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Rethinking Axel Honneth's *The Idea of Socialism*

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Axel Honneth's (2017) *The Idea of Socialism* is a timely reflection on a puzzling state of affairs: Perhaps at no time in the past several decades have so many sensed that there is something terribly wrong with global capitalism—from mounting inequalities to runaway climate change—and yet rarely has the resolve to think through workable alternatives to the global capitalist order been weaker. But the “sudden decline in utopian energy” (p. 2), or withering away of the millenarian impulse, is perhaps not so difficult to explain. As Honneth recognizes, it is incredibly hard to re-engineer vastly complex, mutually interdependent systems of political governance, economic production, and sociocultural reproduction—perhaps so difficult that the very idea of fashioning ideological blueprints for the refabricating of the world has itself grown outmoded.

Honneth's favored explanation for this frustrating situation is the role of reification, the idea that social facts now appear as naturalized “givens” more

strongly than ever before, thereby seeming immune to the ameliorative efforts of social movements (pp. 4-5). As Fred Jameson (2003: 76) is fond of pointing out, “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.”¹ But Honneth fails to seriously consider another alternative: that previous generations of socialist reformers and revolutionaries were blind to the complexities of the tasks that lay before them, and that social reality has become increasingly complex in line with the increasing interdependence of social reality. Past utopians were simply ignorant of the objective complexities facing them, and those complexities have only increased.

Axel Honneth is one of the world's leading thinkers in the Critical Theory tradition, a protégé of Jürgen Habermas, and a professor of philosophy in Frankfurt and at Columbia. It is well worth paying attention, then, to what this influential thinker of Hegelian recognition and Habermasian communicative ethics has to say about socialism. I want to challenge Honneth's account on five central points. Briefly, these points can be summarized as follows. First, Honneth glosses over socialism's sacrifice of individual liberty on the altar of collectivism. Subordinating individual liberty to social solidarity, as Honneth's concept of

¹ In a perspicacious comment on technofuturism, van Valkenburgh (2017: 4) notes that technological optimists find it easier to imagine capitalism's transcendence of human nature (through technological augmentation) than humanity's capacity to transcend capitalism (through collective action).

“social freedom” presupposes, seems inevitably to involve displeasure and opposition among sizeable segments of the population. How will socialism bring these naysayers onboard? Second, Honneth claims the early socialists were insufficiently attuned to the “functional differentiation” of society. But Honneth commits a category error: they were revolutionaries, not sociologists, and their images of society were simultaneously attempts to make those images real. Third, even if the early socialists were wrong on multiple points—why shouldn’t their views be at least partly invalidated by two centuries of ruptures and revolutions?—this should not needlessly detain us. We can and should move beyond the exegesis of socialism’s Fathers, from Saint-Simon to Marx and beyond. Fourth, Honneth suggests abandoning the “nation-state” and experimenting with a sort of anarchist localism in its place. But Honneth doesn’t stop to consider how the potentially cataclysmic catastrophes confronting humanity today are to be resolved by spontaneous, post-statist entities. Finally, the concept of social freedom is underdeveloped, remaining allusive and sketch-like.

Whatever the reasons for why socialism has foundered, Honneth’s aim is to rejuvenate it. To this end, he draws on a long tradition of “early” or “classical” socialist thinking, primarily from the first half of the nineteenth century, from Saint-Simon and Fourier through Robert Owen to Karl Marx and beyond. Honneth primarily thinks of socialism as a movement seeking to reconcile a contradictory aim emanating from the French Revolution: that of harmonizing

liberty and fraternity. Freedom has, of course, been the watchword of Western liberal democracy for over two centuries, but it has been freedom largely conceived in contractual, individualistic terms—Isaiah Berlin’s notion of negative freedom.

Fraternity, on the other hand, has received less attention.² Unlike the early socialists, who viewed socialism as little more than the “desire for a more just distribution of resources” (p. 10), socialism has always revolved around a series of essentially “moral or ethical intentions” (p. 10), whatever the Marxists might have to say about such matters (and they’ve largely disparaged the idea that Marxism is at heart an ethical project). As Oscar Wilde observed in his classical essay on socialism, “Under socialism...there will be no people living in fetid dens and fetid rags, and bringing up unhealthy hunger-pinched children in the midst of impossible and absolutely repulsive surroundings” (Wilde 2001 [1891]: 128). For all of the Marxian bluster about “utopian socialism” (e.g. Marx and Engels 2008 [1848]: 77-80), socialist thought has continuously been nourished by a Wildean rage. And this rage, one might plausibly claim, has aimed at raising the general levels of “fraternity” in society. Fraternity means “mutual responsibility in solidarity” (p. 12), a way of socializing desire, while freedom has in the Western

² Honneth never once stops to consider the gender-specific implications of *fraternus*, “of or belonging to a brother,” despite his later criticism of early socialism for failing to consider feminist concerns.

tradition largely been reduced to the “pursuit of purely private interest” (p. 12). Fraternity means recognizing the suffering of others and incorporating it into one’s own being.

How to reconcile these aims? Honneth is enough of a Hegelian to recall the observation in the *Philosophy of Right* that liberty expressly does not mean the “freedom to do as we please.” As one of Hegel’s *Zustände* has it, “Talk of this kind is due to wholly uneducated, crude, and superficial ideas” (Hegel 2008: 301-302). Rather, true freedom, on the Hegelian account, involves a certain orientation toward the world and a particular mode of action embedded in collective aims, shaped and enabled by thick webs of collectivism, or “ethical life” (*Sittlichkeit*). Honneth describes this as *social freedom*. Without a strongly developed concept of social freedom, that is, if “liberty is not interpreted in a less individualistic and more intersubjective manner” (p. 13)—which is the theoretical premise for a future reconciliation of the tripartite normative foundation of socialism, i.e. liberty, equality, and fraternity—socialism will continue to founder. Solidarity is just another word for social freedom, which is just a roundabout way of saying love, in Honneth’s reading of Marx: unlike in a society obeying the logic of Adam Smith’s political vision, where “each member is only a ‘merchant’ for the other” (p. 16), socialism means forging loving relationships of mutual solidarity. “Just as in love, my activities must both serve my own self-realization,” Honneth writes, “as well as that of my partners in interaction” (p. 18). Socialism is love by another name.

Without love, solidarity, or sociality, our individual aims and desires will sooner or later come crashing up against the interests of wider collectives, for a solidarous subjectivity entails self-adjusting preference sets, so that one's desires do not exceed the constraints given by an embedded economy. But this is precisely what makes socialism both attractive and unattractive. Honneth never really addresses this central challenge, pulsating at the core of socialism. As Plato's *Republic* makes clear, the purpose of Socrates's ideal society is not "to make anyone group outstandingly happy but to make the whole city so, as far as possible" (Plato 1997: 1053). Socialism's aim of "making the whole city happy" inevitably entails the reduction of misery at the cost of reducing exuberant joys. It simply isn't possible to produce, in Honneth's words, a "social form of life in which individual freedom thrives not at the cost of solidarity, but with its help" (p. 107). Solidarity must necessarily trump individual freedom, often in quite deliberate, constrictive ways. Honneth wants to be a good Hegelian proponent of *Sittlichkeit*, solidarity, and what he terms "social freedom," while still clinging to the liberal valuation of negative freedom.

But while many will probably be quite happy to soak the rich if it means housing, feeding, and clothing the homeless, how far are they willing to go in sacrificing comfortable lifestyles—traveling on cross-continental vacations, say, or buying expensive consumer gadgets, or acquiring a holiday home—for the sake of helping the poor, downtrodden masses? How can socialism address the twinge of anxiety the contented classes in postindustrialized societies feel at the prospect

of lifting the field by lowering the ceiling? “The point of departure of the socialist movement is the holistic notion that the community of solidarity, rather than the individual, is the bearer of freedom,” writes Honneth (p. 25), glossing over the difficulties of making such a position saleable to the winners of capitalism, of whom there are quite a few in postindustrialized nations. Indeed, the idea of the intertwining of community and individual, the adjustment of the individual desire for personal to societal ambitions, are what make socialism both so easy and so difficult to attack.

Difficult, because, as Honneth points out, appeals to the collective good, to fraternity and even equality, have always been an integral part of the liberal creed, however obtusely formulated: Adam Smith’s baker, butcher, and brewer are said to promote the collective good by self-interested action. No ideology can survive long without convincing its addressees that it is capable of producing sound and stable modes of collective existence (p. 25). Easy, because all of this sounds vaguely ominous: the Hoover Institute would have a field day with the totalitarian undertones of the concept of “social freedom,” which could easily be construed as a contradiction in terms.

Here I think we are approaching one of the signal defects of Honneth’s book. For if all ideologies promise to deliver up the secular trinity of the French Revolution, why bother with socialism at all? What is the special appeal of socialism, and how does it mark a distinct position against competing paradigms? Honneth doesn’t offer much of an answer. Perhaps this stems from Honneth’s

somewhat slipshod usage of the book's central term, which covers all major ideological positions extending from reformist social democracy to revolutionary communism and left libertarianism. In one telling passage, Honneth flits between socialism and communism, noting that both "socialist and communist utopias...electrified their addressees with visions of a better form of life" (p. 4).

Differently put, why socialism and not communism? Why not *The Idea of Communism* instead of *The Idea of Socialism* (besides the fact that the former title has already been taken by Žižek, Badiou, and their colleagues)? As Žižek pointedly remarks, socialism is no longer an idea that differentiates, in the sense of marking difference or staking out a distinct ideological space. It does not set one apart from the Martin Schultzes and George Soros of the world. "Everyone can be a socialist today, even Bill Gates: it suffices to profess the need for some kind of harmonious social unity, for a common good and for the care of the poor and downtrodden," Žižek (2015) writes, and consequently, the only properly leftist millenarian project is to be found in communism, Žižek claims. Today, everyone to the left of (and including) Steve Bannon is more or less a socialist, desirous of a future in which the state is mobilized to rein in markets and embed capitalism in a vaguely social or socialized framework. There is nothing distinctively radical, utopian, or anti-capitalist about socialism. Being a good socialist means effectively taking on the mantle of a postwar social democrat, a proponent of Swedish welfare capitalism, or an FDR-style New Dealer.

I have a theory that when an author unremittingly repeats the same point, again and again, we have hit upon a traumatic point, or at least a structural weakness in the architecture of their thought. Repetition is one way to obfuscate argumentative vacuity. In *The Idea of Socialism*, Honneth repeats in an almost astonishing number of ways the claim that traditional socialism failed to take into account non-economic processes and remained trapped in economic determinism (that old anti-Marxian slur: that base precedes superstructure)—that classical or early or traditional socialism “denied any functional differentiation” and thought of “society as an entity determined entirely by the economic sphere” (p. 95). Honneth derives all sorts of supposed deficiencies in socialist thought and strategy from this alleged failure, including the inability of the Marxist left to take women’s rights seriously and a proclivity for economic determinism. I think this is a rather sloppy reading of the traditional socialist canon, but I won’t spend a great deal of time laboring the point, because I think it is *besides* the point. More importantly, why does it matter today that there were inadequacies at the core of the traditional socialist project? (Honneth understands “early” or “traditional” or “classical” socialism to be the work of the first half of the nineteenth century, extending from Robert Owens, through Saint-Simon and Fourier to Marx and Engels.) We are free agents and free thinkers, relatively speaking, capable of making our own way in the world. We need not feel ourselves hemmed in by the limitations of classical, traditional, or early socialism. We should forge ahead.

In almost comically academicist fashion, Honneth misunderstands what socialism in its essence was and continues to be. Socialism is not a sociological or analytical theory destined for the hands of professional social scientists. It has always been above all a theory of revolutionary practice, which means a theory aimed at subverting society rather than representing or portraying it. Its aim has been to transform and revolutionize, a fundamental insight Honneth, despite his erudition, seems to have forgotten. Early socialism tried to exert what Bourdieu calls a *theory effect* (Bourdieu 1989: 17), an attempt to change the facts on the ground, to impose a new way of seeing that would recast the world according to the beholder's desires. The point was, as Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach has it, to change the world, not interpret it.

This has been a recurrent misunderstanding of Marx in the social sciences, where Marx has been recast as a sort of proto-sociologist. This representation is largely a figment of the twentieth-century scholastic imagination, an attempt to incorporate the old master into the sociological canon, and thereby appropriate him, without having to deal with the essentially threatening implications of his work. And yet Marx was never a completist in matters of social analysis—he certainly made no claims to completism—and he clearly ignored lots of issues that would be of relevance to contemporary sociologists, from the family to the prison system to cultural production. This doesn't mean Marx or Engels didn't write *something* about most of these issues. (For instance, Marx writes very memorably on crime that its purpose is to produce the whole apparatus of the

criminal law, courts, judges, and prisons—a perfect Hegelian inversion.) And Marx’s articles in the New York *Tribune* (e.g. Marx 2007) are a testament to the spuriousness of the charge that the two leading figures of early socialism were brute reductionists—why else bother to expend considerable analytical firepower to understand the political contingencies of the day? As Wacquant (1985) has shown, Marx did not remain restricted to a base-superstructure model, but was clearly sophisticated enough to appreciate the “organic totality” of social reality.

Marx was not a sociologist because sociology did not yet exist in the mid-nineteenth century. So the idea that a model of society largely left unresolved such areas as the family and civil society is only problematic in so far as that model is not above all else an attempt to *transform* society rather than *catalogue* society, i.e. produce comprehensive accounts of social life. Honneth seems to forget what traditional socialism was all about in committing the category error of reading early socialism as a sort of nascent sociology. The scholastic gaze tends to reduce all issues to scholastic issues, as Bourdieu (1990) reminds us. Honneth’s view of early socialism is certainly tinted by a *vita contemplativa*: anyone who has led a *vita activa*, which means political struggle, would not allow themselves to produce such arguments. This isn’t to romanticize activism and denigrate academe. We need both. Still, it’s worth bearing in mind how the material conditions of production shape the products of the academic process of production. I am tempted to ask, in the style of an angry Maoist of the 1970s:

What did Honneth ever do to make the world a little more socialist—besides writing books?

It is so important to Honneth that early socialism allegedly failed to take into account the “functional differentiation” of society—Honneth sounds like a Parsonian structural functionalist in this register—because he ascribes the failure of socialism to an inability to take functional differentiation into account. Socialism was a product of the Industrial Revolution, Honneth notes, and therefore it could not think outside the terms imposed by industry: it could not get beyond economy, because it was itself a reactive ideology, a reaction to industrialization and economic dislocations. If socialism is to work in the late-modern or advanced capitalist age, so the argument goes, it must be able to figure out what to do about all of these socially differentiated functions. (One thing sociology cannot be faulted for over these past 20 years is its proliferation of terms and metaphors meant to capture functional differentiation: systems, fields, bubbles, spheres, and so on.) Socialism “must be able to say something about how the different spheres of social freedom are to harmonize with each other in the future” (p. 90). In other words, socialism needs a *coordinating* agency or framework, something that can manage the “interplay among the various spheres of social freedom” (p. 94).

The standard assumption is that this coordinating agency must be the state, or “the nation-state” (p. 94), as Honneth glosses it. Instead, Honneth flirts with spontaneism, with anarchist organicism, federal arrangements, councils,

communes, and localism. Honneth thinks the age of the nation-state has passed, because of “transnationalization,” which means the weakening of the nation-state following climate change, capital mobility, and other processes of planetization. How all of this is supposed to work remains unclear, which is perhaps to be expected from a compact, hundred-page-long book, originally delivered as a public lecture series.

Still, there are good reasons to be wary of abandoning the nation-state. If the social fact of transnationality has made the nation-state superfluous, why should we expect a lower level of social organization, a regional or local council federation—

consisting of fewer people, less money, and less *power*—to be able to make itself relevant? I think Brexit teaches an important lesson in this regard: One of the first things Prime Minister Theresa May did after triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, initiating withdrawal proceedings from the European Union, was to travel to Saudi Arabia to hold trade talks with the kingdom’s Wahhabite regime (Asthana 2017): a lowered concentration of power entailed less, not more, morally sound decision-making. Whereas a large regional superpower was able to, in part at least, refuse concessions to a reactionary regime, a smaller concentration of power in a single nation-state compelled the latter to give such concessions, precisely because of its reduced stature on the world’s economic-political circuit. What holds true for smaller nations will also a fortiori hold true for smaller regional players.

In this vein, Žižek's (2017) plea for a "bureaucratic socialism" can be viewed as a rejoinder to Honneth's intimations of the virtues of mutualist localism. Perhaps the scale of our challenges have instead become so great that we now need hyperconcentrated megastates, capable of allocating social energy at a sufficiently large scale, not devolved microcouncils. In his musings on life after capitalism, Frase (2016) notes, "The reconstruction of society along ecologically sustainable lines entails a significant role for governments." Rather than an abandonment of the nation-state tout court, William Mitchell and Thomas Fazi (2017) claim, what we need more than ever today is a reclamation of the state, because only an entity of the magnitude of the state can tackle the major calamities facing humanity in our present situation.

It is perhaps telling that one of the few concrete suggestions for leftist political agitation to cross Honneth's field of analysis includes Erik Olin Wright's (2010) call for the construction of "real utopias," which includes Wikipedia, the Mondragon Corporation, and Canadian unions' attempts to engage in ethical investment practices through "solidarity funds." All of these proposals, writes Honneth, are "committed to the spirit of experimental socialism" (p. 71). But these ideas are hardly capable of bringing us beyond capitalism. On the contrary, Wikipedia, founded by a right-wing libertarian, has been resoundingly critiqued for its Hayekian epistemology (Mirowski 2009). In some sense, Wikipedia is the perfect knowledge supplement to the capitalist digital economy, a source of public-domain information readily exploitable by megacorporations like Google

(or, rather, “Alphabet,” as it is now known), serving to exploit the free labor of the writing and thinking public—a kind of social dumping on the World Wide Web. Furthermore, the idea of ethical investments has been used to make one of the world’s largest Sovereign Wealth Funds, that of Norway’s Government Pension Fund Global (GPF), with revenues sourced from ecologically devastating hydrocarbon production, has used its “ethics council” to convince the public that a clean, responsible form of shareholder capitalism is possible (Shammas 2012). And the Mondragon Corporation is fine for what it is, but it is a limited and limiting case, serving not as a model for the transformation of capitalism but as a vehicle for the promotion of post-Fordism (Kasimir 1999). These are “reformist reforms,” not revolutionary reforms, to use André Gorz’s conceptual couplet, that is, palliative treatments that expressly do not push us towards a “radical transformation of society” (Gorz 1987 [1967]: 102).

Finally, the concept of “social freedom,” which Honneth repeatedly returns to in this book, remains underdeveloped. It hinges on certain transhistorical standards of human flourishing, dignity, and justice, standards which must necessarily therefore be divorced from the historical particularities of symbolic struggles whose aim is to construct and impose definite conceptions of justice, dignity, and human welfare. The concept presupposes a God’s-eye-view: an impossible view from everywhere and nowhere. It requires a firm foundation from which to posit particular standards of human life, which entails an impossibility, because this foundation must itself be posited and willed into being, thereby

raising the spectral issue of *what foundation do the foundationalists—the positors of social foundations—stand on?* This is surely an impossible, intolerable situation, but it is emblematic of where the Frankfurt School stands today: a sort of humanist essentialism and (reflexive) foundationalism seem to reign supreme. Incidentally, Rahel Jaeggi, one of Honneth's students, is committed to a similar theoretical position in an attempt to rescue Marx's concept of alienation in a book that never resolves the concept's fundamental problem (see Jaeggi 2014): for an individual to be alienated, they must be alienated *from* something, which means an essential human core. But who will define this core? On what grounds? These are the sins of the father.

Similarly, to be committed to social freedom seems to demand establishing principles that must at once be posited, at once be universally valid. "Social freedom...means taking part in the social life of a community whose members are so sympathetic to each other that they support the realization of each other's justified needs for each other's sake" (p. 24), writes Honneth, but all the tricks of a quasi- Rawlsian-Habermasian philosophy are contained in that seemingly innocuous phrase, "justified needs." For what are justified needs? What I tell you three times is true, wrote Lewis Carroll, and much the same could be said of justified needs: justified is that which dominant groups impose as justified. The best antidote to the Honnethian vision of socialism as necessarily entailing human flourishing because it would involve a new politics and a new sociability, a new way of engaging with one's fellow beings, remains Bourdieu's political

sociology, his vision of the universality of struggle, of conflict, and symbolic power, meaning the imposition of definite categories and conceptions of reality. If all of social reality is premised on agonism, as Bourdieu holds, that is, that ceaseless struggles over symbolic power constitute the paradoxical antifoundational foundation of social reality, then even the economic equitability produced within socialism will remain riddled with domination. No amount of experimentation with antihierarchical organizational forms will rid the social realm of the specter of domination. Whatever lessening of domination we can hope to achieve, Bourdieu suggests, will be the contingent result of social struggles, not armchair theorizing.

Perhaps therein lies a pragmatic lesson, that socialism's best shot at coherence lies in it being premised on an arbitrarily posited series of absences: perhaps the ridding of the world of Beveridge's (1942: 6) five "giants on the road of reconstruction"—"Want...Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness"—are as solid a foundation for a future society as we can hope for, a sort of negative catechism, and the rest must be struggle. Perhaps theorizing in the spirit of positivity is where socialism has foundered in the past—and continues to go wrong now. Perhaps negativity really is the key to remaking this world into that best of all possible worlds.

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