Between Idealism and Materialism

In its early years, Critical Theory was especially concerned to assess its credentials relative to rival philosophical, economical, and sociological approaches. Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer had been trained in philosophy at a time dominated by mannerist neo-Kantianism. Marcuse had studied with Heidegger, who challenged this “school philosophy,” but he issued that challenge from within and, in any event, one might argue that the Magus of Meßkirch could conjure so convincingly only against the background of that run-of-the-mill. Neo-Kantianism was hardly alone in its commitment to idealism of one sort or the other. The other contending philosophical forces, e.g. phenomenology, logical empiricism, and Marxism, also had idealist strands of which they were intensely self-aware. Moreover, such self-awareness was historical and concerned to settle accounts when it came to the relative precedence of the two main representatives of systematic idealism, i.e. Kant and Hegel. If one were more taken with questions of mathematics and physics, Kant seemed unavoidable. If one held that philosophy had graduated from its self-assigned role of guarantor of the natural sciences to be more properly concerned with ethical, social, and political questions, Hegel was of signal importance. This is not to say that Kantian ethics has not been a primary point of orientation for philosophers since that time. But it is important not to miss the fact that the most philosophically penetrating and historically refined accounts of Hegelian ethics—here I have in mind those of Robert Pippin and Allen Wood—find resources in Kant, perhaps conceptually underdeveloped or difficult to discern because of his idiom, that are more replete in Hegel.

Early critical theorists were just as intent, however, to distinguish themselves from “vulgar materialism.” Pressure to do this came from the empirical side of the critical enterprise. The important figures spearheading the social scientific dimension of the Institute of Social Research, e.g. Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neumann, and Friedrich Pollock, were
not involved in providing a justifying apparatus for their research, firmly grounded though it was in Marxist ideology critique. That task fell primarily to Horkheimer, who attempted to articulate, among other things, a proper role for materialism in Critical Theory. His inaugural lecture at the Institute set the mark: Critical Theory is to be a new form of social thought that combines philosophy, history, sociology, anthropology, economics, jurisprudence, and political science. One might say that Horkheimer's injunction was in its way supremely Hegelian—i.e. a call to revivify an understanding of these disciplines as deeply and inherently conjoint. And, indeed, the form of materialism pertinent to early Critical Theory is, as is well known, indebted to neo-Hegelian understandings of what is essential in Marx. The problematic materialism treated in Horkheimer's and Marcuse's seminal early essays takes explanation to be the conceptually basic mode of understanding and causation to be the fundamental form of relation among social phenomena. But even vulgar forms of Marxism or materialism have their upside. Namely, they inhibit the tendency of idealism to "transfigure" (verklären) suffering, i.e. to propound otherworldly measures of ultimate value that substitute for and suppress social self-understanding, freedom, and this-worldly change. On the downside, however, unalloyed materialism reduces overall value to instrumental value and, thus, undermines criticism. "Instrumental reason," as Horkheimer calls it, treats its objects as inert. That is, in order to engage with such objects in terms of one's projects or ends, one need not take into account any like needs or desires on the part of the object. Such objects, that is, do not of themselves impose limitations outside those of physical possibility on how they are conceived and used. No one treats social structures quite so explicitly in this fashion—i.e. as if they were completely divorced from having been made by humans—but to see such structures as a matter of degree in this way is to divest them of intrinsic agency to that degree. This, in turn, undermines criticism because taking social structures to be fixed enough to analyze exhaustively in a causal manner is to take them as data only, as instrumentally defined theoretical entities for which criticism is irrelevant. Of course, this is not only an issue for the social scientist; any social agent can form beliefs about the nature of their society, or perhaps of any society, that cast mass social structures or society itself as being fixed in this manner. One often adverts here to large-scale economic structures, i.e. that their ambit and pervasiveness means that they are not candidates for change that might result from criticism. This is nonsense of course. Economies are not galaxies; they are artifacts through and through. What can be done can be undone.

Idealism and materialism are, then, locked in an uncertain embrace in early Critical Theory. Many of the resources upon which early Critical Theory was able to draw in order to check materialism in its instrumental forms were leavings from German idealism—an idiosyncratic brew of Kant and Hegel. But idealism's tendency toward abstraction could also be a form of instrumental rationality, as evidenced by Marburg neo-Kantianism's affection for the thought that philosophy's main function was still to secure modern science. The infiltration of conceptions of strict laws into Kant's ethics is also not to be missed in this regard. Perhaps even more problematic, however, is the operation of the kind of ideals that idealism posits as criterial for answering a wide range of social and political questions. These are ideals precisely not sensitive to real human possibilities as they are encountered in runs of historical experience. What is ideal about such ideals is that they hover above experience in "pure" realms of reason or insight. Their purported power comes from being isolated from specific instances of application.

Political Abstraction, Abstracted Politics

There is at present a lively debate concerning the foundations of political theory between those who take politics to be a part of the domain of morality and those who take politics
to be a discipline that should be autonomous from morality. To proponents of the first position, moral philosophy fixes the terms of what is right and good as such, providing an overall framework for considering questions concerning regard toward others and self; political philosophy concerns itself with those moral principles that pertain to social existence. Such principles—say, those of justice—are in their fundamental specifications ethical, and such specifications constrain their political application. Application is essentially a two-step procedure. First, the moral principle receives a political interpretation that establishes an ideal for political practice. For the concept of justice, for example, the interpretation yields a primary structure of how individuals and groups must stand to one another in relations of permission, right, and duty. Only once this ideal is in place does political theory turn to the task of surveying the actual political landscape, taking into account existing desires, hopes, beliefs, needs, and practices. There typically is reciprocal responsiveness between ideal and object, between the moral rule instantiated politically and the actual practices and beliefs it confronts. On the one hand, the reason for introducing the morally ideal into the political domain is so that it can act as a criterion for correctness that governs political actions; according, actions are to conform to the dictates of the rule. On the other hand, one must rank-order such actions in terms of their social impacts in order to discern which will be subject to law, that is, which will be candidates for coercive enforcement and which not. Even in the most rigorist cases of the political cum moral, ideals must bend in order not to break. The key point here is that it is in the nature of political ideals, in this way of thinking, that they tend to downplay the exigencies of practice. Put another way, a good part of the force of conceiving of political ideals as having their genesis in moral theory is to reign in exigency as much as is consistent with a balance of ideal and practice. It is worth mentioning that aversion to over-idealization, i.e. to idealism, in political theory has a home within liberal democratic theory, a form of morals-based politics if ever there was one. What counts as “over-idealizing,” as well as what counts as “moral” is a matter of both degree and dispute of course.

The second position on the relation of moral theory to political philosophy sees them as conceptually separate enterprises. The proper and basic orientation of political theory is toward those aspects of ongoing political life that are of first significance. There may be many such, but particularly evident is contestation, i.e. the various disagreements people have. Such disagreements are not limited to specific political courses of action; they also involve ideas of the basis for right and good. This second approach to the relation of morality to politics credits disagreement about matters such as, e.g., the nature of rights or whether there should be rights at all. Fundamental disagreement of this sort is not due to a failure to conform to the moral terms purportedly governing the debate—conflict itself is basic. Once one allows this, the problem of social life presents itself in a new way. The challenge is not getting the right moral-political principles in place and executing social arrangements according to an antecedent form; rather, the problem is how to have a social structure of lasting effect given that moral terms cannot provide at the fundamental level the shared consensus that the structure is viable and correct. What counts as structural stability, i.e. what kind of structures are involved and how much and what sort of stability is necessary are matters of dispute. In any event, for theories of this second type social structure has its source in the exercise of existing authority backed by threat of force. The question of permissible social structure is the question of permissible rule by force, where “permissible” is a strictly political concept.

Proponents of this second view on the relation of politics to ethics have a variety of ways to refer to the first view. Bernard Williams terms such approaches “moralism” or “applied ethics” (Williams 2005: 77; cf. Williams 2003: 112–14); Raymond Geuss labels them “ethics-first” views (Geuss 2008: 9). Williams and Geuss both call the competitor view that they
support “realism” (Williams 2005: 92; Geuss 2008: 9–11). They are hardly alone; there is an argumentatively lively and conceptually diverse literature in political realism (see Unger 1975; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Hampshire 1989, 2001; Honig 1993; Sluga 2014). Nothing in political realism requires one not to expect, hope, or aim at a coincidence of political and moral principles, nor does realism forbid moral discussions in the political sphere. Realism is, rather, the view that political principles may not be justified in terms of moral principles. One might think the term “realism” is somewhat inapt on account of its most prevalent use in political theory: in the modern theory of international relations, where realism enjoins one to treat states as the only politically relevant actors and power and pursuit of state interest as the sole substantial aims of such actors (see Morgenthau 1948). But “realism” in the sense Williams, Geuss, and others favor does not pledge allegiance to Realpolitik nor does it entail that might means right. Where the power to enforce laws through coercion is not distributed over the population but is reserved (“monopolized”) by and for a social institution, Weber, who would be counted with Hobbes as one of the main precursor theorists in the realist tradition, holds that we may speak of a political state (Weber 1994; Weber 1976: 26–30). This monopolization of force in the state must stand the test of its legitimacy—legitimacy in fact, not merely as perceived. But, again, what makes a political structure legitimate is a matter internal to the political sphere, not a moral question.

The philosophical tradition in the West that views moral and political principles as continuous is a good deal older than its rival. It is unsurprising that the view is most stable both conceptually and as a practical matter in historical periods in which there is not a clean division between the respective domains at all: in accounts like Aristotle’s where realization of ethical well-being requires political life or in periods when there is a stable religious-political structure that dictates the relevant relation, e.g. the Roman Catholic Church in medieval Europe. With the onset of modern forms of ethical and political thought that increasingly emphasize neutral rationality as a tribunal for ethical and political thought and action, the question of the possible autonomy of ethics and politics from one another comes to be squarely posed. Even if one is a proponent of the view that political rationality is grounded in its ethical counterpart, that is something that needs to be shown over and against claims to the contrary. The main moral theories dominant in the modern period upon which politics could draw also reflect in their structures potential gaps between morality and politics: rule-consequentialism and deontology. Both deploy the concept of a rule the force and substance of which is antecedent to what the rule orders; that is, they exhibit a confluence of moralism and abstraction. Of course, formally speaking any rule must be antecedent to its applications, but that is not the point. Realists certainly deploy positive conceptions of political rules. The point is that moral rules are not distilled from the “best practices” of experience; rather, they confer from above upon such practices their moral authority. In deontological theories, this is easy to see. Take Kant’s account of the intrinsic good of the moral will as an example. It is no doubt a caricature of Kant’s ethics to portray moral agents as always engaging in universalization or Kingdom of Ends tests. Kant holds that moral agency “on the ground” is for the most part automatic, even in cases that might be thought challenging in abstraction. Notwithstanding this, what makes an action moral is that it stands under a “pure,” impersonal, yet self-authorized moral law. The rule-consequentialist is similarly situated. What makes an act moral is that it accords with an ideal increase in overall ethical well-being. Whether that in fact has taken place can only be established empirically, but the ideal that provides the end for action is anything but non-moral.

When turning to contemporary political theories that realists typically class as moralizing, it is very important to differentiate what is and what is not at issue. It was noted previously that one might be anti-idealist and be a political moralist. Likewise, one might be a political realist and an idealist, i.e. one for whom moral authority did not determine political
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rationality and, yet, who finds abstract principles politically binding come what may. But while political realism is not synonymous with anti-idealism, the moral theories most likely to transgress politically do feature strong idealization. Indeed, that they do so makes their transgression all the simpler. Realists might reject those idealizations but argue for others of course. That said, most contemporary political realists are contextualists and, therefore, will always be suspicious of idealism. This is perhaps due to the intellectual proximity of political realism to the so-called “Cambridge School” of intellectual history (see Skinner 1969; Skinner et al. 2002.) It cannot be merely that it is wrong to think of politics as “applied moral philosophy” (Williams 2005: 77), for several thinkers who would count as moralizers also make the denial. Rawls, for one, attempts to be clear as possible that he holds that politics cannot admit into its base principles or allow political discourse to depend on what he terms “comprehensive” moral or religious doctrines (Rawls 2001: 5, 14). The sense in which Rawls’ theory of justice qualifies as applied ethics cannot consist in his lodging of elements of the second Critique into what he argues is the basic framework of political justice, for Rawls does no such thing. The theory is an example of an idealizing ethics-first approach because Rawls’ view that the principles of justice are political ab initio rests on a series of methodological abstractions based in moral concerns that have their intended force prior to political reality. One may capture the suspect idealization in a catchphrase: justice trumps all always. The idealization, while not depending on importing comprehensive moral doctrines into politics, is nonetheless moral, as Rawls intends. Realists’ criticisms snap into place just here. Realists will allow that justice may outweigh other political values in some cases, but in some cases it will not. Rawls’ insistence on the unalterable primacy of justice reveals that the political basis he cites for the provision of the value, while it may not depend on comprehensive moral doctrines, does depend on a provision of first principles, principles that apply as trumps and, thereby, structure antecedently how other political considerations must be subaltern relative to them. Political forms of life unsecured by such a priori constraints are mere modi vivendi. Realists pounce on the “mere” in the formulation, revealing as it does Rawls’ disdain for forms of thought and action that would see justice as not having intrinsic absolute value for purposes of achieving political coordination and stability, but rather as one more thing (important to be sure) to place on the scales. Rawls presents his theory of justice in essence as a set of purported transcendental constraints on liberal democracy. This is the heart of what one might as well call his idealism, expressed methodologically. But this is not merely methodology. Transcendental arguments may take a variety of subtly different sorts, but a coarse approximation of general form suffices here. A transcendental argument grounds a state of affairs by regressing to the purported necessary conditions on the very possibility of that state of affairs. The state of affairs in question is not put in question by the argument; its actuality and rightness is assumed as a premise. The methodology’s whole purpose is to identify a principle that is immune to revision by experience. This violates per se the contextual realist injunction to look to matters at hand and be guided by the multivalent demands of the situation.

Theories like Rawls’ token disquiet on the part of some political theorists that if hard and fast laws are not provided from outside the political sphere (or, in the case of Rawls, inside it, where “inside” is reformulated in terms of morals), mere exigency will win the day. Again, the word “mere” is far from incidental. One concern that hounds moralistic idealism is political legitimacy. One strand of political realism answers the question against the backdrop of the centrality of the demand for stability in politics. When Weber, for instance, defines the modern state as that which enjoys a monopoly on legitimate coercion under law, the value of legitimacy is not to be understood for all time as answering to democratic requirements of being able to rationally assess and embrace the rightness of the coercion over and against individual liberty and the like. Weber is very clear that legitimacy has and does come
in many forms: what the King decrees, what the oracles say to do, etc. Nowadays, stability may require legitimation through rational self-authorization, but matters were not always so, and that they were not always so is not a matter of rational impoverishment. It is a matter of different conceptions of what count as good reasons, or even reasons as such. Williams addresses this concern about the proper place of the concept of political legitimacy in realism, arguing for what he calls a “basic legitimization demand” (Williams 2005: 4–9, 135) and raises for himself the objection that his principle is just the sort of moral demand that he counts as inappropriate to the sphere of politics (Williams 2005: 5). As I understand it, Williams’ response, stripped to the essentials, is that it is analytic to the very concept of government—of the political as such—that the power to be exercised is (correctly) accepted by one who is subject to the power as binding upon one. Power deployed, even systematically and unerringly meted out, does not amount to politics. In fact, the exercise of power unhinged from any form of consent is what politics is meant to blunt. If the principle is moral in nature it is so in a peculiarly political way, resulting as it does from reflection on what constitutes the political as such. Although Williams did not live to develop the conception of a basic legitimization demand, it appears that this formulation does not commit him to a pre-moralized form of politics.

Let’s take stock. The realist’s basic problem is to understand and appreciate the myriad ways that humans organize into groups that structure and control power relations. Realists are interested in the balancing act of, on the one hand, limiting the arbitrary exercise of power of the many and, on the other, of making certain that reposing power in the one does not result in abuse. This means that realists will be attracted to investigating such things as “microhistories” (Ginzburg 1976) of social coordination, i.e. coordination in its incipience, as it is most natively responsive to concrete situations. There is also a premium placed on political judgment, i.e. on the negotiated sensitivity to the requirements of establishing political order. The literature here is vast, including most early modern European republicanism—Machiavelli, Montesquieu—and contemporary neo-republicans like Philip Pettit. The takeaway is that sensitivity to the demands of context may require deployment of power that is much more extensive than what would be tolerated by an ideal model. This means, in turn, that contextualizing realists will treat social institutions as autonomous sources of political meaning and not merely as ways to promote deeper principles, as would idealists. Because institutions considered as actors in their own right are not rooted in an invariant moral substructure, attention to the historical specificity of institutions also will be of the essence.

**Realism, Idealism, and Recent Critical Theory**

The focus given in political realism to institutions, historical specificity, and genealogy of central concepts and practices would seem prima facie to be attractive to Critical Theory. Moreover, it would appear that Critical Theory would not hesitate to reject political moralism on what are essentially realist grounds. Given the strongly contextualist leanings of most critical theorists, this dovetails with a rejection of idealism. In the first place, idealism violates the prescription that the content and structure of political theory result from interactive exchange between philosophy and the empirical social sciences. Horkheimer, for whom idealist theories counted as “traditional” not “critical,” had an eye cocked toward just this corrective power of social science. It is worth remembering that expatriated Critical Theory—what was to become known as the Frankfurt School, in exile in the USA during the period of the late 1930s to the late 1940s—continued the mix of empirical research and social theory typical of the Critical Theory’s first decade. Adorno’s ill-fated partnership with the Rockefeller Foundation-funded, Paul Lazarsfeld-led Princeton Radio Project produced basic materials for his philosophy of music. Pollock’s work on state capitalism, Neumann's
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Behemoth, Kirchheimer’s Punishment and Social Structure, the cooperative social-psychological study The Authoritarian Personality, and the Horkheimer-edited monograph series Studies in Prejudice were all products of this period, not to mention the research Kirchheimer, Marcuse, and Neumann conducted for the wartime OSS. The leading front of American sociology—e.g. C. Wright Mills, Talcott Parsons, and David Riesman—took this work very seriously. Only one uninformed about the importance of such studies would opine that Critical Theory in its “American era” was a marginal intellectual presence. In point of fact, Critical Theory already had made its mark on the European intellectual scene in the 1930s, as its impact on Laski and Mannheim in England shows. In 1949 Neumann edited a new English translation of Montesquieu’s De l’esprit des lois. Montesquieu observes that the imposition of law in advance of coalescing consensus is a singularly poor way to bring about social change (Montesquieu 1949: 304–305). This cannot have failed to impress Neumann positively. Laws are human inventions that express in especially concentrated form antecedent recognition of value. In voicing skepticism concerning the prospects of a “legislation-first” agenda for social change, Montesquieu put his finger precisely on the dangers of idealization as a critical theorist might see them.

The second main point of contention between Critical Theory and idealism parallels this aperçu, for views like Rawls’ take such a top-down moralizing approach to instilling proper conduct. Ethics-first views treat political consensus in advance of principle as unprincipled and, thus, very circumspectly. For the idealist will take it that such consensus may token a lack of the right kind of reflection, i.e. may appear accidental viewed from the aerie of theory. Consensus, viewed in this way, has near cousins in conformity and complacency. Of course, consensus is insufficient for political good. There was consensus aplenty in the Third Reich. The point is that legislation in advance of a predicate laid by existing social convention that could see in law a reflection of its self-understanding does not enhance change, but impedes it. This, again, is quite the opposite of the view of critical theorists prior to the 1970s, who view the imposition of law on this basis—on the basis of abstract and moralizing principles detached from the vagaries of the real world of politics—as dangerous.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, the stance of the Frankfurt School in its more recent history for or against idealism and moralism is a complex matter, and that means that its posture with regard to realism will be likewise complex. Large-scale political theory has dominated much of Critical Theory from the 1980s to the present. Critical Theory had always been “political” in the sense that its research often took political objects as its subject matter—“vulgar” forms of Marxism, authoritarian social psychology, the economics of state capitalism, etc. Nevertheless, after the student revolts in the former West Germany of the late 1960s, philosophers like Habermas could look back at early Critical Theory and judge it as not having engaged sufficiently in politics (cf. Hammer 2006). Over a span of three decades beginning in the 1970s, Habermas has laid out an intricate and far-reaching theory of political freedom and justice that straddles the divide between political idealism and realism. Habermas’ work at the intersection of sociology and the philosophy of language provided a platform in social and political philosophy in the form of the “ideal speech situation” (see Habermas 1981, 1983), a platform broadened in the 1990s in a deontological—indeed Kantian—direction in his “discourse ethics” (see Habermas 1991, 1992). Habermas’ work at the intersection of sociology and the philosophy of language provided a platform in social and political philosophy in the form of the “ideal speech situation” (see Habermas 1981, 1983), a platform broadened in the 1990s in a deontological—indeed Kantian—direction in his “discourse ethics” (see Habermas 1991, 1992). Habermas acolytes abound, and there are at present several subtly different yet converging strands of this approach to ethically-informed politics in the literature. When viewed in terms of the relation of ethics to politics and the coordinate concern about idealism in political theory, Habermas’ political philosophy operates on a parallel track with Rawls’. It is moralist and idealist, if not as robustly anti-realist (see Anderson 2005: 127–128).

Dissatisfaction with Habermas’ retrenchment in idealism has caused some critical theorists to turn to other basic materials. A case in point is the work of Axel Honneth. Drawing
largely upon Critical Theory’s Hegelian provenance, over the last twenty years Honneth has crafted an ambitious account of social and political freedom in terms of the concept of mutual recognition (gegenseitige Anerkennung). Honneth’s most comprehensive statement to date is Das Recht der Freiheit, an expansion and partial reconsideration of his previous main work, Kampf um Anerkennung.

Honneth’s account of mutual recognition is multilayered. Earlier work drew upon Hegel’s 1805–1806 Jena lecture manuscripts on the “philosophy of Spirit” (Hegel 1987: 193–204; Honneth 1992: 54–105) and joined his interpretation of the “young Hegel” (cf. Dilthey 1959; Lukács 1973) with Donald Winnicott’s psychoanalytic account of object-relations in childhood (Honneth 1992: 148–173; Winnicott 2005) in order both to establish the basic forms of mutual recognition: self-trust, self-respect, and esteem and to identify and track the “social pathologies” corresponding to deficiencies in each (see Honneth 1992: 168, 174–191, 197–210). This earlier work is discernably Kantian in its treatment of self-respect in the political realm (Honneth 1992: 174–191) and more sanguine about taking legal status to be paradigmatic of political status. Critics of liberalism’s atomic conception of political freedom can question the adequacy of the very concept of a right, or of right to property in particular, and the political realm (Honneth 1992: 174–191) and more sanguine about taking legal status to be paradigmatic of political status. Critics of liberalism’s atomic conception of political freedom can question the adequacy of the very concept of a right, or of right to property in particular (see Marx 1958: I, 364; MacIntyre 1984: 66). The idea of a private right still plays a central role for Honneth, but the account of social freedom is in many ways extra-juridical. Additionally, Honneth has argued along Fichte lines for recognition as a basic structure underlying all cognition (see Honneth et al. 2008). So, for instance, failures of what Honneth terms “antecedent recognition” result in reification. Unlike Fichte, however, Honneth does not construe basal recognition ethically, holding instead that reification results from a “forgetting” of antecedent recognition (Honneth et al. 2008: 17), an idea he culls from a somewhat gnomic sentence from Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment: “alle Verdinglichung ist ein Vergessen” (all reification is a forgetting) (Horkheimer and Adorno 1969: 244; see also Adorno and Benjamin 1995: 417).

Neither antecedent recognition nor reification features by name in Das Recht der Freiheit. Perhaps Honneth has withdrawn the concept of antecedent recognition in the face of some recent criticism of the idea alleging that such recognition is crypto-moral (see, separately, Guess and Lear in Honneth et al. 2008: 126–127, 134–135). In any case, I leave these concepts aside in what follows. Das Recht der Freiheit is also a thoroughgoing reimagining of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, deploying a frame device adapted from Hegel’s doubly nested tripartite structure of (A) Abstract Right, (B) Morality (Moralität), and (C) Ethical Life (Sittlichkeit) and within (C), structures of (1) Family, (2) Civil Society, and (3) State (cf. Taylor 1995). Hegel arranges the parts of this structure in an interlocking and dialectically progressive hierarchy, secured by a teleological metaphysics governing what he takes to be the necessary developmental structure of human communal intelligence. Honneth rejects this metaphysics; nevertheless, his own account is progressive. Honneth calls the argumentative approach he takes to social and political theory “normative reconstruction,” a form of immanent critique in terms of which he nests the various forms of recognition, which forms are fine-tuned to the requirements of modern social, economic, and political reality as he sees them. In particular, his approach is calibrated in terms of the requirements of a modern conception of freedom.

Honneth finds that neo-Kantianism in political theory errs when it insists that principles of freedom can be (must be) developed from sources external to the social reality to which they will apply (Honneth 2011: 21–22). Instead of surveying social reality and then regressing to an idealization, the critical theorist ought to look around hard in the first place. Honneth is particularly keen to demote political theories that obscure the social-communal nature of human being, whether they are of classically liberal lineage or theories of “reflexive freedom” in either their “pure reason” (e.g. Kant) or “authenticity” (e.g. Fichte) veins. He holds
that a Hegelian conception of social freedom can encompass and give proper place to both of the individuality-centered accounts of freedom by surmounting them. Although inherently social in nature, individual freedom for Honneth remains the core personal, social, and political value, the organizing principle around which the “transcendental” presupposition of the drive to normative integration” operates (Honneth 2011: 19). (It is worth marking that Honneth places the word “transcendental” in scare quotes; a realist might balk at even this, wondering how seriously he takes the demand for integrative force issuing from mutually recognized freedom.) Honneth’s view is that being free means being able to satisfy one’s demand that others recognize one as free. In turn, this means that one must see others as free in order for such recognition to matter in the right way (i.e. to be freedom enhancing). The minimal free “unit” is this coordinating, reciprocating “we.” Social structures that protect, enable, and preserve freedom as self-determination via mutual recognition by definition are just (Honneth 2011: 38–39).

The principal question of political theory that Honneth confronts is Hegel’s as well: what is the proper theoretical relationship of morality (Moralität) to ethical life (Sittlichkeit)? Hegel takes morality to be “abstract,” in a sense not too far afield from the one we have developed in prior discussion of political realism. Morality requires one to do one’s duty but the content of that duty—what duty it is—is left indeterminate without resources external to morality. While moral principles may provide ex post tests for the validity of candidate moral judgments and actions, they do not determine the judgment or action at hand as it is at hand. The basis for the charge is an entirely general feature of Hegel’s metaphysics, which targets a purportedly inadequate, modern account of how a universal (i.e. a law) and a particular (i.e. an action) are conjoint in thought (i.e. judgment). Kant limns his conception of a moral law from that of a physical law; what he calls strict laws, in which universal and particular are isolated from one another antecedent to thought. Laws determine their instances by imparting form to them; what is to-be-formed does not contribute lawlike structure of its own. That an instant judgment falls under moral law shows at best, according to Hegel, that the law is a necessary but not a sufficient condition on the judgment. The Kantian may intervene at this point to remind one that Kant does not think that instances are wholly formed by the laws under which they fall; they are determined as the instances they are by material components exogenous to law. That may be, but it is beside the point. Hegel does not deny that Kantian moral laws do not determine with exactness the specifics of judgment; it is, rather, that the specifics cannot enter into the law in the first place. For Hegel only empirical social specifics can provide what is contentful about moral precepts—a source of authority that could only count as heterogeneous in Kant’s reckoning. Ethical life takes on board the provision of content from existing social activity, thereby satisfying the sufficiency condition. This does no violence to the necessity of moral law because, as Hegel has it, the social content is itself rationally constructed to abide within the form of law. That is, such content is structured developmentally by an inhering, rational, teleological historical process. On this basis, Hegel holds that ethical life encompasses morality in an enriched form. Not reversing this “direction of fit” between morality and ethical life is as crucial for Honneth as it was for Hegel. Only by presenting an account in which morality is dependent on ethical life, and not the other way around, can one avoid idealism, viz. an abstracting, ethics-first view of politics.

The two sectors of mutual recognition Honneth discusses that most touch upon what a realist would consider the political involve market economics and institutional politics. As to the first, Honneth rejects, as did Hegel, the notion that market rationality is autonomous. Markets are at least in part ethical; political questions of their legitimacy are always pertinent. In their present state, however, markets are so devoid of Sittlichkeit that Honneth admits that the proposition that they are constrained ethically cannot emerge from normative
reconstruction. This raises the difficulty that any requirement to engage economic markets as potential bearers of recognized ethical value issues from an idealization not different in kind from one a neo-Kantian might propose. In other words, economies currently bottom out in *Moralität* with no intrinsic way forward. This admission may amount to less a willing embrace of idealism than a testament to what can happen to the Hegelian who abjures metaphysics. Perhaps Honneth is offering what a Kant would regard as a regulative posit. How welcoming that admission and procedure will be to the realist will depend on whether Honneth thinks the regulative debt might be at some point discharged. To the extent that it is a transcendentally necessary posit (i.e. a posit that *cannot* be discharged on pains of a failure of rationality), the realist will reject it.

As for the political arena, Honneth stresses, as does Habermas, the intertwined historical development of media and democratic discourse; however, Honneth now departs from Habermas by not focusing predominately on legal institutions as guarantors of or impediments to freedom. Exclusive or near-exclusive focus on legality threatens to tip the scale, again, in the direction of abstraction. Legal status is of course important, but the idea of legislating esteem—holding that one has a *right* to be treated with dignity with respect to, say, one's ethnic origin, i.e. an obligation imposed on another backed, if necessary, by force—is, to say the least, contestable. Honneth places emphasis on less structurally concerted forms of recognition present in art and less mainstream forms of life to cover the bases. This is a reincorporation of Adorno's avant-gardism; such products are important due to their expression of forms of experience that are not yet fully "recognized" in the culture. They work, in essence, in the reverse direction of law—not from top down, but from bottom up.

To be sure, Honneth is mindful of many of the concerns that contextual political realists take to be central: the avoidance of moral idealization antecedent to and independent of political reality, the role played by political judgment, the deployment within political philosophy of social scientific resources, and rejecting the introduction of prior substantive commitment to particular moral theories within politics. As we saw, Hegel criticizes Kant's abstracting moralism by incorporating it in the more comprehensive category of ethical life. Honneth's conception of social freedom is modeled on Hegel's conception of the same and—the case of markets aside—likewise identifies forms of social justice that are "ethical" in the expanded Hegelian sense, but nonmoral because nonabstract. Is Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, deployed as a political ground, a concept that the realist is bound to reject, notwithstanding the Hegelian's own objection to Kantianism? Does the move away from Kantian forms of idealism inoculate Honneth from contextual realist scrutiny?

Consideration of the question is helped by recalling the general thrust of Marx's critique of Hegelianism. There used to be an abundant (some might say: overabundant) literature on the question of whether Marx is an ethical thinker and, if he is, in what sense. Regardless of how one settles that question, there are two things Marx is not: (1) a moralizing Kantian and (2) an endorser of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*. According to Marx, Hegel was correct to reject Kantian *Moralität* as abstract. But Marx rejects Hegel's incorporation of morality into ethical life. There are two grounds for the rejection. First, according to Marx it is manifest that, in fact, morality governs the modern political state, not ethical life. The modern state as it exists is steeped in liberal political ideals, determined to be a state governed by private right and individual self-interest. Second, that one might be oblivious to this fact is due to the illusion left in place by an even more basic and false structure underpinning Hegelian thinking. The basic Hegelian conception of human agency is not sufficiently material, as it does not embed possible forms of thought in possible forms of labor. Instead, it relies on a metaphysical conception of preadapted harmony between material political structures and the requirements of *Geist*. Hegel can only rest satisfied that morality is encompassed by ethical life adequately because of this metaphysical assumption. In other words, Hegel is
captive to the specious division between mental and physical labor. Now, one might think that Marx can retain *Sittlichkeit* by cleansing it of *Moralität*. But Marx sees that this is not an option. Marx must reject *Sittlichkeit* because it is a product of rationalist metaphysics that is, in turn, a product of inadequate views concerning the nature and proper philosophical role of the division of labor and its history. Put in Hegelian terms, ethical life is what it is only when it dialectically subsumes morality; there is no way to perform the surgery necessary to excise morality from ethical life and leave ethical life intact. That would seem to settle the question about Marx’s ethics in the negative. Marx does not “have an ethics” if what “ethics” means is either Kantian or Hegelian ethics.

That Marx is broadly a political realist cannot be doubted. Critical Theory in its early period was discernably Marxist, albeit in a form of so-called humanistic Marxism that did not reduce culture to material base. Translated into realist terms, Marx’s claim against Hegel might be put as follows: *Sittlichkeit* still incorporates a second-level form of moralism: the idea that there is a collective intelligence whose developmental essence guarantees content be given to morality. It is “raw” history, however, that gives such content through the material determination of thought, a history that has an ultimately contingent progressive developmental arc, not one that is necessary in the sense that Hegel requires. Honneth in essence holds that there is a form of *Sittlichkeit* that is not captive to morality, even though morality is still the dominant going concern in large segments of political society. He can cite an increase in scope and depth of civil rights over the last half-century in favor of his view that there is a progressive tendency in society with regard to mutual recognition. Perhaps the tendency is so embedded that wholesale lapses in such recognition would be experienced as contrary to rationality. Marx’s rejection of *Sittlichkeit*, then, does not bite automatically against Honneth’s *Sittlichkeit*, since Honneth rejects the same Hegelian metaphysics that Marx targets. Honneth uses Hegel’s conception as a springboard for his own, but does not adopt it uncritically.

This brief excursion through Marx not only brings home that abstract theories of idealism are not explanatory; it is also the case that they are not critical and, therefore, not political interventions (Marx 1958: III, 7 [§11]). Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit* is for Marx ideological. For all one can tell, one might exist in a social or political order that seems legitimate while it is not so, and any position at the intersection of Critical Theory and political realism will have to take ideology and false consciousness very seriously. Even more to the point, ideology compromises realistic assessment of one’s political circumstance by masking existing power relations and substituting for them an idealized appearance of the same. Ideology, that is, undercuts political realism, since it is realism’s charge to be able to penetrate existing relations of politics in order to criticize them. Here Guess provides more guidance than Williams. This is to say that, at the crossroads of realism and Critical Theory, moralistic theories are not merely false; they falsify the very reality that realism seeks to understand. As Marx insisted, theories are modes of political agency, part of what Critical Theory and realism will wish to understand and counteract through critique. The point is, then, not merely to recoup the advanced edge of what social knowledge is available in the status quo. Rather, it is to allow for radical critique of the status quo—to permit a form of criticism that goes beyond the knowledge available “on the ground” from existing social relations. The trick is to do this without falling into the pit of moral idealizations.

Placed against this altered backdrop, the question posed to Honneth’s view is not whether it is moralizing or abstract malgré lui in the way Kantian theories are. It is, rather, whether it can be robustly critical—i.e. critical in the radical sense. I wish to conclude by briefly considering whether the methodological underpinning of Honneth’s account, normative reconstruction, allows for radical critique and, if it does not, whether that counts against its realism.
I put aside general criticisms of mutual recognition as a “master concept,” some of which may be telling. I also cannot address here other objections that might be raised, e.g. that Honneth’s view is functionalist, specifically, Aristotelian, i.e. as holding that there is a general account of human flourishing against which one may measure deviation. One might interpret certain trends in earlier Critical Theory in such a way (see Freyenhagen 2013); nevertheless, a realist will reject this essentialism as moralistic, albeit this-worldly. What I offer here is not in any sense meant to be definitive; rather, it is meant to spur thought. Normative reconstruction rests on four “premises” or precepts. First, normative reconstruction assumes that relevant social structures regulate themselves by means of norms that express shared conceptions of the good. In modernity, which operates under a standing demand for self-authorization, this is tantamount to the idea that social orders legitimate themselves in terms that reflect the ethical values and aspirations present in the society as that society recognizes them (Honneth 2011: 19–24). Call this the legitimation principle. Second, the relevant objects of reconstruction will be drawn from social ethical reality and not from abstract models that are not anchored in that reality. Further, only progressive ethical components are subject to reconstruction—i.e. components that are superior to those of prior social formations (Honneth 2011: 19–24). Call this the progressive realism principle. Third, only those practices and institutions central to securing the social good are subject to reconstruction (Honneth 2011: 24–27). Call this the centrality principle. Fourth, normative reconstruction is not merely descriptive, aiming to give an account of existing practices as they are understood to be within the society in question. It is critical in that it has the power to juxtapose the existing state of institutions and practices with the ideals that they are crafted to instantiate (Honneth 2011: 27–29). Call this the critical principle. “Ideals” here do not mean, of course, abstract principles; rather, they are what is concretely but as yet implicitly assumed in the social life in question.

For the realist attention falls squarely on the critical principle. Simply put, a realist will not want to rule out a severe mismatch between the status quo and freedom, a case that is especially possible if there are strong ideological constraints on the formation of accurate beliefs, hopes, desires, etc. But social criticism for Honneth centers on existing social understanding and practice as criteria for determining the degree to which the underlying ideals are met. The legitimation principle is similarly constrained: practices are legitimated to the extent that they are understood to be so, given the ideals as they exist. But again, perform the criticism principle, this is limited to an assessment of whether the practices realize the goods they are supposed to embody; there is no essential reference to whether such underlying ideals are good in the first place. One might suppose that the progressive realism principle delivers a bit more on this front, but it merely posits measures relative to prior existing instantiations of value. The centrality principle is likewise conservative, since what real social structures are at the functional core of a given society may indeed be the ones that, even when rendered better in terms of their underlying ideals, are recalcitrant to criticism and change. The challenge may be set directly: what is normative reconstruction to do with a situation in which both the existing practices and the ideals they are meant to realize are inconsistent with freedom? Correlatively, since critique is limited to the potential mismatch of practice and ideal internal to a system, the result of criticism will be less of a mismatch, and the progress indexed to the criticism must be incremental. One might put matters thus: there is no account of revolution to be teased out of Honneth’s gradualism. Or, in terms of Geuss’ more recent work, the view fails to be “utopian” (see Geuss 2015).

Now, some may hold this to be an impeccably Hegelian result. But is it a realist one? One might think that realism dictates gradualism. After all, one works with the social understanding that one has on the ground and importing into the reconstruction standards of freedom that do not register in the ideals that underlie practices might seem an offense
to concrete criticism. But those who might object to Honneth’s procedure here might also point out that a finding of deep bankruptcy on the part of an even apparently progressive social substrate does nothing to vitiate concrete criticism. One might even see in Honneth’s allowance for the importance of marginal practices—i.e. in art—a concession in this direction. But, more to the point, realism does not require a moderate political response to every political situation. In some situations, moderation is unrealistic. Accordingly, the realist need not write off revolution as a possible result of critique. Indeed, when the requirements for massive change are real, the realist may not do so.

Note

1 I presented an earlier version of this paper at the ETH-Zürich and would like to thank the audience there for their comments and criticisms, especially Michael Hampe, Norman Sieroka, and Lutz Wingert.

References


Further Reading

Works that provide necessary historical and conceptual background to political realism, in English or English translation:


