure the extent to which whites benefit from keeping social relations, practices, and institutions exactly the same.

Since white peoples' beliefs about inequality in effect maintain the status quo – since they are "a disguised way to defend privilege"[74] and subtly shift blame for inequality from the social structure to those subordinated by it – it is, strictly speaking,

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[74] Ibid, 57.

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irrelevant what individual whites intend. Even if whites sincerely desire a color-blind society, where people relate to each other as morally equal and unique persons, where success or failure is determined by ambition, merit, and so on, it is still true that, given the structure of U.S. institutions, whites remain systemically privileged *vis-à-vis* blacks. Denials of inequality, criticisms of putatively inferior value systems, condemnations of welfare or similar social programs – all of these "well-intentioned" positions preserve the status quo and never touch the heart of the matter, which is the racial hierarchy in the U.S. The only thing that will genuinely reduce racism in America, according to Wellman, is social change that aims at structural transformation.

Wellman contrasts his structural model of racism with other structuralist accounts[75] as well as with theories he calls culturalist.[76] Among the former are William J. Wilson's contention that the main problem currently facing blacks in America is poverty, not racism. Poverty among blacks is symptomatic of anonymous market forces whose "impersonal shifts" affect, i.e., isolate and impoverish, blacks as well as whites. This type of structuralist account does not neglect the pernicious effects of racism, but Wellman claims that it minimizes the impact of racism insofar as it demands greater attention be paid to the way market economies systematically disadvantage the poor and working poor. Although Wellman praises Wilson's emphasis on structure and social location, he criticizes the latter's view for failing to explain why whites and blacks in similar social positions are treated differently, and why a disproportionate number of blacks are relegated to low wage work. Unless race is a primary category in a structuralist theory of society, phenomena such as the racial division of labor and

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[75] Ibid, 5-7.
[76] Ibid, 7-11.

differential treatment of persons in the same economic position will be ignored. For this reason, structuralist theories that fail specifically to address racial inequality are, in Wellman's view, inadequate.

While alternative structural accounts of racism minimize the role of racism, culturalist theories maximize the impact, but do so in a manner that obscures the material basis underlying and perpetuating the racial hierarchy. Culturalist theories of racism investigate the role of race in social relations by analyzing "meaning systems, categories, and beliefs" as well as discursive strategies, social practices, and media representations. Despite differences among competing culturalist approaches, Wellman concludes that all such approaches are ultimately beholden to the concept of ideology. While never explicitly defining "ideology," Wellman means something fairly traditional: in effect, "false consciousness," untrue or distorted understandings of reality stemming from systems of meaning and representation. On the culturalist view, then, racism is seen as a social problem, but one that affects social beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions. Such theories are deficient to the degree that they leave unexamined the institutional arrangements that systematically benefit whites at the expense of blacks. The theoretical weakness of culturalist theories is that they "provide no serious analysis of the contemporary structure of racial advantage and how it might be connected to the ways in which people talk about race."[77]

Although these alternative theories inadequately explain racial inequality in America, together they illuminate what Wellman refers to as the "two sides of racism," social structure and culture. Racism is essentially about maintaining material privilege,

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[77] Ibid, 9.

which combines control over and access to scarce resources. If the scarcity of resources is assumed, then it appears that white privilege can only be secured and maintained through a social structure that subordinates blacks. But the inequality generated by the defense of white privilege must be justified such that white complicity in perpetuating racism is concealed. This problem is felt most acutely when "access to those scarce resources [is] challenged,"[78] as happened vigorously and prominently during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s. Whites must then give reasons and explanations for racial inequality that simultaneously rationalize the status quo and exempt themselves from blame. Culturally, racial inequality must be explained in ways that do not contradict such ideals as personal freedom and social equality. For Wellman, the theoretical value of defining racism as "culturally acceptable beliefs that defend social advantage based on race"[79] is that it integrates both aspects of society, the structural and the cultural, into a single model. By contrast, rival sociological theories of racism have "become bifurcated" so that one must "choose between the frameworks [structuralist or culturalist], to opt for one or the other."[80] Racism *qua* defense of racial privilege purportedly bridges this gap, offering a unified theoretical account of the "two sides of racism."

Wellman's remarks on contemporary sociological theories of racism are similar to Nancy Fraser's assessment of contemporary political theory. In "Recognition without Ethics?" Fraser says that "forces of progressive politics have been divided into two

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[78] Ibid, 24.
[79] Ibid, 25.
[80] Ibid, 25.

camps,"[81] the one focused on *distributive* justice, the other on *recognitive* concerns.

Fraser argues that political philosophy is *bifurcated* between the politics of redistribution

and the politics of identity, with the result that current political thought exhibits a type of

"schizophrenia." The claim neatly fits Wellman's criticism of structuralist and culturalist

theories: theories weighted too heavily in favor of the structural risk losing sight of race

(*status*, in Fraser's terms) while those weighted in favor or the cultural (i.e., *identity*) risk

eliding the reality of economic inequality. Clarifying the intersection of class and race, or

redistribution and recognition, requires that theory be complex enough to address both

elements without reducing one to the other, and that it do so in a single conceptual

framework. Like Wellman, Fraser claims to have developed such a "comprehensive

framework" with her *status model of recognition*, and thus to have avoided theoretical

"schizophrenia."

I examine aspects of Fraser's theory in a later chapter. For now, it suffices to note

that some of her reasons for rejecting, or at least being suspicious of, an identity-

recognition theory parallel Wellman's reasons for rejecting the prejudice model of

racism. In "Rethinking Recognition,"[82] Fraser claims that identity-based social theories

create two problems, namely the problems of *displacement* and *reification*. Identity-

based theories *displace* economic concerns. "Largely silent on the subject of economic

inequality," Fraser avers, "the identity model treats misrecognition [e.g., prejudice] as a

free-standing cultural harm: many of its proponents simply ignore distributive injustice

altogether and focus exclusively on efforts to change culture."[83] The position criticized,

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[81] Nancy Fraser, "Recognition Without Ethics?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 18:2-3, 21-42. Hereafter referred to as "RE."

[82] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review* 3, 107-120. Hereafter referred to as "RR."

[83] Fraser, ibid, 110.

like the criticism itself, resembles Wellman's criticism of culturalist theories. The idea is that too great an emphasis on identity, systems of representation, and so on, diverts attention from the economic conditions that produce and maintain social inequality. As Wellman notes, "Psychologizing it [prejudice] in this way makes racism appear independent of material structures, or as the cause of social structure."[84] Thus "the crucial feature of race relations in America becomes the ideas that whites have about others; not their own superior position, the benefits following from their position, or the institutions that maintain this relationship."[85] In Wellman's view, on the contrary, racial inequality is the result, not of prejudice or a failure to recognize another's distinctive identity, but of the institutions that govern social and economic relations, practices, and opportunities.

The problem with the prejudice model of racism for Wellman, as well as with identity-recognition theories for Fraser, is that they locate the *source* of the social wrong (e.g., racism) "in the heads" of social agents. Hence, the problem with the prejudice model of racism and with identity-based theories is that each construes social processes in *psychological* terms. "If the sources of racism are not located in structural dimensions...then it follows that its origins are in people's minds."[86] Such "psychologization" misconceives the *nature* of white racism as well as the harms resulting from it. On the one hand, the prejudice model of racism suggests that the main social harm suffered by blacks is mental, or in Fraser's words, consists of "[being]

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[84] Wellman, *op. cit.*, 38.
[85] Ibid, 43.
[86] Ibid, 42.

thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes."[87] The problem with this view is not only that it ignores institutions, but that it wholly misses the physical deprivations and denials of opportunity that characterize racial inequality. It implies that *the wrongness* of racial injustice boils down to personal insult and hurt feelings.

On the other hand, the prejudice model of racism suggests that racism is "mental." According to Wellman, sociological theories of racism have assumed that racism was defined by prejudicial attitudes and beliefs, which consist of (all or some combination of) three features.[88] Racists were assumed to be a) openly hostile toward the object of prejudice; b) ignorant of or liable to misconceptions about the object of prejudice (subject to systematically distorted views of social reality); and c) "attitudinally rigid" with respect to values, social roles, and authority. "Attitudinal rigidity is usually overt, explicit, not concealed. Misconceptions, too, are systematic, predictable, and hostile toward different, or competing views."[89] So it is no surprise that racism has been viewed as irrational or as a psychological or cognitive defect. Nor is it surprising, if it is assumed that prejudice involves rigidity or provinciality, that members of the (assumedly) less educated working-class appear to be more prejudiced than members of the (assumedly) cosmopolitan middle- and upper-classes. As Wellman notes, "Middle-class whites are *trained* to subscribe to American ideals [e.g., color-blindness] and to verbalize tolerance."[90]

Wellman takes umbrage with the prejudice model of racism for several reasons. First, as already mentioned, Wellman insists that racism is "a pervasive phenomenon

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[87] Fraser, *op. cit.*, 113.

[88] Wellman, *op. cit.*, 29-30.

[89] Ibid, 30.

[90] Ibid, 51; italics in original.

which can be found throughout the class structure"[91] since whites *as whites* – i.e.,

irrespective of social class – are advantaged *vis-à-vis* blacks. "Analyzing racism as a

defense of privilege permits detection of it among all, not just a few, Americans."[92] As

all whites benefit from the subordination of blacks, it follows that all whites are complicit

in perpetuating racial inequality, regardless of personal beliefs or attitudes. Secondly, the

assumed fact of scarcity not only makes intelligible the opposition of working-class

whites to black demands for social change, it provides a vantage point from which such

resistance appears *rational*. By "resources," Wellman means those social goods that are

divisible and therefore usually grouped under the distributive paradigm. Income,

housing, job and educational opportunities are examples, since there is a limited amount

of each and since each is susceptible of reallocation (or redistribution). From the

viewpoint of working-class (as well as poor and working poor) whites, however, this

means that social change aimed at redistributing more resources to blacks directly

threatens their share of, or access to, an already limited number of resources. It is worth

quoting Wellman at length here:

> Given the organization of society, there are only so many resources to go around.
> If race is one of the basic divisions around which access to resources is
> determined and if institutional changes demanded by blacks are accommodated,
> then some groups of whites stand to lose certain advantages. The analogy of a
> zero-sum game is appropriate. For blacks to gain may mean whites will lose.
> White people thus have an interest in maintaining their position of racial
> advantage. The issues that divide black and white people, then, are grounded in
> real and material conditions.[93]

As a result, Wellman avers that the reluctance of working-class whites to embrace social

change is, in fact, rational. If middle-class whites appear to be more tolerant than

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[91] Ibid, 29.
[92] Ibid, 61.
[93] Ibid, 56.

working-class whites, and thus less racist, it is only because "tolerance is not simply an attribute middle-class people learn; it is also a luxury they can afford."[94]

Finally, Wellman simply denies that the prejudice model of racism accurately represents the beliefs of whites toward blacks. He denies that contemporary white Americans are generally hostile toward blacks, ignorant of the social reality of racism, or inclined toward authoritarian belief systems. He offers as support for this claim the results of his qualitative interviews with whites in the late 1960s, and the results of more systematic data gathered at Berkeley and in Bensonhurst, NY, in the early 1990s. I dispute his conclusions below; for now, I note only that Wellman denies that the responses of his interviewees, of Berkeley students, and of Bensonhurst residents reveal anti-black prejudice. Wellman avers that construing the interviewee responses in light of the prejudice model would yield no useful distinctions and would provide no way of explaining differences and discrepancies among the responses.[95] Instead, he proposes that the most accurate and fruitful interpretation would follow the lines he has sketched out, that is, understanding white attitudes toward racial inequality as "a disguised way to defend privilege."

For Wellman, the key difference in attitudes toward racial inequality involves *receptivity to social change*.[96] In this context, "social change" refers to change aimed at remedying racial inequality. The degree to which subjects embrace or oppose social change speaks to their awareness both that inequality exists and that it possesses a racial character. Wellman notes that interviewees differed in their openness to social change

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[94] Ibid, 59.
[95] Ibid, 213.
[96] Ibid, 213.

and in their opinion about which policies or programs were legitimate means to accomplish it. None endorsed radical structural change. Some acknowledged that racial discrimination existed – that blacks had fewer opportunities and more obstacles than do whites – and that "something must be done to change the situation" (e.g., provide educational and job training opportunities). But others denied that discrimination was the cause of racial inequality and concluded that the onus was on blacks to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. Still others were tepidly receptive to "group strategies like black power";[97] while a few urged blacks to see themselves as *individuals*, not as *black individuals*. What accounts for these differing beliefs and degrees of receptivity to change, according to Wellman, is the class location of the interviewees: those from the working-class were largely amenable to the idea of social change; those from the middle- or upper-class were not.

For Wellman this finding is at first paradoxical. Given his thesis, one would *prima facie* expect working-class whites to be less receptive to social change than middle- and upper-class whites. As argued above, in light of the reality of scarcity the opposition of working-class whites to social change is *rational*. It is rational, or in the collective interest of working-class whites, to oppose social change because change from their perspective results in increased competition for scarce resources, which jeopardizes their economic well-being. For this reason, receptiveness to social change among working-class whites appears paradoxical.

But the appearance of paradox can be dispelled by examining how the intersection of race and class is experienced by social agents, and also by considering the class-

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[97] Ibid, 213.

specific "stakes" involved in racial issues. In Wellman's view, whites *qua* white are privileged *vis-à-vis* blacks. Whites are "pushed upward" economically and "pulled together" racially in relation to blacks, so that whites as a social group are *constituted* in opposition to blacks. Two things follow from this: race unifies whites as a social group and, moreover, is experienced by individual whites in group terms. This is why Wellman believes it is in the rational (collective) self-interest of whites *qua* white to resist social change. Class relations, by contrast, separate whites, "pushing" some up and others down. Although he gives no argument as to why this is the case,[98] Wellman claims that class, unlike race, is experienced in individual terms. And so, working-class whites are both advantaged ("pushed up" *vis-à-vis* blacks) and disadvantaged ("pushed down" *vis-à-vis* the middle- and upper-classes). Working-class whites' interests are threatened by competition from the middle- and upper-class and also by social change aimed at benefiting blacks. Middle- and upper-class whites, on the contrary, are advantaged ("pushed up") with respect to *both* race and class. And since they are economically secure enough not to feel the competitive "push" from working-class whites or from disadvantaged blacks, Wellman states they experience class and race in individual terms.

It is the "tension" between race and class that "creates [a] receptivity to change"[99] in working-class whites. To see why requires considering the different "stakes" involved in such change. The stakes for working-class whites seem self-evident: "Black people raise issues that often directly affect working-class whites...When the situation of blacks

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[98] I do not deny such an argument could be made. Indeed, there is no shortage of arguments that show how market societies fragment social relations and desiccate personal experience, so that subjects tend to regard themselves as isolated and impenetrable nodes or atoms. My point is only that Wellman asserts this, rather than arguing for it.

[99] Wellman, *op. cit.*, 215.

is upgraded, these people feel it first. The issue...is a *personal* one."[100] Working-class

whites oppose redistributive schemes because they perceive them as threats to their

economic survival: "they are defending personal interests."[101] Wellman concludes that

working-class whites are otherwise amenable to *non-economic* forms of social change:

"Blacks can do pretty much what they please, as long as it does not involve [working-

class whites] directly."[102] The stakes for middle- and upper-class whites differ

significantly. Their economic well-being is not threatened, so the issue is not "personal"

for them in this way. Rather, Wellman argues that they object to the use of "group

solutions" to solve social problems: "They are defending the principle of

individualism."[103] Thus the "basic objection to a strategy like black power is that it

violates the principle of individualism that guides and justifies"[104] the lives of middle-

and upper-class whites. They putatively have "more at stake" than working-class whites:

"Their principles are at issue. It is not just a question of immediate personal interest."[105]

In this way, Wellman believes the above-mentioned paradox has been resolved.

If those most affected by social change are nonetheless most receptive to it – and

conversely, those least affected by it least receptive – this is intelligible in light of the

"stakes" generated by different experiences of the intersection of race and class. Whites

qua white resist social change aimed at benefiting blacks, since it threatens their

privileged position in the racial hierarchy. Whites *qua* members of the working-class are

receptive to social change, but only to the extent that proposed changes do not affect their

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[100] Ibid, 216.
[101] Ibid, 217.
[102] Ibid, 217.
[103] Ibid, 217.
[104] Ibid, 217.
[105] Ibid, 217.

economic well-being. Whites *qua* members of the middle- and upper-class, despite the fact their economic interests are not threatened, are nonetheless hostile to social change because it violates the principles by which they order their private and public lives.

In this light, Wellman's indebtedness to economistic assumptions is easily seen. First, he repeatedly states that racism consists of whites protecting their *self-interest*. "In crucial respects there is a conflict of interest involved: gains for black people can mean losses for whites."[106] The self-interested nature of racism is literally a matter of definition: "The essential feature of racism is...the defense of a system from which advantage is derived on the basis of race."[107] Second, the self-interest that whites aim to defend is *economic*. Referring to the interviews he conducted and to survey data collected at Berkeley, CA, and in Bensonhurst, NY, Wellman concludes: "In each instance, the conflict is over scarce resources."[108] The economic self-interest defended by whites, moreover, holds for whites both individually and collectively.

Third, his view relies on the social-ontological assumptions characteristic of economism: subject-object dualism and the linking of strategic reason with action. Consider the assertion that a proper definition of racism must "include sentiments that in their consequence, if not their intent, support the racial status quo."[109] These "sentiments" are "culturally sanctioned beliefs" that rationalize racial inequality, protecting and justifying white advantage relative to blacks. The assumption is that the "sentiments" are motivated by white self-interest and, therefore, that such sentiments are strategically deployed to secure white economic advantage. Put differently, self-interest

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[106] Ibid, 206.
[107] Ibid, 210.
[108] Ibid, 242.
[109] Ibid, 211.

motivates whites to give explanations for racial inequality which are, in turn, used instrumentally to exempt themselves from criticism, and in this way to legitimate their position in an unjust social structure. And, given this social structure and the fact of scarce resources, Wellman considers it *rational*, though still racist, for working-class whites to be leery of black demands for structural change. After all, it is their self-interest at stake, their economic well-being, and: "For blacks to gain may mean whites will lose."

Critique of Wellman's Economistic Theory of Racism

In this section I develop criticisms of Wellman's theory, showing that, on his own terms, his account is inadequate. I identify ambiguities, interpretive inconsistencies, and the conceptual limitations of his reduction of racism to a struggle over scarce resources.

Part of Wellman's theory consists of the denial that prejudice plays an important role in American racism. While he does not deny that prejudice was at one time common, or that some whites still display prejudice, he claims that civil rights has effected something of a sea-change in the attitudes of whites.[110] Referring to his own interviews, he says: "Each position is formulated in very acceptable, almost liberal, American terms. With some minor exceptions, there is not a prejudiced-sounding formulation among them."[111] He continues:

> These are not "prejudiced" people. The distinctive feature of their racial senti-
> ments is neither hostility toward nor faulty generalizations about racial groups.
> As far as I can tell, their attitudes are not characteristically based on prejudgment
> or misjudgment.[112]

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[110] Ibid, 209.

[111] Ibid, 208.

[112] Ibid, 210.

He concludes the same about the responses of Berkeley students and Bensonhurst residents. About the latter he states: "Their ideology…also maintains…the racial status quo, without sounding 'racist' since they justify their actions in culturally respectable terms."[113] Consequently prejudice, so far as it still exists, plays at best a peripheral role in contemporary racism.

Perhaps the most evident problem with Wellman's interpretive strategy is that he accepts at face value what interviewees tell him. Although he acknowledges that it is these days socially unacceptable to use racially hostile or demeaning language, he insists on interpreting the absence of such language as the absence of prejudice.

But a graver problem is that many of his interviewees *make prejudicial comments*. One considers black militants "intelligent spades," but bristles at being "hassled by spades" in San Francisco. (I take it as given that "spade" is a racial epithet.) Another claims that racial inequality results from a lack of motivation among blacks; while another opines that there is no real inequality in America – the opportunities are there, for black and white alike, if people just took advantage of them. And although not all were asked about interracial marriage, those who were, opposed it. On one hand, Wellman is right that these are neither openly hateful views nor biological justifications for inequality; but, on the other, they still involve stereotyping, faulty generalizations, and misconceptions or distorted perceptions of social reality. But that some of those beliefs had (and still have) cultural currency does not make them *correct*; simply because they are "culturally respectable" does not make them any less mistaken, stereotypical, or "rigid." Yet these are precisely the features that Wellman had earlier singled out as

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[113] Ibid, 240.

definitive of racial prejudice. So it is puzzling why he adamantly denies that his interviewees are prejudiced.[114]

Wellman's theory also suffers an ambiguity on the term "privilege" (i.e., "advantage," "benefit"). He says, "racism today remains…a defense of racial privilege." "Privilege" here can be interpreted in two ways:

(a) racism maintains the economic privilege of whites relative to blacks

(b) racism maintains the privilege of whites relative to blacks, all things considered.

The difference is this. On version (a), "privilege" is specifically economic. So that when whites espouse beliefs that maintain the racial status quo, it is to protect their economic self-interest. Of course, "privilege" in this sense refers to more than jobs and income; it refers to divisible goods such as affordable housing, educational opportunities, transportation, and healthcare. On version (b), "privilege" extends beyond economic interests to include social and cultural considerations, such as social prestige, local decision-making authority, valorization of cultural heritage, and so on. Put differently, version (a) subordinates non-economic considerations to economic interests, or rather, makes the former a function of the latter; whereas version (b) posits economic security as one of many forms of privilege (e.g., political power, legal authority, cultural status).

The question is whether Wellman intends version (a) or (b). If he means that all whites are racist insofar as they want to defend their economic privilege relative to blacks, then it seems to me that he is obviously wrong. Some whites are wealthy enough not to have to worry about economic competition, from blacks or from less well off

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[114] The problem here is deeper still, since Wellman's definition of racism – "culturally sanctioned…sentiments which, regardless of intention [serve to protect white privilege]" – seems to *require* systematic self-deception by whites.

whites; conversely, not all whites are economically privileged relative to blacks, so they cannot defend a privilege they do not have; and many blacks are middle-class and may be viewed as economically privileged with respect to some whites. It is true that whites are economically better off than blacks *proportionately*, which supports the claim that, collectively, whites are privileged *vis-à-vis* blacks. But given Wellman's thesis, this still fails to explain why, individually, whites who are not conceivably defending economic privilege are nonetheless racist.

On the other hand, if he means that all whites are racist inasmuch as they want to defend their privilege relative to blacks *all things considered*, then the claim is more plausible. On this view it may be that whites who are not economically privileged nonetheless feel a sense of social or cultural entitlement: a sense of privilege, say, that manifests itself in the expectation of legal protection and fair treatment, social belonging and political participation, cultural recognition, and so on. An advantage of this interpretation of "privilege" is that it can acknowledge racial inequality, a system of privileges maintained by the subordination of blacks, without reducing the variety of benefits gained to economic interests. It can include the former view – say, as a background assumption that whites *simply will be* economically better off than blacks – but does not derive the privileges whites gain at the expense of blacks solely from economic well-being.

Thus, it seems to me that version (b) is the more plausible of the two. Unfortunately it is not the version Wellman seems to defend. Although he uses locutions like "racial privilege" and "advantages based on race," which could be interpreted either way, he regularly formulates his theory in terms of *scarce resources*, as when he says that

racist beliefs are "culturally sanctioned, rational response[s] to struggles over scarce resources."[115] Indeed, he argues that racist beliefs among working-class whites are rational *because* "there are only so many resources to go around"; in this context, he invokes the image of a "zero-sum game": to the degree that blacks gain access to or control over scarce resources, whites lose ground. At the end of the day, then, "the conflict is over scarce resources."[116] If "privilege" were construed as privilege *all things considered*, the analogy of a "zero-sum game" would make no sense. Certain forms of cultural privilege, e.g., esteem, are not the sorts of things that can be distributed; in any case, ensuring equal legal protection or forms of cultural recognition *takes away* no scarce resource from whites. So, despite attendant difficulties, I conclude that Wellman's position is that white racism consists of the defense and rationalization of economic self-interest, specifically.

There is additionally an important and revealing inconsistency in Wellman's theory. Recall the many claims regarding receptivity among whites to social change aimed at benefiting blacks. It was argued that whites *qua* white oppose such change, but that working-class whites are more open to change than middle- and upper-class whites. The reasoning was as follows.

Working-class whites resist forms of social change that threaten their interests, but are open to changes that do not affect those interests. Since part of the experience of being working-class includes a "heightened awareness of inequality," the working-class is "sensitive to the limits of individual solutions and the advantages of group

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[115] Wellman, *op. cit.*, 54.
[116] Ibid, 242.

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strategies."[117] Hence working-class whites tend to "recognize inequality and attribute it in part to differences in power, [such that] under certain conditions they are willing to accept group solutions that involve militancy and invoke power."[118] Middle- and upper-class whites, on the other hand, are defending not their economic interests but, rather, their *principles* – e.g., "individualism" and "achievement" – and "[t]here is no way group strategies can avoid bumping into the principles of individualism to which [they] subscribe."[119] Consequently, middle- and upper-class whites oppose change aimed at benefiting blacks, even though such change in no way threatens their economic status. In this light, Wellman qualifies his judgment of working-class whites' receptivity to social change. Although they "find group strategies…acceptable under some conditions…they [still] are committed to the notion that people should be autonomous and independent."[120] These values constitute the American "creed and culture," a national identity that shapes and informs the lives of working-class whites. So when blacks *as a social group* demand, say, reparations for past injustices, it not only threatens the economic self-interest of working-class whites. Such a demand "[says] to people that the cultural currency they have invested in has been devalued; the rules of the game have been changed. That is something [working-class whites] will not tolerate; they have too much of themselves invested"[121] in the values of independence and self-sufficiency.

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[117] Ibid, 217-218.

[118] Ibid, 218.

[119] Ibid, 217.

[120] Ibid, 219.

[121] Ibid, 220.

The appeal to principles and shared values reveals an inconsistency in Wellman's theory.[122] The claim that whites, of all classes, oppose social change because it threatens their value system concedes that there are motivations other than, and in fact *stronger* than simple economic self-interest. These motivations, which Wellman acknowledges, are rooted in values and principles that govern people's actions, give meaning to their everyday lives, and shape their expectations about themselves, others, and the society of which they are a part. The decisive factor in white resistance to race-conscious social policies, then, is not fundamentally the threat to or preservation of economic self-interest. If white opposition to such policies arose primarily from the desire to protect economic interests, then middle- and upper-class whites would be untroubled by the idea of affirmative action or social welfare. Since the implementation of these policies would affect the economic well-being of working-class whites more than middle- and upper-class whites, there would be no reason for the latter to oppose the policies. But Wellman argues that they do oppose them. So, on his own premises, the motivation to support or resist forms of social change (say, race or gender-specific legislation) is grounded in *identity*. The economistic theory of racism has subtly shifted ground from a conflict over scarce resources to a struggle for the recognition of cultural values, meanings, and identity. And as a result, Wellman cannot consistently define racism as *essentially* a defense of economic self-interest. Racial conflict, on the part of whites as well as blacks, involves demands for recognition as well.

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[122] I should note that I am not distinguishing between "principles" and "values" in a technical and disciplined way. For present purposes, I stipulate that principles embody and reflect values that a person or community recognizes, and so are usually reflectively articulated in a way that values are not. To defend an action or policy "on principle," then, is to offer justificatory, yet contestable, reasons for so acting. But to appreciate why the action or policy was undertaken would, in turn, require some account of the values prompting or underlying the action.

If this is right, then a fundamental limitation of economistic theory has been revealed. Namely, economistic explanations must draw on resources beyond those allowed by its own concepts, categories, and assumptions. Construing the motivation for engaging in social conflict (in this case, racism) purely in terms of economic self-interest either fails to grasp the complexity of the conflict, or else invokes unacknowledged identity claims. In Wellman's case, economism functions surreptitiously as a theory of identity and agency, which can be seen in the claim that racist beliefs serve both to justify the racial status quo and also to exculpate whites from their complicity in perpetuating inequality. Admitting complicity in racial inequality would violently clash with the image whites have of America and of themselves. And since, according to Wellman, they cannot accept seeing themselves this way, i.e., as "sons of bitches," it is crucial they explain away inequality in terms of widely accepted principles and values, such as equality, merit, independence, and so on.

In other words, Wellman plausibly argues that forms of social change that acknowledge and aim to rectify racial inequality undermine the beliefs that American institutions are (and ought to be) color-blind, that the distribution of social resources is determined by effort and merit, and that social equality (or the means sufficient to attain it) already exists. If these beliefs are revealed as false, then the values they express (equality, merit, etc.) are also endangered. It is not that the values would be "unmasked" as unworthy, but that they would be seen as unrealized, not yet "lived up to." To the extent that social policies and institutions acknowledge inequality, specifically racial inequality, whites would be less able to assure themselves that their success, status, and achievements were due to individual effort in free and equal competition. In order to

persuade themselves that their success and status result from and embody a free, meritocratic and egalitarian society, it would behoove whites to deny the justification and need for race-conscious social change. Yet it is crucial to note that the motivation underlying such a posture toward social change is not access to and control over scarce resources. Rather, it is the coherence and maintenance of identity. Put more simply, Wellman's account traces white resistance to race-based social change back to the "horizon of value" against which Americans interact socially, judge the rectitude of institutions and practices, and ultimately shape their identities.

But the assertion that whites *cannot afford to see themselves* a particular way is either unsupported speculation about human psychology, or an assumption about the preconditions of identity formation. For even if it were granted that racist beliefs were a "cover story" aimed at defending racial privilege, the *necessity* of self-deception cannot be understood in Wellman's terms. Such a need is merely assumed. Integral to his theory of racism is an identity claim that, on the economistic premises he accepts, cannot be theorized. For this reason, it seems to me that economism is not only a theory of motivation, but is also a theory of identity and agency.

I am making two claims here, and it is worth pausing to distinguish them. On one hand, in a fairly straightforward way, economism presupposes a theory of identity, which I have just tried to demonstrate. On the other hand, economism is itself a theory of identity, even though it ostensibly says nothing about recognition and identity formation, and even though the thinkers I would describe as economistic would likely reject my characterization of what their assumptions commit them to. In the social sciences, they might reply, rational choice theory is used to model and predict human action, not to

enhance self-understanding, query the structure of the self, or prescribe norms and values. And yet the conceptual core of economism, i.e., the links between methodological individualism, economic self-interest, and strategic action, yields a conception of agency, commits the economistic thinker to a particular conception of how subjects experience and exercise their freedom. Because people are assumed generally to be motivated by self-interest and because their interactions with others are assumed generally to be strategic in nature, it is concluded that the economist or sociologist can explain such macro-level social phenomena as social conflict and change. But these generalizations about the motivation (self-interest) and the ends (utility maximization) of human behavior, while not assumed to hold unvaryingly and without exception, are nonetheless proposed as descriptive statements concerning how and why human beings behave as they do.

For these reasons, economism is a theory of agency. One of the problems economism readily faces, as I point out in chapter 5, is that it moves from assumptions about motivation and action to generalizations about human behavior, and seems to regard those assumptions as if they picked out actual features of human nature. But in treating *particular* motivations as universal or quasi-universal, economism fails to appreciate the historical specificity and mutability of norms, relationships, socialization patterns, economic practices, etc. As a result of this ahistoricism, economism begs the question concerning its core premises, merely assuming that the self-interest and strategic relations prevalent in liberal-capitalist societies are generalizable to all peoples and societies.

Moreover, in chapter 2, I argued that identity and agency are co-extensive. The process of identity formation (or individuation through socialization) is a form of agency, which is why the concept of identity is internally connected with autonomy and self-realization. Now, insofar as economism purports to explain motivation and action, it necessarily makes substantive assumptions about how people conceive of their action, or rather, makes assumptions about how people experience their behavior, goals, and relations. Put differently, economistic theory makes assumptions about how concrete individuals see themselves as social actors, think of themselves as persons. Thus, for example, the economistic thinker will be unsurprised that so many of the detractors of affirmative action state their opposition in the distributive terms of scarce resources, a "zero-sum" social policy, rewarding the less qualified, and so on. Affirmative action has been hotly contested, and criticisms of it have a pervasively economic cast – as well, importantly, as a decidedly aggrieved tone. This nearly reflex-like interpretation of affirmative action as a zero-sum game involving scarce social resources (e.g., degrees, promotions), together with the often expressed sense of indignation among whites, suggests that people experience themselves (or think that they experience themselves) as the self-interested, strategic calculators that economism portrays them as being. Since people commonly, though not universally, understand and explain their actions and motivations in economistic terms, and since the economistic theorist will take this as confirmation of her assumptions, it seems to me that economism is, whether or not this is acknowledged, a theory of identity as well as agency.

Highlighting the reliance on concepts drawn from an identity-recognition theory indicates an answer to the question Wellman gestures at in his definition of racism but is

unable to answer, given his theoretical framework: why is it that the beliefs that rationalize, elide, or explain away racial inequality require cultural sanction at all? If the truth about social interaction *simply is* that concrete individuals are self-interested, why is it necessary that white beliefs about race relations and inequality be consistent with culturally sanctioned values and norms? Although Wellman's definition of racism incorporates the need for beliefs that rationalize inequality, that necessity cannot be adequately explained on strictly economistic grounds. The explanation that is offered gains whatever plausibility it has only by surpassing the economistic framework: that is, the need for a "cover story" is explained by the necessity of establishing a coherent, sustainable identity. But economism lacks the concepts needed to link motivation and action to identity and its correlative recognitive demands.

To sum up my arguments in this section: in explicating his theory, Wellman abandons the economistic premises with which he begins and shifts ground to concepts implicating identity claims and recognitive demands. Only thus could he argue that people whose economic interests were not threatened by race-conscious distributive policies nonetheless protested them. Next, his definition of racism incorporated, even depended on an implicit identity claim, since "culturally sanctioned beliefs" were taken to be necessary to rationalize the institutionally secured advantage of whites *vis-à-vis* blacks. But the need for rationalization would be mysterious, unless what was at stake was the coherence of the identity of the persons affected, which observation is borne out by the assertion that the function of racist beliefs is, on the part of whites, self-exculpatory.

Of course, that people frequently describe their actions in economistic terms does little to support the purported universality of economistic assumptions. Given the historical character of social practices, institutions, recognition relations, and identity, it can plausibly be argued that if people understand their experience or explain their participation in social struggles in the terms offered by economism, it is not because that theory is *true*, but because we have created a social world in which economism has the veneer of truth and reality. I explore these ideas more closely in chapters 5 and 6. In chapter 4, I present and examine the identity-recognition alternative.

Chapter 4

The Recognition Theoretic Alternative

In the previous chapter I defined the concept of economism, presented a

contemporary illustration of an economistic position, then briefly developed internal and

external criticisms of that theory. My goal was to examine an economistic theory of

white racism and to demonstrate how, on its own premises, such an account runs into

difficulties. Wellman's thesis that white racism is in essence a defense of economic

advantage is a structuralist view that emphasizes the organization of social institutions in

perpetuating racism, and contrasts with culturalist views that focus on systems of beliefs,

representations, and meanings. On such a view the presence or absence of prejudice, or

of anti-black sentiments among whites, is incidental to the phenomenon of racism. To

theorize racism as a defense of racial economic advantage implies that irrespective of

consciously held beliefs, whites will continue to act in ways that maintain their economic

self-interest *vis-à-vis* blacks.

A particular problem with Wellman's account is interpretive, since he fails

accurately to represent the interviewee responses on which his theory is based. Deciding

from the start to interpret responses as expressions of economic self-interest forced those

responses into a Procrustean bed, obscuring the ways in which values and racial identity

motivate attitudes toward racial inequality and social change. Another problem involved

an equivocation on the term *privilege*. While on one hand this is a question of the

consistency of Wellman's theory, on the other it points to an inadequacy of an

economistic theory of racism in general. If privilege is construed only as economic benefit, then remedies aimed at rectifying racial inequality will be mainly or even solely distributive; and the social, cultural, and political benefits whites gain at the expense of blacks will be viewed as derivative or superstructural. If privilege is construed more broadly, then non-economic factors for combating racial inequality and explaining white attitudes to racially oriented social change come into view. Despite the explanatory advantages of the latter option, it is clear that Wellman intends privilege in the more narrow economistic sense.

I also argued that the cogency of Wellman's theory of racism depends on assumptions about motivation and identity that could not be accounted for on his own premises. Although he tries to bracket questions of social identity, he nonetheless draws on resources associated with identity politics and the concept of recognition in articulating his own theory. In this chapter, therefore, I want to present an alternative conception of motivation and action that is grounded in identity formation and recognition. In contrast to economism, the position I develop here is based on a theory of identity-recognition that conceives of motivation, action, and social conflict in terms of intersubjective recognition relations. The aim of this chapter is expository. My goal is to explicate how motivation, action, and social conflict are conceived from the viewpoint of identity-recognition theory. In chapter 5, I show how this theoretical alternative provides a better understanding of the motivation for white resistance to race-conscious social policies than does economistic theory.

To formulate the identity-recognition theory alternative, I draw on the work of G. W. F. Hegel and critical social theory. As Hegel was the first to identify the centrality of

mutual recognition in the development of persons and social groups, I begin by analyzing

the concept of recognition in two of his early works. Despite criticisms of Hegel's

metaphysical pretensions, I try to show the value for social theory of his criticism of

social contract theory, which criticism throws into relief his innovative social ontology. I

then examine Honneth's appropriation of the concept of mutual recognition in his attempt

to establish critical theory on the foundation of an identity-recognition theory. I also look

at Honneth's relation to Jurgen Habermas, whose theory of communicative action is

regarded as a theory of modernity, social interaction, and morality. Although the concept

of recognition figures less centrally in Habermas's work, his chief insight consists of

conceptualizing identity formation and social interaction in intersubjective terms. While

Honneth accepts Habermas's "communicative turn," he rejects his insistence that critical

theory be a theory of reason, and instead tries to establish social theory on the premises of

identity-recognition. I conclude by elaborating and critically examining Honneth's

recognition-theoretic alternative.

My aim in this chapter is to trace the formation of the concept of recognition in

the tradition running from Hegel to Honneth. Implicit in the concept of recognition are

claims about *conflict* and *motivation*. On Honneth's reconstruction of Hegel's early

work, it is specifically the intersubjective demand for recognition, rather than the pursuit

of self-interest, that spurs conflict and leads to moral progress. It is on this basis that, in

chapter 5, I argue that white racism is best understood as motivated by experiences of

perceived disrespect or denials of recognition, rather than by the defense of economic

self-interest.

Hegel

If there is one concept for which Hegel is known, it is probably his conception of the role that mutual recognition plays in the formation of self-consciousness. Although the concepts of "dialectic" and "spirit" are associated with Hegel's systematic theory, the former is often linked more precisely with the famous recognition struggle recounted in the *Phenomenology's* Master-Slave Dialectic, and the latter with the social formations that result from relations of mutual recognition. As early as the Jena lectures of 1802-1804 and as late as the *Philosophy of Right* (1821), Hegel argued that individual self-awareness, as well as social institutions such as family structures and the economic and legal institutions of liberal-capitalism, were constituted by intersubjective recognition relations. Although the constitutive character of recognition relations has been minimized in interpretations of Hegel as a metaphysician committed to a teleological account of *Absolute Spirit's* apotheosis,[123] there are persuasive contemporary interpretations[124] that view his formulation of mutual recognition, not as a stage in the development of a transhistorical subjectivity, but as a nonmetaphysical, intersubjective account of knowledge, identity, and social organization and change. The explication below follows the latter tack. In the remainder of this section, I examine the constitutive role that recognition plays in the formation of spirit (that is, a society, community, or form of life) in two of Hegel's early works, the essay "First Philosophy of Spirit"[125] and

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[123] This is Honneth's interpretation in *SR* and Habermas's in "Labor and Interaction: Remarks on Hegel's Jena 'Philosophy of Mind,'" trans. J. Viertel *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973).

[124] The two best in my view are Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) and Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[125] G. W. F. Hegel "First Philosophy of Spirit," ed. and trans. by H. S. Harris and T. M. Knox *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1979). Hereafter referred to as "First Philosophy."

the major work *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[126] While my aim is expository, I will treat

Hegel as a postcritical, nonmetaphysical thinker, which will inflect my presentation of

these works in the following way.

Unlike Habermas and Honneth, who interpret "First Philosophy" as an embryonic

theory of intersubjectivity that was abandoned in Hegel's later work for methodological

reasons, I take both the "First Philosophy" and the *PhG* as nonmetaphysical works. My

reasons for taking the *PhG* as nonmetaphysical are based on the work of Pippin and

Pinkard, who deny that Hegel's conception of "spirit" refers to a transhistorical subject

that overarches all of human history, and whose self-development comprises various

historical periods and proceeds in accord with an objective teleological principle.

Instead, they maintain that "spirit" should be construed as *social reason*, or rather, as a

form of social practice whereby human beings propose, establish, test, and modify the

standards governing what counts as a rational or valid claim within some domain of

activity. In their view, the concept of "Absolute Spirit" does not refer to an end state,

say, the complete and transparent self-knowledge of "Spirit," but rather to a reflective

and ongoing process of rational learning: *absolutizing* spirit. Viewing Hegel as a

nonmetaphysical thinker is important, since I want to show that the constitutive character

of recognition relations, especially as illustrated in the Master-Slave Dialectic, yields

insights into contemporary social relations, and race relations in particular. Although

mutual recognition plays an epistemological role in the *PhG*, I want to show that there is

a sense in which it plays a motivational role as well.

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[126] G. W. F. Hegel, trans. A. V. Miller *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). Hereafter referred to as *PhG*.

I first examine the Master-Slave Dialectic, then turn to Hegel's account of recognition relations in "First Philosophy." My reasons for proceeding in this way have to do with the role the concept of recognition plays in each work. In the *PhG*, the concept of mutual recognition is introduced to explain how a subject comes to be convinced of the authority (or the "truth") of its own contribution to its knowledge of itself and of the objects of its desire. Hegel argues that if a subject is conceived as a monad, or as a given consciousness in isolation from other subjects, then it cannot be assured of the authority of its knowledge claims about itself, about others, or about external objects. For its claims to count as objective and meaningful, for its beliefs and desires to acquire provisional validity *as* claims, those beliefs, desires, and so on must be ratified, confirmed, or *recognized* by another subject. Or, stated more simply, Hegel tries to demonstrate that the cognitive independence of a subject presupposes recognition by another subject. At this stage in the *PhG*, however, there are no developed social relations, so the recognition relation just described is a pre-social (or proto-social) relation intended to capture an epistemic necessity. And yet Hegel portrays "self-consciousness" as a practical being, a being necessarily connected with an external environment, and whose needs and desires can be satisfied only by working on and transforming external objects, and whose cognitive demands can be satisfied only *vis-à-vis* engagement in a community – i.e., a "We" in relation to which an "I" gains independence.

So, while mutual recognition functions to explain how a subject gains confidence in the authority of its knowledge claims, it prefigures the crucial role that recognition relations occupy in Hegel's social-political writings also. To show this I turn to "First

Philosophy," even though it predates the *PhG*. My reason for examining the *PhG* first

and the "First Philosophy" second is that, in the earlier work, Hegel uses the concept of

recognition to explicate the formation of social relations generally, as a constitutive

condition of *the social*. "First Philosophy" thus has a greater social-theoretic generality.

For Honneth, moreover, it is the work that represents Hegel's most important

contribution to a theory of intersubjectivity.

The *PhG* is an epistemological account of spirit's self-education. That is, it is an

account of how spirit, or reason as embodied in collective practices and social

institutions, historically achieves the standpoint of "absolute knowledge," wherein the

distinction between subject and object is overcome and spirit *qua* human subjectivity

comes to know itself (its intentionality, or activity of relating itself to and distinguishing

itself from objects of knowledge) as the ground of its knowledge claims. Just how this

Bildung, or process of self-education, is to be understood is controversial. Some interpret

spirit's progressively comprehensive self-understanding as a type of metaphysical

teleology, contending that Hegel *begins* with a conception of absolute spirit and, on that

basis, proceeds to recount the different "stages" spirit passes through in recollecting (i.e.,

gaining knowledge of) itself. Since the end is given in the beginning, the dialectical

transitions through which spirit passes have for Hegel a type of logical necessity, so that

the task of the philosopher consists of demonstrating how actual historical societies have

embodied spirit in its "return" to itself. Others interpret the *PhG* as a post-Kantian,

nonmetaphysical epistemology, arguing that there is no pre-given teleological logic but

only the force of norms emerging from and grounded in the standards, practices, and

institutions of historical communities.

As mentioned above, I subscribe to the latter, nonmetaphysical interpretation of the *PhG*. Thus I take the text to be a theory of the self-grounding, norm-constrained nature of reason and knowledge. Such an interpretive decision becomes significant for the purposes of my project when in Chapter IV of the *PhG*, "The Truth of Self-Certainty," Hegel first introduces and shows the need for the concept of mutual recognition. After analyzing and rejecting both empiricist and rationalist theories of knowledge in Chapters I-III, Hegel proposes in Chapter IV that the subject gains awareness of the ways in which its own cognitive activity contributes to the objectivity and meaning of external objects. More specifically, the subject is said to become aware that, while on one hand, *qua* knowing subject it is *independent* of the objects of its experience, on the other hand, *qua* living and desiring subject it is, nonetheless, to some degree *dependent* on objects. At this stage in the development of the subject's relation to objects, then, the subject becomes aware not only of itself as taking objects to be a certain way, but of itself as a desiring, needful creature. As a living thing, the subject has needs and desires; but while the subject experiences its needs and desires, it cannot reflectively determine them. Rather it is *life* that constrains the subject. The physical environment imposes on the subject its needs and desires, as well as the means to satisfy them. The independence of self-consciousness is therefore incomplete. The subject has gained a measure of independence from objects; but this independence is limited and threatened by its dependence on those same objects, inasmuch as they are necessary to the satisfaction of its need and desire. Self-consciousness, Hegel says, is "sunk in life," unable freely to determine and establish its independence from objects.

And it is to resolve this impasse that Hegel introduces perhaps the second most famous motif of the *PhG*, namely, the "struggle to the death" between two subjects who seek to establish the independence of their subjectivity *vis-à-vis* the other. But before turning to this provocative passage, it is worth noting three implications of Hegel's remarks about the subject's relation to the external environment. First, describing a subject's independence from and dependence on an external world, and insisting on such a relation as a necessary condition for self-consciousness, helps to clarify Honneth's use of the term "self-relation" when discussing identity and agency. For, so long as a human being blindly follows impulse or merely reacts to immediate sensations, it is conscious but it has not achieved what I have called reflexive subjectivity, since it has not yet become able to reflect on and interpret its own feelings, needs, and so on. Perception, need, motility, desire, constitute a necessary substratum to identity, insofar as they stabilize a subject's experience of its body and establish a boundary, an outside, to its subjectivity. But they only become elements of a person's identity, only become a desired trait or unwanted emotion, when the subject acquires the reflexive capability to name, interpret, and valorize or modify them. It is in this fundamental sense that Honneth speaks of "self-relation" as an ineliminable component of identity. Sentience is not enough; a subject must be able to *relate to* its somatic experience.

Secondly, the claim that a subject's relation with an external environment is a necessary (but insufficient) condition for experiencing oneself as an independent, subsisting "standpoint in the world," underscores my remarks in chapter 2 concerning the distinction between the concepts of intersubjectivity and socialization. My argument was that, while the concept of socialization presupposes a subjectivity *already capable of*

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"owning" its own experiences, or of apprehending determinate (albeit malleable) needs

and wants, the concept of intersubjectivity, by contrast, tries to account for how a human

being *becomes* the sort of being capable of experiencing itself in that way. Put more

simply, the concept of intersubjectivity tries to illuminate the various mediations or types

of relations enfolded in and constitutive of self-experience. And by beginning with the

subject's relation to its environment, Hegel has identified one such mediation – a

mediation that Honneth, in some places more explicitly than others, regards as

fundamental to a social agent's ontological security.

Thirdly, and directly relevant to my thesis: Hegel's claim that the relation to an

external environment serves as a bedrock for identity formation and personal agency,

though not intended as an empirical claim, has nonetheless gained substantial support in

psychological research. As historian Alfred W. McCoy documents in *A Question of*

Torture,[127] during the 1960s and 1970s, the CIA funded research to determine how the

Soviets and the Chinese so effectively elicited false confessions from political dissidents.

In particular, they concluded that psychological manipulation and coercion broke down

prisoner resistance more effectively than any other technique, including physical

violence. Two forms of psychological manipulation that proved especially successful at

increasing the vulnerability and pliability of prisoners were sensory deprivation and

prolonged solitary confinement. Chillingly, it was also learned that each of these

techniques could cause severe and sometimes permanent psychological damage.

Although the effects of solitary confinement and sensory deprivation are not uniform and

unvarying, victims commonly experienced deindividualization, depression, psychosis,

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[127] Alfred W. McCoy, "Mind Control," *A Question of Torture: CIA Interrogation, from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2006), 21-59

and loss of a sense of reality. Curiously, the research into "coercive interrogation techniques" lends indirect support to Hegel's assertion that the experience of an external environment is a basic condition for the formation of identity, insofar as research has confirmed that the deprivation of a stable but varied environment can, and typically does, threaten a person's experience of himself as a unified, embodied agent. In this way, Honneth's use of the phrase "integrity of identity" as well as my emphasis on conceiving identity as the integration of somatic, affective, and cognitive functions, gain new force. Each underscores the complexity and vulnerability of identity, and the sense in which identity needs to be sustained through normatively governed recognition relations.

In the essay "Torture,"[128] Jean Amery remarks that torture is the *destruction of the social* and manifests a unique form of sadism. Sadism, in Amery's sense, is the exercise of unlimited *sovereignty* of the Self over the Other, which is achieved through the annihilation of the Other through torture as well as through the repression of mercy, dependence, and vulnerability. In this light, it is instructive to return to Hegel's account of the "struggle to the death," as it is here that the subject attempts to establish its independence, not by using (or "negating") objects, but rather by trying to subordinate another subjectivity. The encounter that Hegel describes is strikingly Hobbesian, in that the subjects are said to compete over the resources needed to survive, to fear each other because of that competition, and, finally, to stand ready to duel each other, i.e., to risk their lives in order to protect their honor and demonstrate their freedom from the contingencies of mere biological existence. And yet, in agreement with Amery and against Hobbes, Hegel will conclude that the attempt to achieve independence by

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[128] Jean Amery, *op. cit.*, "Torture," 21-41.

exercising sovereignty over another, or rather, to establish the authority of one's standpoint in the world by suppressing or annihilating the subjectivity of another, is ultimately self-subverting.

Briefly to recap Hegel's account: two subjects encounter one another while trying to satisfy their needs and desires. Each apprehends that the other is not an object, but is a subject with its own ends and projects. But because both are immersed in the immediacy of survival, are "sunk in life," their needs, desires, ends and projects remain mutually inscrutable, so that the one experiences the other as (in Sartre's felicitous phrase) a "hole in being." It is this impenetrability of the other's subjectivity that, according to Hegel, generates conflict. For, at this stage in the development of self-consciousness, the ambition of each subject is to confirm itself as a unique, self-sufficient perspective on the world. To confront a second subject who is striving after the same, therefore, is destabilizing, a threat to the first subject's self-certainty. Since each subject is in a symmetrical position *vis-à-vis* the other, each is motivated to try to subordinate the other, to subsume the other's unsettling subjectivity. Put differently, *each* subject tries to force the other to affirm, or to recognize as authoritative, the validity of *its own* projects and ends. By forcing the other to subordinate its ends, the first subject receives an external confirmation of the worth and objectivity of its own subjectivity, which it was unable to achieve through the use of objects. Hence, each subject attempts to establish its independence by compelling the other to forfeit its independence – or, in other words, by forcing the other to *choose dependence*.

It is the refusal to acknowledge mutual dependence that has spurred this nascent conflict, and the struggle is only exacerbated by each subject's refusal to give ground.

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For the demand to subordinate one's ends to those of the other would cancel one's claim to independence. And so, to demonstrate its independence, even in the face of danger, Hegel contends the subject must show that it is independent of *its own* needs and desires, that it can *rise above* them by "staking its life" in a duel with the other. But, as mentioned above, a struggle to the death must fail. On the one hand, death would nullify the subject's claim to independence; on the other, the death of the other subject would deprive the survivor of the recognition necessary to affirm its objectivity and independence. The conflict is quelled only when one subject yields to the other and accepts subordination rather than death, recognizing as authoritative the needs, purposes, and projects of the other. Of course, for Hegel the "struggle to the death" is a necessary stage in the formation of self-consciousness, even though the struggle concludes indecisively and acquires determinate meaning only by virtue of its transition to the Master-Slave Dialectic.

The Master-Slave Dialectic describes how an asymmetrical recognition relation fails fully to establish the identity and agency of each subject. The Master has subordinated the Slave; the Slave thus experiences itself as dependent and orients itself in accord with the Master's purposes, beliefs, projects, and judgments. The Master's dominance, its putative independence *vis-à-vis* the Slave, consists both of controlling the actions of the Slave and of establishing what counts as knowledge, moral rightness, and so on. The Slave in this way *recognizes* the Master as a subject. The Master, on the other hand, despite gaining freedom from material necessity by means of the Slave's labor, fails to recognize the Slave as a subject: for the Master, the Slave is a means, not a person worthy of recognition.

Yet by refusing to recognize the Slave as an autonomous subject, by instead treating it simply as a means of production, the Master undermines its own effort to achieve autonomy. For an object cannot confer recognition in any meaningful sense, cannot affirm or correct knowledge claims or normative demands; and so, inasmuch as the Slave is regarded merely as an object, it is not recognized as being the sort of thing *capable of giving* recognition. But even if the Slave were viewed as capable of giving recognition, any recognition it granted would be merely contingent. Because the Slave is wholly dependent on the Master, its recognition of the Master's choices, dictates, and values is coerced, not freely and voluntarily given. For these reasons, the Master's bid to establish itself as an independent, self-sufficient subjectivity fails. For the Slave, on the contrary, a type of transformation occurs: a new awareness and appreciation of its agency emerges, as it realizes that the Master is in fact dependent on the labor of another, namely, the Slave's own labor. The Slave gains a sense of power as it apprehends that the satisfaction of need and desire, the achievement of practical goals and purposes, depend on its agency, efficacy, and productivity. Thus, Hegel maintains that the Slave *objectifies* itself in nature and comes to know itself, or to *recognize itself* in the social reality that its labor has transformed. Although the Slave has not at this point achieved full independence as a subject (Chapter IV terminates in the Unhappy Consciousness[129]) the self-knowledge it has attained via its relation with the Master and with (social) nature discloses both the embodied and communal character of subjectivity.

Later in the chapter, I examine Honneth's appropriation of Hegel. For now, I mention in passing that the Master-Slave Dialectic was influential in the research of child

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[129] And the "Unhappy Consciousness" is, at this point, still a dualistic, internally divided consciousness.

psychologist Donald Winnicott,[130] and remains influential in the work of objects-relations

theorist Jessica Benjamin,[131] which attests to the fruitfulness of Hegel's phenomenology.

More relevant to the nexus of recognition, identity, and motivation that I address in this

chapter and the next, is the power and acuity of Hegel's account as a framework for

interpreting social conflict, and the wellsprings of social conflict in particular. I noted

above that although the *PhG* is a theory of knowledge, the Master-Slave Dialectic

suggests something about the motivation of subjects attempting to forge an identity and

sense of agency, as well. More exactly, what it suggests is that people are motivated to

social struggle precisely to realize and affirm their *existence as subjects*. The motivation

to subordinate another, ill-fated though that endeavor was, was not intended to affirm *a*

standpoint, whosever's it be, but to consolidate one's physical and mental capacities with

a view to establishing the unity-in-difference of *this* subjectivity, of this *concrete*

individuality. On my interpretation of Hegel, then, the *PhG* has salient implications

concerning a theory of social ontology. Paramount among those implications, as

Honneth so often stresses, is that identity not only is fragile, but moreover is invested

with otherness, inextricably bound up with relations to others and to the world, which

means that identity (or reflexive subjectivity with self-understanding) requires ongoing

social interaction and communication, the renegotiation of meanings, roles, expectations,

and so forth, if it is to be sustained.

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[130] See especially Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge Publishers, 2005).

[131] Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988) and *Like Subjects, Love Objects: Essays on Recognition and Sexual Difference* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

One might consider in this light Charles Mills' notion of an *epistemology of ignorance*,[132] with which he tries to capture the way that whites in a racist society *have a stake* in remaining largely unaware of their complicity in sustaining racist practices, and of the privileges they retain by doing so. Or one might consider the nameless protagonist in Ralph Ellison's tellingly titled classic, *Invisible Man*;[133] or Marilyn Frye's brilliant allegory of the "schizophrenic" woman convinced that her loving father was poisoning her every time he prepared her a cup of coffee[134] (presented, interestingly enough, in the essay "On Being White"). In each case, members of the subordinate group are harmed, or at least palpably threatened, by the unreflective self-assurance of members of the dominant group, whether such a trait manifests in the arrogation of decision-making authority, the presumption of intervening in another's actions or speaking in their name, or more simply in the pretension of claiming to understand members of subordinated groups better than they understand themselves. What is jeopardized by disrespect or denied recognition, in other words, is not merely one's "emotional state" or self-image, but one's confidence in one's self-efficacy, the sense that one is an *agent* capable of autonomously ordering one's life. It is for that reason that struggles over recognition are especially susceptible to conflict.

I now turn to Hegel's "First Philosophy," where he first sketches a conception of a social theory grounded in recognition relations. I concentrate on the "First Philosophy" because this is the text Honneth identifies as his point of departure, and because it is here that Hegel conceives of mutual recognition as constitutive of spirit. But it is worth noting

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[132] Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* and *From Class to Race*; also see Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, ed., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*.

[133] Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995).

[134] Marilyn Frye, "On Being White: Toward A Feminist Understanding Of Race and Race Supremacy," in *The Politics and Reality: essays in feminist theory* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1983), 110-127.

that even earlier than "First Philosophy," Hegel had criticized natural rights and social contract theories on the grounds that they were unable truly to grasp modern social institutions and subjectivity. In "Natural Law,"[135] he argues that the state of nature posited in traditional natural law theory begs the question with regard to the genesis of organized societies, because it assumes that the traits and behaviors of modern subjects (competitiveness, possessiveness, and so on) are features of human nature as such. In this way, the *a priori* is derived from the *a posteriori* (i.e., qualities that are the product of social relations and practices are regarded instead as natural qualities of humanity) and the institutional structure of liberal-capitalism is at once reified and seen as "accidental." In Hegel's view, what such theories fail to comprehend is the historical nature and logic of a given society – or, in Hegelian terms, of an *ethical totality*. It is in "First Philosophy," then, that he formulates an alternative conception of ethical totality.

Hegel's aim is to understand how spirit – or a form of life – emerges from specific types of social action and relationships. He employs three categories, *language, labor* and *family*, each of which follows its own developmental logic, and which is identified with a type of relation that mediates both the interaction of subjects and the subject's use of objects. *Language* mediates a subject's relation to objects through symbolic representation, *labor* through the transformation of objects, and *the family* through interaction based on reciprocal recognition. Therefore, spirit is not conceived as a pre-given reality whose actuality needs only to be explained philosophically. Instead it is viewed as the product of human agency, a totality emerging from the variety of ways that subjects relate to objects and to other subjects.

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[135] G. W. F. Hegel, trans. T. M. Knox *Natural Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975). For a useful discussion see Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 22-32.

As the first category of spirit, language at once constitutes and supersedes individual consciousness, grounding the subject's relation to objects but also surpassing the subject-object relation intersubjectively. Since for Hegel language and the particular dialectic it involves do not bear directly on identity and recognition conflicts, I will cover the topic briefly. Hegel argues that subjects first use language to *name* the objects they encounter in nature. It is by naming, distinguishing, classifying, and remembering that consciousness separates itself from objects found in the world. Since the linguistic symbol makes present objects that are absent, language both *represents* and, insofar as the subject produces the meanings of linguistic symbols, enables consciousness to *objectify* itself. There is thus a two-fold mediation: of the linguistic symbol that represents the perceived object; and of the subject that distinguishes itself from the object it names and to which it assigns meaning. Through language consciousness establishes a relation to itself as a constitutive as well as a reflective agent. Moreover, although language mediates subject-object relations, language is nonetheless a communicative, essentially intersubjective form of interaction, which means that the subject is but a particular in a more inclusive social totality. Language is thus the first stage in the constitution of spirit.

The second category of spirit is *the family*, and in the love relation is the first recognition relation treated in "First Philosophy." The relation between loved ones (or between husband and wife) turns on the recognition of the other's concrete individuality, and in this way of one's own personal particularity. In affirming the particularity of the beloved, the lover at once affirms her own concrete individuality, since an integral element of the particularity of the beloved consists in turn of his positive regard (or

recognition) of the lover as *this* unique person. Put differently, in marriage a different facet of the identity of the lovers develops through a conflictual process of mutual recognition. The love relation is conflictual because, as seen in the *PhG*, the subject first tries to confirm its identity in opposition to another subject, who, in turn, is trying to do the same. And so, the dependence of identity on recognition is a conceptual as well as a practical matter: conceptual, since the validity of a person's subjectivity *qua* beloved presupposes recognition by another subject; practical, since the recognitive presupposition is actualized in a concrete social relation. The family is constitutive of spirit not only because it allows for the socialization of the lovers and their offspring, but also because the family has possessions that are necessary to its survival and well-being. Accordingly, in order to secure the property and possessions on which the family's survival and well-being depend, various "heads of family" (by which Hegel means husbands, male heads-of-household) are prompted to enter into a different type of social relation, namely, that of property owners.

I would like to pause a moment to take note of Hegel's argumentative strategy. Rather than *presuppose* property rights or familial relations as givens, he begins by demonstrating that social institutions (language, the family, and private property) arise from recognition relations, and that certain determinate forms of recognition are integral to the individualization of social agents. In this way, Hegel can show that social institutions embody recognitive norms and thus exist for the purpose of supporting the identity formation of social agents. Moreover, since his argument begins from determinate recognition relations presupposed in identity formation, it offers an historically nuanced understanding of the genesis and evolution of social institutions, a

comprehension that discloses both the normative and intersubjective nature of society. Spirit, or the totality of social relations, practices and norms, is thus the materialization of human agency as well as the scaffolding for protecting and engendering the freedom of concrete individuals.

The third category of spirit Hegel discusses is *labor*, which is a means of satisfying need and desire. Here, rather than subject (i.e., subordinate) nature to linguistic symbols, the dialectic begins with the person's subjection to nature. Since the satisfaction of need and desire depends on the person's ability to work on and transform a recalcitrant nature, he must initially postpone gratification and expend his energies working on objects instead. To the extent that the subject is dependent on objects, he is object-like; but through his labor, he eventually invents *tools*, which afford him a degree of independence from the mute externality of nature. With the development of technology (tools and techniques) the subject is said to "return to itself," as he is now able to instrumentally control natural processes. Tools thus mediate between the subject and object and, as do symbols, serve to stabilize the ephemera of subjective experience. They also embody or *objectify* spirit – labor is *social* – insofar as they preserve in traditions the skills, knowledge, and techniques of forbears.

Then, clearly anticipating an important claim in the *PhG*, Hegel asserts that in the object of labor subjects find their own ingenuity and efficacy, or rather, experience their subjectivity as objectively confirmed. The laboring subject *identifies with* the object of its labor, and so takes up this object in the form of *possessions*. Above it was noted that the concrete individuality of lovers required their mutual recognition, that the survival and well-being of families depended on their possessions, and that this dependence in

turn pointed to a further relation between families, namely, that of *property owners*. Under the category of labor, then, Hegel proposes that a new aspect of the subject's identity develops, as various "family heads" engage in a struggle for the recognition of rightful possession: the subjects oppose each other in claiming property rights. The struggle over the recognition of valid property claims demands that each subject *sublate* himself, or that he rise above his mere particularity by asserting his individuality against the community represented in the figure of the opposing subject. The form such a sublation takes is of a "life-and-death struggle," wherein the subject makes himself a "totality" (e.g., of subjective needs, wants, desires) *in opposition to* the social "totality" and, *vis-à-vis* the other subject, risks his own self-destruction in order to preserve his subjective "totality," i.e., his personhood. But for reasons unclear in the text, Hegel argues that the conflict is resolved, not by a reconciliation of the opposed subjects, but by the apprehension by each that his identity, or integrity *qua* subject, requires recognition from another subject. Thus, with the intersubjective recognition of property rights, conflict has been constrained and spirit has reached a new level of development.

In sum, in "First Philosophy" Hegel argues that the three categories of spirit, together with the corresponding dialectical relations, constitute the identity of the concrete individual as well as the shape and ends of social institutions, relations, and practices. Of particular relevance for my thesis are Hegel's claims concerning the constitutive character and motivational force of mutual recognition and conflict, specifically the insight that social development is motivated and internally governed by recognitive demands. As I show in the following section, these ideas of the early Hegel are fertile and suggestive enough as to provide the conceptual foundation of Axel

Honneth's efforts to reformulate critical social theory on the basis of identity recognition.

It is in light of such social-theoretic premises that, in chapter 5, I defend the claim that

racial conflict, or rather, the resistance of whites to social policies aimed at remedying

racial inequality, should be understood as the result of perceived disrespect or denied

recognition.

Honneth

The social theory of Axel Honneth is the most recent iteration of the tradition of

critical social theory begun by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and other German

intellectuals in the 1930s.[136] The Frankfurt School, as these thinkers came to be known,

were initially influenced by the renowned Marxist theorist, Georg Lukacs, and took as

their project the reformulation of an essentially Marxian conception of social

organization and change. Interdisciplinary in design, this new conception of a theory of

society combined philosophical reflection and social scientific research, so that social

reality could be analyzed "critically," or rather, could be evaluated from a normative

standpoint. In 1937, Horkheimer spelled out this ambition in the essay "Traditional and

Critical Theory," in which he contrasted the historically prevalent conception of theory as

epistemologically independent of and unsullied by extant social institutions, practices,

relations, and so on, with a conception of theory as grounded and engaged in the social

reality it aims to comprehend. An adequate theory of society, in other words, must at

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[136] Excellent background on the Frankfurt School is provided in Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, as well as Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), David Ingram. *Critical Theory and Philosophy* (New York: Paragon House, 1990) and Rolf Wiggerhaus, trans. Michael Robertson *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge: MIT Press. 1995).

once be immanent to and transcendent of the social reality it takes as its object. It is the

self-conscious reflection on its own social conditions of possibility that makes a theory

critical, and thereby distinguishes it from traditional conceptions of theory.

The self-conception of critical social theory evolved considerably over

subsequent decades, especially as a result of historical events. In addition to the

unexpectedly widespread nationalism during WWI, the susceptibility of the German

working-class to National Socialism during the 1920s and 1930s further diminished

Marxian hopes that the working class was the agent of social emancipation, just as the

barbarism of WWII appeared to make a mockery of notions of historical progress. But

more significant from a theoretical standpoint were the changes to critical theory

introduced by the "linguistic (or communicative) turn" of Jurgen Habermas in the late

1960s.[137] While sharing the Frankfurt School's emphasis on grounding a theory of

society in social reality, Habermas took the tradition in a new direction by developing a

theory of communicative action, which linked conceptions of social reason and

interaction by means of communication aimed at mutual understanding. To frame this in

the terms mentioned above: Habermas identified communication as a feature of social

interaction as such, or as a form of action immanent to all forms of reason, human

interaction, and social organization. At the same time, communication is normative, a

rule-governed form of interaction that implicitly contains criteria for evaluating speech

acts and the forms of validity proper to them, and in this way transcends the immediacy

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[137] The following texts are important for locating Habermas in the tradition of Critical Theory and for elaborating his theory of communicative reason: *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971); *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979); *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Pres, 1984); and *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

of particular speech acts. Therefore, Habermas proposed that communication possesses a universalizability which makes it uniquely suitable as a normative foundation for critical social theory. Social practices and institutions are thus to be evaluated in light of the norms presupposed by speech and communication, which constitute the conditions of possibility for the former.

In the wake of the tremendous influence of Habermas's theory of communicative action, Honneth proposed a new normative foundation for critical social theory: namely, in recognition relations, which are normatively governed by expectations to be recognized. As with the early Frankfurt School, Honneth insisted[138] that a critical social theory must emerge from, or rather, be immanent to the society it subsequently transcends and normatively evaluates. Put differently, if social theory is to serve a diagnostic function, it must be normatively grounded; theory can only justifiably criticize a society's practices, relations, and institutions if it can be shown that its own standpoint, as well as the norms against which the criticism is to be carried out, are constitutive of society as such. In this way criticism becomes critique and achieves universalizability, so that any society can be evaluated on the same normative grounds.

For Honneth the source of immanence is located in recognition relations, which, as Hegel argued in "First Philosophy" and the *PhG*, constitute a necessary condition for the formation and sustainability of identity and, more generally, of social organization. Recognition relations thus have philosophical and political implications. The political implications become visible in those recognitive expectations that structure and govern everyday interactions, practices, and relations. When these (usually unarticulated)

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[138] Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect," 322-330 especially.

expectations are violated, as in cases of oppression, the result is social struggle aimed at securing – or at restoring – acceptable forms of recognition. For this reason, Honneth cites Hegel's "First Philosophy" as one of the chief influences on his identity-recognition reformulation of critical social theory. The other fundamental influence, of course, is Habermas's theory of communicative action.

Habermas's theory of communicative action marks a significant change in critical theory. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas purposed to develop a social theory with emancipatory intent, which would be capable of identifying the standards for evaluating, as well as the means for overcoming, social domination. But Horkheimer and Adorno grew disenchanted with the possibilities of reason, arguing in Dialectic of Enlightenment[139] that the instrumental reason that enabled social reproduction through the control and manipulation of external nature at the same time increasingly came to control "internal nature," through, for example, the industrialization of popular culture, the normalization of consumer identities and strategic action, and so on. By contrast, Habermas formulated a more complex theory of reason, distinguishing between a form of reason necessary for material reproduction (i.e., instrumental reason), on one hand, and a form responsible for interaction and social integration (i.e., communicative reason), on the other. In this way, the bleak philosophy of history offered in DE could be rejected, and a new, universal foundation for a politics aimed at freedom from domination and superfluous suffering could be developed.

Before turning to the specifics of Habermas's social theory, it is useful to examine his criticism of the projects of Horkheimer and Adorno, as well as of Marx and

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[139] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. John Cumming Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Continuum, 1999). Hereafter referred to as DE.

Hegel. Despite their differences, what they share, according to Habermas, is a one-dimensional conception of reason as well as a failure to appreciate the intersubjective nature of both society and social agents. Put another way, they remain committed to what Seyla Benhabib has described as the "philosophy of the subject." The "philosophy of the subject" presupposes that history is the gradual, directional unfolding of a transhistorical subject, which constitutes itself through a unitary form of action.[140] In *DE*, for example, Horkheimer and Adorno sketch a history of Western civilization in which reason invariably subverts itself in an ongoing dialectic of promise and disenchantment, with no ultimate redemption apparent. But what led them to view history as a long sequence of tragedies was, as mentioned above, their conclusion that there was no longer an emancipatory agent (such as the proletariat) capable of radical social transformation.

Earlier, Marx conceived of social change as a dialectical process that involved conflicts between the forces and relations of production. But the foundation of such conflict was labor, or control over labor power as well as the product of labor, so that for Marx labor as a universal form of human activity was the root of social change. On mechanistic interpretations, the theory of historical materialism presupposes that society is a unified totality, which changes historically in accord with a teleological logic manifested in the dialectic between the forces and relations of production. On this view, social labor is the form of action by means of which societies achieve greater degrees of freedom and productive power; norms, values, and traditions, accordingly, are said to be conditioned by the mode of economic production. By contrast, Habermas maintains that

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[140] Benhabib, Seyla, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 54-57.

Marx's theory of revolution presupposes a conception of communicative action, insofar as any transformation in the relations of production would depend on actual communication among workers. (For example, before workers participate in a labor movement, they must share a sense of grievance or discursively agree on certain demands, e.g., for a shorter workday or end to child labor.) Yet the centrality of communicative action remained undeveloped in Marx, elided by the theoretical prominence accorded to labor as a means of social integration and reproduction.

Earlier still, Hegel sketched the outline of a social theory as well as a conception of intersubjective recognition relations, but did so under the aegis of the concept of *spirit*. As the concept is often interpreted,[141] spirit denotes a transsubjective entity that finally arrives at self-knowledge only after unfolding (or manifesting) through various teleologically ordered "stages" of history. The consequences for a social theory or conception of intersubjectivity are evident: if any society or subjectivity is viewed as a "necessary moment" in a pre-figured totality, then the possibility of social criticism as well as conceptualizing intersubjectivity are lost.

Habermas proposes that each of these theories lacked a sufficiently differentiated concept of reason; more specifically, each failed to grasp the philosophical and social importance of *communication*. Habermas thus distinguishes between instrumental and communicative reason, and, correlatively, between labor and interaction. Instrumental reason governs the means-ends relations between subjects and objects, and hence is appropriate to the labor process that secures a society's material reproduction. Communicative reason governs intersubjective relations, or those relations between

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[141] This is the interpretation of Hegel as a metaphysician that Robert Pippin and Terry Pinkard try to counter.

subjects that enable a society's symbolic reproduction. The difference between labor and interaction is that the former is oriented to the successful manipulation and transformation of objects (e.g., into use-values), whereas the latter is oriented to the achievement of mutual understanding and to the criticism of ideology and power relations. Marx's effort to analyze society solely from the perspective of production proved inadequate, then, because the instrumental reason governing labor could not account for the communicative character of moral consensus, political action, or even the formation of class-consciousness. Similarly, to the extent that Hegel's concept of spirit was predicated on the model of a monological self-consciousness, it could neither accommodate the particularity of social formations and identities nor grasp the communicative processes involved in sustaining them.

For my purposes here, the concept of communicative action is relevant because it allows Habermas to theorize identity formation in a materialist and relational manner while at the same time establishing a universal foundation for critical social theory. Like Hegel, Habermas views identity as a social achievement that results from interaction and reciprocal recognition. But rather than view the constitution of subjectivity as a "moment" in spirit's path to self-knowledge, Habermas insists that individualization is a contingent and historical process, which is essentially linguistically mediated. How one understands oneself, who one takes oneself to be, results not only from experience with other subjects, but also from the reflective manner in which one takes up (or rejects) the values, norms, and traditions available in one's society. Moreover, the norms, traditions, and so on that prevail in a society are themselves the result of linguistically mediated

interaction aimed at mutual understanding, since they could only attain generality and

legitimacy through processes of communication and collective will formation.

From the perspective of critical theory, the theory of communicative action is

intended to provide a normative foundation for social theory. Habermas attempts this by

reflecting on the pragmatic presuppositions of speech acts.[142] Implicit in every speech act

is a validity claim in light of which the particular speech act can be evaluated. Different

forms of reason and action, accordingly, involve distinct types of validity claims.

Empirical propositions (i.e., concerning matters of fact) are evaluated in terms of their

truth or falsity; normative claims (i.e., concerning moral questions) in terms of their

rightness or appropriateness; and expressive propositions (i.e., concerning values,

emotions, interests) in terms of their truthfulness or sincerity. The import of identifying

validity claims implicit in speech acts is that it allows Habermas to affirm that language

is a normative, or necessarily rule-governed, form of action. To identify norms implicit

in a form of action in which all social agents engage, and validity claims that are

unavoidably presupposed by any speaking subject, provides social theory a grounding in

social practice for social critique. Habermas can therefore maintain that a society is

unjust to the extent that speech is systematically distorted (for example, by powerful

media or the state) or that speech situations are asymmetrical, coercive, nonreciprocal, or

unevenly distributed.

In "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect," Honneth situates his identity-recognition

theory in the tradition of critical social theory, and tries specifically to differentiate his

conception of critical theory from Habermas's. It is unclear in this essay exactly how

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[142] Jurgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" in *Communication and the Evolution of Society.*

Honneth understands the relation between his theory and Habermas's. On one hand, after summarizing his view, Honneth claims to have presented "the first outlines of an alternative to the version of the communication paradigm which is based in a theory of language."[143] A few paragraphs earlier, on the other hand, he states that he wants to develop "the communication paradigm constructed by Habermas more in the direction of its presuppositions regarding the theory of intersubjectivity – indeed, in the direction of its sociological presuppositions."[144] So it is unclear whether Honneth claims to be augmenting Habermas's theory, or supplanting it with a new conceptual foundation.

In my view, the question remains indeterminate, primarily because Honneth does not address this particular question in later essays. But given the specificity of my thesis concerning motivation, recognition, and social conflict, trying to resolve the question of whose social theory is most basic, or which theory presupposes which, is not germane to my argumentative task. To put a stake in the ground nonetheless: I find no compelling reason to conclude that Honneth's identity-recognition theory should supplant Habermas's theory of communicative action. It seems to me that the two positions are compatible, with Honneth's conception of recognition and social conflict aimed at disclosing what spurs conflict, and Habermas's discourse ethics aimed at explicating the discursive justificatory basis of the moral point of view. That is, Habermas's discourse ethics explicates how moral norms can be justified without coercion or violence, while Honneth's phenomenology of moral experience sheds light on what triggers conflict in the first place. The two views are not only compatible, but in fact complementary.

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[143] Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect," 329.
[144] Axel Honneth, ibid, 328.

Nonetheless, Honneth intends to distinguish his project from Habermas's, and the first way he attempts to do this is by denying that his identity-recognition theory is a *theory of reason*. From Horkheimer's "Critical and Traditional Theory" through the mature theory of Habermas, Honneth contends, social theory has been formulated as a theory of reason. In *DE*, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that instrumental reason, which they viewed as the single dominant form of reason in history, dialectically undermined every effort to liberate social relations and institutions from domination. It is for this reason that they insisted that the connection between theory and practice was snapped: if reason itself reinstates domination, then the only form of politics left is mimesis or a recourse to art. For Habermas, it is the encroachment of instrumental reason on action properly governed by communicative reason which, in certain circumstances, produces social pathologies or "systematically distorted speech." On this view, reason is not conceived as a source of domination; rather domination is a consequence of and is perpetuated by using a form of reason that is proper to subject-object relations to regulate a different form of action and social relation, namely, intersubjective relations. Unlike the critique of Horkheimer and Adorno in *DE*, Habermas's distinction between forms of reason allows him to reconnect theory to practice, and so to propose a politics: to the extent that collective will formation is threatened by instrumental reason, social agents must insist on public discourse aimed at normative consensus.

Now, it is not exactly clear what Honneth's denial that his theory is a theory of reason amounts to, or what the force of the denial is with respect to Habermas. Honneth states that

> characteristic of all these models of social critique is the consistent measurement
> of social pathologies...only in terms of the stage attained by the development of

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human rationality. That is why only distortions which occur in the cognitive orientation of human beings can be regarded as deviations from an ideal that must be presupposed categorically as the standard for a 'healthy' or intact form of society. Accordingly, such a perspective is also accompanied by a narrowing of social critique to a theory of rationality.[145]

This passage suggests that for Honneth a social pathology is viewed not as a type of unreason, but rather as a moral wrong, an injury suffered from disrespect or denials of recognition. Social pathologies *practically* disrupt one's ability to relate to oneself, and thus damage or threaten to damage a person's agency and ability to achieve a self-realized life. Honneth's objection to formulating critical theory as a theory of reason therefore seems to consist of the denial that the *wrong-making feature* of social domination is that it is inconsistent with reason. Instead, the wrong-making feature of domination (e.g., violence, exclusion) is that it directly endangers the ontological security of concrete individuals, who, Honneth observes with Habermas clearly in mind, "experience an impairment of what we can call their moral expectations...not as a restriction of intuitively mastered rules of language, but as a violation of identity claims acquired in socialization."[146]

Honneth's line of argument is unconvincing, however. For one thing, in "From Adorno to Habermas,"[147] Honneth acknowledges that Habermas conceives of rationality as a form of action and not merely as a type of cognitive activity. He says there that Habermas "moves the concept of 'rationality'...into the theoretical context of social action: 'rationality,' in the critical sense of the Frankfurt theoretical tradition as well, can

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[145] Axel Honneth, ibid, 331.

[146] Axel Honneth, ibid, 328.

[147] Axel Honneth, "From Adorno to Habermas: On the Transformation of Critical Social Theory," Charles Wright, ed., *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 92-120.

be interpreted as the objective form of processes of social action."[148] For another,

Habermas does not argue that it is the violation of linguistic rules that is immoral, but that

it is such rules (i.e., the pragmatic presuppositions of speech) that govern the procedure

of discursively justifying such moral norms as are proposed for adoption. As Habermas

notes

> the content of the universal presuppositions of argumentation is by no means
> 'normative' in the moral sense. For inclusivity only signifies that access to
> discourse is unrestricted; it does not imply the universality of binding norms of
> action. The equal distribution of communicative freedoms and the requirement of
> truthfulness *in* discourse have the status of *argumentative* duties and rights, not of
> *moral* duties and rights. So too, the absence of coercion refers to the process of
> argumentation itself, not to interpersonal relations *outside* of this practice.[149]

On Habermas' discourse ethics, then, it is not the violation of linguistic norms that

constitute moral harm, but the violation of norms that achieve consensus through moral

argumentation.

Finally, there is good reason to think that Honneth's identity-recognition theory

is, or could be rightly characterized as, a theory of reason. After all, the triadic structure

of modern identity is, according to Honneth, the result of historical moral struggles

concerning recognition; indeed, he argues that such struggles are at once the catalyst for

and substance of social progress. But on Honneth's own premises, struggles over

recognition consist of conflicts involving moral norms: persons resist humiliation and

exclusion because such practices violate their legitimate (i.e., normative) expectation to

be recognized. That norms are institutionalized and come to be experienced as

expectations, background assumptions concerning how persons are to be treated, suggests

that reasons can be given for why people resist disrespect as well as for why disrespect is

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[148] Axel Honneth, "From Adorno to Habermas," 101.

[149] Jurgen Habermas, Ciaran Cronin and Pablo de Greiff, ed., *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 45.

judged to be unjust or immoral. I fully agree with Honneth when he stresses, for example, that the pain or indignation accompanying an insult is experienced pre-reflectively, or experienced as an immediate emotional reaction rather than a reasoned judgment that a justified norm has been violated. But, on pain of lapsing into an empiricist moral psychology, Honneth must grant that some form of judgment is involved in apprehending that a norm has been violated. In light of such considerations, it seems to me that Honneth continues critical theory's conceptualization of reason as a form of social action.

Another way that Honneth tries to distinguish his theory from Habermas's concerns what each regards as the source of *immanence*. By immanence, I mean that aspect of everyday social experience that possesses liberatory potential, and which therefore grounds critical social theory and illuminates the potential to *transcend* extant forms of oppression and domination. Honneth notes that for Horkheimer and Adorno critical theory "called for a diagnosis of society that could bring to light a degree of immanent, intramundane transcendence,"[150] which required the "quasi-sociological specification of an emancipatory interest which is anchored in social reality itself"[151] and which is susceptible of further development. For Honneth, the "emancipatory interest" of social agents is immanent to the recognition relations presupposed in identity formation.[152] As this type of argument is empirical as well as philosophical, Honneth attempts to identify the psychological conditions required for a subject to establish an identity, at the same time that he argues that the universality of recognition endows those

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[150] Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect," 322.
[151] Axel Honneth, ibid, 323.
[152] Honneth, ibid, 322-323.

conditions with a normative quality. The combination of psychological theory and philosophical reflection brings to view historically constituted expectations about how human beings are to be treated, i.e., recognitive expectations, and thereby links experiences of disrespect and denied recognition to social conflict. As noted, Habermas identifies the pragmatic presuppositions of speech acts as the normative foundation of critical social theory. By distinguishing between types of speech acts and the corresponding validity claims to which a speaker is committed by making an utterance, he claims to have located in speech an unavoidably normative (or rule-governed) form of action. Thus: "Habermas finds in [communication] a pre-theoretical sphere of emancipation to which critique can refer in order to confirm its normative standpoint within social reality."[153] That is, since communication is a social practice necessary for material and symbolic reproduction, it is a form of action that is integral to social reality and human freedom (i.e., immanence) but that, at the same time, is able critically to reflect on that reality (i.e., transcendence).

Nonetheless, Honneth proposes that Habermas's theory of communicative action does not provide an adequate foundation for critical theory. In Honneth's view, if a form of action is to count as foundational – or as an emancipatory interest – it must not only be "anchored in" social *reality* but must also be reflected in the lived *experiences* of social agents. He observes that

> The emancipatory process in which Habermas socially anchors the normative
> perspective of his Critical Theory is not at all reflected as such a process in the
> moral experiences of the subjects involved.... A process of communicatively
> rationalizing the lifeworld may unfold historically, but it is not reflected in the
> experiences of human subjects as a moral state of affairs. For this reason, a

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[153] Honneth, ibid, 326.

correlate cannot be found within social reality for the pre-theoretical resource to which the normative perspective of Habermas's theory refers reflexively.[154]

The thrust of this excerpt is that Habermas's critical theory offers little analysis of the experience of moral harm that *gives rise* to social struggle. The observation that a morally just resolution of social antagonism would require the discursively achieved consensus of all affected participants, and that such consensus is only imaginable in a speech situation free of coercion, does not entail that the moral wrongs which provoke the need for discursive resolution are linguistic in nature and does not account for why subjects would be motivated to engage in moral argumentation. By contrast, Honneth insists that "what must be considered first of all is the fact that there is an assumption of social recognition, which subjects connect with their normative expectations when entering communicative relationships."[155] Honneth's objection therefore concerns what sorts of experiences would compel a person initially to challenge a norm or question the legitimacy of a practice. What is the *wrong-making feature* of an experienced harm that would *instigate* or *trigger* social conflict, and how is such a wrong linked to the normative foundation identified by critical theory? Honneth concludes that because a critical social theory based on a linguistic foundation cannot speak to these questions, it fails to capture what *motivates* the conflicts whose resolution engenders social progress

Deciding the question of whose critical social theory offers a more tenable foundation is a complex issue. And, at the risk of sounding glib, the question has something of a chicken-egg feel to it: that identity formation integrally involves communication is hard to deny; but that identity formation includes non- or pre-linguistic

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[154] Honneth, ibid, 328.
[155] Honneth, ibid, 329.

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elements is also hard to deny, and is supported by psychological research into, e.g., infant

attachment disorder.[156] Yet it seems to me that Honneth's objection turns on an

ambiguity in the concept of "foundation," or, perhaps better, an equivocation on the

concept of "correlate in social reality."

In the passage just cited, for example, he asserts that a properly grounded critical

theory must be "reflected in" the first-personal experience of social agents. Given such a

criterion, Honneth finds fault with Habermas's theory thus: the harm of systematically

distorted speech is felt, not as a violation of argumentative rules, but as a form of

disrespect (an insult, a sign of contempt). Hence, an identity-recognition theory putatively

offers a firmer foundation for critical theory only if the object as well as the justificatory

standard of critique involves recognition struggles. But other times Honneth construes

the question of a "foundation" (or a "correlate in social reality") somewhat differently,

arguing that critical theory must link with a *social practice*, or rather, must aim "to give

the standards of critique an objective foothold in pre-theoretical praxis."[157] And if the

criterion of a properly grounded critical theory is that it identify a social practice that is

presupposed by social reproduction, integration and socialization, Habermas's theory of

communicative action enjoys at least as much *prima facie* tenability as a normative

foundation as Honneth's identity-recognition theory.

Moreover, while Habermas does not accord recognition relations and identity

formation the same pride of place as Honneth, his longstanding insistence that solidarity

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[156] Martha Stout, *The Sociopath Next Door* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 130-134. Stout notes: "Attachment disorder is a tragic condition that occurs when attachment in infancy is disrupted, because of parental incompetence...or because the infant is simply left too much alone...Children and adults with severe attachment disorder, for whom attachment was not possible during the first seven months of life, are unable to bond to others emotionally, and are thereby directed to a fate that is arguably worse than death," 131.

[157] Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect," 324.

is "the other side" of justice indicates that he is keenly aware that people experience

injustice and moral harms as threats to their identity and forms of life, and not merely as

transgressions of formal and abstract rules. Noting that "theories in the tradition of

Hegel, Humboldt, and G. H. Mead have shown that communicative actions involve

shared presuppositions and that communicative forms of life are interwoven with

relations of reciprocal recognition, and to this extent, both have a normative content,"[158]

Habermas draws a conclusion which could have been written by Honneth himself:

> From the fact that persons can only be individuated through socialization it
> follows that moral concern is owed equally to persons both as irreplaceable
> individuals and as members of the community, and hence it connects justice with
> solidarity. Equal treatment means equal treatment of unequals who are
> nonetheless aware of their interdependence. Moral universalism must not take
> into account the aspect of equality...*at the expense of* the aspect of
> individuality...[159]

Honneth is correct that Habermas offers little detailed analysis of the question of what

motivates social conflict.[160] He is also correct to point out that, with respect to social

conflict in particular, the desired end of entering into moral discourse – the point of such

argumentation – is commonly to address conflicts stemming from identity claims or

recognitive demands (though, as Honneth grants, it is an empirical question as to just how

commonly). But since the brunt of Habermas's efforts for the last two decades or more

has been to develop and justify a conception of the moral point of view, he might reply

that *irrespective* of motivation, it is nonetheless through normative discourse that conflict

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[158] Jurgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other*, 40.

[159] Habermas, ibid.

[160] In Jurgen Habermas, trans. Ciaran Cronin *Justification and Application: Remarks on Discourse Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993). Habermas reflects on the question "Why be moral?" which, as I noted above, is not exactly the sense of motivation that concerns Honneth. In any case, Habermas concludes that moral theory cannot speak to the question of motivation: "In their capacity as philosophers, their only recourse is to reflective analysis of the procedure through which ethical questions *in general* can be answered" (75).

is justly resolved. And it is in this light that we see how the theories of Honneth and Habermas work in tandem.

Honneth maintains that resistance to perceived injustice is motivated by experiences of disrespect and denied recognition. Such experiences are affective and cognitive, so that although the linkage between identity formation and motivation is importantly cognitive, it is the affective reaction (e.g., shame, fear, anger) against unjust treatment that pre-reflectively "signals" that a person has been disrespected. Condescension and ridicule, no less than exclusion and isolation, characteristically diminish a person's self-respect, her sense of efficacy, as well as her physical autonomy and confidence.

But that the emotional responses that point to acts of disrespect are *reactions*, that is, are typically felt *pre-reflectively*, brings to light two important implications. The first is that "this thesis could easily give the impression that feelings of disrespect are something morally valuable in themselves, to which theory can refer directly and without qualification in its social self-justification."[161] Indeed, one of the main goals of my project is to demonstrate that feelings of disrespect are neither self-explanatory (i.e., not to be accepted at face-value) nor "morally valuable in themselves." Because "the self" is not transparent, people can be – and often are – mistaken not only about the content of their own emotions, but also about the external sources (e.g., an interlocutor's intention) that occasioned those feelings. The second implication is that people may engage in conflict or join a social movement for reasons they are not yet clearly aware of. In such cases, Habermas correctly notes that needs and wants require interpretation and

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[161] Axel Honneth, "The Social Dynamics of Disrespect," 335.

redefinition, norms discursive clarification, and identity claims collective articulation. It is through discourses of this sort that subjects are able to crosscheck what they take to be an insult or exclusionary practice against an intersubjectively constituted social reality.

I now turn to Honneth's identity-recognition theory, focusing particularly on his account of the connection between recognition, motivation, and social conflict.

Honneth's Theory of Recognition: Recognition and Social Conflict

In this section, I present and examine the thesis that people are motivated to engage in social conflict when justified recognitive expectations are, or are perceived to be, violated. I will begin by discussing Honneth's "negative" or "indirect" method of explication. Briefly, Honneth avers that conflict is motivated, not by the reflective judgment that political or moral norms have been violated, but by the aversive emotional reactions such violations evoke in social agents. To elaborate this thesis, I turn to the theoretical basis of identity-recognition theory, which consists of a conceptual link between identity formation and recognition as well as a "differentiated" (i.e., unified but complex) conception of identity. Following Hegel and Habermas, Honneth affirms that identity presupposes mutual recognition. Clarifying his conception of motivation therefore requires analyzing that premise and exploring its implications.

As noted above, Honneth regards the concept of mutual recognition as perhaps the most important philosophical insight of Hegel's work. The concept of mutual recognition asserts that intersubjectivity is the condition of possibility for conceptualizing a stable, independent, and sustainable subjectivity. Because mutual recognition is the condition of possibility for reflexive subjectivity (or for identity), the concept further

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gestures toward a theory of the intersubjectivity of reason and social action, a theoretical conception most fully presented in Habermas's theory of communicative action. The priority of recognition implies that identity formation is a contingent and vulnerable social process, through which embodied, communicative subjects engage one another in an effort to reach understanding and agreement concerning the norms, practices, and institutions orienting their shared existence. In light of Honneth's concerns about Habermas's theory of communicative action, the challenge facing identity-recognition theory is not solely how to theorize the link between recognition and and identity formation, but, equally important, how to develop the concept of recognition so that it provides a normative basis for social criticism. Honneth must argue, first, that recognitive relations are normative, or that people have a justified claim to be recognized; and secondly, that recognitive relations are immanent to (an implicit end of) social interaction, insofar as violations of normative expectations in day-to-day interactions are experienced as a type of disruption or impairment of a person's agency.

He attempts to demonstrate the normative character of recognition relations by what he calls a "negative" or "indirect" method of explication. He proceeds from two premises:[162] the first is that insight into the concept of identity is gained by identifying everyday forms of disrespect; and the second is that the experience of disrespect is transformed into a force for social change when those who are disrespected strive to restore (or to establish in the first place) the integrity of their identity. According to the first premise, the social theorist learns something indirectly about a successfully integrated identity by seeing how a subject's identity formation and exercise of agency

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[162] Axel Honneth, "Personal Identity and Disrespect," in *SR*.

can be compromised by disrespect. And according to the second premise, because

disrespect negatively affects a subject's freedom, the person who suffers disrespect is

prompted to resist. Honneth illustrates these claims by reflecting on everyday language

use and forms of disrespect. This "negative" or "indirect" method can further be

illustrated by citing empirical psychological research.

Earlier in this chapter, I proposed that certain torture techniques (e.g., prolonged

solitary confinement, sensory deprivation) offer indirect evidence of Hegel's claim that a

varied external environment is a precondition for self-consciousness. Of course, Hegel

was providing, not an empirical explanation of human psychology, but rather a

phenomenological description of the transcendental conditions (a priori conditions of

possibility) for a subject's reflexive awareness of itself as an independent center of

experience. Psychological research indirectly supports his claim, however, by

demonstrating that the methodical disruption of a human being's perceptual and motor

interactions with its environment typically (though not invariably) induces a variety of

harms, including deindividualization, loss of a sense of reality, hallucinations, and so on.

In a similarly "indirect" way, the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty attempts to

describe the holistic and integrated character of a human's experience of its body,[163] not

by positing functions or attributes taken to be essential to embodiment, but rather by

observing deviations from normal human functioning and, by working backward, as it

were, ascertaining the pre-reflective contours of bodily experience by contrast with such

breakdowns.

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[163] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, trans. Colin Smith *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1995). See Part I, Chapters 3 and 4, especially.

A final illustration, especially pertinent to Honneth's "negative" method and concept of identity formation, concerns the psychological condition called attachment disorder. Described by Martha Stout as "a fate that is arguably worse than death,"[164] attachment disorder occurs when an infant is physically and emotionally neglected, deprived of the nurture and care necessary to normal human development. If an infant's needs are regularly ignored in the first months of its existence, then, as a child and eventually as an adult, the person will typically be unable to form emotional connections and trusting relationships with other people. Stout explains:

> Normal attachment is an innate system in the brain that motivates an infant to seek the nearness of her parent...so that the very first interpersonal relationship can be formed. This first relationship is crucial not only for reasons of infant survival but also because it allows the infant's immature limbic system to "use" the mature functions of the adult's brain to organize itself. When a parent reacts empathically to an infant, the child's positive emotions, such as contentment and elation, are encouraged, and her potentially overwhelming negative emotions, such as frustration and fear, are moderated. This arrangement promotes a sense of order and safety that will eventually be encoded in the baby's own memory, providing her with...a "secure base" in the world.[165]

By observing how normal human functions and development either break down or are never consolidated in the first place (as when a person is unable to trust others, even though she ardently wishes to do so) it is possible to illuminate and foreground the conditions that are presupposed in normal human development. What this and the previous examples exemplify is a method of concept formation (e.g., of self-consciousness, embodiment, or emotional maturation) that begins by identifying needs and vulnerabilities, rather than by positing a normative conception of the phenomenon to be understood. Honneth's conception of modern identity is formulated in like fashion:

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[164] Martha Stout, *op. cit.,*, 131.
[165] Ibid, 130.

rather than posit an *a priori* definition of identity, Honneth derives the structure of identity by discerning the ways that identity can be undermined or compromised by disrespect. Characteristic vulnerabilities point to self-relations and relations with others that are necessary for an integral and cogent identity.

Like Hegel in the *PhG* and "First Philosophy," Honneth asserts that the independence and sustainability of identity presupposes intersubjective recognition. The harm of disrespect is that it subverts a person's expectation that she will be recognized; that is, affirmed in her personhood, respected and esteemed as the concrete individual she is. The concept of disrespect presupposes an expectation to be recognized because the experience of being disrespected is perceived to be a threat to agency. Acts of disrespect reveal correlative forms of recognition which are distorted or denied by, e.g., contempt or derogation, as well as by refusals to recognize the worth, abilities, and contributions of others. Yet just as Hegel argued that a bare, isolated consciousness could not secure its own objectivity as a self-consciousness, so Honneth avers that an unrecognized or disrespected person cannot form the practical self-relations underlying autonomous identity.

Before turning to Honneth's taxonomy of characteristic forms of disrespect, I want to take a moment to clarify how I am using the concept of disrespect, and in what sense systematic disrespect constitutes a social pathology. Honneth characterizes distorted or denied recognition alternately as a social pathology, a normative violation, and a moral transgression. But he often fails clearly to differentiate between the varying types of wrongs. So, to clear away conceptual underbrush, I will try to specify the type

of wrong committed by acts of disrespect. Overall, my observations are consistent with, even implied by Honneth's work.

Disrespect is a category of action in which an agent refuses to recognize another, or else recognizes another but in malicious or insulting ways. A person can disrespect another directly, as when a person insults another. The members of a social group can disrespect the members of another group, as when blacks are blamed for white resentment. And institutions can disrespect people, as when, say, welfare regulations are punitive or demeaning to recipients. Disrespect can be conveyed by false or stigmatizing ascriptions, as well as by refusals to acknowledge or affirm the qualities and contributions of others. Thus, acts of disrespect can be acts of commission or omission, and can be personal, collective, or institutional in nature.

For example, minorities, women, and the poor are denied recognition when institutions or the practices of a dominant group render them silent or invisible. People are disrespected in such cases because they are denied the freedom to project their own meanings and definitions onto the world. And when "the cries of the wounded" (as William James strikingly puts it) are repeatedly and resolutely ignored, people are disrespected because their suffering fails even to register as being of social importance or making a moral demand. Members of subordinated groups are also disrespected – or, more clumsily, "misrecognized" – when institutions or members of a dominant group ascribe to them traits or behaviors which they, the subordinated, experience as degrading, marginalizing, threatening, or simply alien to their own self-understanding. When members of dominant groups impose expectations and roles on members of subordinated

groups, the latter are effectively treated as objects, things to be harnessed and positioned, rather than as autonomous agents.

Sometimes it can be difficult to decide whether persons are being disrespected by false or malicious ascriptions, or by being denied recognition. For example, when a man announces to a woman, "You aren't angry, you're just being emotional," the slight could be interpreted in either way. That is, the remark may reflect an assumption that women are defined by inchoate emotion rather than reasoned judgment, or an assumption that women are unable accurately to name their own emotions. Since both interpretations are plausible and additional examples of this sort could be adduced, the concept of disrespect is polyvalent. In my view, this is not especially troubling. Acts of disrespect can be deleterious whether they result from denied recognition or from false ascriptions. If I refuse to acknowledge a woman's competence (and right) to define her emotions and needs, if I refuse to listen and hear her, then I disrespect her as surely as if I had declared her an emotional dervish. Thus, to deny recognition is to refuse to see the other as she sees herself, which increases the probability that alien qualities or expectations will be imposed on or ascribed to her. For this reason, denied recognition and harmful ascriptions are on a continuum. Both are forms of wrongful recognition, tantamount to a literal mis-recognizing of the other, and therefore equally forms of disrespect.

Disrespect is also a normative category. To disrespect others is to wrong them. I argued in chapter 2 that identity and agency are co-extensive, so that a subject's ability to contour and define her identity is a measure of her freedom as an agent. And yet, because identity formation presupposes recognition, the formation of agency is not a solitary or solely individual endeavor. Without external affirmation of the substantiality

of its interiority, a subject could not experience itself reflexively, as a differentiated locus of feeling, thought, and action. Disrespect constitutes a normative violation because it impedes or, in worse cases, compromises a subject's ability to establish the practical self-relations required by identity formation. Said differently, disrespect constitutes a form of injustice because it deprives the disrespected of an intersubjective support, a type of "social primary good" necessary for subjects to relate autonomously to their abilities, needs, goals, etc. Recognition engenders and sustains personal freedom; disrespect subverts it.

Moreover, social institutions can recognize or disrespect concrete individuals and groups. In Honneth's view and in my own, institutions give concrete and objective form to recognitive norms, or rather, to the recognitive demands and expectations that propelled historical struggles. Such conflicts are resolved, however tentatively, when institutions are founded or modified so as to accommodate these recognitive demands and expectations. Honneth therefore rightly affirms that institutions exist in order to facilitate and protect the freedom (i.e., the formation of identity and agency) of concrete individuals. Systematic disrespect (i.e., institutionalized disrespect) thus becomes pathological: a perversion of recognition that impairs or disrupts the normal functioning of social processes, reproduction, and interaction.

Freedom is the normative standard by which social relations, practices, and institutions can be evaluated. Disputes concerning whether practices or institutions recognize or disrespect persons and groups are to be expected – and indeed, are to be observed in contemporary societies and throughout history. For identity-recognition theory, social criticism becomes more complex when the possibility of adaptive

preferences is acknowledged. On the one hand, the oppressed may adapt to their circumstances, expecting little and asking for less, so that social inequality and power asymmetries in time appear merely natural, as much a "fact" as gravity. On the other hand, and as my thesis tries to show, the oppressor may adapt to their circumstances, expecting much and studiously avoiding questions, so that the inequality and power asymmetries that work to their benefit are assumed as entitlements or confirmation of their worth and status. In both cases, while the pre-reflective affective reactions central to Honneth's conception of motivation continue to guide inquiry, they are not apodictic and not to be taken at face-value. The aversive reactions that customarily prompt resistance, whether stemming from the oppressor or oppressed, must be analyzed and interpreted, and social freedom provides the baseline for such assessments.

Thus far in my exposition, neither the form nor the content of those recognition relations presupposed in successful identity formation have been discussed. Rather, in keeping with his "negative" method, Honneth chooses to examine three characteristic forms of disrespect in order to show – i.e., to throw into relief – the affirmative forms of recognition that have been violated. In this way, he intends to indicate the corresponding forms of recognition that are required for a person to establish and sustain a unified identity. The forms of disrespect he cites are violence and humiliation; the denial of rights and moral agency; and the devaluation of ways of life, social groups, and the like. After analyzing these forms of disrespect, I explicate the positive patterns of recognition that Honneth takes to be conditions for healthy identity formation, then conclude the section by explaining how experiences of disrespect motivate social conflict.

It may initially seem unusual to consider violence a form of disrespect that threatens or damages identity. Violence is inflicted on bodies, and identity is commonly, almost exclusively regarded as a "mental" or cognitive phenomenon. To understand the reason Honneth construes violence as a form of disrespect, one must recall that on his view identity is complex, not simple, and consists of different types of practical self-relations, different ways that a person relates to her *self*. The body is integral to identity. Perception, language, desires, and needs all contribute to a person's reflexive self-relations, relations to others, and relations to the norms, practices, and institutions governing social life. A person's practical self-relations, then, are conditioned by her needs: by her ability to interpret and satisfy those needs and, more generally, mobilize her body toward ends of her own choosing.

By jeopardizing physical autonomy, violence and humiliation (e.g., torture, rape, or war casualties) directly threaten the identity of victims. Because humans are embodied beings, they must form stable relations to their physical, perceptual, and emotional capacities if they are to experience themselves as independent standpoints in the world. The exercise of personal agency presupposes a basic social ontological security, which is contingently achieved when a person begins to integrate his physical and mental capacities and competences. Violence and humiliation threaten identity by destabilizing or unsettling a person's relation to his body, to other persons, and to the external environment. The victim of more severe forms of violence or humiliation may lose self-trust, i.e., may lose her immediate and pre-reflective confidence in her feelings, perceptions, movements, judgments, intentions. Indications that this fundamental level of identity has been threatened may be revealed by feelings of shame, self-doubt, or

alienation from one's needs, desires, or emotions. Importantly, the distress experienced in such cases is often felt and expressed affectively: not solely or ultimately as a violation of principles of justice but, rather, as a moral violation. And the reason this form of disrespect is felt or judged to be immoral is because bodily integrity, which constitutes a person's "trust in the world," serves as the linchpin for more cognitive dimensions of identity, as well as for one's social presence.

The second type of disrespect examined by Honneth is exclusion and the denial of rights. Examples include denying races, ethnicities, or other social groups voting rights or participation in public institutions, as is currently the case in the U.S., where gays and lesbians are denied the right to marry in many states. The denial of rights threatens the identity of the persons affected because it diminishes moral agency. As Hegel intimated in his dialectic of mutual recognition, the formation of an independent subjective standpoint involves the ability to view one's actions, ends, and projects from the viewpoint of another. Only by apprehending the validity of one's reasons for action from the viewpoint of another can a subject become convinced of the objective validity of those reasons. For this reason, social interaction is normative, and personal autonomy secured intersubjectively. Moral agency and responsibility thus presuppose a system of rights, universal and reciprocally binding norms, so that to be denied rights casts into doubt a person's normative self-understanding, her confidence in her capacity for moral autonomy and action. With Kantian overtones, Honneth states: "To this extent, the experience of being denied rights is typically coupled with a loss of self-respect, of the ability to relate to oneself as a partner to interaction in possession of equal rights on a par

with all other individuals."[166] The denial of rights undermines that dimension of identity made possible by normatively governed participation in a society's practices and institutions.

The third type of disrespect is the degradation of groups and ways of life. What Honneth has in mind here can (loosely) be grouped under the title of *multiculturalism* or *identity politics*. Unlike violence, which most directly affects bodies, and the denial of rights, which affects the ability to view one's actions from a normative perspective, the degradation of ways of life or social groups pertains to the ridicule or devaluation of those features of a person's identity that stem from collectively shared values, traits, or projects. The threat to identity results from the systematic marginalization and mistreatment people suffer insofar as they belong to a group. Such denigration can produce social fragmentation and hostility between groups (e.g., between blacks and whites, or fundamentalists and atheists) as well as shame, resentment, or a sense of incompetence or powerlessness in persons who take themselves to be ostracized or belittled by the dominant group(s). The dimension of identity that is developed with compeers in various cultural settings, over against a horizon of shared values and practices, is in this way potentially devalued and can be experienced by those affected as a loss of worth or self-esteem.

Yet, as pointed out above, forms of disrespect at the same time indicate corresponding "patterns of recognition," or recognition relations that are constitutive of a stable, cogent identity formation. As I have already filled in much of the content of these recognition relations in my presentation of common forms of disrespect, I will in the

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[166] Axel Honneth, "Integrity and Disrespect: Principles of a Conception of Morality Based on the Theory of Recognition," *Political Theory* 20:2 (May, 1992), 187-201.

discussion below highlight key features of them, and will subsequently explain Honneth's view about recognition, motivation, and social conflict. Before proceeding, I want to pause to consider the *historical character* of recognition relations on Honneth's view.

Like Hegel, Honneth maintains that mutual recognition is a condition of possibility for identity. He supplements this conceptual claim by incorporating empirical data drawn from the social sciences, which data allow him to discern the forms of recognition relations necessary for identity formation based on existing social relations, institutions, and practices. On the one hand, Honneth argues that recognition is a necessary precondition for identity: irrespective of time and place, identity formation presupposes mutual recognition. That is a conceptual claim. On the other hand, he argues that the *specific form* of recognition relations, which are institutionalized and concretely sedimented in a society, cannot be determined by reflection alone. This second proposition is an empirical, or quasi-empirical, claim. Put differently: *that* recognition is a condition for the possibility of identity implies little about the *form* that historically contingent recognition relations will assume concretely. The way that recognition is institutionalized (*qua* recognition relations) is linked to historical changes in social organization. Hence, Honneth can argue that the structure of identity is *historical*, susceptible of further differentiation and thus greater degrees of personal freedom and self-realization.

For example, viewing oneself as an autonomous and rights-bearing subject capable of acting on universal norms is an historical achievement, made possible in part by the emergence of various institutions under capitalism. It is not a "fact" of human nature or a "metaphysical truth" about rational entities. Similarly, viewing oneself as a

member of a community of value or a social group, as a person possessing certain abilities or values and deserving of approval *as that concrete individual*, only became possible once essentialist hierarchies of status, sex, and race, which had formerly elided the concrete individual behind the homogeneity of a collectivity, lost their persuasiveness and social purchase. Historical changes in social organization give rise to new possibilities for identity formation, new forms of self-relation. These possibilities, which are frequently created by struggles over recognition, or rather, by social movements that demand new or expanded freedoms, only attain social objectivity when transformed recognition relations are institutionalized. I elucidate this point below. Presently, I want to turn to the three patterns of recognition which Honneth regards as necessary for modern identity.

The first, and most fundamental, recognition relation necessary to identity is the *love relation* characteristic of families, lovers, and friends. In *SR*,[167] Honneth focuses chiefly on the early development of the child, from infancy forward, and therefore draws on empirical data from such psychologists as Erik Erikson and the object-relations theory of Donald Winnicott and Jessica Benjamin. In *RR*,[168] too, he discusses the institutional changes under capitalism that made it possible for family life to be pursued as a "private" arrangement between a man and a woman, separate from the "public" life of economic and political activity, during which childhood came to be seen as a period of socialization and maturation that, ideally, was free of the burdens and responsibilities of adulthood. In both cases, the earliest stages of a person's growth and development are taken to be the foundation for subsequent psychological, moral, and identity formation. For Honneth,

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[167] Honneth, *SR*, 95-107.
[168] Honneth, *RR*, 138-139.

the core purpose, part of the irreducible meaning of intimate relations (say, between parents and child) is *love*, the nurturing and care for a person by means of which that person gains the confidence and ability to relate to her body (needs, desires, emotions), to other persons, and, more generally, to the social environment. The type of love afforded by intimate relations engenders in the person a basic trust in herself and in the surrounding world. The self-relation in this way made possible is *self-confidence* (which, in turn, is threatened by violence and humiliation).

It should be noted that although Honneth specifies familial relations as a form of relation vital to identity formation, the function served by parents (i.e., nurturers) implies nothing about family structure. The claim that identity requires a basic confidence in one's bodily autonomy as well as trust in the expectations and reactions of others, and that such trust is established through caring and nurturing relations, is compatible with various family structures, whether heterosexual or same-sex unions, and with a primary caregiver of any sex. Since what is gained from intimate relations is self-confidence formed through love, this type of recognition relation extends beyond immediate family relations to include friendships and love relations. Typical of the love relation as a form of recognition is its emotional texture, the affective attachment to another person with whom one feels connected yet distinct, and who confirms the validity of one's needs and desires while also establishing an outside, demarcating a boundary to the person's subjectivity.

The second recognition relation necessary to identity is *legal relations*, or rather, social relations between rights-bearing subjects. In various texts, Honneth explains that the dimension of identity secured through legal relations is well conceived in terms of

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Kantian "respect":[169] it is the capacity of a person to assume moral responsibility and view oneself as an autonomous agent acting on universal norms. But, unlike Kant, Honneth views autonomy as a distinctively modern achievement: a new dimension of individuality opened by transformed social relations, practices, and institutions. As a result of the altered political and social arrangements established under capitalism, private property and individual rights gained political legitimacy, so that thereafter persons were legally considered rights-bearing subjects acting on reciprocally binding norms. To regard oneself as bound by only the legal norms one helped to author, and to regard oneself as entitled to forms of treatment one is, in turn, obligated to accord others, is to view oneself as an autonomous moral agent entitled to equal political and social participation. Thus, the object of legal relations is *respect* as an autonomous subject capable of moral action and responsibility. For it is only by viewing oneself from the standpoint of another, in a symmetrical and reciprocal relation, that a subject can recognize herself as autonomously acting on universal norms. The self-relation in this way made possible is *self-respect* (which is threatened by exclusion and the denial of rights).

In contrast to the confidence fostered by love relations, which is emotionally-based, the respect resulting from legal relations is cognitive in nature. It presupposes shared knowledge of both the norms governing interaction and the rights to which consociates are entitled. Thus, the second dimension of identity incorporates a Kantian emphasis on rational autonomy as well as a Habermasian emphasis on communication aimed at mutual understanding. And, since the norms constituting moral autonomy are

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[169] Honneth, *SR*, 111-112, 172-173; also in "Integrity and Disrespect" and "Recognition and Moral Obligation," *Social Research* 64:1 (Spring, 1997), 16-35.

available to any competent speaker, legal relations, by contrast with the moral particularism of love relations, imply moral universalism.

The third and final recognition relation necessary to identity is *solidaristic relations*, characteristic of those relations wherein a person is a member of a social group (blacks, women, gays/lesbians) or a way of life (e.g., a religious group). As noted above, this form of recognition relation speaks to the concerns animating multicultural and identity political theories. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, it is the part of Honneth's recognition theory that has received the most attention and seemed the most controversial. Like legal relations, solidaristic relations represent an historically emergent aspect of identity that originated in and manifested through the political, economic, and legal institutional changes that founded modernity. With the transformation from feudal to capitalistic economic relations (e.g., the institutionalization of private property, formal rights, and contractual exchange) a person's identity was no longer anchored in naturalistically conceived ideas of "estate" or "rank."[170] One consequence of the Hobbesian break with Aristotelian teleology, which prefigures the contemporary distinction between the right and the good, is the conviction that while a person's economic and political actions require public normative constraints, her cultural, religious or intimate pursuits were private matters, contingent on her choice and preferences as a concrete and self-determining individual.

Because a person's status was no longer naturalistically fixed by membership in a group or a community of value, individuals and collectivities were freer to embrace or, on the contrary, to redefine or try to transform received values, practices, and social

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[170] Honneth, *SR*, 121-127; *RR*, 140-143.

meanings (e.g., of class, race, gender). Concrete individuals as well as collectivities could now demand public recognition for differing forms of behavior, belief, ability, and so on. Provided this expanded social space for identity development, together with the enriched communicative participation so elicited, the structure of modern identity evolved, became further differentiated internally, so that solidaristic relations between people who share a conception of the good life coalesced as a legitimate social expectation. The object of this form of recognition relation is *esteem*, which consists of subjects affirming each other's self-understanding and sharing a sense of common purpose. The self-relation made possible is *self-esteem*, the feeling and knowledge that one's projects, goals, and membership in groups or ways of life are valorized by others: the assurance, that is, that one is valued *as the kind of individual one is*. Inasmuch as solidaristic relations differ from primary love relations and formal legal relations, they contain emotional as well as cognitive elements. Solidarity implies, moreover, what Honneth calls a principle of *egalitarian difference*, which can be reformulated as equality *in* difference (or *as* different) rather than equality *despite* difference.

For Honneth, these are the three patterns of recognition presupposed by modern identity formation. Intimate relations confer love and enable persons to relate to themselves with self-confidence. Legal relations, which are governed by rights and norms and provide the reciprocal relations through which people come to see themselves as autonomous and morally responsible agents, confer self-respect. Solidaristic relations secure self-esteem and enable subjects to experience their abilities, values, and traits as valuable to their social group or way of life. Each recognition relation was indirectly indicated by identifying a corresponding form of disrespect: violence threatens a person's

trust in her own physicality; the denial of rights impedes a person's ability to regard himself as a moral agent able to act on universal norms; and the denigration of social groups demeans or marginalizes persons because of their membership in a particular group or way of life. I now turn to Honneth's thesis that social conflict is motivated by struggles for recognition and, on the basis of the above analysis, will try to clarify the respect in which experiences of disrespect or denials of recognition motivate people to engage in social conflict.

The experience of disrespect or denied recognition damages a person's self-relation and manifests in negative emotional reactions, e.g., shame, embarrassment, fear, anger. What such negative emotions reveal is that a correlative form of recognition, to which the affected person is morally entitled and on which successful identity formation depends, has in fact been denied. It is for this reason that Honneth insists that the presence of negative emotional reactions, insofar as they aim at restoring (or establishing in the first place) justified forms of recognition, illuminate the conflictual nature of social relations generally, and recognition relations particularly. Identity is historical, and as institutions and practices change, new possibilities for identity formation are disclosed. But these new dimensions of identity are only made *possible*; they cannot be assured *a priori*, so that the social conditions required to actualize these possibilities depend on struggles for recognition.

An important implication follows. Given the intersubjective character of identity as well as the initially affective nature of experiences of disrespect, demands for the recognition of new types of identity will not be made or brought to the level of social conflict by subjects acting in isolation from others. Because one articulates a *self* through

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social interactions that are affective and cognitive, identity formation is internally related to recognition. In any recognition relation, each subject must at once recognize and be recognized by the other. While it is true that a person can withhold recognition from others, this observation misses the forest for the trees, so far as the cogency of the subjective standpoint from which such a judgment (that is, to deny recognition) would be made *itself presupposes* mutual recognition. It is in this sense that Hegel's "I that is a We" is to be understood: it signifies an inner *relatedness* between individuated, communicative subjects. So, returning to the link between disrespect and social conflict, it can tenably be argued that violations of recognitive expectations are disclosed by negative emotions only insofar as subjects are already socialized. Or rather, it is only because disrespect transgresses shared, taken for granted recognitive norms and expectations that people feel (and judge) such disrespect to be a moral injury, and therefore a moral wrong. And they can form these sorts of judgments only to the extent that they are already concretely individuated.

Hence, disrespect presupposes intersubjectively secured identity formation and affects the disrespected emotionally, say, by provoking fear, indignation, self-contempt. And yet, before such experiences can be judged as moral wrongs or injustices, they must be grasped as violations of normatively justified recognitive expectations. Before the feeling that a person has been disrespected effectively motivates her to engage in social struggle, the experience (comprised of the offending act and the corresponding negative emotion) must be apprehended both *as* a moral transgression and as *typical* of the experience of members of a group. To clarify this claim, a distinction must be made in the concept of motivation, which Honneth himself fails to draw.

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On one side, he rightly notes that experiences of disrespect can be *personalized*: regarded as episodic, unsystematic, merely private harms, as when an abused spouse asks "what did I do?" or a worker wonders "why doesn't the boss like me?" Such feelings do not become a source of motivation to resist until they are connected with, and understood as typical of, the experience of others in the same situation – as typical of members of that social group. To view subordination or marginalization as personal misfortune is to miss the pervasiveness, the systematic nature of the moral wrong – or, indeed, to miss its quality *as* a moral wrong. For this reason, Honneth maintains that a "semantic bridge" is required to link the experiences of various persons who experience a common form (or common *forms*) of disrespect. As a person realizes that her fear of violence, or her anger at feeling erased by skin color, are experiences shared by other women of color, she can in this way come to understand that her fearfulness, frustration, etc., are signs, not of her own inadequacies or failings, but rather of a social pathology: that is, of a social reality that systematically excludes, deprives, degrades, or fails (refuses?) to protect members of certain social groups. Acts of disrespect once experienced privately and pre-reflectively, disrespect that was *felt* before it was analyzed and interpreted, become susceptible of *articulation*. Through the organizational and discursive efforts of social movements, experiences of disrespect are made available to collective reflection, analysis, interpretation, and contestation.

And yet, on the other side, more needs to be said about the structure of motivation in the experience of the subject. Honneth examines only the affective aspect of motivation, arguing that the experience of disrespect is felt pre-reflectively, signaled by negative emotional reactions, and thus becomes a motive for resistance.

Phenomenologically this seems correct; it is plausible to view disrespect as an immediately felt threat to a person's identity and agency. One of the key virtues of this approach is its emphasis on embodiment, the insight that identity formation is as much the result of bodily, emotionally charged experience as of reflective judgments, intentions, and evaluations. Conceptually, however, it seems evident that a conception of motivation, that is, an analysis of the structure of motivation, must contain a cognitive aspect also – must involve a tacit judgment by the person affected *that* a normatively justified recognitive norm has been violated. In order to prompt a person to resist the source of disrespect and demand a normatively valid form of recognition, the experience of disrespect must contain not only negative emotional reactions but also an apprehension that a justified expectation has been denied. Reflection on everyday experience bears this out, as at times an intended insult may pass unnoticed, or, on the other hand, an offhand remark may cause embarrassment.

To conceive the structure of motivation as affective as well as (implicitly) cognitive thus elucidates the teleological character of recognition and identity. Identity formation presupposes mutual recognition and at the same time aims at self-realization – the further, fuller development of personal agency. Self-realization, or the freedom to develop one's identity, is a fundamental form of freedom, a thick conception of autonomy that is catalyzed and sustained by recognitive relations. When the recognition relations on which identity depends are violated, the person affected reacts emotionally; yet this reaction presupposes a tacit judgment, whether veridical or mistaken, that a valid recognitive norm has been violated. Such is the structure of motivation to resist *personal* experiences of disrespect. As people gain awareness that they belong to various social

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groups (by virtue of traits, values, circumstances) and that their experiences of disrespect are typical of members of that group, the immediacy of the affective reaction is transformed into the motivation for a *collective* struggle for recognition.

Conclusion

In this chapter I presented Axel Honneth's recognitive theory of motivation for engaging in social conflict. Before examining his identity-recognition theory, I explicated the conceptual history of the concept of mutual recognition, first by analyzing its origin in the work of G. W. F. Hegel, and then by reviewing important innovations introduced in Jurgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. Honneth derives from Hegel, on the one hand, a transcendental argument concerning the preconditions of identity. The cogency of identity presupposes the recognition of others who, by virtue of such recognition, affirm the inviolability of a subject's bodily integrity; the autonomy and equality of persons as moral agents; and the worth of a subject's dispositions, traits, values, and social contributions. On the other hand, Honneth locates the germ of a social theory in the early Hegel's insistence that social relations and practices emerge from historically constituted and institutionalized recognition relations.

From Habermas's theory of communicative action, Honneth derives a theory of social interaction based, not on metaphysical conceptions of subjectivity, but rather on a conception of communicative agents whose linguistic agency, moral autonomy, and identity develop intersubjectively, as a result of communication aimed at mutual understanding. While Honneth identifies identity formation rather than the universal presuppositions of speech as the basis of social theory, he remains within the

communicative framework pioneered by Habermas. The latter has little of a systematic nature to say about the felt or lived experiences that motivate people to protest injustice, however. Or rather, Habermas does not analyze the phenomenology of moral injury that motivates individuals and collectivities to engage in struggles over the meaning of norms, rationalizations for social domination, and sources of disrespect, violence, and exclusion. It is here that Honneth's focus on identity formation is especially valuable.

By theorizing identity formation as well as the recognitive expectations and relations that necessarily accompany it, Honneth is able to situate critical theory in a process intrinsic to social reproduction, namely, individuation and socialization. All communicative subjects individuated, and the condition of possibility for and the sustainability of individuation presuppose mutual recognition. Self-realization, freedom, and personal agency are bound up with, can be enhanced or impeded by, the quality of recognition relations governing social interaction. The *liberatory potential* of identity-recognition theory consists of the claims that disrespect and denials of recognition are normative violations that damage the integrity of a person's identity, which consequently diminish her agency and subvert her efforts at self-realization; and that such violations are felt pre-reflectively, i.e., experienced emotionally as moral wrongs before they are reflectively apprehended as, say, a failure to observe a moral rule. Because direspect threatens a process necessary for social reproduction, identifying characteristic forms of disrespect supplies a basis for social criticism and illuminates possibilities for transcending relations of domination and power.

But more germane to my thesis is the way Honneth links identity and recognition to the question of motivation for entering social conflict. Since identity conceptually and

empirically presupposes recognition, experiences of disrespect not only are normative violations but are *felt as* injuries to one's self or personhood. For this reason, Honneth avers that disrespect is initially "signaled negatively" by emotions such as anger, shame, etc., rather than formulated positively (or reflectively) as a transgression of a moral or political norm. When experiences of disrespect are understood to be typical of members of a particular social group, as can happen when social movements articulate grievances and form "semantic bridges" between personal experience and structural phenomena, then the well has been primed for collective struggles for recognition.

In this light, a problem with Wellman's definition of racism becomes evident. While he affirms that white racism should be construed as a struggle over scarce resources, he nonetheless explains the resistance to race-sensitive social policies among middle- and upper-class whites, whose economic interests are not threatened by such policies, by citing their commitment to the principles of individualism, equality, and merit. The problem is not with Wellman's explanation, as such, but with the fact that the explanation's persuasiveness derives from assumptions about the motivating force of identity and recognitive expectations. But Wellman is unable to see this because of the economistic assumptions on which his theory of racism is based. The ontology of the person that is presupposed in his theory is monological and subjectivist, in contrast to the intersubjective conception of identity embraced by identity-recognition theory. Consequently, he accepts as given the primacy of self-interest, in general, and economic self-interest, in particular. Moreover, he has no account of the role of historical transformations in a society's material conditions or of communicative interaction among

social members in shaping, abandoning, re-interpreting, and modifying social institutions and relations.

The upshot, as I show in the following chapter, is that economistic theory is flawed both as a theory of motivation and as an account of why racially dominant groups are motivated to resist forms of social change that would – or would seem to – jeopardize their privilege and hegemony. Specifically, the forms of recognition Honneth calls *legal* and *solidaristic relations* are threatened, or are perceived by whites to be threatened, by efforts to reduce racial inequality and oppression.

Chapter 5

A Identity-Recognition Theory of Motivation for Social Conflict

In this chapter I defend the thesis that the motivation for engaging in social

conflict, specifically racial conflict, is better conceived as the result of disrespect or

denied recognition than as the result of the defense of economic self-interest. In chapter

3, I defined economism; presented Wellman's theory of racism, which exemplifies

economistic theory; then developed a criticism of that view. In chapter 4, I presented an

alternative theory, the identity-recognition social theory of Honneth, and traced the

conceptual lineage of that tradition from Hegel, through Habermas, to Honneth's current

position. Now I want to juxtapose economistic and identity-recognition theories to show

that continued white resistance to social policies directed toward ameliorating racial

inequality is more plausibly understood as the result, not of a defense of race-specific

economic interest, but of the perception among whites that they have been wrongly

recognized or denied recognition.

Elaborating on a criticism mentioned in chapter 3, I begin by arguing that

economism, in addition to being a theory of motivation, is implicitly a theory of identity

and agency. Insofar as economism assumes that economic self-interest is the most

generalizable type of motivation, it emphasizes only that part of subjectivity and action

that involves economic interaction, and thereby ignores the motivational force of

experiences originating in race and gender relations, religious values and beliefs, and so

on. Economism insists that people are motivated at bottom by self-interest, which

implies that social change results from the pursuit of economic well-being and that constitutive elements of identity and agency such as race and gender are, in a sense, epiphenomenal or subsidiary. Because this is a claim about how people experience or identify with themselves and their social relations, it is actually an identity claim; and because it reduces the significance of various forms of identity to economic agency, it is a reductionist identity claim. Since economism is this sort of reductionist theory of identity and agency, it cannot illuminate non-economic forms of conflict, or rather, other motivations for participating in social struggles. Moreover, economism is ahistorical, a false universalization of self-interested economic agency which is grounded in the commodity form. Thus, I draw on Marxist theory as well to demonstrate that economism reifies contingent social relations and forms of agency.

My critique of economism – that it is an ahistorical theory of identity and agency, and to that extent reductionist and incapable of adequately grasping the motivation for social conflict – is not meant to deny that people are sometimes motivated to enter social conflict to protect economic interests. While in my view Honneth is ambiguous on this point, I consider the strong thesis that economic self-interest plays no role in social struggles patently implausible. My critique of economism is rather intended to support the weaker, yet no less interesting thesis that the more common motivation for social struggle emerges from the experience that justified recognitive expectations have been violated. Formulated this way, the thesis admits of struggles that are ostensibly aimed at securing economic interests. But even here, it may be the case that purportedly distributive struggles are motivated by the sense among the members of a social group that *they*, in particular, have been unjustly denied social resources or opportunities. It is

here that I marshal the recognition-theoretic concepts discussed in chapter 4 to defend my claim that white opposition to particular social policies can be more fruitfully conceived as the result of experiences of disrespect.

More precisely, I argue that the disrespect motivating whites to resist efforts to improve the well-being of blacks arises out of perceived threats to white privilege. Of course, I mean *privilege* in a broader sense than Wellman, who uses the term in a reductive, economistic sense. I distinguish between social, cultural, political and legal privileges, on one hand, and economic advantage, on the other. The sense that whites occupy a special place in American society issues from and perpetuates a presumption of normative rightness and inviolability, so that any demand placed on whites, placed on the social and cultural authority arrogated by them, is experienced as an affront, an unjust encroachment on what is experienced as an unquestioned and rightful entitlement. In keeping with critical theory's interdisciplinary approach, I develop my claim by drawing on sociological research concerning what has been called *welfare racism*. Doing so not only casts doubt on Wellman's assertion that the problem of racism today has little or nothing to do with prejudice, as mentioned in chapter 3. By recalling the prevalence of racial stereotyping so apparent in criticisms of social welfare and affirmative action in the 1990s, it additionally demonstrates how imaginary threats to entitlement and normative self-understanding produced white anger and indignation, commonly expressed as resistance to social welfare.

Critique of Economism

In chapter 3, I argued that economism is a version of rational choice theory that, on one hand, assumes that human action is motivated by (specifically) economic self-

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interest and, on the other, presupposes that subjectivity is structured by strategic relations between subjects as well as between subjects and objects. Such are the premises of a social ontology underlying not only classical liberalism and rational choice theory, but Wellman's theory of racism. For Wellman, white racism in America is – and will remain – misunderstood so long as it is theorized as a form of irrationality or prejudice, or as a cultural phenomenon consisting of and sustained by systems of demeaning representations and beliefs. In his view, although beliefs about race (about the nature of race and the character of race relations) play a role in racism, they do so only indirectly. Rather than reveal disdainful attitudes toward blacks, as is characteristic on the prejudice model, racist beliefs serve as a rationalization for what *really* concerns whites: preserving their status and privileged position in the racially-coded economic hierarchy. So, for Wellman, the true motivation behind white resistance to policies aimed at improving the well-being of blacks is economic self-interest: given the fact of scarcity, race-conscious distributive schemes threaten white economic privilege, so that it is self-interest, not antipathy toward blacks, that motivates white opposition to social change.

In chapter 3 I also argued that Wellman's theory is economistic, because he assumes that action should be conceived as a form of strategic reason. In contrast to communicative reason, which is intersubjective, a form of reason employed by and between communicative subjects, strategic reason is monological, a form of reason used by subjects in relation to objects, where the latter exist as mere means to the ends of the former. Insofar as Wellman asserts that racist beliefs are rational, i.e., serve to attain the ends of white security, he construes social relations strategically rather than intersubjectively. The problem with such an assumption is that it uncritically relies on

the stark individualism for which classical liberalism has frequently been criticized, which has the effect of obscuring the constitutive roles of recognition and historical change in identity formation and social relations.

The assumptions that action is strategic and motivated by economic self-interest obscure the role of recognition in identity formation and social relations in the following ways. On such a view the question of identity formation, the development of a subject's ability to relate to self as well as to others *as* a concrete individual, scarcely arises. The economistic model instead presupposes and generalizes from an abstract individual with pre-given interests and motivations. The influence of socialization on the constitution of a reflexive subjectivity – the formation of desires and preferences, the acceptance or rejection of values, and so on– is met with theoretical silence, or else regarded as secondary. Economism, in other words, conceptually starts from the already formed individual without attempting to theorize the process of individualization through which a human being becomes a *concrete* individual. Thus, social relations are conceived as external relations between static, self-enclosed individuals, whose agency is an ahistorical given and whose social relations are governed by ubiquitous competition instead of recognition. To conceive of individuality and social relations in this way surreptitiously requires theorizing intersubjective relations as, instead, relations between subjects and objects, since in a given relation one subject is merely a means to the ends of another, either as an obstacle or an enabling prop. This conception of identity and relationality is characteristic of the position I am calling economism. There is no *a priori* necessity to conceiving of agency and interests in this manner. But insofar as economism conceives of identity and relationality in this way, the pre-theoretical, cognitive and affective

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relations between subjects whose identities depend on being recognized are effectively elided.

The implications of the social ontological assumptions of economism are significant especially in regard to questions of agency, social conflict, and the historical character of both. For, as I have argued above, economism is covertly a conception of agency and *eo ipso* of social conflict. Inasmuch as economism holds that action, individual or collective, is motivated by economic self-interest, it reduces the conceptual field not only of possible motivations but also of possible identities, goals, forms of reason, and types of conflict. To argue that the social action undertaken by subjects is invariably self-interested and motivated by economic well-being implies that persons are, essentially, economic agents. Thus any agency exercised by, e.g., women, blacks, or gays, irrespective of their self-conception or understanding of their motives or actions, is on such a view always to be interpreted as economic. But this interpretation would entail interpreting social movements like feminism or anti-racism through a distributive lens, which would either trivialize or drain them of their specificity.

This criticism is already familiar. Insofar as economism insists on an abstract and self-interested individualism, it is incapable of conceptually appreciating different forms of and motivations for interaction, as well as different forms of identity and their relevance to concerns about justice and morality. As a result, and as has been argued in regard to orthodox strains of Marxism, theories that reduce the motivation and ends of action to economic self-interest fail to grasp the heterogeneity of current and past social conflicts, ranging from labor struggles for greater workplace autonomy, to feminist demands for legal protections against sexual harassment and marital violence, to anti-

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racist efforts to end stereotyping and discriminatory practices. An economistic theory would be hard pressed to demonstrate, in each case, that what motivated such conflicts was economic self-interest, or that all or most feminist or anti-racist struggles have been merely veiled expressions of economic interest.

Although this criticism remains important and probably under-appreciated, the problem with economism extends beyond it to a commonly less noticed fact: economism is a *conception of identity*. I noted above that, in Honneth's as well as in my view, identity is a complex concept involving interconnected types of self-relation. I added to this general formulation of identity a more specific definition, namely: identity is reflexive subjectivity with self-understanding, and so is coterminous with agency. Identity refers to a subject's ability autonomously to evaluate and interpret her wants and needs, actions and interactions, beliefs and values. Identity formation is therefore properly understood as a form of practical freedom. Such a conception of identity, especially in its emphasis on dimensions of embodied experience, has almost nothing in common with alternative views that conceive identity as a *core* or *authentic* self, or psychologically tinted views that conceive identity as *self-image* or *personal narrative*. Identity is internally linked with the ability to act socially, so that agency and identity are mutually implicative. As argued in chapters 2 and 4, a subjectivity capable of apprehending itself as independent of, yet related to, another subjectivity is a precondition for the ability *to take* objects (e.g., situations, events, meanings) as *mattering* (i.e., as meaningful, of value). If a person is to deliberate, decide and act purposefully, it is necessary not only that she experience needs, wants, desires, but that she experience these needs and wants as *hers*, as feelings or dispositions with some type

of value to her. Insofar as economism theorizes action and motivation, it is to that extent a theory of identity, since its basic assumption is that what motivates and orients action and desire is economic self-interest.

Of course, rational choice theorists and liberal theorists alike would probably reject my claim that economism is a theory of identity. Identity, that squiggly, "highly contested" concept is, they might say, precisely what is bracketed out of their theory. But if the link I propose between identity and agency is defensible, that objection is mistaken. For the assertion that action is motivated by economic self-interest, and is for that reason rational, is at once a claim about the motives, interests, and ends governing the actions and social relations of any concrete individual. Put another way, economism is a theory about how people understand, orient, and valorize their public and private lives. And these are just the elements with which a person's self-conception, which always includes her membership in groups and communities, is articulated. For these reasons, I maintain that economism is a theory of identity and agency – a theory of how persons practically and reflexively relate to their desires, ends, endeavors, and so on.

In this light, the ahistorical character of economism becomes visible. The two premises of economism, i.e., that action is motivated by economic self-interest and that social relations are governed by strategic reason, reflect what Marx called the *commodity form*.[171] In non-Marxian language, they present the social relations prevalent under a contingent historical constellation of social and economic institutions as though those relations were eternal, natural, and universal. In other words, economistic theory implies that the form of social relations institutionalized under capitalism is natural to human

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[171] Karl Marx, trans. Ben Fowkes *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), especially chapters 1 and 3, "The Commodity" and "Money, or the Circulation of Commodities."

relationships as such. The concepts of *commodity fetishism*[172] and *reification*[173] are

intended to capture precisely this sort of false naturalization and eternalization of

concepts, relations, and forms of agency, which are, in reality, products of social

interaction and history.[174] Reification denotes a type of conceptual error that occurs

when a concept is regarded as a thing or when specific social relations are treated as

natural kinds or as causally determined. The error in presenting social relations as

strategic, and economic self-interest as a universal motivation, consists of the assumption

that the goals, motivations, and practices of a particular historical formation are qualities

of human nature. Similarly, commodity fetishism (more a practical than a conceptual

error, and defined by Marx[175] as treating social relations as relations between things and

relations between things as social relations) refers, for my purposes here, to the

assumption that social relations are properly strategic: that in interaction subjects *simply*

do relate to other subjects as they would to objects. Rather than acknowledge the

contingent and historical nature of social relations, economism naturalizes them, in this

way universalizing and eternalizing them. Such an absence of historical self-awareness

further supports my claim that economism is a type of identity, insofar as it makes

substantive assumptions about the character of individuality, agency, motivation, and

social conflict.

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[172] Marx, *Capital*, 163-177 especially. Also see Paul M. Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 34-40.

[173] Probably the most famous analysis of reification is in "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in Georg Lukacs, trans. Rodney Livingstone *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971). Also see Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*.

[174] "Something which is only valid for this particular form of production...appears to those caught up in the relations of commodity production...to be just as ultimately valid as the fact that the scientific dissection of the air into its component parts left the atmosphere itself unaltered in its physical configuration." Marx, *Capital*, 167.

[175] Marx, *Capital*, 164-165,

As noted above, to reify strategic action and economic self-interest as universal qualities of human nature, as essential to and definitive of social interaction, takes no account of different sources of motivation, nor of the historical character of social relations, complexity of identity, or new dimensions of subjectivity opened by transformations in social practices and institutions. Given its limited social ontology, economism lacks the conceptual resources to grasp the nuances and specificity of social struggles that involve identity claims, i.e., demands by individuals (*qua* members of social groups) to be respected and recognized as *particular* individuals capable of contributing to a community's shared goals and projects. An identity-recognition social theory, on the contrary, is attuned to the ways that changes in social institutions give rise to new social relations, which create new personal freedoms and possibilities for self-realization and, thus, new forms of and demands for recognition.

So, for example, while the contractual character of social relations under capitalism gave institutional support to the recognition of personal autonomy and legal rights, the modeling of social relations on a pattern of contractual exchange nonetheless coexisted with appalling material deprivations of the lower classes, histories of colonization and slavery, as well as the oppression of women. Although it is true that many of these injustices were, to some degree, rectified by social conflicts that appealed to human rights and individual autonomy, this retort misses the forest for the trees. Properly to understand social change (and, putatively, moral progress) requires examination of what motivated blacks, women, colonized peoples, and the underclass to resist and struggle against injustice.

An adequate and convincing answer to this question requires a shift from an economistic to an identity-recognition conception of motivation. Again, I am not arguing that economic self-interest never plays a role in social conflict, or that social conflict is in every case a struggle for recognition. My position is less ambitious than that, consisting instead of the thesis that, most commonly, what motivates people to engage in social conflict is the perceived threat to, and thus the need to protect, identity. To say that social conflict is motivated by struggles for recognition means that, given the dependence of identity on intersubjective recognition, persons perceive that their subjectivity, their sense of self, is jeopardized by certain traditions, practices, and so on. In instances of social conflict with a more or less economic character, the motivation may be self-interest or experienced disrespect; determining which constitutes the more decisive motivational catalyst will often be an empirical question. Not all labor struggles are indisputably distributive, and not all recognition conflicts are primarily about affirming one's "self-image." Nonetheless, an identity-recognition theory is better able speak to and evaluate ostensibly economic struggles, than an economistic theory is able to account for recognition conflicts.

In sum: I have thus far argued that the theory of economism depends on concepts and claims derived from an identity-recognition theory. Insofar as economism fails to acknowledge and explicitly develop these presuppositions, it provides an incomplete and inadequate social ontology, and thus a flawed account of action and motivation for participating in social conflict. Assuming that the motivation for interaction and conflict is always economic self-interest simply omits the role of intersubjective recognition in identity formation. Moreover, the assumption is reductionistic, since it either fails to

consider other motivations for action or subordinates these to economic self-interest, as

when points of view grouped under the label "identity politics" are dismissed as

archaisms,[176] distractions,[177] or matters of self-image.[178] Another flaw of economism

consists in its inability to account for its own conditions of possibility, which include the

historically emergent forms of recognition relations and identity made possible by

changes in institutions and social practices under capitalism. It is in part because of the

prevalence of the commodity form that stark individualism and strategic social relations

could come to appear as "natural," or as a universal quality of human nature. And so, to

the extent that economism fails to theorize its contingent and historical character, it

remains both conceptually impoverished and empirically narrow.

In the next section, I defend the thesis that what motivates whites in America to

oppose social change aimed at remedying racial inequality is the perception that race-

conscious change denies them recognition, or rather, that such change disrespects or

excludes whites in some way.

Social Conflict and Struggles for Recognition

In this section I show that the motivation to engage in social conflict is conceived

better as a struggle for recognition than as a conflict over economic self-interest. First, I

discuss what has been called welfare racism.[179] By welfare racism I mean a discourse

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[176] As when indigenous cultures or organic customs and traditions are regarded as quaint or endearing, but ultimately peripheral to economic growth or security.

[177] See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000), 319-320 especially.

[178] Fraser, "Recognition without Ethics?" and "Rethinking Recognition."

[179] Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America's Poor* (New York: Routledge, 2001). "We define welfare racism as the organization of racialized public assistance attitudes, policy making, and administrative practices," 36.

and set of stereotypes and preconceptions prominent in the U.S. throughout the 1990s that portrayed social welfare as a black phenomenon and, more egregiously, as a form of social policy that threatened traditional American values such as independence, self-reliance, a sturdy work ethic, and merit. Secondly, I link this sociologically supported discussion with the premises of identity-recognition theory to show that it is the perception of disrespect or denied recognition that prompts white opposition to welfare. My intention is not to justify such a stance, but rather to offer what seems to me a more tenable interpretation of what has motivated racial disharmony in the U.S.

Basing my claims on sociological studies, I want to show that many of the stereotypes and images associated with welfare depict recipients of federal assistance as lazy, undeserving, and content to rely on "handouts" rather than make an honest effort to find work. Such preconceptions were reflected in public opinion concerning welfare, which fairly consistently expressed outrage at the "welfare fraud" perpetrated by those who purportedly "cheated the system." If the case can be made that the harshest criticisms of welfare were color-coded, that the media representations, misconceptions, and stereotypes about welfare specifically depicted blacks as those "cheating" the system at the expense of "hardworking" whites, then this will support my claim that white resistance to social change aimed at benefiting blacks is fueled by race – race *qua* identity which fuels racial antagonism. My aim is not to restore a prejudice model of racism; I do not argue, for example, that whites "just don't like" blacks or can only establish themselves as (normatively ideal) Subject by reducing blacks (*qua* Other) to the status of Object. Nor is my intent to show that blacks are discriminated against or disadvantaged by the welfare system itself. Similarly, I do not mean to imply that such stereotypes and

preconceptions are solely racist; there are also sexist stereotypes and stigmas that have negatively influenced public opinion about welfare. Still, I want to show how racial stereotypes, representations, and misconceptions function to create in whites a feeling of victimization, injustice, or a sense that their values and normative expectations are violated by a welfare system that is perceived to benefit mainly blacks; and how this serves to motivate many whites adamantly to oppose such policies and practices.

In *Why Americans Hate Welfare*[180], Martin Gilens contends that Americans do not oppose welfare as such. In fact, most Americans accept that the government has some responsibility to provide certain forms of welfare for all citizens, such as affordable housing, health care, public education, job retraining programs, and social security benefits. Not only did survey respondents support these programs in principle, they expressed a willingness to support them practically by paying higher taxes. The specific form of welfare that aroused public ire and opposition was, by contrast, AFDC (or, post-1995, TANF),[181] which administered public assistance through monthly means-tested payments. For my purposes here, two immediate conclusions drawn by Gilens are worth noting: first, attitudes toward welfare are not meaningfully explained in terms of self-interest. Survey data indicate that Americans do not oppose welfare *simpliciter*; they accept the need for, and express a willingness to support certain types of, programs. What they oppose is that form of welfare which consists of cash payments to individuals and families. (The reason for this opposition will be discussed below.) Secondly, attitudes toward welfare are not neatly or obviously explained by American individualism. For conceding that the government has some responsibility to ensure the

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[180] Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Hereafter referred to as *WAHW*.

[181] Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, respectively.

well-being of citizens in need at once implies an appreciation of the fact that, at times, people are rendered dependent or vulnerable through no fault of their own, e.g., when corporate executives and shareholders decide to outsource labor. Thus, opposition to public assistance is not explained by a dogmatic, unreflective commitment to individualism.

To discern why Americans oppose welfare administered as cash payments to individuals and families, Gilens distinguishes between public perceptions of the poor. On one side are those who are poor due to external factors and circumstances over which they have no control, e.g., "market fluctuations." These persons deserve assistance from the government to help them "get back on their feet," but only so far as they set their sights on finding a new job and reestablishing their economic independence. On the other side, in contrast to the deserving poor, are those who are poor because of internal factors and circumstances over which individuals can be expected to exercise control. According to public perceptions, these persons are undeserving of government help since their poverty arises from their own lack of initiative, rejection of a proper work ethic, and willingness to "go on welfare" indefinitely instead of securing work.

> When a 1995 survey asked whether 'most people on welfare are using welfare for a short period of time and will get off it eventually' or 'most people on welfare are so dependent on welfare that they will never get off it,' only 15 percent said most use welfare for a short time; 79 percent said most welfare recipients will never get off welfare.[182]

It is here that American individualism reasserts itself. For what is decisive in public opposition to welfare are the widespread assumptions that recipients are able but not willing to work, and that their needs are therefore not genuine needs at all but, rather,

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[182] Gilens, *WAHW*, 37.

needs arising from laziness and a resigned dependency. The difference between American attitudes toward welfare programs in general and those that provide cash payments to individuals and families in particular is therefore explained by perceptions and judgments of the values, traits, and moral character of the persons receiving the latter type of assistance. As Gilens notes:

> Americans' individualistic ideology, rather than resulting in a principled rejection of welfare as such, provides a basis for judging the moral worthiness of welfare recipients. Americans support government aid for those who are trying – but nevertheless failing to make it on their own. But the "undeserving poor," who choose to remain on welfare when they could be supporting themselves, receive little sympathy.[183]

While challenging the assumption that a significant number of persons on welfare are there by choice would be worthwhile, this is not the place to do so. Instead I want to turn to the main conclusion of Gilens's research, which is that Americans, and whites particularly, regularly overestimate the number of blacks who are poor as well as the number who are on welfare; and, similarly, generalize about welfare recipients based on preconceptions and stereotypes of blacks. More precisely, Gilens provides evidence that Americans view blacks as lazy, lacking a proper work ethic, comprising a majority of the poor, and thus especially susceptible to dependence on – or becoming "trapped by" – welfare. When such stereotypes of blacks as lazy and unwilling to work are combined with the mistaken assumption that they constitute the (numeric) majority of welfare recipients and the poor, it seems to follow that public opposition to welfare is based on and reflects a negative, demeaning judgment of blacks as a social group. Or, put differently, the reason Americans oppose some but not all forms of welfare stems from moral judgments about the putative habits and behaviors of welfare recipients. Yet these

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[183] Ibid, 63.

habits, traits, and so on mirror the stereotypes that (white) Americans have of blacks, so

that, almost syllogistically, Americans consider welfare illegitimate and morally

unacceptable to the extent that it is coded black. Were these attitudes formulated into a

syllogism, the argument would be: *blacks are lazy*; *welfare recipients are lazy*; therefore

welfare recipients are black. This argument is clearly both invalid and unsound. But

what I want to call attention to is the way in which racial stereotypes creep into and shape

public discourse and perceptions about public assistance and moral dessert.

In "Race Matters,"[184] James M. Avery and Mark Peffley examine how print and

television media have racialized welfare through selective images and representations of

welfare recipients and the poor, and link this to negative public attitudes about welfare.

The media contributes to the racialization of welfare by accompanying stories about

poverty and welfare primarily with images of blacks, thereby suggesting to viewers and

readers that the latter constitute a greater numeric percentage of the poor than they in fact

do. Moreover, the racial composition of media representations of poverty and welfare

vary according to the tone and content of the story being reported: stories about unwed

mothers, dependency, or "welfare fraud" are more often illustrated with images of blacks,

while stories about job retraining or poverty among the elderly are more likely to be

illustrated by images of whites. Avery and Peffley as well as Gilens show that, prior to

the 1960s, portrayals of the poor mainly consisted of images of (rural) whites; from the

1960s through the late 1990s, by contrast, depictions of the poor, especially of those

receiving welfare, increasingly consisted of images of blacks, such that from 1950 to

1992 nearly "two-thirds of the poor people pictured in major news magazines and

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[184] James M. Avery and Mark Peffley, "Race Matters: The Impact of News Coverage of Welfare Reform on Public Opinion," in *Race and the Politics of Welfare Reform*, ed. Sanford F. Schram, Joe Soss, and Richard C. Fording (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003). Hereafter referred to as *RPWR*.

network news broadcasts were black – about twice the true proportion of blacks among the nation's poor."[185]

Of course, the change in media representations of welfare recipients and the poor could be explained as a response to greater public awareness of urban poverty or, following the civil rights battles of the 1960s, of the hardships and obstacles confronting blacks. Whether such explanations are tenable is not at issue, however, since I am not claiming that news producers deliberately chose to misrepresent the percentage of blacks among welfare recipients or the poor. Rather, the fact of the disparity itself is important due to the effect it has produced – or, perhaps better, the impression it has reinforced – in public perceptions about poverty and welfare.

By repeatedly associating blacks with poverty and welfare, particularly the negative or unpopular aspects, the media reproduces and propagates the racial stereotypes mentioned above and, in this way, intensifies opposition to welfare. The way such representations are taken up and digested by members of the public are shown in surveys indicating that, other things being equal, respondents are more likely to blame a black woman for losing her job, i.e., attribute fault to the individual, than a white woman, in which case "blame is more likely to be directed at the problem of welfare reform."[186] Similarly, "respondents who read a story with an accompanying photograph of a black (versus a white) woman and her child were decidedly more harsh in their evaluations of welfare recipients and welfare in general."[187] This suggests that the media fuels negative attitudes toward – and thus opposition to – welfare by stressing the *personal failings* of

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[185] Avery and Peffley, *RPWR*, 133.

[186] Avery and Peffley, *RPWR*, 140.

[187] Ibid, 146.

recipients, or rather, by framing stories and reportage in terms of racially-loaded

stereotypes and preconceptions about individual responsibility, independence and

initiative, commitment to the work ethic, merit, and so on.

I have argued that Americans do not oppose welfare as such but rather a particular

type of welfare, namely, that consisting of payments to individuals and families. And I

have shown that such resistance arises from the racial coding of welfare combined with

the public perception that welfare rewards the "undeserving poor." Since the traits,

values, habits, and behaviors of the "undeserving poor" mirror stereotypes of blacks, I

suggested it was plausible to view opposition to welfare as a veiled expression of

derogatory attitudes towards blacks generally, as well as of the presumption among

whites that their own traits and values possess moral authority.

These claims are supported by Dean Baker's observation in "Numbers Before

Politics"[188] that Americans wildly overestimate the amount of federal money spent on

welfare. Fully 40% of Americans believe that welfare is one of the two largest items in

the federal budget; it is no doubt for this reason that allegations of welfare "fraud" and

"wastefulness" arouse such pique as they do. Yet in light of the research discussed

above, and aside from the falsity of the belief about the budget, it seems crucial to

emphasize *who* the public assumes is receiving the money. If welfare recipients are

assumed to be black and if blacks are perceived to comprise the "undeserving poor," it

seems reasonable to conclude that what provokes discontent and opposition is not the

mere fact that tax dollars are being used for welfare but, more precisely, that they are

being used to reward the members of a social group viewed as morally undeserving, or

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[188] Dean Baker, "Numbers Before Politics," *In These Times* 29:12 (May, 2005)

even unworthy of help. If it were only a question of the government extorting taxes from citizens, the same rancor and resistance would be directed toward welfare in general, and surely toward corporate welfare in particular. Such is not the case. Instead, the most strident criticisms of welfare continue to center on AFDC/TANF and to appeal to the putative personal failings of recipients.

What I hoped to show by reviewing sociological findings on welfare racism is that an economistic explanation of white opposition to welfare misunderstands the basic motivation for such opposition. Pivotal in shaping public perceptions about the legitimacy of welfare and the worthiness of recipients are the race of the latter as well as the practices and values respondents consider morally acceptable. Opposition to certain forms of welfare arises from the perception that cash payments reward the "undeserving poor," i.e., the lazy, those who reject the work ethic and are simply unwilling to support themselves. Further, these judgments concerning personal character mirror racial stereotypes of blacks, which explains why respondents tended to attribute fault to black but not white welfare recipients and, on the whole, expressed suspicion about the causes of black poverty. Misconceptions about the number of blacks who are poor or receiving welfare are reinforced by the media's disproportionately picturing blacks in stories on welfare and by associating blacks with its most unpopular aspects, as well as by the mistaken belief that welfare constitutes a larger portion of the national budget than it does. Together, these last two misconceptions underscore the perception that welfare rewards the unworthy and that welfare "wastefulness" is caused by "freeloaders" and "cheats."

Nonetheless, given what was said above about the historical nature of identity formation, social relations, and institutions, it might yet be argued that economism offers a tenable account of white resistance to welfare and affirmative action. If modern social organization, norms, and practices engender the strategic individualism found in liberal-capitalist societies, it may be that for purely historical reasons an economistic account of motivation aptly describes contemporary conflicts in those societies. Although such a view would entail rejecting economism's claim to universality, it might salvage the plausibility of economism by acknowledging its own historical contingency while, at the same time, maintaining that it is the modern structure of identity that justifies explaining social conflict in terms of economic self-interest. Despite the attractiveness of this attempt to historicize economism, I will argue in the remainder of the chapter that white opposition to efforts aimed at bettering the status of blacks in America is motivated not by the desire to protect economic advantage but, rather, by the perceived threat posed to white identity.

White identity in the U.S. is constituted by historical and presumptive authority, power, and privilege. I do not mean economic advantage, since economic relations are such that many whites have little or no decision-making authority or power. Rather I mean whites enjoy more subtle social and cultural privileges *vis-à-vis* blacks, as was illustrated by reflection on attitudes toward welfare, which included presumptions of independence, responsibility and achievement, and greater cultural visibility and acceptance. These privileges, or the self-assurance they offer white identity, are underwritten by social and cultural values and practices. Inasmuch as white identity is informed by such values as independence, personal responsibility and merit, and such

relations and practices as competition, private property rights, and so on, white identity crucially depends on defending the validity of those values, relations, and practices. Social movements or political policies that link the efficacy of individual agency or moral responsibility to a broader historical context or to membership in social groups (e.g., Blacks, Women) therefore challenge the archetypal image whites have of themselves – not only how they "see" themselves but, more importantly, how they experience their status, accomplishments, sacrifices, and ambitions. For this reason, it can be argued that the ability coherently to relate to oneself, to one's actions and goals, as a morally accountable person equal to others – without privileges or advantages gained through the domination or oppression of others – requires overlooking the ways in which the identity and agency of whites *qua* white are grounded in and sustained by practices, relations, and normative judgments that subordinate or disadvantage others insofar as they are members of particular social groups. Social welfare, affirmative action, and reparations, I submit, present precisely such challenges to white identity.

Thus far, the points I have made remain at the level of sociological observation. It may be that white Americans retain an ideal image of themselves as committed to (in principle) and embodying (in practice) universal norms and impartial values. But further argument is necessary to show what this has to do with the question of motivation, social conflict, and their connection with recognition relations. This link can be established by recalling Honneth's claims about the historical character of identity, or rather of the recognition relations on which identity formation depends and out of which normative expectations to be recognized emerge.

As I argued in chapter 4, the complexity of the structure of identity is not discernible *a priori*, but rather is historically mutable and requires conceiving of identity as grounded in and to a significant degree constituted by forms of intersubjective recognition, as well as by institutional organization and social practices. Such a conception implies that as new recognition relations are institutionalized and new dimensions of subjectivity disclosed, the conditions required for the successful identity formation of human beings socialized in a particular society will differ from those prior to such changes. With the recognition of private property rights and legal equality established with capitalism, for example, feudal relations that had subordinated individuality to estate – one simply was a serf, peasant, aristocrat – were no longer adequate to social reality. Changes in institutions and social relations spurred new demands for recognition, generated new expectations to be recognized, in this case as a rights-bearing subject. What the example is intended to show is that changes in social structure change the ontology of the person and the normative expectations underlying social interaction, as well. For those born and socialized in a given society, the norms governing social interaction already provide possibilities for identity formation and agency. The process of individualization, of achieving an identity and becoming a social agent, therefore requires the internalization of recognitive norms to the extent that they can properly be described as implicit expectations of social interaction. Since the structure of individuality is already institutionalized via recognition relations, which has thereby gained social objectivity, the violation of recognitive norms and expectations is experienced by the person, pre-reflectively and quite literally, as an attack on one's

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agency, one's ability to establish practical self-relations and, on that basis, to act autonomously.

The link between recognitive expectations and the motivation underlying social conflict should now be easier to make out. Because disrespect and denied recognition violate norms that govern social interaction and identity formation, when it occurs – either blatantly, as in the denial of voting rights, or more subtly, as in the assumption that affirmative action rewards undeserving minorities – it is initially felt by the affected person emotionally, or pre-reflectively. Disrespect is experienced concretely, as a personal affront, and is signaled by negative emotional reactions such as indignation or anger. While it is the negative emotions triggered by disrespect that motivate resistance, the former reveal (often "indirectly") the cognitive content of recognition relations, which implies that the structure of motivation is cognitive as well as affective and that motivation involves a pre-reflective judgment that normative expectations have been violated. Phenomenologically, then, recognition relations possess a cognitive potential whose suppression evokes feelings of anger or indignation, and these emotions motivate the affected to demand the recognition they have been denied. When people realize that the injustices to which they are subject are systematic and experienced by other members of a social group, previously mute affective reactions become susceptible of communication, shared reflection, and the articulation of demands to establish or restore those forms of recognition that were distorted or denied. In this way, the cognitive potential of recognition relations is tapped and raised to the level of social awareness. The understanding that one is disrespected because one belongs to a social group can result from the efforts of existing social movements, of course, or can provide the basis

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for their formation. In any case, the consciousness-raising and voicing of recognitive demands by social movements are themselves instances (and results) of conflict, struggles spurred by disrespect or denied recognition.

Returning to the question of racial conflict in the U.S. (or, more exactly, of white opposition to forms of social change aimed at benefiting blacks), my task is to identify the form of recognition denied whites, or the type of recognition whites take themselves to deserve but perceive themselves to be denied, which in turn would provoke their resistance. Any adequate answer will be complex, consisting of more than generic claims about universal self-interest or, say, about the need for one (type of) identity to coalesce around and sustain itself through the subordination of another. The problem can at least be brought into clearer focus by examining it in light of the types of recognition relations that Honneth refers to as legal relations and solidaristic relations.

Legal relations acknowledge the moral equality of persons and, as a result of the institutionalization of human rights, anchor moral accountability and autonomy in reciprocal, procedurally governed relations. Thus they pertain to that dimension of identity that is more narrowly individualistic, conceiving the person principally as a bearer of rights and negative liberties. In the U.S., it seems to me uncontroversial that this is the conception of selfhood that holds sway: the idea, that is, that a person's real opportunities and possibilities depend above all on individual effort, resourcefulness, and ambition. Solidaristic relations, by contrast, pertain to that dimension of identity that is more heterogeneous and particularist than the former: namely, those traits, abilities, and practices that a concrete individual possesses or participates in, and by virtue of which she defines herself *qua* individual and also *qua* member of specific social groups or ways

of life. The type of recognition demanded here is not of universal equality but, rather, of differences: different aptitudes, values, and so on. The person is conceived not solely as a bearer of rights but also as a member of a race, gender, class, or religion, so that the capacity for self-realization – relating to oneself as *this individual* – requires the affirmation, or at least the minimal acceptance, of such particularity. This aspect of identity continues to be politically divisive and inadequately conceptualized in theories of social conflict, yet remains central to the analysis of racism in the U.S.

If it is plausible that modern identity is structured and sustained by the three types of recognition relations analyzed in chapter 4, then the sources of disrespect and denied recognition that motivate white resistance to certain types of social change stem from the perceived violation of norms governing legal and solidaristic relations. Regarding the claim that white opposition to affirmative action arises not from prejudice but from the belief that it is unfair and contradicts the liberal-capitalist values of independence and equality, it seems to me that the claim itself implies that what is threatened, in fact, are the values and conception of individuality by means of which Americans have traditionally understood and organized their identity, interaction, and agency. Affirmative action acknowledges the historical character of social institutions and relations; the affect of that history on opportunities and power relations; and the fact, so difficult to see on an individualist ontology, that membership in social groups shapes identity and agency. Hence, affirmative action compels reconsideration of once taken for granted, uncritically held cultural assumptions, values, and norms, which is in turn experienced by whites as a form of disrespect: a denial of recognition, or else a wrongful

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form of recognition, such that whites feel accused, put upon, unjustly held responsible for the past.

If affirmative action strains the norms underlying legal relations, social welfare pressures solidaristic relations. Since a dimension of modern identity consists of socialization processes guided by the values and practices of social groups, that is, by a person's ability reflexively to accept or reject social meanings, the way in which a person relates to herself is shaped by both historical and contemporary forms of social interaction and recognitive expectations. White identity *qua* white will be informed not only by the universal norms underlying legal relations, then, but by the contingent values and expectations embedded in American culture as a result of its legacy of racial domination. The historical reality of white privilege and power constitutes a social background or horizon against which whites *qua* white presume privilege, authority, or social status. It therefore seems plausible to assert that white identity is so saturated with expectations of social and cultural privilege that welfare, curiously enough, constitutes at once a confirmation as well as a condemnation of American institutions and race relations.

To see how welfare might provoke the feeling among whites that they are disrespected or denied recognition, one need only recall what was said about the racialization of welfare. To the extent that welfare is perceived as a "black problem," federal support of welfare demonstrates, on the one hand, that American institutions, practices, and values function well for the majority of Americans, who after all do not need welfare. In this way, welfare can be taken to confirm or validate the status quo. But since the status quo rests on a history of racial domination, in effect what would be

confirmed is white self-assurance that "whiteness" constitutes the social and moral norm, so that those who draw welfare are simply those who deviate from the norm. On the other hand, to the extent that welfare is presented by the media and perceived by the public as rewarding the "undeserving," accommodating socially devalued ways of life or family structures, and tacitly admitting race-specific inequalities, federal support of welfare signifies a betrayal and subtle condemnation of "traditional" American values. Aside from more invidious stereotypes (e.g., that welfare recipients are content to remain "on the dole," have children to increase the size of their allotment, etc.), the misconception that welfare recipients are overwhelmingly black is a constant reminder of racial inequality, which must then be squared with the belief that U.S. institutions are just in principle as well as in practice.

The public perception that welfare mainly benefits blacks, then, suggests either that the latter are disadvantaged as a social group, which in turn would imply the persistence of racial domination and *eo ipso* the injustice of contemporary social institutions and relations. Or else that blacks as individuals are in some way to blame, say, by failing to embrace a "proper" work ethic or assume "personal responsibility" – in short, that blacks "bring on themselves" existing inequalities by acting in normatively unacceptable ways. It seems to me that the latter view best captures public attitudes about welfare. If so, then federal support for welfare would amount to political recognition of value orientations and practices alien or even hostile to those accepted as "traditional." Indeed, I submit that proposing race-conscious policies for what are commonly assumed to be personal failings is viewed, by whites particularly though not uniquely, as "giving in" to a "politically correct" ideology; that is, as a violation of

historically seated expectations to be assured of strictly negative freedoms, rewarded solely on the basis of effort and merit, and regarded by the state as an abstract (i.e., colorless and genderless) individual. Social welfare in this way jeopardizes white self-assurance. Thus, the motivation driving whites to oppose forms of social change assumed to benefit blacks is plausibly conceived in terms of the perception of social disrespect or denied recognition – a conflict rooted in recognition relations and demands.

I should stress that although my argument incorporates claims about the role of beliefs, values, and representations in identity formation and social conflict, my concept of motivation is not "merely psychological" or idealist. On the contrary, the theory of recognition on which I rely is materialist, conceiving identity formation as a process involving embodied agents situated in practical relations. The dependence of identity formation on recognition relations produces, via socialization and internalization, expectations to be recognized, which in turn are signaled by the experience of negative emotions when those expectations are violated through disrespect.

Recalling what was said about the history of racial dominance in the U.S. and how this generated in whites an unreflective, presumed sense of entitlement and privilege, I now propose that programs like social welfare and affirmative action challenge white identity directly at the level of practical agency. Such programs and practices are not, after all, uniquely distributive in nature. They include demands for local authority over community organization and decision-making, the recognition of contributions by marginalized minorities, the preservation of customs and traditions, and constraints on speech and behavior intended to curb harassment. At stake are not just ideas, images, and discourse, then, but previously unquestioned, taken-for-granted power

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relations; and it is this that whites may experience as an affront, as "power-grabbing" by blacks, or as a violation of the "rights" of whites.[189] Formerly unnoticed assumptions about acceptable types of interaction would be raised to public awareness and contested, such as the invisibility of whiteness in the experience of whites and the seemingly inescapable visibility of blackness in the experience of blacks. If this argument is tenable, it underlines the presumed sense of entitlement and privilege of whites *qua* white, and suggests that their resistance to certain forms of change is motivated by the perception that their (assumedly) rightful claims to recognition are violated.

Often that resistance is, as Wellman states, articulated in terms of purportedly neutral and self-evident values: equality, merit, freedom. But on the view developed here, it is crucial to note that although the meanings of the values (as well as the institutional structures and types of social practices they require) are contested rather than self-evident, they nonetheless have been historically institutionalized in ways that have reproduced and rationalized a structure of white privilege *vis-à-vis* blacks, thus normalizing inequality and oppression. So when whites allude to universal values when objecting to race-conscious social change, they may appear to be color-blind but, in reality, I contend they are resisting alterations to a way of life that has historically guaranteed their privilege *qua* white. The struggle to preserve inherited privilege and a sense of social esteem is apparent in certain reactions to welfare and affirmative action that are so typical as to have become slogans: recipients are "undeserving"; the state is "encouraging dependency" while "imposing" a "tax burden" on others; affirmative action

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[189] Such is the position of the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (MCRI), which opposes using race as a consideration for college admissions.

perpetuates racism, is "reverse discrimination," and, much worse, actually demeans those who benefit from it.[190]

Moreover, while disrespect is first felt emotionally and personally, it commonly breaks into social awareness and becomes a force for social change when, as a result of the forms of communication and reflection provided by social movements, personal experiences are seen to be typical of the experience of members of a particular social group. For this reason, and in light of the structure of modern identity, it is no surprise that social movements and their proposals for change often allude to and dispute the meaning of the same values. So, whereas the demands of the civil rights movement included demands for equality and respect, some whites (e.g., those supportive of the MCRI) currently oppose affirmative action on the grounds that it would entail treating them unequally, unjustly holding them accountable for past wrongs and making them "feel guilty for being white." Similarly, and especially after the 2004 presidential election, a public debate stirred concerning whether same-sex rights are analogous to civil rights; whether Christians constitute a marginalized, culturally ridiculed community; and so on. Each of these conflicts involves identity claims and recognitive demands, individually and collectively, which have been articulated publicly and made the locus of legislative struggles by social movements.

Conclusion

In this chapter I developed a critique of economistic theory, then proposed a recognition theoretic conception of motivation for engaging in social struggle. My goal

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[190] Since, the reasoning goes, it is *proof they couldn't make it any other way.*

was to connect the requirements for forming and sustaining identity and agency to experiences of disrespect or denied recognition, and to link this motivational affective reaction to social conflict. I criticized an economistic account of motivation and agency as ahistorical and, consequently, as incapable of grasping its own conditions of possibility. These conditions consist of historically contingent social relations and institutions that make possible and structure new dimensions of identity and forms of agency, which are embedded socially and internalized by a society's members, and which ultimately achieve the status of normative expectations. Economism, in contrast, focuses only on the individualistic, self-interested form of identity and agency characteristic of capitalist societies, and thus universalizes and reifies a single form of identity and agency to the exclusion of others. For this reason, economism implies a conception of identity. By reducing motivation and agency to economic self-interest, economism obscures the heterogeneity of social struggles as well as the variety of non-economic forms of identity. So not only is economism conceptually flawed, it is of little value for analyzing, understanding, and evaluating actual social struggles.

A recognition theoretic approach to conceiving the motivation for social conflict is not flawed or limited in these ways. On the contrary, the view defended here, following Honneth's identity-recognition social theory, possesses many advantages. Insofar as the goal of individual self-realization requires autonomous identity formation, its normative basis is clearer and more tenable than that of economism. Moreover, an identity-recognition approach is intersubjective, construing individualization as an outcome of communicative and recognitive interaction, and thus offers a more nuanced and philosophically compelling social ontology. Finally, it avoids reifying a single type

of identity and agency. It is instead sensitive to the historical preconditions of identity, or rather, to the influence of social relations and institutions on the ways individuals relate to themselves and to others. As a result, recognition theory is better able to evaluate the expectations underlying social interaction, and to link them in a systematic way to the sources of motivation that trigger social conflict.

Furthermore, identity-recognition theory provides a framework in which heterogeneous social conflicts can be analyzed without dissolving or sacrificing their specificity. For while the types of injustice and oppression experienced by women, blacks, the poor, and so on, are similar in many respects, they nonetheless differ in important ways. Although recognition theory identifies disrespect and denied recognition as the motivation for social struggle, it does not collapse all forms of identity, agency, and conflict into a single category. Rather it is flexible and complex enough to grasp the open, variable, changing character of normative expectations, forms of recognition and disrespect, and correspondingly heterogeneous social struggles.

In the next chapter, I consider and reply to objections to my thesis, then point to areas of further research that can profitably be addressed with the resources of an identity-recognition social theory, and conclude by examining political implications.

Chapter 6

Objections and Areas for Further Research

My aim has been to develop a conception that understands motivation for social conflict in terms of identity formation and mutual recognition, in contrast to a conception that conceives motivation in terms of economic self-interest. Having contrasted this identity-recognition theory with a more traditional economistic account, I now want to consider and reply to objections and indicate areas of further research.

Before doing so, I briefly want to clarify the relation of my project to Honneth's social theory. My intent is not uncritically to endorse his identity-recognition theory. There are aspects of his theory that I find underdeveloped, vague, and sometimes unconvincing. Yet I regard his elaboration of the role of recognition in social reproduction as a valuable philosophical insight, and as well suited to serve as a basis for social theory. I consider my thesis a critical reflection on Honneth's social theory, and accept his recognition theory as a working background. Thus, while the objections I consider also apply to Honneth, I will reply with the resources developed in this paper, defending Honneth's position only so far as doing so is relevant to my thesis.

Objections

a. Recognition of another cannot be obligatory

The first objection concerns Honneth's assertion that subjects are mutually obligated to recognize each other's identities and identity demands. The objection turns

on an analogy with emotion, and denies that people can justifiably be held accountable

for feeling specific emotions toward others. Esteem for another's identity, according to

this objection, can be a matter of *obligation* as little as can be love, and so it is unrealistic,

if not impossible, to *demand* that people esteem one another.[191] If esteem is demanded

rather than given freely, then, like the demand to be loved by another, the result is not

genuine or authentic.

The first thing to note in reply to this objection is that, for Honneth, recognition is

not an emotion but a form of social relation and interaction. The end or aim of a

recognition relation is to enable the person recognized to develop practical self-relations,

specifically self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Self-esteem, for example, is

the aim of solidaristic relations. But that *esteem* is the aim of a recognition relation does

not imply that the person giving recognition is obligated to experience positive emotions

for the person being recognized; that is, it is not necessary that the recognizer feel for the

recognized warmth, admiration, or whatever sensations or positive emotions are

associated with esteem. Because the goal of solidaristic relations is to enable the person

recognized to relate to her traits and abilities as having worth, esteem is better understood

as the outcome of, rather than as a condition for, recognition. Hence, people are not

obligated to feel a specific, concrete emotion when recognizing others. Just as Kant

argued that "respect" and "beneficence" required not "pathological love" but a

commitment to acknowledge and support another's autonomy, so a charitable

interpretation of Honneth's identity-recognition theory suggests that we act toward

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[191] For Charles Taylor's treatment of the problem, see "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 66-73.

others, not necessarily lovingly, but in ways that support their autonomous identity formation.

The analogy with emotion therefore fails. But even if Honneth argued that people were obligated recognitively to esteem others (i.e., to feel the emotions associated with esteem), the objection runs into a different difficulty. Namely, the objection assumes that emotions are by nature involuntary, and then concludes that subjects are not obligated by or responsible for states that are not under their voluntary control. And yet, while emotions and feelings often exhibit an involuntary character, they are nonetheless susceptible to interpretation, revision, and alteration. Emotions possess both physiological and cognitive elements, and so are wrongly construed as spontaneous impulses over which a person has no control. If emotions are rationally revisable, and if recognition is akin to emotion, it follows that whatever emotions inhere in recognition are rationally revisable as well. On this analogy, recognition would be voluntary and revisable.

Despite the objection's weaknesses, there is another way in which it forcefully highlights an ambiguity in Honneth's work, an ambiguity he has never convincingly addressed. As I note in passing above, the link between recognition and identity formation can be understood in two related though importantly distinct ways. Recognition can be conceived as a transcendental condition of identity formation, that is, as a condition of the possibility of identity formation. On the other hand, recognition can be treated as an empirical condition of identity formation, which affirms the necessity and temporal priority of concrete and contingent social relations in the psychological development and socialization of concrete individuals. Although the two senses are not

incompatible, they should not be casually conflated. While I have tried consistently to stress the former sense (or recognition as condition of possibility), Honneth invites the objection to his work insofar as he vacillates between the two senses of the term, or else fails to elucidate the relation between them. But that ambiguity is a feature of Honneth's and not my argument.

b. Not all identity claims seem to merit recognition

The second objection also addresses the claim that recognition is something to which people are morally entitled. This objection asserts that it is perverse, at worst, and undesirable, at best, to insist that *every* identity claim, even those of racists or sexists, has a legitimate claim to recognition. If such claims were legitimate, the ability of recognition theory to criticize forms of injustice and oppression would vanish, since any conflict motivated by identity claims would be irresolvable – every claim would seem to be equally justified! The objection questions whether identity-recognition theory can distinguish between valid and invalid recognitive demands and identity claims. What standard or criterion is available for making such a distinction?

Before proceeding, it should be observed that this objection applies only to the *third* form of recognition Honneth discusses, namely, the social esteem that is achieved through solidaristic relations. As forceful as it appears, the objection leaves untouched the claim that people have a right to be recognized as bodily and morally autonomous subjects. As I have noted, this seems characteristic of criticisms of Honneth's identity-recognition theory, which tend to bracket the first two forms of recognition in order to focus only on the third. In this way, the criticisms create the impression that a moral

demand to be recognized amounts to no more than affirming another's self-conception or

self-image. In a moment, I explain why this is mistaken, although, here again, I feel that

Honneth himself has never developed a rigorous response to this objection.

Perhaps more than any other, Nancy Fraser has criticized Honneth's identity-recognition

theory for its putative inability to discriminate, in a principled way, between valid and

invalid, justified and unjustified recognitive claims. The gist of her concern is captured

in the following passages:

> According to Axel Honneth...everyone needs their distinctiveness recognized in
> order to develop self-esteem...an essential ingredient of an undistorted identity
> It seems to follow that claims for recognition that enhance the claimant's self-
> esteem are justified, while those that diminish it are not. On this hypothesis,
> however, racist identities would seem to merit some recognition...Antiracist
> claims would confront an obstacle, in contrast, as they threaten the self-esteem of
> poor whites.[192]

And so:

> We must ask: what justifies a claim for the recognition of difference? How can
> one distinguish justified from unjustified claims of this sort?

She concludes that

> not every claim for recognition is warranted, just as not every claim for redistri-
> bution is. In both cases, one needs an account of criteria and/or procedures for
> distinguishing warranted from unwarranted claims...Theorists of
> recognition...have been [slow] to confront this question. They have yet to
> provide any principled basis for distinguishing justified from unjustified claims.[193]

The stakes are high. If this objection is sound, then a conception of motivation for social

conflict based in recognition relations loses its normative traction, remains solely

descriptive, and to that extent proves philosophically uninteresting. Nonetheless, I

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[192] Nancy Fraser, "Recognition Without Ethics?" 32.

[193] Nancy Fraser, ibid.

believe this sort of objection can be answered, although not in the manner pursued by Honneth.

In "Recognition and Moral Obligation,"[194] Honneth confronts this question indirectly, by reflecting on moral obligation and conflict in light of his recognition theory. I agree with other commentators[195] that his argumentation here is strained and unconvincing, if not downright self-contradictory. The argument is that the three patterns of recognition that serve as preconditions for successful identity formation (love/self-confidence, rights/self-respect, solidarity/self-esteem) "constitute the moral point of view." Since the integrity and texture of individuation depend on being recognized by others, recognition relations are normative and entail moral obligations. Honneth claims that the particular content of these obligations arises from the moral injuries discussed in chapter 4: love entails recognizing people's bodily integrity; rights, their moral autonomy; solidarity, their traits and abilities. The harder question, which leads back to Fraser's objection, is what to do when recognitive obligations conflict. If recognizing a sexist entails denying recognition to women, how can recognition theory resolve the conflicting claims?

It is here that Honneth's argument is least convincing. On one hand, he avers that in cases of moral conflict, the resolution "cannot…in any way be decided in advance: the moral point of view comprises three moral attitudes that cannot in turn be ranked from some superior vantage point." Instead, "the entire domain of the moral is pervaded by a tension that can be resolved only in individual responsibility." And yet, on the other hand, he asserts without any supporting argument that "there is a normative restriction

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[194] Axel Honneth, *op. cit.*

[195] See Jon Mahoney, "Axel Honneth's Ethical Theory of Recognition, *International Studies in Philosophy* 31:1, 97-110; and Jordy Rocheleau, personal correspondence.

placed on such decisions, following from the universal character that the recognition mode of respect possesses; because we have to recognize all human beings as persons who enjoy equal rights to autonomy…we may not choose social relationships whose realization would require a violation of those rights."[196] Hence, after denying the possibility of an ordering of moral obligations in one breath, in the next, Honneth adverts to the traditional liberal view that "respect," or universal human rights, is indeed a type of master "normative restriction" on other obligations. But aside from this inconsistency, and aside from the lack of any elucidation of the term "responsibility," there is the further problem that Honneth has seemingly forgotten his own assertion, earlier in the same essay, that "moral injuries that rob a person of [bodily security] *have to be considered elementary.*"[197] While not explicitly stated, the clear implication is that moral injuries that threaten a person's bodily autonomy are "considered elementary" relative to other moral injuries, e.g., those that demean a person's values or personal qualities. Such an observation suggests a means of ordering or of hierarchically ranking obligations in a way that is consistent with Honneth's identity-recognition theory, and that additionally provides a principled approach to resolving moral conflicts.

Consider the most severe types of moral injury that Honneth associates with the denial of love – abuse, rape, and torture. These constitute disrespect inasmuch as they fail to acknowledge a person's bodily autonomy: her physical integrity as an emotional, needful, and desiring subject. Or, perhaps more frighteningly, they do acknowledge this aspect of identity – but make that the target of attack and abuse. The 2004 "prisoner abuse scandal" in Abu Ghraib prison is apropos. What emerged in investigations, and

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[196] This, and the two previous quotes, are in Honneth, "Recognition and Moral Obligation."
[197] Ibid, emphasis added.

what made the scandal especially galling, was the deliberate and systematic attempt to destroy the fundamental physical integrity of detainees, e.g., through the use of "stress positions," extremely loud music and bright lights, sleep deprivation, exposure to extreme temperature variations. Interestingly, even if one were to accept U.S. officials' claims that such activities were not *really* torture, and thus not violations of the Geneva Convention, the intentional effort to undermine a person's trust in his or her own needs, feelings, and emotions is no less repugnant. Similarly, in the case of rape it seems uncontroversial to affirm that the true harm of sexual assault is not only, nor even primarily, that it is a form of nonconsensual sex. Rather, it is a form of violence that threatens the assaulted on the level of her relation to her own body, creating doubt about her needs and movements, alienation from her wants and desires, not to mention a (possibly enduring) distrust of others and associated difficulty forming intimate relationships. This form of moral injury can be considered *fundamental* or *elementary* because it strikes at the core of a person's *embodiment*.

Although Honneth seems not to draw such an implication, I suggest that the significance of the above reflection is that bodily integrity and confidence constitute a *precondition* for moral autonomy. My reasoning is similar to arguments that stress the need for material rather than strictly formal equality: it is disingenuous to promote only a policy of noninterference in the autonomous decision-making of others when a society's material conditions (practices, relations, institutions) undermine or fail to establish a person's *ability* to act autonomously. As illustrated by the Abu Ghraib scandal, there is at best a partial transitivity between instances of physical abuse and denied rights, so that at times a person's legal rights can be honored while his bodily confidence and trust are

nonetheless assailed. But the reverse seems not to be the case. It is difficult to imagine how physical violence would not negatively affect a person's experience of himself as a rights-bearing moral subject, or rather, would not adversely impact his exercise of agency. Fear, insecurity, and physical degradation can diminish a person's self-confidence to the extent that, in her own eyes, she does not feel worthy to press rights claims. The same reasoning would hold for the relation between rights and self-respect, on one side, and solidarity and self-esteem, on the other. If esteem requires the recognition of a *particular* person's abilities, values, and so on – recognition of another as a *concrete individual* – it follows that her moral autonomy must already be recognized, since it is only in this way that persons are free to express, develop, and individuate themselves as they choose.

These arguments imply an evaluative standard, a ranking of forms of recognition of the following sort: most basic is physical security (from which follows self-confidence), then legal rights (from which follows self-respect), and finally solidarity (from which follows self-esteem). From a moral standpoint, then, principled reasons could be given for affirming that rape is not merely a violation of rights or failure to gain consent but, rather, is a fundamental act of violence. The wrongness of rape includes but goes beyond the failure to gain consent or the violation of another's right to dispose of her body as she chooses. It is an attack on another person's bodily integrity that, in the worst of cases, can disrupt a person's ability autonomously to form desires, define needs and wants, and establish intimate boundaries. For this reason, acts of violence such as rape potentially undermine not only a person's self-respect or esteem but, more gravely, her self-confidence, her ontological security as a social agent. Similarly, returning to

Fraser's example, principled reasons could be given for repudiating the identity demands of the racist, since, while putatively aimed at securing one's own self-esteem, such demands *constitutively require* the denial of more elementary recognitive claims of others (e.g., self-confidence or respect). Put more formally the principle would be: *a recognitive claim is valid or binding only if honoring that claim would not entail violence against, or the subordination or degradation of, other persons*. As formulated, the principle offers a way of resolving moral conflicts generally; and, since it applies equally well to potential conflicts between conceptions of the good, it speaks to Fraser's worry as well. It seems to me that an identity-recognition theory therefore yields a principled way of deciding which identity claims are morally defensible and obligating.[198]

I have examined this objection in detail because it highlights a specific advantage of an identity-recognition theory. Concerning the question of motivation for entering social conflict, recognition theory is able to distinguish between progressive and regressive conflicts, or to separate social movements and conflicts that aim at greater personal and collective freedom from those that aim at greater unfreedom, say, by limiting the rights of members of groups. But giving an account of what motivates social conflict differs from the moral evaluation of those conflicts. So it was important to demonstrate that recognition theory also possesses a criterion with which to differentiate liberatory from oppressive identity demands and forms of social conflict.

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[198] Although I developed this argument independently of and before reading Mahoney, "Honneth's Ethical Theory of Recognition," he homes in on the same point and resolves it with nearly an identical formulation. His reads, "only those conceptions of the good are morally permissible which do not disable others' capacity for self-realization" (107). There is this difference, though. While my formulation is intended as a general principle for resolving moral conflicts, his is an attempt to justify Honneth's insistence in "Recognition and Moral Obligation" that moral respect and autonomy must always be recognized, or, conversely, must in no case be violated.

c. Ambiguity in Honneth's conception of solidarity

The third objection concerns the claim that self-esteem arises from solidaristic relations that are formed by socialization within a common value system. A person acquires self-esteem when people who share traditions, practices, and circumstances affirm his particularity and difference. Yet there is an ambiguity in this formulation. As Jeffery Alexander and Maria Pia Lara observe,[199] it is unclear, though important in cases of conflicting values and convictions, where to distinguish between local, immediate communities, on one hand, and the more general society to which one belongs (e.g., the nation-state), on the other. Consider the identity demands of racist whites: it is unclear which value horizon is definitive in their social experience. Should the focus be on their socialization *qua* white? On regional practices and traditions? Or on their socialization *qua* American? In other words, which solidaristic relations are primary or most basic?

From the 18th century on, Americans have professed a commitment to individual rights, social and political liberties, independence, and equality. In this way a national identity was forged and bonds of solidarity woven. At the same time, women, blacks, Native Americans, and the poor were oppressed and denied civil and political liberties, which suggests either that ideas of freedom and equality were at best partial, or that there were other, implicitly racist and sexist practices that governed political relations and social interaction. On the one hand, the evident discrepancy between the values endorsed reflectively and those effective practically speaks to the need in Honneth's work for a conception of ideology, which need I address below. On the other hand, it raises the question as to whether self-esteem, as Honneth conceives it, requires solidarity with

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[199] Jeffrey Alexander and Maria Pia Lara, "Honneth's New Critical Theory of Recognition."

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everyone in a nation, or only with members of local social groups? Does self-realization require identification with a nation's norms, values, and practices? Or does identification with local ways of life suffice?

Since Honneth's concern is with social inclusion and integration into society in general, the former seems to be the case. This follows from Honneth's proposal that the master principle governing the generation of self-esteem and social solidarity in modern capitalist societies is *achievement*.[200] On this view, only those abilities, skills, traits, and forms of labor that contribute to a society's material success and productivity are valorized. *Achievement* constitutes the value horizon against which the traits and abilities of both persons and groups are esteemed. In this way, Honneth believes identity-recognition theory can address anti-racist and feminist concerns about the devaluation of work coded as feminine or black, as well as the centrality of labor in both distributive disputes and processes of socialization and identity formation.

But the claim that an "achievement principle" governs the formation of self-esteem and solidarity in modern societies seems overly strained. For one thing, it reduces the multiplicity of normative orientations in modern societies to a single value, which is construed economically so that modern subjects are assumed to esteem others (and expect themselves to be esteemed) only so far as they are "productive." Such reasoning forecloses from the start the possibility that non-economic social categories and normative orientations are primary in a person's interaction and experience, and therefore ignores the possibility that there may be more than one value horizon governing the conferral or denial of esteem. While it may capture some manifestations of racism and

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[200] Honneth, *RR*, 140-141, 147-150.

sexism, for example, it is implausible to insist that the denial of achievement captures the variety of group-specific moral and political injuries (e.g., economic dependence, racial insult).

For another thing, identifying a single *substantive* principle as the source of esteem and solidarity in modern societies is suspect. Modern societies may be too complex to permit the identification of a single recognitive principle that, even hypothetically, would secure the esteem and solidarity of every social member. Not only is the singling out of a substantive recognitive principle dubious empirically; the assumption that some such principle is necessary to secure the recognitive unity of heterogeneous social groups is questionable conceptually. As noted above, it is conceivable that esteem and solidarity can be secured via local and immediate recognition relations, without the necessity of a higher-level, more global substantive principle that would reconcile multiple and varying normative orientations. For example, conservative Christian and Jewish groups subscribe to well-defined value and behavior systems, which establish communal membership, roles, and patterns of esteem, but which do so largely independently of economic considerations such as productivity or financial reward. And as bell hooks points out in *Ain't I A Woman?*,[201] an ostensibly economic imperative (e.g., that a man should "protect and provide for" his spouse) means something different for blacks and whites, and the specific difference is rooted in skin color rather than any particular characteristic of work. According to hooks, the allegedly deficient "work ethic" among black males is explained, not by indolence, but by blacks' distrust of white demands, expectations, and definitions of "proper" behavior. But the

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[201] bell hooks, especially "The Imperialism of Patriarchy," in *Ain't I a woman? black women and feminism* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1981), 87-119.

more significant point is that blacks and women in the U.S. have always had to negotiate oppressive racist and sexist norms and practices, on one hand, while, on the other, seeking alternative communities and practices in which they could discover or create affirmative senses of self and of communal belonging. Given the centrality of skin color and biological sex in the experience of blacks and women, it would be suspect, at best, to insist that achievement constituted the principal grounds for according or denying social esteem to all social members.

Rather than attempt to isolate a single recognitive principle in light of which esteem is granted, I submit that Honneth's *formal conception of ethical life*,[202] together with my claims about an evaluative standard for adjudicating recognitive claims, indicates how esteem and solidarity could be established through more immediate and local groups. What is needed is not the identification or constitution of a substantive recognitive principle to which all social agents would subscribe but, instead, the institutionalization of the preconditions for self-realization. By protecting institutionally the bodily integrity, legal equality, and solidaristic relations of social participants, intra-group solidarity would be formed concretely and inter-group solidarity would be secured (or constrained) formally.

These reflections are intended to show that although experiences of disrespect motivate people to resist what they perceive as injustice, little is implied about whether the content of ensuing demands will prove harmonious or consistent with the normative horizon of the wider culture, or with society in general. Racial supremacy may be the basis of self-esteem for some; gender or ethnic separatism (aimed at autonomy rather

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[202] Honneth, "Intersubjective Conditions for Personal Integrity: A Formal Conception of Ethical Life," in *SR*.

than at the subordination of other groups) for others. Thus, *contra* Honneth's ambition to develop a notion of progress grounded in the teleological structure of identity and recognition, I submit that not all social conflict must be liberatory, or must enrich and advance the moral quality of social relations. But since my thesis concerns only the motivation for entering social conflict, it is free of the ambiguity identified in the third objection.

d. Not all who are disrespected are motivated to resist

This objection concerns the claim that people experience adverse emotional reactions when disrespected or denied recognition. I have argued that recognition forms a precondition for personal autonomy and self-realization because of the nexus formed between recognition and identity formation, and identity formation and agency. Disrespect jeopardizes the ends of autonomy and self-realization by impairing a person's ability to form an integrated identity, and to interact and participate socially in a self-determining manner. Disrespect prompts resistance, or negative emotional reactions aimed at establishing or restoring justified recognition relations, because it imperils a subject's agency and ontological security.

Despite the *prima facie* plausibility of this claim, it seems evident, in fact as well as in principle, that people do not always react negatively when disrespected or denied recognition.[203] People internalize stereotypes; identify with norms and traditions that ignore or subvert their interests; endorse beliefs that legitimize inequality; and accept

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[203] Versions of this objection have been raised against Honneth in Jeffrey Alexander and Maria Pia Lara, "Honneth's New Critical Theory of Recognition," *New Left Review* 220, 126-136; Roger Foster, "Axel Honneth's Critical Social Theory," *Radical Philosophy* 94 (March/April 1999) 6-18; and Jordy Rocheleau, personal correspondence.

externally imposed identities. The persistence of such concepts as "false consciousness," "consciousness-raising," and "constituted identity" attests to the fact that people do not always and automatically protest disrespect, much less the harms and diminished freedom that follow from it. This objection questions whether recognition theory can account for why people at times internalize, seemingly without doubt or dissonance, oppressive identities that constrain freedom. If disrespect is a form of unfreedom, how can recognition theory explain why some are motivated to resist while others accept unfreedom without resistance? If disrespect is supposed to prompt aversive reactions that motivate social struggle, how is it that some persons or groups appear to accept marginalization, oppression, or subordination?

Perhaps the first thing to note is that neither the lack of organized opposition to, nor of articulated personal grievances against, acts of disrespect implies the absence of feelings of anger or indignation. As noted above, the assertion that disrespect is experienced emotionally and pre-reflectively means that such harms are not immediately apprehended cognitively; or are not *first* articulated to oneself as a violation of a norm and then, in a *second* step, "felt to be" an insult or affront. Even when people identify with imposed identities, say, when they *accept as their own* values and roles that are externally imposed, they may nonetheless feel consternation, confusion, or doubt, and may resist stereotypes and expectations in subtle, imperceptible ways. There are examples in labor, anti-racist, and feminist histories of small acts of subversion, whether done consciously or unconsciously; as well as examples of "passing," or *publicly* honoring socially accepted values and expectations while *privately* violating them.[204]

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[204] One example would be worker slowdowns, not all of which are organized or done for bargaining leverage. Another would be the deliberate though individual attempt to subvert or confuse conventional

Although these observations do not constitute a refutation of the objection, they offer a reminder that some forms of resistance may go unseen, passing under the radar of public (or even personal) awareness for lack of social organization and articulation. The thesis that disrespect or denied recognition motivates social conflict thus remains plausible.

More importantly, I believe that the objection relies on an uncharitable, if not erroneous interpretation of the recognition theory developed by Honneth and defended in this paper. The objection presupposes that negative reactions to disrespect, as well as the increases in freedom made possible by such reactions, follow nomologically (i.e., in a causal way) or teleologically (i.e., with metaphysical necessity) such that any act of disrespect must invariably be followed by, or rather must automatically motivate, resistance and conflict. The observation that some people do not react aversely to disrespect would not constitute an objection to recognition theory unless it were assumed: first, that such reactions followed with necessity; second, that there were no other conditions that influenced action; or third, that recognition relations formed an irrepressible telos,[205] unfailingly steering social interaction toward greater freedom. But these assumptions are unwarranted. To affirm that people experience indignation when

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understandings of gender or sex. Then there is the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* who recognizes and then appropriates his invisibility; Ellison, *op. cit.* Marilyn Frye reflects on how to practically "disaffiliate" from a social category, White, that perpetuates racial domination; Frye, "White Woman Feminist," in *Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism*, (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1992). Finally, Honneth points out that regular confrontations with the law or, very differently, aiding a suddenly unemployed neighbor can be instances or signs of larger social conflicts (*RR*, 118-119).

[205] I have argued that identity has a teleological structure, which can be understood as the project of reflexively and autonomously developing one's skills, capacities, talents, etc. The end of identity formation is self-realization, or the freedom and ability to develop one's (embodied) self as one will. Since disrespect palpably threatens or vitiates that freedom, I maintain that in such cases there will be an accompanying emotional reaction. If a friend ignores my greeting, I will – perhaps only fleetingly – be hurt, angry, worried. But the perception of disrespect can be mistaken – I can *fail to realize* that another intends insult – and also controlled, as when one reflexively decides "not to take insult." So, the assertion that identity has a teleological structure does not *entail* that experiences of disrespect will necessarily and inevitably trigger an indignant reaction which culminates in protest.

disrespected assumes neither a mechanical causality nor a logic of universal law and particular instantiation.

A more charitable interpretation would note that the expectations structuring identity formation and social interaction are historical and contingent. There is no necessity determining which forms of recognition gain legitimacy and ultimately achieve social objectivity; thus, there is no necessity that violated recognitive expectations will always, automatically trigger negative emotional reactions and conflict. Since identity is complex, on the one hand, and a contingent social accomplishment, on the other, identity formation should be understood as an agonistic process, susceptible to dispute and uncertainty about the validity of norms and expectations. If the assumption that disrespect necessarily triggers conflict is dropped, the observation that some do not openly resist disrespect ceases to embarrass Honneth's theory.

Nonetheless, I agree that an identity-recognition theory, especially regarding the question of motivation, would be enriched by an account of why some resist disrespect while others, not only do not, but seem even to endorse restraints on their freedom. Why do some subscribe to belief systems, the substance of which *in practice* exclude or marginalize them? Why do some identify with political or economic positions that are committed to, that sometimes structurally require inequalities of power or resources? To begin to answer such questions requires theories of *ideology* and *power*. Accordingly, Honneth has recently sketched a theory of ideology.[206] But as I show below, it is too schematic to give insight into the most troubling phenomena a theory of ideology seeks to grasp, which include understanding why some members of oppressed groups endorse

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[206] Axel Honneth, see "Recognition as Ideology," ed. Bert van den Brink and David Owen *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 323-348.

ideologies that diminish their freedom, and why many members of oppressor groups succumb so readily to ideological falsifications and "epistemologies of ignorance."

The meaning of the concept of ideology is famously difficult to isolate and clarify. But I believe it is fair to say that the following features form much of the meaning of the concept of ideology, at least in the tradition running from Marx through critical social theory. An ideology is irreducibly conceptual and practical (or material). It consists of theories, values, principles, and so on, on one hand; and practices, relations, and institutional norms and procedures, on the other. What "irreducible" underscores here is the sense in which the conceptual content and the practical structures of an ideology are reciprocal, which means that the conceptual content of an ideology is not "contained in" and "transmitted by" practices, but rather is engendered by and coterminous with those practices. The practice is the ideology. What adds the frequently pejorative connotation to the term "ideology," and what differentiates it from other belief systems, is that it elicits the endorsement and support of social agents by heralding values, virtues, opportunities, freedoms, which are prized reflectively but unattainable in practice. For Marx, the labor contract is ideological because it *appears* to institutionalize freedom and legal equality, and also because it induces the belief (in social agents) that contractual agreements exemplify their freedom and equality as subjects. Yet for Marx the labor contract is a mystified form of a power relation, a relation of domination: the norms people believe to be actualized by (in this example) an economic institution are, in reality, undermined by that very institution.

Honneth preserves the sense that ideologies form a conceptual-practical mobius strip, as well as the sense that ideologies gain legitimacy by promising a freedom and

fulfillment that are either unredeemable or indefinitely deferred. And his explication of the concept of ideology from a first-personal perspective is a strength of his conception, since it allows him to examine the concept within the frame of his identity-recognition theory and thus to probe the motivational efficacy of ideologies in the formation and maintenance of a person's identity. At the same time, there is much to object to in his theory. After summarizing his view, I indicate two shortcomings that are especially relevant to my thesis.

Honneth's goal is to find a criterion that would allow the critical theorist to distinguish between justified forms of recognition and ideological forms of recognition (or IFRs, for short). Echoing a standard formulation, Honneth states that the irrationality of IFRs is "to be found…in the discrepancy between evaluative promises [say, of autonomy] and material fulfillment."[207] A form of recognition is ideological when a "gap" (a gap necessary to maintain social domination) exists between the "evaluative qualities" that some policy or institution promises to confer on subjects, and the material conditions required effectively to realize such qualities. A form of recognition is ideological, then, not only because it cannot deliver on what it promises, but also because the allure of its evaluative promise elicits spurious support from its addressees, which in turn prompts them voluntarily to adopt conventional meanings, definitions, roles, and so on.

For Honneth, three conditions must be satisfied if a form of recognition is to function as an IFR. First, recognition relations and norms must confer (or promise to confer) on subjects or groups a desirable quality or trait not previously recognized. The

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[207] Honneth, *op cit.*, 328.

quality must be affirmative, judged to be valuable or estimable, since otherwise it would not motivate people to take up the prescribed behaviors, projects, and so on. Because an IFR, if it is to be efficacious, must be seen to recognize people in a positive way, Honneth says that "classifications that are of an obviously discriminatory character...as is the case with racism, misogyny, or xenophobia...cannot take up the role of being [IFRs], as they normally cause an injury in the self-image of their addressees."[208]

Secondly, recognition relations and norms must be "credible," by which Honneth means both "realistic" and "progressive." That is, the value an IFR ascribes to persons or groups must be relevantly connected with the traits, practices, or circumstances of the IFR's addressees. Commending a military officer for his nurturing style of command, for example, would probably fail to be a source of public esteem. Because the personal trait valorized is so disparate from the social function, the act of recognition in this case would not provide credible acknowledgement of the officer's skills and abilities. Moreover, the value an IFR ascribes to people must surpass, or be perceived to surpass, the traits and expectations that are already embedded in a society's norms and practices. Urging women to seek self-fulfillment through marriage and motherhood, Honneth suggests, is too anachronistic for such counsel to function successfully as an ideology.

Finally, recognition relations and norms need to be "contrastive," i.e., must differently inflect or accentuate an existing social meaning so as to distinguish, to add a novel distinction to, subjects or groups.

In sum, an IFR "can evoke an individual self-conception that motivates a subject to accept tasks and obligations freely and willingly only if the value-statements employed

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[208] Ibid, 338.

are simultaneously positive, credible, and contrastive to a certain degree."[209] But the

twist in the ideological knife, so to speak, is that these new meanings and possibilities for

self-development are more appearance that reality, insofar as they lack material support.

Subjects are encouraged to think of themselves as freer, but material conditions have not

been altered so as to actualize that freedom. "Thus, between the evaluative promise and

its material fulfillment, an abyss opens up that is characteristic in the sense that the

provision of the institutional prerequisites would no longer be reconcilable with the

dominant order"[210]

Whatever the merits of Honneth's theory of ideology, it seems to me that there are

two grave defects. When considering what may or may not count as an IFR from the

perspective of members of subordinated groups, he either begs the question or else

evades the more tenacious problem associated with ideology, which involves discerning

how ideologies induce allegiance to norms and practices that diminish one's own

freedom. In questioning what is or is not an IFR, he says that exclusionary forms of

recognition cannot function as ideologies because they openly threaten freedom and

would for that reason be resisted. Yet he later states that identifying an ideology "is

simple only in cases where the concerned parties actually resist new forms of evaluative

distinction. Here we have at least an initial reason...to suspect that a mere ideology

could be at work."[211] In a stroke, then, Honneth has contradicted himself. If

exclusionary norms evoke resistance and resistance leads us to suspect an ideology, then,

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[209] Ibid, 340.

[210] Ibid, 346.

[211] Ibid, 341.

on Honneth's own logic, exclusionary forms of recognition are properly seen as ideologies.

But the weakness of Honneth's formulation, in my view, is more fundamental. Namely, the presence of protest and resistance is evidence that a putative IFR has not, in fact, aroused loyalty and consent. Dissent demonstrates that an ideology has not taken hold. Those who resist demeaning or discriminatory norms experience a dissonance, a pinch in the social fabric, instead of the pacifying white noise of an ideology whose function is to naturalize unequal freedom and social power. In this way, Honneth evades, or at least postpones reckoning with the more central "ideological problem," which is to shed light on why people would (counter-intuitively) accept and endorse recognitive norms that exclude or demean them. Honneth begs this crucial question by merely asserting that such norms would be renounced. Yet the tenacity of the ideological problem demands critical analysis of why people sometimes accept, rather than reject, oppressive restrictions on their freedom. It is this phenomenon that requires examination.

The second weakness of Honneth's conception of ideology concerns its silence about the effects of ideology on the members of dominant groups. While he says that IFRs elicit loyalty, prompt agents voluntarily to adopt conventional roles and projects, and hence function to sustain the "dominant order," it is unclear in what the "dominant order" consists: that is, whether, and in what way, group-specific economic advantages, social privileges, power relations and political interests are implicated in the formation of IFRs. It is important to know whether IFRs affect the members of dominant and subordinated groups in the same way and with similar consequences; or whether, perhaps, IFRs are more transparent to and thus susceptible to critique by members of

subordinated groups. Yet without an understanding of the forces and agents that constitute IFRs, and of the grip IFRs have on the identity formation and agency of members of dominant groups, the question cannot be adequately addressed.

I doubt that a single, comprehensive theory of ideology could be adequate. The variety of forms and experiences of oppression suggests that while recognition theory may offer a useful conceptual frame, investigation into the constitution of (as well as the conditions for) recognition relations and identity formation would have to be local – oriented to specific groups, categories, ways of life – and carried out in a resolutely interdisciplinary manner. But given the historical and differentiated character of identity, such additional complexity should not be surprising.

Further Research

a. Working-Class Racism

In Marxist theory, an important unresolved political problem concerns racism among economically disadvantaged whites, be they working-class, working poor, or poor. Although it may be more stereotype than truth that racism is characteristic of the lower classes, and decreases in proportion as income or educational level increase, the absence of solidarity across the color line seems to remain a social fact. For Marxist theory, given its emphasis on the class structure of society and its affirmation of the liberatory potential of labor, the problem was (and arguably remains) that racial resentment and distrust blocks solidarity among workers. On this view, the transition to a socialist society is delayed, at least in part, by racial divisions that turn worker against worker instead of worker against capitalist. Racism undermines class-consciousness,

obscuring the understanding of working-class whites that it is capitalists, not blacks or immigrant laborers, who threaten their material interests and well-being. Although aware of this problem, Marx never investigated the relation of class and race in detail.

Wellman's *Portraits of White Racism* is a valuable contemporary analysis of the link between race and class, insofar as it conceives racism as an outgrowth of capitalist society. For Wellman, racism is a structural phenomenon that is created and perpetuated by struggles over scarce resources. If working-class whites prove more racist than middle- or upper-class whites, it is not because the former are less civilized or more hateful than the latter, but because their access to and control over social resources is less secure, and blacks are competitors for those resources. Racism, then, is rooted in a society's economic organization and relations. Yet, as I argued in chapters 3 and 5, Wellman's use of economistic concepts and assumptions hinders his ability to develop a compelling account of white working-class racism. His theory is ahistorical, and employs impoverished conceptions of subjectivity and social interaction.

One of the promising avenues pursued by Honneth consists of his reflections on labor and class relations from the perspective of recognition theory, and *inter alia* his effort to illuminate the moral quality of social conflict, particularly labor struggles. Since *The Critique of Power*,[212] Honneth has attempted to rethink Marxian concepts within a Hegelian conceptual framework, and his work in this regard has been influenced by and sensitive to the innovations, insights, and criticisms provided by Habermas's theory of communicative action. Like Habermas, Honneth rejects Marx's philosophy of history (i.e., historical materialism) and his conviction that labor forms the basis of integration

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[212] Axel Honneth, trans. Kenneth Baynes *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

and socialization. Instead, recognition struggles drive historical change and mediate

integration and socialization. But whereas Habermas conceives of labor as an

instrumental relation between subjects and objects, Honneth conceives of the labor

process and the division of labor as thoroughly intersubjective, permeated by social

meanings and values. As Habermas acknowledged in passing in *Knowledge and Human*

Interests,[213] it is just these sorts of meanings and norms contained in and circulating

through the division of labor (how types of work are valued or devalued, how resources

are distributed, etc.) that can spur social conflict, can yield a "dialectic" wherein

economic goals, rules, and expectations are politically contested.

Economic relations, class identity, and the division of labor thus form part of a

society's recognitive infrastructure. Through the reformulation of the category of labor

in intersubjective terms, recognition theory can link class and race in order to analyze and

evaluate white working-class racism. Honneth has addressed this question only

sparingly. Given his assumption that Western societies are governed by an

(economically-tinged) *achievement principle*,[214] it seems doubtful that he could say more,

since the assumption seems to entail that race relations are less primary or fundamental

than economic relations. If his argument is that the primary means for being granted or

denied esteem turns on achievement, i.e., on one's economic productivity, then racism

would lose its specificity and appear to be secondary to economic relations. The danger

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[213] Jurgen Habermas, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

[214] Of course, neither Honneth nor I mean to imply any necessity here. Since Honneth views the "recognition order" of any given society as historically contingent, the result of "past directed development," he can espy developmental tendencies without claiming to possess a blueprint of future societies. But my point is that if he sees capitalism and the "achievement principle" as a normative accomplishment of historical development, the possibility of criticizing capitalist societies seems to be reduced. To be sure, class conflict would continue; but the goal of overcoming class inequality seems foreclosed.

here is of a nascent reductionism. A more promising approach, which follows from the premises of recognition theory, is to conceive race (and racism) as a distinct social category, just as class is. By "distinct," I do not mean that racism exists, develops, or can be understood in isolation from other social phenomena, but that it possesses its own logic, and so should not be dissolved into the logic of other social categories. The historical constitution of racial categories could be analyzed internally, by reflecting on the social forces and agents operative in the formation of a racial identity; or externally, with a view to establishing and clarifying how race intersects with class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.

A project of this sort would require an interdisciplinary approach that combines different methods of analysis and research. Literature from whiteness studies, feminist and critical race theory indicate the direction such inquiry would take. Recognition theory would offer a unified but complex conceptual framework within which moral injury and injustice could be evaluated.

Identity-recognition theory would prove especially apt for theorizing the formation of racial and class identities, as well as for examining the particular phenomenon of white working-class racism. Honneth's work is too programmatic to offer concrete direction here. But David R Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* is an excellent example of the sort of study I have in mind.[215] An important work in Whiteness Studies, *WW* is an historical study of how the category of the "white worker" emerges in the 19th century. Roediger's project is not to account for the origin of whiteness or racism in the U.S. Rather, he examines how, from roughly 1810 through 1860, members

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[215] David R. Roediger, *op. cit.*

of the labor movement came to experience themselves not only as wage-laborers but, more specifically, as *white* laborers.[216] I will summarize and then comment on Roediger's account.

A new form of identity emerged in the U.S. as the republican ideals carried over from the Revolution were interpreted and adapted in light of the material transformations caused by the sudden growth of capitalism. Before and during the Revolution, colonists worried that British oppression would lead to "slavery." Although used metaphorically, the term "slavery" conveyed the colonists' conviction that economic servitude and political subordination would be degrading and intolerable, a life of servile dependency akin to the existence of black slaves in the Americas. The ideals of freedom and independence decisively shaped the self-understanding of both the white colonists and the post-Revolution citizenry, and survived with vigor into the 19th century. But the meaning of the ideals changed as wage labor metastasized, converting independent white producers into dependent wage laborers. Increasingly, the ideals of freedom and independence were conflated, such that economic dependence came to be viewed as a form of unfreedom – or rather, as a form of "wage slavery." As the number of wage laborers swelled in the first quarter of the 19th century, a powerful labor movement formed and condemned wage labor as a violation of, and an ongoing threat to, the republican ideals of freedom and independence.

Such is Roediger's account of the formation of the working-class in the U.S. To see how the working-class "became white," or how workers came to experience themselves specifically as *white* workers, Roediger examines the ideals of freedom and

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[216] Roediger, ibid, see "Part II: Race and the Languages of Class from the Revolution to the Civil War," 43-95.

independence in light of the fact of black enslavement. Before, during, and after the Revolution, whites used black slavery as a reference point for their understanding of the deleterious effects of oppression. The political and economic servitude of blacks served as a counterpoint to the freedom and independence fought for by the colonists. Yet if whites alluded to slavery to justify rebellion, it was not to empathize with black slaves, but to make vivid the consequences of unfreedom and dependence. Put more simply, blacks embodied what whites feared they might become, whether under British rule or, significantly, under capitalist rule. Indeed, as capitalism converted independent laborers into wage earners, leaders in the labor movement continued the practice of referring contrastively to the situation of blacks to indicate the hardship and indignity that might befall whites if they did not resist wage labor.

The dependence and unfreedom of black slaves signified something else to many whites, according to Roediger: namely, that blacks (free or enslaved) were not genuine members of the newly formed political community. Many whites opined that because blacks were enslaved, they were unfit for the rigors and demands of freedom; because blacks were dependent, they were unsuited to independence and self-determination. Moreover, their enslavement would foster resentment among blacks, just as their dependence would render them easily manipulated, a combination that threatened the stability of the republic. By denying that black slaves were capable of freedom and independence, whites effectively excluded blacks from citizenship in the political community – thereby fixing whiteness as the norm, and blackness its normative shadow. Roediger notes: "That Blacks were largely noncitizens will surprise few, but it is important to emphasize the extent to which they were seen as *anticitizens*, as 'enemies

rather than the members of the social compact.' As such they were driven from the

Independence Day parades as 'defilers' of the body politic...The more powerless they

became, the greater their supposed potential to be used by the rich to make freemen

unfree."[217]

White wage laborers shared this sense of normative superiority to blacks, who,

free or enslaved, were seen as unworthy of membership in the body politic. While the

labor movement invoked the republican ideals of freedom and independence to criticize

capitalism, these ideals at the same time functioned by contrasting the virtues of white

workers with the debased condition of blacks, which only further entrenched whiteness as

the nation's normative baseline. Resentful of capitalism, wage earners commonly

likened the dependence and vulnerability of wage work to slavery. But more often than

not, allusions to "wage slavery" were intended to express the anxieties of workers and to

enliven their awareness of the dangers posed by capitalism, not to establish solidarity

with the suffering of blacks. Even amidst the insecurities and upheavals caused by

capitalism, white workers were at least putatively free and independent; they regarded

themselves as freemen and insisted that others *not* regard or treat them as subordinates,

servants, or, worst of all, slaves. The unfreedom, dependence, and turpitude of black

lives, cultivated and perpetuated by institutionalized white supremacy, exemplified what

white workers feared might be their lot as wage-earners, yet reassured them of their

normative worth and status as whites.

Roediger's account of white working-class racism is compelling. It also nicely

illustrates the strengths of a recognition theoretic approach. It shows how norms,

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[217] Ibid, 57.

practices, and institutions reciprocally produce identities, social relations and categories, and conflict. White privilege is linked to working-class economic disadvantage in a way that probes, rather than reduces, the interplay of material conditions, identity formation, and social interaction. Moreover, it shows that conflict is motivated by recognitive expectations *as well as* economic interests. Indeed, I believe it supports my contention that, set against the historical horizon of presumed status and privilege, whites often perceive black social demands as a form of disrespect or effrontery.

b. Conservative Religious Movements

I believe that recognition theory can shed light on the upsurge in political activity and prominence among conservative Christians in the U.S. over the past two decades. Following the 2004 election, there was a concentrated but brief discussion in the media concerning the political influence of conservative evangelical Christians. Editorialists and print journalists framed the debate as one over "moral values": George Bush won the election because his moral stance on hot-button "moral issues" such as same-sex marriage, abortion, and stem cell research mobilized many conservative voters who otherwise might have stayed home. As in the 1990s, when the Republican-controlled Congress framed political discussion in terms of "family values," so had the Bush campaign appealed to voters in terms of "moral values." As professor of politics Mark Rozell observed, "The turnout of the religious right was key to Bush's victory. The new slogan should be: 'It's the culture, stupid.'"[218]

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[218] Quoted in Paul Harris, "How Bush tapped into a well of faith," *The Observer*, November 07, 2004.

In other words, many political commentators agreed that the strategy succeeded because Bush projected moral certitude and conviction while his opponent, John Kerry, appeared slightly ill at ease speaking publicly about "his faith." But what surprised some was the number of voters in economically hard-hit states who voted Republican, seemingly against their own economic interests. Pepe Escobar summarizes this sentiment well:

> As the much-documented negative campaigning worked its marvels, it also managed to convince millions of farmers, factory workers, carpenters, shop clerks and waitresses all over the dreary wasteland of rural red states to vote for Bush – against their own economic interests. It's a remarkable feat, to persuade the poor working class and the struggling lower middle class to vote for tax breaks for billionaires. How to fool them? Simple: by promoting "moral values."[219]

Especially interesting is the claim that voters in "red states" were, indeed *had to be* "fooled" into voting for "values" instead of "interests." The implication is that there is something paradoxical, if not irrational, about an individual's subordinating or sacrificing economic interests to cultural or moral values. This judgment echoes the orthodox Marxist view that the "true" or "rational" interests of the working-class are economic, and that all else is ideology or "superstructural"; as well as Thomas Frank's thesis in *What's the Matter with Kansas?*[220] that the Republican Party has for decades mollified its constituents with promises of moral reform when, in reality, its concern has been to benefit the wealthy. The role "moral values" played in the election and the political clout apparently wielded by the religious right are thus viewed by some as a diversion, a tactic to distract attention from the struggle that *should* command people's attention – namely, redistribution.

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[219] Pepe Escobar, "Value-added victory," *Asia Times*, November 05, 2004.

[220] Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004).

Given my thesis, I of course find such a view reductionist, tendentious, and mistaken. I am certainly not saying that concerns about economic justice are marginal or unimportant; I deny only that they uniquely constitute a person or group's rational interests. To dismiss outright the reasons people themselves offer for voting as they did is a mistake, not only because it conjures images of a vanguard party that exhibits a certain disdain for the beliefs and self-understanding of the subjects in whose name they speak, but because it misconstrues their reasons for entering political struggle.

As argued above, this question touches on social meanings and categories, the nature of social conflict and change, and, finally, the possibility of effective social critique. The countless expressions by conservative Christians of, on one hand, cultural and political anger, alienation, and exclusion (captured well by the plaint, "An atmosphere of atheism is being forced upon us by the courts"[221]) and, on the other hand, identification and solidarity with excessively religious politicians and policy proposals, cannot merely be waved off as irrational phantasms. To do so would be to misdiagnose, and to fail effectively to criticize, a prominent source of modern social conflict. Conservative religious groups are active, increasingly influential political agents, so much so that talk of a "culture war" seems to be neither an exaggeration nor a media-conjured bogeyman. At stake is the public recognition of values, social relations, traditions and practices, or rather, the basis for self-esteem and cultural solidarity. For this reason, recognition theory is especially well suited to analyze and evaluate modern religious identity; or, more precisely, those recognitive norms that adherents, justifiably or not, experience as violated. In this way, social criticism could grasp, from the

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[221] Quote in Jane Lampman, "Bringing the Case against Judges," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 13, 2005.

perspective of social agents themselves, the feelings and reasons motivating their disaffection and resistance.

The question of how such an analysis would proceed is another matter, and unfortunately I can only gesture at a possible approach. Perhaps surprisingly, I believe that a promising tack was first sketched by Nietzsche with his conception of *ressentiment*. *Ressentiment* refers[222] to a vengeful motive underlying the formation of early Christian beliefs and values. Nietzsche argues that since early Christians experienced social persecution and powerlessness, they developed a system of values according to which their own social condition and behaviors (obedience and humility, poverty and powerlessness) were valorized as morally good, while the social position and behaviors of their oppressors (wealth, power, self-affirmation) were devalued, judged as the opposite: morally bad or "sinful." Lacking freedom and authority in this life, then, Christians consoled themselves with the belief that, in the *next*, they would be free – indeed, God's favored. And their thirst for vengeance, stemming from the humiliation and anger suffered at the hands of their oppressors, was sated by the belief that those who enjoyed wealth, power, and prestige in this world would, in the next, suffer torments and shame. Christian beliefs and values literally made virtues of necessities, and reflected, at bottom, a desire for revenge, i.e., by *ressentiment*.

For my present purposes, it is irrelevant whether these claims are tenable. What is more noteworthy is that the concept of *ressentiment* is, at least in part, a materialist account of identity formation. Nietzsche describes the social relations and conditions amidst which a distinct value system emerged, a new constellation of beliefs, values, and

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[222] I largely follow Walter Kaufmann's interpretation in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

traits against which self-esteem was secured and solidarity established; and which, moreover, was motivated by experiences of moral injury or disrespect. Such an account could be applied to contemporary fundamentalist religious groups as well. It seems plausible that the moral relativism of markets, the secularism of modern state institutions, and the seepage of multiculturalism into public consciousness are experienced by religious fundamentalists, be they Jewish or Muslim or Christian, as affronts, direct threats to their worldview. Given the absolutism of some fundamentalist groups ("Our goal is a Christian Nation....We have a Biblical duty, we are called by God to conquer this country"[223]) it is not hard to imagine how these social tendencies could lead adherents to feel marginalized and embattled. Identity-recognition theory would be well suited for analyzing, evaluating and understanding this prominent source of contemporary social conflict.

c. Political Implications

To ascertain what type of political guidance or contribution an identity-recognition theory offers, I will reflect on Honneth's remarks on the classical distinction between *the right* and *the good*. One of the concerns raised about Honneth's identity-recognition theory is that it relies too heavily on an ethical conception of the good, which becomes apparent in his contention that the formation of esteem requires that subjects share values, actively affirm each other's abilities and traits, and establish solidarity through shared projects. Yet to demand such emotional investment in the activities of other people would not only prove personally burdensome; it would invite an undesirable

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[223] Randall Terry, head of Operation Rescue, as quoted in *The News-Sentinel*, April 16, 1993.

(and illiberal) degree of state intervention in people's lives. Honneth replies to this concern by stressing that recognition theory accepts liberalism's normative commitment to both personal autonomy and moral equality. I now examine and defend that line of argument.

The distinction between the right and the good turns on the seldom disputed assertion that given the moral and cultural pluralism evident in modern societies, justice can best be achieved by protecting individual freedoms and equality. Justice requires guaranteeing personal autonomy and human rights while abstaining from efforts to impose particular conceptions of the good, that is, substantive conceptions of what behaviors, beliefs, roles, and projects constitute a worthwhile life. Insofar as Honneth insists that self-realization is a normative end for every person, he seems to be promoting the good over the right. Concerning the question of how to foster acceptance of different ways of life, for example, it might be countered that any attempt to "legislate morality" violates individual freedom: indeed, hate speech is still sometimes defended by appeals to the right of free speech or expression. Not only does the demand to esteem others seem to encroach on individual freedom; but the claim that self-realization is (and ought to be) an end pursued by every concrete individual is, for some,[224] an instance of promoting a particular conception of the good. After all, are there not societies in which a commitment to individuality is less important than social obligations and a commitment to the collective good? To the extent that Honneth's identity-recognition theory privileges the good over the right, it seems to cut against the grain of traditional liberal theory.

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[224] Christopher Zurn makes this argument in "Anthropology and normativity: a critique of Axel Honneth's 'formal conception of ethical life,'" *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 26:1, 115-124.

Honneth addresses this worry in *Redistribution or Recognition?*; and while his remarks there are rudimentary, they at least point in the direction of a principled and convincing response. His strategy is to argue that liberalism's basic commitment to the right (individual liberties, legal equality, state neutrality) itself presupposes a conception of the good. Although liberal theorists typically abstain from evaluating and ranking what types of life are better or worse for people to lead, Honneth argues that liberalism as a tradition assumes the necessity of "socially influenced preconditions that must be available for individual subjects to realize their autonomy."[225] However implicitly, liberal theory reflects an understanding of human well-being, which is why Rawls argues that justice requires an indexical ordering of social goods and Fraser proposes that institutions should be so organized as to ensure "participatory parity." So, rather than deny that identity-recognition theory constitutes a conception of the good, Honneth attempts to show that liberalism possesses more substantive ethical commitments than it is usually wont to admit.

If tenable, this argumentative strategy strengthens the normative justification for identity-recognition theory. More clearly than some versions of liberalism, recognition theory tries "to spell out and justify what for the most part only ashamedly forms the hidden basis of procedural versions of liberalism: a normative idea of the goals for whose sake the establishment and realization of social justice represent a political task that we consider ethically well-grounded."[226] The "normative idea" is self-realization, which refers to autonomy and fulfillment as well as to the social conditions for mutual recognition and identity formation. Put differently, Honneth insists that liberalism and

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[225] Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition*, 178.

[226] Ibid, 178.

recognition theory have the same normative grounding, but that the latter is conceptually more self-aware of its foundation. He underlines the commonality by stating: "for modern societies I proceed from the premise that the purpose of social equality is to enable the personal identity-formation of all members of society. For me this formulation is equivalent to saying that enabling individual self-realization constitutes the real aim of the equal treatment of all subjects in our societies."[227] The ends of recognition theory are consistent with those of liberalism: autonomy, moral equality, and self-realization.

I believe that Honneth's argument has merit. And yet, by modifying his reasoning, it seems to me that one could just as easily – and perhaps more persuasively – rebut the charge that recognition theory privileges the good over the right. The moral purpose of protecting individual rights is to ensure respect for personal autonomy as well as equal (or fair) treatment by the state, so that a concrete individual is free to develop, revise, and pursue her independently determined life plan. But if in the previous sentence "pursuit of a life plan" is replaced with "pursuit of self-realization and maximal personal freedom," it becomes clear that recognition theory is oriented toward the same norms as liberalism. Now, Honneth argued that because recognition theory and liberalism presuppose a conception of human well-being, say, a thin conception of the good, they are in principle consistent. Both recognition and liberal theory are concerned with the social preconditions for autonomy. But the former implies a *thicker conception* of the right (or a richer understanding of what rights are) than the latter. The normative touchstone of recognition theory remains the concrete individual, together with such

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[227] Ibid, 177.

material conditions as are required by identity formation and self-realization – or, in less "ethical" terms, the autonomous formation and exercise of agency.

Honneth appears to go beyond liberal theory's prioritization of the right with his notion of self-realization as an anthropological and normative end, which has been construed as an "ethical value" or form of the good. But the notion of self-realization should not mislead. As I have stressed, self-realization for Honneth refers to the freedom to develop one's identity, i.e., to autonomously exercise agency, which is a capacity both galvanized and sustained by recognition relations. This conception does not privilege certain forms of identity, or proclaim in the abstract what a "proper" or "healthy" identity *must be*. In other words, recognition theory does not entail an *a priori* normative ranking of forms of identity and recognition relations, as though it could be determined by reflection alone that gender or racial identities were more basic than class identity, or that a secular identity were preferable to a religious identity. Honneth's recognition theory maintains only that, given the structure of identity that has emerged from historical changes in social norms and institutions, subjects can justifiably demand recognition for those aspects of their identity that have been sedimented, i.e., objectified in the lifeworld. Since being recognized through determinate relations is a condition for the possibility of forming a coherent and stable identity, it seems plausible to regard self-realization as a richer, more complete version of what classical liberalism has long termed autonomy.

Put more simply, Honneth's notion of self-realization does not presuppose an *a priori* hierarchy of values, traits, or practices. Like liberalism, identity-recognition theory strives only to identify the social and institutional conditions required for enhanced personal freedom. Thus, Honneth's *conception of ethical life* should be understood *as*

formal, as he himself emphasizes. The intent of the conception is neither to naturalize

existing institutions, nor to prejudge which identities and institutions are ahistorically best

or ideal. As he notes:

> While it is true that we devise such a theory in light of all the knowledge we
> have at our disposal, we cannot hope to ever see it exhausted by empirical
> findings or theoretical assumptions. To this extent, even recognition theory...
> only has the status of a hypothetically generalized outline of the good life:
> informed by converging funds of knowledge, such an outline determines the
> forms of mutual recognition subjects *now need* in order to develop the most
> intact possible identities.[228]

This passage implies that general social structures can be identified and judged to be

materially necessary to the identity formation of the members of a given society. Just as

liberalism asserts that human rights are a prerequisite for autonomy, so recognition theory

affirms that recognitive norms and relations are a prerequisite for the free development of

identity and agency. While the specific form of a recognition relation or identity cannot

be deduced or decided in advance, once it has been institutionalized and thus gained

social objectivity, it acquires validity as a normative demand. In this way, the

constellation of recognitive norms and relations structuring a society can be discerned

empirically at the same time that its normative character achieves binding force

practically. Insofar as Honneth argues for a thick conception of personal freedom and

agency, his identity-recognition theory is not so removed from liberalism's prioritization

of the right over the good.

The same conclusion is reached whether one follows Honneth's argumentative

strategy or my own, which is that recognition theory is consistent with, rather than a

dangerous departure from, liberalism. Therefore the claim that because some societies

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[228] Ibid, 180; emphasis added.

subordinate individuality to the social good, recognition theory's emphasis on self-realization amounts to a view of the good life, can be dismissed. If such reasoning justified rejecting recognition theory, it would justify rejecting liberal theory as well, since liberalism's defense of rights aims at protecting personal freedom. Interestingly enough, though I can only mention the point here, to take the above claim seriously would underscore Honneth's contention that liberalism presupposes a conception of the good. But if that were the case, the distinction underlying the objection would be erased and the objection would negate itself.

Returning to one of the objections I considered above, which asked how the conferral of esteem and formation of solidarity could be instituted politically, I want to elaborate on the reply I gave there. While it is at least questionable whether a person can be forced or can will himself positively to esteem another in her particularity and difference, it nonetheless seems true that the relevant form of esteem can be secured negatively. Recall the *formal* character of Honneth's conception of ethical life. By linking recognition relations to identity formation, indeed to the full development of personal agency, the formal conception of ethical life calls attention to the normative importance of those material conditions that underlie and structure the more specific, historical forms that recognition relations assume socially. Rather than naturalize or reify social identities (Black, Woman) or relationships (heterosexism, classism), identity-recognition theory conceives of such identities and relations as manifestations of new dimensions of identity that were made possible by historical conflict and change. From a political viewpoint, what matters is the structure of identity, or rather, the material conditions underlying that structure and making it a constitutive element of social reality

(rather than, say, the episodic and variable "choices of self" or "lifestyle experiments" carried out by congeries of individuals).

So far as it functions as an imperative, esteem demands that people recognize the moral right of subjects to develop their public selves as they choose. Mutual esteem would be secured negatively in the sense that concrete individuals, *insofar as they are members of groups or ways of life*, would be protected against disrespect (e.g., legal equality) and, in this way, would be recognized as persons with individual value rankings, traits and abilities, and so on. Since group belongingness is typically important in people's lives, they should not suffer degradation, denial of rights, or violence because of that belongingness. As tentative as it is, this line of reasoning is promising since it is amenable to formalization. Unlike Honneth's attempt to identify a concrete recognitive principle that grounds solidarity, a variant of the evaluative standard discussed above (recognitive claims are valid only if they do not violate the more basic recognitive claims of others) could orient political practice. I thereby avoid the seemingly unrealistic demand that people indifferent to each other become emotionally invested in one another's well-being. What would be required is the recognition of egalitarian difference: recognition of the other as other, different yet morally equal.

Conclusion

I have examined and replied to four objections to recognition theory, then identified three areas for further research. Rather than reprise the arguments here, in the following chapter I will select and elaborate on such observations from this chapter as are relevant to my thesis.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

My thesis is that social conflict is commonly motivated by struggles over recognition, that is, motivated by indignation against systematic disrespect or denials of recognition. I also contend that conceiving of social conflict as a struggle over recognition, a struggle motivated by demands to be recognized, provides a finer, deeper understanding of social change than does an economistic explanation, a traditional and widely held view that explains conflict in terms of economic self-interest. Although my thesis has roots two to three centuries old, formulated first in the work of Rousseau and Hegel, it remains a neglected and under-appreciated perspective on what motivates people to engage in social struggle. By linking the concepts of recognition and identity formation, and identity and motivation, I have argue that identity presupposes recognition and constitutes a basic form of agency, so that what is at stake in even economic struggles is the intersubjectively generated and sustained autonomy of concrete individuals.

I developed my thesis through an interpretation of why many white Americans, despite the relative economic advantage and social privileges they receive by virtue of being white, have opposed in sometimes vehement ways the implementation of race-sensitive social policies aimed at reducing racial inequality. Part of the answer is that many whites judged (and perhaps still do) programs like social welfare and affirmative action as simply unjust, a violation of the values and norms (e.g., merit, responsibility,

etc.) that purportedly define "us" as a political community. If whites resist such programs, therefore, it is because they *feel them to be* unjustified affronts, even insults, to people who regard themselves as model citizens and workers.

If this interpretation is tenable, it casts light on two important implications of my work. First, considering how often debate about race-sensitive social policies in the U.S. is cast in predominately economic terms, observing the ways that identity and recognition inflect social struggles reveals how impoverished and distorted public discourse becomes when economism is the default position. While welfare and affirmative action indisputably involve questions about class inequality, focusing so narrowly on economic relations obscures the fact that criticisms of those programs rely on dehumanizing racial stereotypes nearly two hundred years old. Racism has always bubbled just beneath the surface of white resistance to programs designed to benefit black Americans. Secondly, my interpretation shows that perceptions of disrespect and injustice as well as the correlative emotions (e.g., indignation, anger) are not incorrigible, self-evident, or beyond reproof. People can take offense when none is intended. And they can imagine injury at the hands of another when, in reality, the "other" is a member of an oppressed group whose only misdeed was to resist her own oppression.

Such is the case with regard to the hostility of some whites toward race-sensitive policies. The indignation of those whites who most ardently oppose such policies is evoked, not by the violation of universally held principles of justice, but by the perceived threat to their power and privilege *as whites*. But, as I mentioned above, race relations and practices serve as an example with which to develop my thesis about motivation and conflict. I could just as easily have drawn an example from the backlash against

feminism, or, in light of the passage of Proposition 8 in the 2008 elections and the ensuing protests, an example from religious opposition to same-sex marriage. Both examples could be developed in an analogous way with my interpretation of race relations, since in both cases members of the dominant group claim to be the aggrieved defenders of justice and moral rectitude, when, in truth, they are denying members of subordinated groups the same rights, opportunities, and privileges which they, the dominant, take for granted (and jealously guard).

Whether it is refusing civil rights to gays and lesbians, sexist stereotyping in politics and the media, or carping about how immigrants are "taking our jobs," the alleged injustices spurring public outrage should not be accepted uncritically. For, as I noted when replying to the objection that not all who are disrespected actually resist, people can be mistaken about their emotions as well as about the source or object of those emotions. Since the recognitive norms structuring identity are historically constituted, and since the emotional reactions accompanying violated expectations involve judgment, error is both possible and unsurprising. Love, fear, ignorance, arrogance: any of these states can account for why people do not protest disrespect, or why they sometimes endorse beliefs and practices that effectively compromise their freedom.

Thus, the more vexing phenomenon involves those who assume to be entitled to forms of recognition to which they are not entitled, or whose identity claims are demonstrably unjustified, as when the dominant demand recognition from the subordinated in ways that threaten, demean, or deprive the latter of their rights. If the oppressed protest, they are apt to be labeled ingrates, immoral, etc.; if they do not protest, they seem to acquiesce to their own oppression. Regardless of how the oppressed act in

such a double bind, we can confidently affirm that the oppressors act wrongly, even unjustly, insofar as they coerce recognition from the oppressed, or condemn them for having the temerity to speak and be seen.

To appreciate and properly diagnose the nature of the injustice, however, requires more than nostrums about how people with power don't like to share. That may be true. But to shrug and stop there would be to excise moral insight, growth, and motivation from social interaction, and to reduce social progress to an almost accidental by-product of power struggles. Recognitive demands and the struggles they engender, even when unjust, can still be conceived as moral in nature, i.e., as subject to analysis and evaluation, inasmuch as they bear upon people's freedom and ontological security as agents.

To elucidate the role of emotion in recognition, identity formation, and motivation for social struggle, I want to reconsider two of the objections discussed above. One of the objections states that recognition theory lacks a criterion for distinguishing between justified and unjustified identity claims. If recognizing the identity of another is obligatory, then it follows that a racist's demand to be respected and esteemed must be honored also. This is a perverse implication for a theory with liberatory intent, so there must be a flaw in the argument. The other objection states that esteeming a person cannot be obligatory because people cannot esteem others at will. Emotions are involuntary. To be obligating, an action must be voluntary. So, to esteem another cannot be obligatory.

But the attempted *reductio* of the first objection fails. Focusing only on esteem and solidarity, it ignores those patterns of recognition that establish more fundamental

constituents of identity, namely, the practical relations to self that ground bodily integrity and moral autonomy. If esteeming a racist required turning a blind eye to racial discrimination or violence, then there are principled reasons why such a demand would be unjust and rightly repudiated. The second objection, in turn, trades on the false premise that emotions are involuntary givens, which makes the argument unsound.

Both objections founder on the same rock, which is to see in recognition theory a type of emotivism that is not there. Emotivism is the view that emotions and feelings arise involuntarily and spontaneously, and that the texture of emotions and feelings determines the moral quality of actions, situations, and so on. But identity-recognition theory does not presuppose emotivism. By contrast, it affirms that emotions are always interpreted, and that their meaning is contingent historically, culturally, and individually. Here, as elsewhere, Honneth invites misunderstanding by not sufficiently clarifying the cognitive element of, say, an angry or indignant reaction to disrespect. If aversive reactions to disrespect were merely causal, it would be senseless to speak of norms, meanings, and expectations, as well as judgments or perceptions that one has, in fact, been wronged.

There is no triggering mechanism ensuring that disrespect will motivate resistance. But it is equally vital to note the converse: the fact of resistance is not fail-safe evidence that there has been disrespect. Conservative evangelical Americans, for example, miss no opportunity to state how embattled and marginalized they feel; and, aside from reproductive rights, the windmill at which they most love to tilt is the demand of gays and lesbians for the right to be legally wed. That evangelicals feel disrespected is certain, as is evidenced by their preferred hybrid fallacy to condemn same-sex marriage:

only heterosexual marriage is just, because it has historically been the norm (appeal to tradition); same-sex marriage would therefore be ab-normal and, if legalized, would open the door to polygamy, incest, even pedophilia (slippery slope). But the perception of insult is ill founded; the outrage unjustified. Exemplified here is a clash between one group's beliefs and values and another group's claim to civil rights and legal inclusion: yet to deny rights to a group is a more basic, a more tangible harm than to offend the sense of propriety of a group.

Of course, the same point can be made by reflecting on white anger against affirmative action, social welfare, and so on. Many whites seem genuinely to believe that affirmative action is unneeded, rewards the unqualified, and unjustly disadvantages and discriminates against them. In *Being White,*[229] a book cataloguing the attitudes to affirmative action of white students at two U.S. universities, the author's surveys reveal that students felt anger, defensiveness, fear, and also a sense of hurt in connection with affirmative action. These feelings are real, so it avails little to wave them away as merely uninformed opinion. The opinions may be uninformed and false. Indeed, the not uncommon claims that whites are "victims" of reverse racism, are being "excluded" from educational and professional institutions, are being "made to feel guilty" for ancient wrongs – such laments are as flimsy as they are frustrating. But to achieve greater understanding, with a view to making social progress, it is necessary to understand the roots of the feelings as well as the misconceptions. In the present case, investigating how historical privileges, advantages, and normative expectations configure, contour, and infuse the agency of white people would advance this ambition.

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[229] Karyn D. McKinney *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

In the Introduction I mentioned Bernard Boxill's conviction that to garner the support of whites for social policies that would reduce black poverty and racial inequality, appeal should be made not to their economic interests but, rather, to their sense of social justice and responsibility. The hair-trigger defensiveness and denial of any responsibility for current social conditions must be loosened, challenged, transformed by moral education. Not only would such an appeal focus attention more precisely on the nub of the problem; eschewing the fixation on economic interests would also be more respectful, in the Kantian sense, because it would engage whites as morally responsible agents.

Economism's kernel of truth, so to speak, is that modern subjects experience themselves principally as economic agents. But this truth is historical – people experience themselves in this way because *they are configured to be* economic agents. And, in the U.S., they are *configured to be "white"* as well. Thus, by linking social categories such as whiteness to recognitive relations, identity formation, and motivation for social conflict, identity-recognition theory would offer a richer sense of social responsibility and facilitate the sort of moral education urged by Boxill.

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