FILOZOFIA
Volume 79, Number 6, 2024

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2024.79.6.11

Axel Honneth:
The Poverty of Our Freedom

Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023, 304 pp.

According to this new book by Axel Honneth, our understanding of freedom is gravely impoverished. On one hand, the concept of freedom appears to be an empty universal, and we can no longer agree on its particular content. On the other hand, the failure of modern society to fulfill the normative promises of social liberty leads to the maintaining of the status quo and threatens societal fragmentation. By challenging this normative crisis, this book expands on Honneth's vision of social freedom, filling in the conceptual gaps and taking up anew the criticism raised by his earlier work *Freedom's Right* (2013). *The Poverty of Our Freedom* contains thirteen essays, divided into three parts, written over the years as responses to some of these issues. Honneth engages Hegel, and Marx, arguing that freedom is possible only in the interrelation with others in the social sphere. While familiarity with both is useful, the uninitiated will not feel lost. Honneth's writing is excellent, and he presents conceptually dense topics in an accessible manner. These critical and constructive essays read very well thanks to the efforts of the outstanding translators, all of whom deserve praise.

The first part, "Forms of Social Freedom," contains six essays, devoted to the analysis of freedom. First, "The Depths of Recognition" presents an analysis of the tension in Rousseau's *oeuvre*, between the struggle for independence and the need for social recognition. By focusing on Rousseau's notion *amour propre*, Honneth shows its impact on the theory of recognition and the subsequent development in philosophy. In "On the Poverty of Our Freedom," Honneth revisits Hegel's theory of ethical life in an attempt to give us with a better understanding of individual freedom. While he concludes that Hegel's ethical theory is not viable as a theoretical model for establishing social freedom in any concrete way, it can teach us just how impoverished our modern understanding of freedom is and may lead to a revision of our similarly impoverished notion of justice. In "The Normativity of Ethical Life," Honneth confronts the paradox of the moral standpoint. Where do our moral

norms come from, if they presuppose a kind of freedom that can only be explained by a recourse to an already existing set of moral norms?

In "Hegel and Marx," Honneth poses a challenge to his contemporaries to develop a successful conciliation of Marx and Hegel, for, he believes, Marx's politico-economical insights are precisely what can enrich Hegel's own social theory in a substantial way. Such an approach would offer a more comprehensive critique of modern society, and its repression of freedom due to the negative effects of the market. Honneth proceeds from the analysis of a shared philosophy of history, and continues with Hegel's social theory, and its elements of family, market, and the state. Then he shows how Marx, by analyzing power and domination, demonstrated that the capitalist market, contains elements destructive to both individual freedom and the autonomy of other remaining structural elements of the family and the state.

"Economy or Society?" can be conceived of as a continuation of the previous essay, as Honneth devotes himself to the limits of Marx's theory. Acknowledging the complexity and vastness of Marx's project, Honneth focuses on a single strand – the development of the fundamental structure and dynamic of the capitalist world – and tackles the question, whether Marx remained faithful to his early anthropological intuitions, or whether he abandoned his early philosophical work. Subsequently, Honneth takes a critical stance towards Marx's framework of "capital" as the only socially formative power in modern society, and pushes it to its limits.

"Three, Not Two, Concepts of Liberty," builds upon Dewey's interpretation of Hegel. Honneth argues that understanding freedom, only as *negative* or *positive*, conceals a possible third notion – social freedom, which pertains to the development of a common will, which does not designate an unconditional capacity of the subjects, but rather pertains to specific social conditions that we practice daily (such as democratic participation, personal relationships). Such social freedom is not just a starting point for individual actions but a goal in itself, and enables individuals to work together towards shared goals that align with their personal preferences.

The second part of the book, "Deformations of Social Freedom," consists of four essays, which relate to specific parts of the social sphere, where the problem of freedom has visible consequences. In "The Diseases of Society" Honneth analyzes how is it possible to speak about "diseases" of society, i.e. how to identify pathologies in different social contexts, and how to differentiate between different kinds of suffering. In "Education and the Democratic Public Sphere," he shows how the contemporary liberalism and

its narrow emphasis on state neutrality with respect to different conceptions of good life, has led to a decoupling of pedagogy from political philosophy. This event threatens the vitality of democracies, for without the rendering of children into morally independent and cooperative adults, the project of democratic self-determination faces obstacles, and the idea of a "good citizen" turns into an empty slogan or a soundbite of political speeches.

"Democracy and the Division of Labor," argues that there is a crucial connection between the significance of work, employment, and democracies, for the lack of security in work plays a causal role in the decaying of democratic institutions. Arguing for the reformulation of the very concept of "work," Honneth believes that a just reorganization of the division of labor would be conducive to democracy, because if the worker feels himself or herself to be a valuable contributor to society as such, their own sense of self-worth will increase, leading to more effective participation in the democratic process. "Childhood" examines the ruptures and inconsistencies of child well-being in contemporary liberal democratic societies. By critically examining what constitutes our idea of child well-being, Honneth argues for a much earlier social integration of children, with the help of society and the State.

The third part, "Sources of Social Freedom," contains three essays, which explore the shaping of our social world by the humanities. In "Denaturalizations of the Lifeworld," Honneth uses the perspective of a growing child, to explore how the cultural-intellectual conditions of our social life-world not only compel us to see ourselves as intrinsic parts of a larger community, but also that this community struggles against forms of dependence that seem to be given. Honneth shows how the humanities, thanks to their inherent skepticism towards the status quo, provide innovative solutions to social challenges, by developing new ideas and solutions that have a lasting impact on our future.

"Is There an Emancipatory Interest?" is an excellent revisitation of the concept of emancipatory interest in the critical theory. Honneth argues that Habermas' project of emancipatory interest in *Knowledge and Human Interests* failed but is worth revising. Returning to Hegel and Dewey, Honneth argues that it can be rooted in the necessity of conflict in social relations. The oppressed groups ought to pursue emancipatory knowledge, which consists of the awareness of the plasticity of social norms and of the reasons for their biased, one-sided interpretation. Such knowledge is necessary, for it grants legitimacy to the pursuit of emancipation of the oppressed from the existing unjust conditions.

The final essay, "A History of Moral Self-Correction," while seemingly beyond the scope of the present volume, highlights the importance of recognition for the current political landscape. Taking Claus Offe's *Europe Entrapped* (2015) as its reference point, Honneth responds to the growing crisis of confidence in the European Union. Offering a normative reconstruction of the conflict-ridden history of Europe, Honneth calls for the revival of solidarity, by appealing to the European civilization's historical mastering of crises that arose out of some of the gravest misdeeds in human history – the aftermath of religious wars, the exploitation of the working class, colonialism, and the Second World War.

The Poverty of Our Freedom re-imagines freedom as a collective endeavor, rather than a zero-sum game. In acknowledging the interconnectedness of individuals and their shared humanity, it is a powerful tool for a constructive approach to the contemporary crisis. This crisis grows with the increasingly worsening social and material conditions. The rise of right-wing sentiments, the decay of social cohesion, nationalistic appeals, distrust and enmity – all prey upon the conceptual openness of freedom, which has become diluted with destructive one-sided narratives. By challenging these, and penetrating deep into the normative promise of freedom, Honneth draws our attention to the values of recognition, respect, and solidarity. We are called upon to strive towards a future where freedom is not a source of division and discord, but rather a force for unity and justice. Let us heed this call.

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This work was produced at the Institute of Philosophy of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, within the project VEGA: 2/0130/23.

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