

## Axel Honneth and the theory of recognition

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### Abstract

This article presents a critical reinterpretation of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition, arguing that his tripartite model—love, law, social esteem—provides the moral grammar indispensable for diagnosing contemporary social conflicts. By systematically reconstructing Honneth's synthesis of Hegel, Mead, and Winnicott, we demonstrate how struggles against disrespect—rooted in the denial of recognition—are not mere ethical protests, but the main engine of social transformation. This framework uniquely reveals why demands for identity, rights, and dignity (from feminist movements to postcolonial struggles) fundamentally challenge institutionalized patterns of misrecognition, rather than merely material interests. Consequently, we propose that Honneth's theory offers critical theory an essential normative paradigm: it shifts the analysis from economic exploitation to the moral injuries underlying systemic injustice, allowing for a more comprehensive critique of social pathologies. The article thus positions recognition as a vital conceptual tool for understanding and legitimizing emancipatory struggles in pluralistic democracies, where demands for visibility and validation drive progressive change.

**Keywords:** recognition, Honneth, Mead, Hegel, critical theory

### Introduction

Today, it is of the utmost importance for Western democratic traditions to elucidate the historical origins and evolution of those concepts that have been fundamental to our

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social and political coexistence. To pursue this great intellectual task, the idea of recognition deserves a retrospective look, for in recent decades it has become an essential element of the way we understand the political and cultural reality that surrounds us. Thus, it is present in demands as diverse as equal rights among members of a community, unconditional recognition of the specificities of the other, or the valuing of cultural minorities through a politics of recognition.

Various studies of classical and contemporary social philosophy have been conducted on the problem of social recognition. Today, the struggle for recognition, which is both identitarian and political, attracts the attention of numerous theoretical strands of the social sciences. Cultural studies, multiculturalism, modern theories of communication, gender studies, various perspectives on collective action, and political theory are some examples of how the process of intersubjective recognition and the conflicts that occur around it constitute one of the essential vectors of the complexity that contemporary societies manifest.

Axel Honneth, in an attempt to renew critical theory, has gone the furthest in deepening and updating Hegel's original idea. This is the idea of recognition (*Anerkennung*), a central concept in the tradition of German idealism, first thematised by Fichte (2000) in his work *Foundations of Natural Right* (*Grundlage des Naturrechts*). It was later taken up by Hegel (2018) in his work *Phenomenology of Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*) in the famous passage on the dialectic of master and slave. In both theories this concept refers to the need for the self to be recognised by others and to be confirmed as a free and active subject. For both Fichte and Hegel this is the essential condition of self-consciousness, understood as the way in which the self enters into relation with itself.

The present paper consists of an analysis of Axel Honneth's theory of recognition from its different perspectives—sociological, psychoanalytic, and philosophical—in which the processes of social change, social conflict, and social identity are explained with reference to the normative claims structurally inscribed in relations of mutual recognition. Honneth, starting

from the Hegelian concept of recognition, with input from Mead and Winnicott, shows us that the engine of social movements and struggles is the struggle for recognition and not for self-preservation, as modern social philosophy maintains. The author makes an extensive and original contribution to the renewal of critical theory in philosophy, political science and sociology (Fontes, 2019). We aim to show the journey and reformulations that recognition theory has had since its initial genesis and that it continues to inspire research in the social sciences.

Our research uses the qualitative method in its documental analysis strand. The methodology used to analyse different documents is based on a critical hermeneutics. It is essentially an analysis of a formal, analytical and conceptual nature. Thereafter, the theories and categories of the various authors are presented from an interpretation and critically evaluated.

## **1. Historical and conceptual journey of recognition**

Although in recent years the theoretical and empirical construction on social recognition has expanded, the essential content of what we call 'recognition' has been little explored since Hegel's conception. Honneth (2002, 505-506), in addressing the concept of recognition, agrees with Ikäheimo (2002) and Laitinen (2002) on four premises: first, that the original mode of recognition corresponds to the central meaning of the German language, the affirmation of positive properties of the other person or group; second, recognition is an attitude, because only through behaviour corresponding to the word or intention does the credibility that is normatively important for the recognised subject originate; third, acts of recognition are a distinct phenomenon in the social world, with an autonomous intention directed positively towards another person or group and not the result of another action with another meaning or secondary intention; and finally, the fourth premise that the three authors share is the conviction that recognition is a fundamental attitude with three different accents, representing a generic concept that unfolds in the sphere of love, legal respect and social valuation, in a Hegelian perspective.

Regarding the semantics of the word recognition, it covers different meanings in different languages. In the different European languages, the concept of recognition not only includes the simple cognitive identification, for example by accepting a fact, but also assumes a more important meaning by characterizing the “normative situation associated with awarding a social status” (Honneth 2002, 505). Later, Honneth in an interview with Lysaker and Jacobsen (2010) clarifies the two senses that the term “Anerkennung” has in the German language, although neither assumes the strong sense of identification like “recognition” in the English language or “reconnaissance” in the French language. On the one hand, it is used in German without normative implications when one affirms a fact already given, for example: when we acknowledge the fact of death. Which means that we must - epistemologically or cognitively – acknowledge something that is difficult to acknowledge. On the other hand, the notion of recognition is used in another sense in the German language, and here English and Latin languages coincide, in the normative sense, referring to an affirmative attitude towards another person in which we feel obliged to follow certain norms. This sense of recognition implies a normative attitude towards the other person in which I am obliged to treat the other in a specific way, which includes a moral starting point towards the other. And this is where Honneth (2002) situates himself, understanding “recognition as a behavioural reaction in which we respond rationally to evaluative qualities that we have learned to perceive, to the extent to which we are integrated into the second nature of our lifeworld” (513).

Exploring the semantic richness of the word recognition, which, in addition to meaning the perception of the familiarity of something or someone, means verification, confirmation and often appreciation, we will develop and deepen the Hegelian theory of recognition developed by Axel Honneth.

## **2. Hegel and intersubjectivity**

The proposal of Hegelian philosophy, contrary to the philosophical paradigm of his time, which finds its exponent in Kant, is based on the abandonment of the atomistic perspective

of society, which starts from an unreal, particular and isolated individual to subsequently discover the community as something external and heteronomous. For Hegel, the philosophical theory of society should not start from the realization of the actions of isolated subjects, but from the moral bonds in whose fabric the subjects always move together. Thus, as Honneth (1995, 12-15) summarizes, reversing the atomistic premise, Hegelian philosophy finds its presupposition in an intersubjective conception of society.

Starting from this intersubjective premise of society, Hegel will reinterpret Hobbes' paradigm of the original struggle of all against all, where the interest of individual self-preservation is evidenced, and propose that the motor of conflicts within society becomes the deficient recognition of the identity of some individuals. Thus, social conflicts no longer function solely from the particular interests of some individuals or groups, but are an ethical event, because they try to change a precarious pattern of recognition for another, broader one, in which new forms of human individuality may find the possibility of full realization (Honneth, 1995, 17).

In the analysis of Miguel Giusti (2004, 82), Hegel tried throughout his work to understand the moral sense that can enclose the voluntary violation of a social norm, trying to explain this conduct within the dynamics of recognition. Because, from this perspective, the crime acquires the sense of a protest against the experience of frustration derived from a normative expectation not fulfilled. It results from this that the solution to the problem of crime cannot simply be punishment, because this does not recognize motivation or moral legitimization, but rather the satisfaction of frustrated recognition.

For Hegel, in a synthetic way, what motivates an act of transgression of a social norm is the perception, by an individual or by a group, of the insufficient recognition of their individuality in the society in which they live. For the author, it is through these destructive acts - which primarily deny a condition of right - that the formation of new ethical configurations becomes possible. Since the act of transgression reveals the situation of fragility in which the disrespected

individual finds himself and, consequently, of his dependence in relation to the community, since it is only by appealing to it that the disrespected subject will be able to reaffirm his offended individuality, not recognized by the aggressor. Thus, as Honneth (1995, 17) argues, it is not a contract between men that will put an end to the precarious situation of a struggle for survival of all against all, but, conversely, it is through struggle as a moral means that we can transition from an underdeveloped state of ethicity to a more mature level of ethical relation. Hegel's reinterpretation of Hobbes' model introduces a "new version of the conception of social struggle, according to which practical conflict between subjects can be understood as an ethical moment in a movement occurring within a collective social life" (Honneth 1995, 17).

For Hegel, negative acts of deprivation of freedom, in addition to destroying the social structures of elementary recognition, can also contribute to the creation of new ethically mature relations of recognition, a prerequisite for building a community of free citizens. Thus, for Honneth (1995, 20-24), conflict would be that which would prepare individuals for the recognition of their mutual dependence. In this way, social conflicts, where natural ethicality is broken, enable individuals to be ready to recognise each other as fully individuated persons, but also dependent on each other.

### 3. Theory of recognition

In reconstructing the foundations of current critical theory on the basis of Axel Honneth's *Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflict* (1995), it can be seen that, with respect to the theory of society, there is a fundamental assumption that the core spheres of societies are institutionalizations of specific forms of recognition that are anchored in distinct principles of reciprocal recognition. A social reality understood in this way should be analysed by means of a normative and substantial theory of society on the basis of the Hegelian hypothesis of a *struggle for recognition* (Honneth, 1995, 1), whose fundamental concepts should be adequate to these expectations. For this reason, Honneth finds in the category of recognition a key concept from the perspective of

social ontology. Thus, outlining the idea of a critical theory of society in which the processes of social change should be explained with reference to the normative claims structurally inscribed in the relation of reciprocal recognition.

Honneth takes up the concept of recognition from the young Hegel with the aim of using it systematically as a key for the moral reading of the history of political claims, that is, in his words, as a “moral grammar of social conflicts” (Honneth, 1995, subtitle of the book). The end sought there is twofold, as Giusti (2007, 6) reminds us: on the one hand, the need to offer a more convincing explanation of the moral motivation that animates civic and cultural manifestations and, on the other hand, the need to correct the excessive formalism of the Habermasian universalist position to which he feels indebted.

Honneth (1995) attempts to understand Hegel's doctrine of recognition in the sense of a theory of the necessary condition of human socialization. The author intends to construct from the normative presuppositions of the recognition relation the reference point of the explanation of the processes of historical and empirical transformation of society, resulting from this a greater concern in the sociological underpinning of the Hegelian theory of recognition. Honneth (1995, 69-70) first investigates Hegel's hypothesis that the various sequential stages of recognition can stand up to empirical considerations, whether it is possible to attribute to the corresponding forms of mutual recognition parallel experiences of social disrespect, and finally tries to find historical and sociological confirmations for the idealization that these forms of social disrespect are indeed the cause of social conflicts. For such an undertaking it will be necessary to expose the moral logic of social conflicts, since the idea of social struggle outlined by the young Hegel did not go beyond the speculative horizon of an idealist theory, which would not be so significant without the historical-materialist turn of his successors.

For Honneth, it was George Herbert Mead who developed in the most consistent way the idea that individuals construct their identity in the experience of an intersubjective recognition. Through Mead, one has access to “the most suitable means for reconstructing the intersubjectivist intuitions of the

Young Hegel within a postmetaphysical framework” (Honneth, 1995, 71). The central issue of the theoretical construction of both that essentially interests Honneth is that both Mead and the young Hegel aspire to explain the moral evolution of society through the struggle for recognition. For Honneth (1995, 143), the fundamental thesis shared by Hegel and Mead is that the struggle for recognition constitutes the moral force within the reality of human social life that propels it towards development and progress. In this way, moral experiences of contempt for the dignity of the subject would be at the origin of social movements of resistance and protest. In this sense, for Honneth, historical progress towards autonomy and freedom requires a social theory in which the Hegelian concept of the “struggle for recognition” can be corrected by Mead's social psychology and by a psychoanalytically oriented anthropology, as we shall see later. In the construction of this paper it is important at this point to elaborate on the central ideas of Mead's social psychology, to be developed in the following paragraphs, in their influence on Honneth's interpretative framework.

Mead (1934) by becoming interested in psychology submits to the epistemological test its object: how can psychology access its specific object, the psychic? By taking up the fundamental pragmatist idea of Charles Peirce through John Dewey, according to which it is exactly the situations of problematization of actions that are taken advantage of by the individual subject in his cognitive operations, Mead obtains for psychology the access to its object, insofar as an individual becomes aware of his subjectivity, since, under the pressure of a practical problem that he intends to solve, he is obliged to creatively re-elaborate his interpretations of reality. Mead (1934, 144-151) designs his methodological framework according to this functionalist principle, that psychology may have an internal conception of the mechanisms enabling an awareness of subjectivity, from the perspective that actors adopt in the ever-threatening interaction with their partners. For this task, a problem arises: how can a subject achieve awareness of the social significance of his actions? Mead explains, that a subject can only acquire knowledge about the



intersubjective meaning of his actions when he is able to trigger in himself the same reaction that his behavior caused as a stimulus in his opponent. For only vocal expression, unlike other non-vocal forms of understanding, can influence the agent in the same way as it does the defiant. From this conclusion, Mead (1934, 149) draws the conditions for the manifestation of human self-consciousness through the expansion of the consciousness of meanings, since there is always a mutual relationship of the individual with the community in which he lives. For Honneth (1995), in this process of individual experience, through “the ability to call up in oneself the meaning that one’s action has for others also opens up the possibility for one to view oneself as a social object of the actions of one’s partner to interaction” (74).

Thus, by responding to himself, and through the process of verbalization, just like the one he interacts with, the subject positions himself eccentrically in relation to himself, obtaining an image of himself, which enables the awareness of his identity. Hence Mead (1934, 122) distinguishes the *Me* from the *I* as two faces of the same *Self*, which constitute personality in the way it is revealed in social experience. The *Self* is essentially a dynamic social process of these two distinct faces. While the *Me* “reflects the other’s image of me, only preserves my momentary activity as something already past- from the ‘I’, which represents the unregimented source of all my current actions”, as Honneth (1995, 74) points out. The *I* precedes the individual’s awareness of himself, as it also comments on the practical manifestations consciously preserved in the *Me*. Thus, between the *I* and the *Me* there is a relationship similar to that between partners in a dialogue. The *I* for Mead can never exist as an object in consciousness, but rather as the dialogical character of internal experience. Honneth takes up the concept of the *Me*, to which collective experiences can be referred, which Mead uses in characterizing the result of the originary self-relation, making it

clear that individuals can only become conscious of themselves in the object-position. For the self that one catches sight of in reacting to oneself is always what one’s interaction partner sees as his or her partner to interaction perceived, and never the current agent of one’s own behavioural expressions. (Honneth, 1995, 74)

Honneth (1995), based on Mead's contribution, formulates an intersubjective conception of human self-consciousness: "a subject can only acquire a consciousness of itself to the extent to which it learns to perceive its own action from the symbolically represented second-person perspective" (75). For Honneth, this thesis represents the first stage in the naturalistic grounding of Hegel's theory of recognition, in which "Mead inverts the relationship between the ego and the social world and asserts the primacy of the perception of the other to the development of self-consciousness" (75).

According to Honneth (1995, 76), Hegel's theoretical potential of the Jena period, goes further than Mead's application, since to the concept of recognition is of interest less in the cognitive relation of interaction, through which self-consciousness is attained, than in the forms of practical confirmation through which the subject acquires a normative understanding of himself as a particular kind of person. The essential interest is revealed in the attempt to understand the intersubjective conditions of the subject's practical self-relationship with his fellow human beings.

Mead (1934, 144-145), presenting the concept of *Me* as the cognitive representation that the subject receives of himself, from the moment he perceives himself from the perspective of a second person, gives a new development to social psychology, by extending his analysis of reactive behaviour to the normative principles of action, by including in the analysis of interaction the consideration of moral norms. Now, for Honneth (1995, 77), it is from this fundamental idea that Mead supports the explanation of human identity formation in his later work. Starting from the development of the child, in which the practical framework of the subject's self-image tends to expand with the addition of interaction partners, we can extract the basic process of the socialization of the human being as a whole. Conceptual mediation, from the narrowest to the broadest, is given for Mead (1934, 106-111) through the concept of the "generalized other". Just as the child, in the playful phase, acquires the capacity to guide its behaviour by rules which it obtained from the synthesis of the perspectives of all those around it, socialization in general takes place in the

internalisation of behavioural norms, arising from the expectations of all the members of society. The subject thus acquires the capacity to participate in the normative interactions of his environment and, by adopting as his own the social norms of action of the “generalized other”, develops the identity of a subject accepted in his community. In this process of socialization, operated in the intersubjective relationship, Honneth (1995, 78) stresses the importance of using the concept of recognition. Honneth's proposal, coinciding with Mead's, goes in the direction of mutual recognition, since the subject by recognizing others through the internalization of their normative attitudes can find himself recognized as a member of his social context of interaction. This recognition as a member of society shapes the concept of dignity, through which the subject can feel secure in the social value of his identity. To characterize the awareness of his value, the concept of “self-respect” emerges, referring to “the positive attitude towards oneself that one is capable of taking if one is recognized by the members of one's community as being a particular kind of person” (Honneth, 1995, 79), the degree of self-respect depending on the extent to which the subject finds confirmation for his properties or abilities, in addition to the “rights” that are attributed to the members of the community. The latter represent for Mead “a solid, though only very general, basis for self-respect” (79).

From Mead's theoretical evolutionary process, a second stage emerges, for Honneth, in Hegel's model of recognition: the generic conception of law, in the concept of the “generalized other” in an in-depth way, because “recognizing one another as legal persons means that both subjects control their own action by integrating into it the community's will, as that is embodied in the intersubjectively recognized norms of their society” (Honneth, 1995, 80). However, this stage of recognition theory fails to express in a positive way one's individual differences, that which distinguishes one from interaction partners. Mead goes beyond Hegel's frame of reference by including the creative potential of the *I* in the process of identity formation, the practical spontaneity that marks our action in everyday life. By contrast, the *Me* aggregates the norms of the community that

the subject seeks to amplify in order to grant social expression to the impulsiveness and creativity of his or her *I* (Honneth, 1995, 80-81). This internal dialectic between *I* and *Me*, outlines the general principles of conflict, in the moral development of individuals and societies and potentiates new forms of social recognition. We must speak of the originality of the *I*, in a continuous process of identity construction, while the common will imposes itself on individual action, it is through the *Me* that the subject is forced “to fight, in the interest of one's 'I', for new forms of social recognition” (Honneth, 1995, 82). It is from this dialectic that personal identity is allowed to be preserved in the form of personal recognition. Since the impulsiveness of the *I* and the normative idealization that accompanies it in its social practice cannot be contained when defending its ambitions in a spontaneous way, the subject is left with no alternative but to continuously seek the agreement of the community, which, in the established recognition relationship, grants it further rights of freedom (Honneth, 1995, 83).

For Honneth (1995, 83-84) this thesis of Mead includes a concept of social development capable of providing the Hegelian idea of “struggle for recognition” with a social psychology underpinning. Mead establishes between the ongoing action of the *self* and social life a systematic, interdependent link, in which individual normative claims drive social development to a constant adaptation to the progressive process of individuation. Both Hegel and Mead understand the moral development of societies as a gradual process of broadening their recognized legal content, in which, historically, in a continuous struggle for recognition, subjects attempt to extend the scope of their intersubjectively established rights, thereby increasing the level of their personal autonomy. However, unlike Hegel, Mead enables us to explain the motivational underpinnings of the process of social development, since, “the forces that propel the 'movement of recognition' each time anew represent the uncontrollable levels of the 'I', which can only express themselves freely and without coercion if they meet with the approval of the 'generalized other'” (Honneth, 1995, 84-85).

Despite Mead's significant contribution to the systematization of recognition theory, Honneth (1995) finds limitations in the application of his concept of a social legal relation, since "Mead does not sufficiently distinguish between the universalization of social norms and the expansion of individual freedom" (86). Similarly, Mead did not provide answers to the questions posed by the process of individual self-realization.

The ethical concept of the 'generalized other' that Mead would have arrived at, had he considered the idealizing anticipation of subjects who know themselves to be unrecognized, serves the same purpose as Hegel's conception of ethical life. It identifies a relationship of mutual recognition in which every individual can know himself or herself to be confirmed as a person who is distinct from all others in virtue of his or her particular traits and abilities. (Honneth, 1995, 88)

In this way, Mead had difficulties to realize that the realization of the *Self*, in the process of the acquisition of personal autonomy, necessitates the anticipation of an ideal other than the "generalized other". What form reciprocal recognition should take, when it does not focus on the guarantee of rights, but on the confirmation of the individual specificities of each one, is a question that was not included in Mead's reflections.

The solution that Mead presents, in a post-traditional response to the Hegelian problem of ethnicity, "involves linking self-realization to engaging in socially useful work" (Honneth, 1995, 88). The recognition that is given to a subject in the system of the social division of labour, by demonstrating competence in his or her function, will be enough for him or her to understand the awareness of his or her uniqueness. The individual, therefore, will only be able to fully respect himself if, within the framework of the functions of the system of the division of labour, he can identify his positive contribution to the reproduction of the community. However, according to Honneth (1995, 89-91), Mead did not clarify some difficulties of his proposal. The idea that individuals in the experience of socially useful work can achieve recognition of their particular characteristics fails first of all for the reason that the evaluation of the regulated functions of the division of labour is itself dependent on the definition of the overarching goals of a

community. Thus, the functional division of labour cannot be regarded as a neutral value system that establishes the rules by which individuals can verify their specific contributions with some objectivity, since the evaluation of socially useful labour contributions is regulated by the intersubjectively shared values that constitute a society's unique way of life, or its common concept of the good life.

Despite the limitations of Mead's proposal, it has the advantage of enunciating some of the difficulties of the theoretical framework of the young Hegel. As seen, both Hegel and Mead give great relevance to the idea of a 'struggle for recognition', in which subjects as biographically individuated persons seek intersubjective recognition. While Mead proposes the system of the division of labour for this form of recognition, the young Hegel presents the idea of solidarity relations. Solidarity will be the synthesis of two modes of recognition, since it shares with "law" the cognitive perspective of universal equal treatment and with "love" the perspective of emotional attachment and solicitude. "Ethicity" for the young Hegel would be, as Honneth (1995, 91) elucidates,

the type of social relationship that arises when love has been refined, under the cognitive impress of the law, into universal solidarity among members of a community. Since everyone who has this attitude can respect the other in his or her individual particularity, it is in this attitude that the most advanced form of mutual recognition is realized.

But in relation to Mead's proposal, the formal Hegelian concept of ethnicity lacks any indication of the reasons that should lead individuals to be in solidarity with one another. Without reference to an orientation towards common values and goals, as Mead proposed in his conception of the functional division of labour, the concept of solidarity still needs a nexus that is the motivating foundation of experience (Honneth 1995, 91).

By recreating the German conceptual tradition of recognition theory and with the building blocks of Mead's social psychology, Honneth (1995) underpins his theory from the fundamental principle that

the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee. (92)

From this premise, the author supposes an element of social dynamics, both individual and group, which normatively compels us to a gradual widening of reciprocal recognition relations in order to give social expression to the ever-renewed claims of our subjectivity. In this way, the process of subjective autonomation of the individual is simultaneously linked to the widening of the relations and contents of recognition. On the level of social struggles, it is through morally motivated collective action and the widening of the forms of mutual recognition that the normative modifications of our societies are realized.

From the tripartite model of social recognition that Hegel and Mead outlined, although they did not develop it, Honneth will develop the typology of the forms of recognition, as well as the equivalent forms of disrespect that make it impossible for subjects to access recognition. Honneth's typology (1995, 94) will link back to the typology of forms of recognition in that forms of disrespect will be distinguished according to which level of a person's intersubjectively acquired relation-to-self they injure or even destroy.

Honneth (1995, 94-95), like Hegel and Mead, distinguishes different forms of social integration according to whether this takes place through emotional attachments, the granting of rights or a common value orientation and matches these forms of interaction with three spheres of recognition or three types of recognition relations: Love, Law and Social Esteem, with the last two representing a moral framework of social conflict.

These spheres create the social conditions under which human subjects can arrive at a positive attitude towards themselves, through the cumulative acquisition of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem give rise to the autonomous individual.

### 3.1. Dimensions of recognition - sphere of love

The sphere of love includes all primary relationships, whether they are between parents and children, between lovers or friends that constitute strong sentimental connections between people. In the sphere of love, emotional and affective dedication develops as a mode of recognition, where the primary relations of love and friendship assume themselves as forms of recognition. In relation to personality, we situate ourselves at the level of the nature of need and affections. Individuals develop self-confidence as a form of practical self-relationship. In emotional dedication we see the uniqueness of the other recognized. The sphere of love represents the first level of reciprocal recognition, since in its development “subjects mutually confirm each other with regard to the concrete nature of their needs and thereby recognize each other as needy creatures” (Honneth 1995, 95). Thus, both subjects in a love relationship perceive themselves as united in their mutual dependence. Their needs and affections are obtained through confirmation that they are satisfied or reciprocated. Thus, “recognition itself must possess the character of affective approval or encouragement” (95). According to Honneth, the explanation of the passage of this topic to the context of investigation of a particular science is presented in Hegel's formulation, in which love could be understood as “being oneself in another” (Hegel, 2018, cited by Honneth, 1995, 96). Through this definition we can see that primary affective relationships depend on a precarious balance between autonomy and attachment, which is established from early childhood.

In order to support this Hegelian idea, Honneth (1995) investigates the tradition of psychoanalysis and its various theoretical clashes, from Freud to the theory of the object relationship developed by Donald Winnicott, where he finds an explanation “especially well-suited to rendering love intelligible as the interactive relationship that forms the basis for a particular pattern of reciprocal recognition” (96). If Freud had defined psychic development on the basis of the evolution of libidinal impulses, in which relationships with others were a function of these impulses, with Winnicott, on observing insurmountable difficulties in the Oedipal paradigm, a



revolutionary research process begins which leads to “*a change in paradigms in psychoanalysis*” (Loparic, 2002, 1). Winnicott (1965; 1982) does not agree, as until then, that in the research of psychoanalysis the baby is separated from its mother in the first months of life, considering it as an object of independent research, given its great dependence on maternal care. As he himself states: “I find that it is here, in the absolute dependence on maternal provision of that special quality by which the mother meets or fails to meet the earliest functioning of the female element, that we may seek the foundation for the experience of being” (Winnicott, 1982, 84). To this condition at the beginning of the individual's life, Winnicott (1982, 130) calls “fusion”, when referring to “a theoretical stage prior to separation of the not-me from the me”, while also using the word “fusion” whenever “there is a return to it from a state of separation” (130). From here, Winnicott undertakes a whole practical work in the relationship with his patients in an attempt to understand

how are we to conceive of the interactional process by which 'mother' and child are able to detach themselves from a state of undifferentiated oneness in such a way that, in the end, they learn to accept and love each other as independent persons? (Honneth, 1995, 98)

Honneth, in pursuing his analysis of Winnicott's theory, prefers to call symbiosis this original state of the human being in which two beings are absolutely dependent on each other, as they are unable to draw individual boundaries in relation to the other. Honneth recovers Winnicott's (1982, 139) fundamental “idea of individual dependence, dependence being at first near-absolute and changing gradually and in an ordered way to relative dependence and towards independence”. For the mother, this impulse towards autonomy takes place when she can again widen the field of her social attention and gradually return to her everyday life, leaving the child alone with herself for longer and longer periods of time. By experiencing the mother's absence as something that is not subject to the control of her omnipotence, the child becomes aware of her dependence, thus abandoning the stage of absolute dependence. From this new stage of interaction that Winnicott (1982, 139) calls

“relative dependence”, the fundamental steps in the development of the capacity of attachment are taken.

### **3.2. Dimensions of recognition - sphere of law**

The specific form of reciprocity of legal recognition, unlike that of affective recognition, was only able to form in a process of historical development. With the establishment of the modern legal relationship family relations were altered, challenged by the principle of equality, suffered profound tensions. Only with the constitution of universal fundamental rights could the form of self-respect assume the character it expresses today, where moral imputability assumes the basis of a person's respect. This theme of legal recognition can hardly be overemphasized. It signifies for Honneth a kind of internal split that occurred within the category of honour in the passage to modern society, ending up constituting a duality that takes the form of two parallel and competing sources of recognition: the legal one, based on legal-formal equality, and the *status* or social appreciation one, linked to the valorization of professional work. In the first sense, the hierarchical notion of honour is democratized; in the second, it is “mediocritized” insofar as it depends on the individual's contribution as a “working citizen”.

A significant part of the sphere of social valuation that was secured by principles of honour graded by orders has shifted to the level of universal validity in the concept of human dignity (Honneth 1995, 125).

For Amy Gutmann (1994) the full public recognition of equality requires two forms of respect: one in relation to the uniqueness of individuals' identities regardless of gender, race or ethnicity and a second, in relation to activities, practices and ways of looking at the world which may be particularly valued by, or associated with, members of minority groups. “Recognition of every individual's uniqueness and humanity lies at the core of liberal democracy, understood as a way of political and personal life” (Gutmann, 1994, 9).

The development potential of the sphere of cognitive respect is verified in the generalization and materialization of legal recognition relations, according to the conceptualization of

Honneth (1995). In the sphere of law the recognition of individual autonomy develops, enabling the empowerment of the person for certain actions. Cognitive disrespect translates into deprivation of rights and social exclusion.

While in social valuation it is important to understand how the system of references for the evaluation of the characteristic properties of a person is formed, in legal recognition it becomes central to understand “how to define this constitutive quality of persons” (Honneth 1995, 113).

It seems pertinent to relate this discourse to Taylor's (1994) analysis of the development of the modern notion of identity, since the politics of egalitarian recognition implies two distinct realities: a politics of universalism, through the principle of equal dignity for all citizens, and a politics of difference, although on a universalist basis. For Taylor (1994, 57-58),

all people should be recognized for their unique identities. Here, however, recognition has another meaning. For the politics of equal dignity, what is established is universal equality, an identical basket of rights and immunities; for the politics of difference, recognition is required of the unique identity of this or that individual or group, the uniqueness of each.

For this author, the *struggle for* recognition will only find a satisfactory outcome through a system of recognition among equals. Taylor summons Hegel in finding such a system in a society with a common goal, where there is a “‘we’ that is an ‘I’, and an ‘I’ that is a ‘we’” (Hegel, 2018, 108 quoted by Taylor, 1994, 50).

However, Taylor warns of some dangers, since “by implicitly invoking our standards to judge all civilizations and cultures, the politics of difference can end up making everyone the same. In this form, the demand for equal recognition is unacceptable” (Taylor, 1994, 71). Pointing out as a solution, that something must go beyond the inauthentic and homogenizing demand for equal value recognition, that goes beyond the closing in of ethnocentric criteria. As other cultures exist and the need to live together, both within a society and on a world scale, is seen as more important, Taylor (1994, 72-73) points out that what should exist is the presupposition of equal

value, in a position which we assume when we dedicate ourselves to the study of the other. What the presupposition requires of us is not peremptory and false value judgements, but a willingness to open ourselves to the comparative study of cultures of the kind that compels us to shift our horizons in the resulting fusions. Above all, it requires us to admit that we fall far short of that ultimate horizon that might make evident the relative value of different cultures.

### **3.3. Dimensions of recognition – sphere of social valuation**

In the third sphere of the relations of recognition, that of social valorisation, self-valorisation develops as a form of practical self-relationship of the subjects. Individuals, as a result of an increasing individualisation of our societies, can no longer attribute the respect they enjoy socially for their performances to a collective, but will have to return this responsibility to themselves (Honneth 1995, 128). The experience of social valorisation involves performing performances or possessing capabilities that are recognised by other members of society as valuable. In modern societies solidarity is linked to the assumption of symmetrical valorization of social relations between individualized and autonomous subjects. Symmetrical valorization “means to view one another in light of values that allow the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for shared praxis” (Honneth 1995, 129). These relationships are constituted as solidary to the extent that they go beyond passive tolerance towards the other and promote affective involvement in the particularity of the other, since by promoting the development of the distinct properties and capacities of the other it will be possible to achieve common goals. A clarification should be drawn from Honneth's theory (1995, 129): the symmetrical relationship does not mean reciprocal valuing in equal measure, but rather the challenge that any subject has the opportunity to experience himself as valuable to society through his capacities and properties. Only then, following Honneth's reasoning, under the notion of solidarity can social relations access a horizon in

which individual competition for social valuation can be free from experiences of disrespect.

As the spheres of recognition are but circles of a theoretical scheme that applies to the study of the social, these are not watertight and the intersubjective relations of individuals are often paradoxical and conflicting between the various modes of recognition (Honneth 1995).

### **3.4. Theory of recognition - model of social conflict**

After analyzing the dimensions of recognition, it is important to analyze the model of social conflict. Honneth (1995, 160-170) differs from all utilitarian explanatory models, in that the proposed concept of social struggle suggests the conception according to which the motives for social reaction and revolt are formed within the framework of moral experiences, which result from the infringement of deeply rooted expectations of recognition. These expectations are linked in the psyche to the conditions of the constitution of personal identity, so that they retain the social standards of recognition under which a subject can know himself respected in his sociocultural return as a being at once autonomous and individualized; if these normative expectations are disappointed by society, this triggers precisely the kind of moral experience that is expressed in the feeling of disrespect. A feeling that through the ability to articulate it in a framework of intersubjective interpretation, which proves it as typical of an entire group is that it can trigger a social movement, depending on a collective semantics.

Honneth (1995, 165-166) presents two models of conflict: the utilitarian model which has as its object of analysis the competition for scarce goods, part of collective interests, in which groups want to increase their power to dispose of certain possibilities of reproduction; and the model of the theory of recognition which has as its object of analysis the struggle for the intersubjective conditions of personal integrity, according to a logic of the formation of moral reaction. Beginning with collective feelings of injustice, it attributes social struggles to the moral experiences that groups have in the face of the denial

of legal or social recognition. The model based on the theory of recognition complements the utilitarian model.

The investigation of social struggles is linked by principle to the assumption of an analysis of the moral consensus which, within a nexus of social cooperation, unofficially regulates how rights and duties are distributed between dominators and dominated. (Honneth, 1995, 167)

Honneth starts from the central thesis that social confrontations take place according to the model of a struggle for recognition. Which implies: not conceiving the conflict model only as an explanatory framework for the emergence of social struggles, but also as an interpretative framework for a process of moral formation. “Even just the reference back to the logic of the expansion of recognition relationships allows for the systematic classification of what would otherwise remain an uncomprehended occurrence” (Honneth, 1995, 168). Honneth advocates a radical widening of the perspective under which historical processes are to be considered. According to the same author (1995, 168) feelings of injustice and experiences of disrespect, through which the explanation of social struggles can begin, are no longer seen solely as motives for action, but should also be studied in such a way as to show the moral role they play in each case in the unfolding of relations of recognition. As a result, moral sentiments are no longer seen merely as the emotive component of social conflicts, but are included in the overall interpretative framework that describes the process of moral formation through which the normative potential of reciprocal recognition has developed over a sequence of social struggles.

The aim of this interpretative framework of Honneth (1995, 170) is to “to describe the idealized path along which these struggles have been able to unleash the normative potential of modern law and of esteem” which “lets an objective-intentional context emerge, in which historical processes no longer appear as mere events but rather as stages in a conflictual process of formation, leading to a gradual expansion of relationships of recognition.”

#### 4. Recognition, knowledge and reification

From Honneth's (2008, 71) historical-theoretical research highlights the consequence, and to some extent the presupposition, that “in the relationship of the human being with his world, recognizing (*Anerkennen*) always precedes knowing (*Erkennen*), so that by reification we must understand a violation against this order of precedence.” Spontaneous, somewhat unconscious and irrational recognition, what the author calls a “pre-cognitive realization of the act of assuming a certain stance” (Honneth, 2008, 73), which leads to accepting the other's perspective after previously recognizing in him a familiar intentionality, is presented as a presupposition of human interaction. This action is neither rational nor does it configure “any awareness of motives” (73). This attitude for Honneth is not normatively oriented, although it does lead us towards some form of position-taking, which is by no means predetermined. The non-epistemic character of this elementary form of recognition is emphasized, so that the author adds to the previously differentiated spheres of recognition a stage of recognition, which appears as a kind of transcendental condition: the spontaneous, non-rational recognition of the other as a neighbour represents a necessary presupposition in order to be able to appropriate moral values, in the light of which we recognize that other in a determined, normative way (Honneth, 2008, 73).

In the absence of the experience of closeness and/or similarity to the other, we could not endow the relationship with moral values ordering our actions. Thus, in the first place, elementary recognition is necessary, “we need to take part (*Anteilnehmen*) of the other existentially, before we can learn to be guided by norms of recognition” (Honneth, 2008, 73) that bind us to certain ways of acting. In the process of their socialization, individuals learn to internalize the culture-specific recognition norms of their respective cultures; in this way they enrich step by step that elementary representation of the other, which is available to them from an early age by habit, with those specific values that are embodied in the principles of recognition prevailing within their society (Honneth, 2008, 74).

What normative principles are presupposed in relation to the human being when claiming that he always refers to others in a “recognizing” (*aner kennend*) way? The answer to this question constitutes a central concern in Honneth's reflection as he contributes to a theory of human intersubjectivity. Honneth attempts to guide sociological analysis in the study of normative claims to recognition.

In his article “Invisibility: On The Epistemology Of ‘Recognition’”, Honneth (2003) presents invisibility as the negation of the notion of recognition. The concept and the beginning of the discussion are inspired by Ralph Ellison's book *Invisible Man* (1952) and are based on the experience of a black character who suffers a process of “invisibilization” by white society.

Using a metaphorical idea, Honneth shows that invisibility is an active process, in which contempt is evidenced: a behaviour concerning a person as if he were not and which, for him, becomes very real. Visibility, on the contrary, means recognizing the relevant characteristics of a person. In this way, Honneth presents individual identifiability as the first form of knowledge. This stage is already considered a social act, since the affected individual knows of his or her invisibility by the lack of specific reactions on the part of the other or others. Besides, the lack of expressive acts of visibility may also be perceived by the other people present. Therefore, one can speak of a social invisibility, which leads Honneth to a differentiation between “knowing” and “recognizing”: “knowing” is then the non-public identification of an individual, while “recognizing” refers to appreciation as a public act.

In an analogous way to Daniel Stern's contributions about infants, Honneth states that also for adults there are signs that openly show whether they have been socially approved. As proof one can consider precisely that feeling which is produced in situations in which a person is denied this approval. All expressions of approval are interpreted as a sign, in a symbolically abbreviated form, of a whole series of dispositions that refer to a set of performances that can be legitimately expected in future interactions, such as being treated with respect. Following the argument of *Struggle for*



*Recognition*, Honneth (1995) adds to the elementary form of recognition through love the ideas of respect and solidarity, which place people in distinct constellations with different performances that can be legitimately expected. All of them go beyond the mere affirmation of the existence of the other, that is, of what is meant by “knowing”, since they show a motivational disposition towards the other that supposes a restriction of one's own egocentric perspective and with which we grant the other a moral authority over us in interaction. Social invisibility then appears as the denial of social recognition.

## **5. Final considerations**

Thus, in summary form, Honneth presents a concept of social struggle that emphasizes the ethical dimension of injustice, proposing new parameters for Critical Theory. His proposal consists of analyzing the concrete patterns of disrespect that lead individuals to social struggles for recognition, in which there is a continuous broadening of the perceptions that individuals have of their unique attributes.

In the words of Honneth (2005, 113), “human subjects are visible for another subject to the degree in which he is able to identify them, according to the character of the relationship, as persons with clearly defined properties”, i.e., when our social interaction partners recognize our singularities and qualities. The author proposes a theoretical conception capable of corresponding to the challenges inherent in situations of oppression in society, resorting to the concept of social invisibility. According to Honneth (2005, 112), “Cultural history offers numerous examples of situations in which the dominant expresses their social superiority by not perceiving those they dominate”. A subject can attest to his visibility only if he forces his social interaction partner to recognize the properties and singularities that form his identity.

Thus, for Honneth, experiences of disrespect constitute the moral basis of the struggle for recognition of individuals, going beyond certain institutionalized standards. We can point to the feminist movement and those of colonized peoples as historical examples, which demonstrate that this moral

substratum is capable of considering the totality of forms of social injustice, resulting from the depreciation of certain standards of social esteem. For Honneth, it is only through a normative paradigm that goes beyond historical contingencies that the broad scale of human suffering can be examined and provide the moral foundation necessary to renew critical theory. The formal conception of ethical life developed by Honneth has as its political implication the need to give feelings of moral disrespect a normative potential, which makes it possible to evaluate the legitimacy of a social order. Since the situation of moral vulnerability is related to the expectations of a group, such claims, when articulated, enhance the expansion of intersubjective processes of recognition, giving rise to new capacities of moral self-reference, through which subjects may conceive themselves in a renewed way.

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