

The Politics of Recognition Between Axel Honneth and Glen Coulthard

In his 1992 work *The Struggle for Recognition*, Axel Honneth argues that emancipatory progress comes about through the desire and struggle for being recognized. Honneth thus articulates a critical theory that builds on the normativity inherent in existing social reality. He writes: “there is no better source of inspiration for developing such a concept than Hegel’s early, ‘Jena’ writings, with their notion of a comprehensive ‘struggle for recognition.’”¹ If anything, Honneth’s most recent work, *Freedom’s Right*, is framed even more explicitly as neo-Hegelian social theory. As Honneth says, when writing the book he “sought to follow the model of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and develop the principles of social justice by means of an analysis of society.”² Although Honneth shifts from a discussion of persons to institutions, the thread of neo-Hegelianism remains strong.

I am deeply troubled by this turn in the Frankfurt School towards grounding normativity in Hegel’s work. This worry has two components. First, there is what can be generously described as a missed connection and less generously termed a willful disregard for social-political theory outside the Western canon. Second, the turn to Hegel commits critical theory to a notion of historical progress that does violence to those whom critical theory purports to advocate for. To put it crudely, when Honneth adopts Hegel’s strategy of normativity he reproduces the imperialist status quo. The fundamental problem is one of recognition: Honneth does not recognize the contributions of colonial subjects as thinking *subjects*. This paper proposes an alternative route to arrive at a politics of recognition, a route

¹ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 1.

² Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), vii. Henceforth referred to in parenthetical citations as FR.

that draws on recent work in Native Studies by Glen Coulthard.³ In particular, I identify a structural parallel. Settler-colonial states settle the claims of colonial subjects (e.g., indigenous people) by recognizing them as equal citizens. Honneth similarly thinks we can address these postcolonial claims of justice by including postcolonial societies in his method of “normative reconstruction.” As I will explain, the solution in both cases is instead to pursue a politics of *self*-recognition. Just as Coulthard theorizes an “indigenous resurgence” to resist the settler-colonial politics of recognition, we would do well to correct Honneth’s work by turning to indigenous voices who write their own theory.

I begin with a reading of Honneth that sharpens my criticism of his neo-Hegelianism. At this stage, I track the critique of Honneth that Amy Allen advanced in her 2016 book *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. However, I depart from her in the second section, where I articulate an alternative politics of recognition that we can find in the contemporary theory of Glen Coulthard. I elaborate on Coulthard’s reading of Fanon in particular before returning to this initial problematic to gesture towards what a conversation between Honneth and Coulthard might offer.

I. Honneth

Honneth is no unthinking neo-Hegelian. He admits that one cannot simply rewrite the *Philosophy of Right* in 2014. Thus, he says:

In reviving Hegel’s project nearly two hundred years later, I realize of course that both social relations and styles of philosophical argumentation have undergone significant changes. We can no longer merely rehash the intention and argumentation of his *Philosophy of Right*, and social reality, whose institutions and practices enjoy the status of moral facts, differs entirely from that of the early industrial, constitutional monarchies of the early nineteenth century.
(FR 2)

³ Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 45. Henceforth referred to in parenthetical references as RSWM.

Honneth singles out two key differences that affect his revival of Hegel's project: (1) the great acceleration of modernization since the nineteenth century and (2) the Holocaust, which throws into doubt Hegel's assumption that "modern societies follow a continuous path of rational development" (FR 3). Nonetheless, Honneth says, "we would do well to take up once again Hegel's endeavour to develop a theory of justice on the basis of the structural preconditions actually existing in society" (FR 3).

What Honneth does not think will affect his Hegelian project is actual existing colonialism. He seems not to have considered, for instance, Susan Buck-Morss' seminal work on the connections between Hegel and the Haitian Revolution.⁴ When Honneth does allude to colonialism, he dismisses any suggestion that it affects his method:

Even the existence of "heterogeneous" societies marked by ethnic or religious diversity has little effect on this "transcendental" necessity of normative integration. Although in these societies ethical values need to be formulated in a more comprehensive and general manner so to make room for the ideals held by minority cultures, material reproduction and cultural socialization must comply with a set of shared norms. In this weak sense, every society embodies objective Spirit to a certain extent, because its institutions, social practices and routines reflect shared normative beliefs about the aims of cooperative interaction. (FR 4)

The existence of (post)colonial societies "marked by ethnic or religious diversity" does not affect the method of normative reconstruction (about which more in a moment). Such societies, for Honneth, are easily assimilable into modernity, because they are inevitably conscripted into the shared norms that characterize all societies in the modern world. Every society, even one outside the Euro-American world, "embodies objective Spirit to a certain extent" because it is an empirical fact that it is part of the modern world. Its "institutions, social practices, and routines" reflect normative beliefs that are essentially European and modern. Thus, according to Honneth, to form a critical theory with normative purchase we can essentially abstract from these differences to an undifferentiated modernity.

⁴ Susan Buck-Morss, "Hegel and Haiti," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 4 (2000): 821–65.

This argument is made more explicitly by another philosopher working adjacent to the Frankfurt School, Thomas McCarthy.⁵ In response to McCarthy's argument, David Scott articulates an objection that I think is equally relevant for Honneth. Responding to their shared assertion that we are *all* modern now, Scott says: "This is an empirical fact — with an imperial history." In other words, we should attend to the violence that lies behind the simple subsuming of all societies into modernity. Scott notes that for a Frankfurt School theorist like McCarthy and Honneth,

this fact simply underlines his expectation that such [postcolonial] thinkers ... are always-already assimilated to the structure and sensibility of *his* moral-intellectual traditions, and are therefore seamlessly and transparently apprehensible to him from within them.⁶

That is to say, the Frankfurt School takes the empirical fact of the colonial periphery's integration into modernity and transmutes it into a theoretical expectation that they are "seamlessly" apprehensible — in other words, interchangeable with Euro-American subjects.

Scott challenges this assumption:

In other words, postcolonial thinkers (like Chakrabarty and Chatterjee) are indeed modern insofar as they have learned to read and think in relation to the moral-intellectual traditions of Europe (and more lately, America); they have even learned to *inhabit* these traditions almost as their own. But does this necessarily imply that their formations and habitations are *identical* with those traditions, or are interchangeable with their European or Euro-American contemporaries?⁷

Scott thinks not. In other words, Scott thinks that Honneth and McCarthy too easily slip between the empirical fact that postcolonial thinkers are bound up in the same historical conditions of modernity and the theoretical assumption that they ought to therefore be treated within the same "moral-intellectual tradition" shared by Honneth, McCarthy, and Hegel. The nub of Scott's criticism is that

⁵ See Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For reasons of space I will not discuss this text in this paper, but for a lengthy discussion see Amy Allen, *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 25–34.

⁶ David Scott, "The Traditions of Historical Others," *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 6.

⁷ Ibid.

the story of race and empire in the modern world is not only the story of the making of discursive and non-discursive regimes of racial and colonial rule and representation, but also the story of *subjects*, constituted as racial and colonized others within these regimes, and who have sought in various intellectual ways to think through and argue about the origins, nature, and implications of their subordination. These arguments constitute the traditions of historical others.⁸

The basic problem with Honneth and McCarthy, then, is that they fail to treat the subjects of colonialism as *subjects* who themselves think differently. They rest content with assimilating them into one undistinguished mass called “modernity.”

Once Honneth sweeps (post)colonial societies into this one undifferentiated mass, he can proceed with his neo-Hegelian method of “normative reconstruction.” Honneth thinks we can find a valuable model of normativity in Hegel’s work that contrasts to a deficient Kantian model he wants to oppose. Instead of basing our political philosophy on abstract, transcendent norms — as Honneth says Habermas and Rawls do — we should turn to actually existing society. Honneth writes that

we should follow Hegel in abstaining from presenting a free-standing, constructive justification of norms of justice prior to immanent analysis; such an additional justification becomes superfluous once we can prove that the prevailing values are normatively superior to historically antecedent social ideals or “ultimate values.” (FR 5)

In other words, the normative justification for justice comes from their inherent superiority to ideals promoted in the past. This is how Honneth hitches his normative reconstruction to the Hegelian horse of historical teleology. He acknowledges this in the next sentence, saying:

such an immanent procedure ultimately entails an element of historical-teleological thinking, but this is ultimately inevitable — just as it is for theories of justice that assume a congruence between practical reason and existing social relations. (FR 5)

We create ideals of justice whose force comes from a “normative reconstruction” of society (FR 7). In so doing, Honneth will not merely reproduce everything that exists; he leaves space for “criticizing social reality” so as to highlight those forms of life “that embody a universal value by virtue of the fact that the practices suitable for their realization have

⁸ Ibid.

already taken shape in society” (FR 8). Honneth’s critical theory reconstructs fundamental ideals and values that actual social institutions embody, and diagnoses the failure of these institutions to realize the ideals they claim. In the rest of the book, Honneth continues to sketch in this Hegelian outline. Insofar as he mentions (post)colonial societies at all, Honneth thinks they can be addressed simply by being recognized as co-participants in modernity.

This juxtaposition between Axel Honneth and David Scott illustrates well the great gulf between Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School) and critical theory (including postcolonial theory). Amy Allen describes this gap in the reception of her own work. She says:

When presenting my work to the former sort of audience, including but not only in Frankfurt, I was criticized vehemently for challenging the various neo-Hegelian and neo-Kantian strategies for grounding normativity favored by contemporary Frankfurt School theorists and thus flirting with relativism; when discussing my project with colleagues who work in postcolonial theory, I found that they were often stunned to learn that anyone was still willing to defend either ideas of historical progress and development or normative foundationalist projects at all.⁹

Theorists of the Frankfurt School tradition abhor the idea that they would have to abandon their neo-Hegelian or neo-Kantian strategies of justifying norms of justice. I do not think this is because they are not aware of the problematic Eurocentrism and false universalism in these efforts; I think this is because they think drifting into relativism is a worse danger.

Postcolonial theorists profoundly disagree. For them, it is a given that a teleological philosophy of history cannot be maintained, and that we must find other sources for norms.

This great divergence is particularly striking and unfortunate, in my view, because these two branches of critical theory have deeply shared commitments to critique and emancipation. As Amy Allen articulates this concern:

Particularly in light of its practical-political emancipatory aim, the failure of Frankfurt School critical theory to engage substantively with one of the most influential branches of critical theory, in the broader sense of that term, to have emerged in recent decades — postcolonial studies and theory — is all the more puzzling and problematic. After all, if critical theory

⁹ Allen, *The End of Progress*, xv.

aims at the emancipatory self-clarification of the political struggles of the age, then how can it ignore the compelling articulation and theorization of contemporary struggles over the meaning, limits, and failures of decolonization that have emerged in this body of work?¹⁰

The turn by Honneth to Hegel is symptomatic of the great divergence between these two quite distinct intellectual traditions that nonetheless share a common name — critical theory. More substantively, I am not criticizing Honneth simply for not engaging with these other theorists; my point, on which I agree with Scott, is that these theorists purport to care about (post)colonial problems, and think they solve them by recognizing colonial subjects as co-participants in modernity, when in fact they do not recognize them as real thinking subjects in their own right.

II. Coulthard

I think Amy Allen has done the most thorough job yet of outlining this critique of Honneth and associated Frankfurt School theorists. But she seems not to appreciate the lengths we must go to for a real solution. Allen spends most of her book in the company of Frankfurt School theorists. When articulating her own project of “decolonizing critical theory,” she finds resources in the work of Michel Foucault and Theodor Adorno. I think this move is misguided, because it once again fails to meaningfully engage with postcolonial subjects as subjects in their own right. To turn to David Scott, again:

what matters, methodologically ... may not exactly ... be who vanquishes whom in the debate about the relative virtues of Habermas versus Foucault ... but rather how Western philosophy (understood as a disciplinary dimension of a wider EuroAmerican discursive tradition) constructs a productive relationship with these traditions of its historical others.¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., xiv.

¹¹ Scott, “The Traditions of Historical Others,” 7.

Scott moves to articulate the task that he thinks critical theory should take up, a task that McCarthy, Honneth, and Allen have each in their own way refused. Scott writes that this task is “Very crucially, among other labors, ... the work of learning how to *listen*.”¹²

I now turn to this task of “listening” in particular to recent theorists in Native Studies who are concerned with the politics of recognition. I focus on the work of Glen Coulthard, who articulates a “call to selectively ‘turn away’ from engaging the discourses and structures of settler-colonial power with the aim of transforming these sites from within” (RWSM 45). I will first articulate his argument before returning to the structural parallel I identify with Honneth’s work.

Coulthard’s intervention hinges on the ambivalent politics of recognition. On the one hand, recognition is a liberatory act. When we are recognized as persons, for example in legal terms, we are able to claim rights and take part in struggles that are otherwise denied to us. Thus, the Canadian state tries to settle rights-claims of Native people by recognizing them as citizens. Coulthard describes this

as a recognition-based approach to reconciling Indigenous peoples’ assertions of nationhood with settler-state sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identity-related claims through the negotiation of settlements over issues such as land, economic development, and self-government. (RWSM 151)

For Native people, recognition has historically been paramount: civil rights only belong to citizens; land and tribal rights need federal recognition within the legal framework of the United States and Canada; and individual members need to be recognized as members of the tribes to gain land, a stake in governance, etc.

There is a flipside to recognition, made perhaps most famous by Fanon with his example of a little boy on the streets of Paris who says to his mother “Look, a black man!”

¹² Ibid., 6.

(*Tiens, un nègre!*).¹³ Coulthard turns to Fanon to articulate this negative side of recognition.

Coulthard notes that

Fanon describes the experience of colonial recognition in profoundly negative terms, like being “fixed” or “walled in” by the violating “gaze” of another. Far from being emancipatory and self-confirming, recognition is instead cast as a “suffocating reification,” a “hemorrhage” that causes the colonized to collapse into *self*-objectification. (RSWM 139–140)

Being recognized by the colonial state is not a wholly positive act. It objectifies, degrades, and flattens out differences. As Coulthard writes,

in our efforts to *interpolate* the legal and political discourses of the state to secure recognition of our rights to land and self-determination we have too often found ourselves *interpellated* as subjects of settler-colonial rule. (RWSM 179)

What is to be done when the only way to pursue claims of justice is through such problematic politics of recognition? Coulthard again follows Fanon, who advocated the power of *self*-recognition. For Fanon, this is expressed in his relationship to Negritude, the earlier artistic, philosophical, political movement by Francophone Black intellectuals (including Aimé Césaire, Fanon’s old teacher from Martinique). Fanon’s relationship to Negritude was inflected by his relationship with Sartre. Sartre in turn based his analysis of the politics of recognition on the “optimistic” portrayal of intersubjective recognition in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This was first countered by Sartre in *Anti-Semite and Jew*.

Coulthard writes that “Sartre’s rendition of the master/slave relation in Being and Nothingness denies the possibility of reciprocal relations of affirmative recognition” (RWSM 134). Fanon picks up this criticism of recognition:

Like Sartre’s portrayal of intersubjectivity discussed above, Fanon’s phenomenological account of “being-for-others” in *Black Skin, White Masks* emphasizes the ultimately objectifying and alienating character of inter-subjective recognition, especially when these relations are played out in contexts structured by racial or cultural inequality. (RWSM 139)

The alternative Fanon finds is *self*-recognition. Biographically, this was Fanon’s turn to Negritude, which “left Fanon feeling empowered, confident, and mobilized: it provided, if

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Repr., Pluto Classics (London: Pluto Press, 2002), chap. 5.

only momentarily, the sense of self-worth, dignity, and respect that recognition from the dominant society had not only failed to deliver, but undercut at every step of the way”

(RWSM 141). However, Fanon does not unconditionally endorse Negritude. He objects to

negritude’s attempt to restore the Native subject as an agent of history through an inversion of colonial discourse [because it] remains comfortably within the very binary logic that has played such a crucial role in justifying the colonial relation in the first place. (RWSM 142)

It is important to note here that Fanon already has an ambivalent relationship to self-recognition. Coulthard, interpreting Fanon, says that “strategies that attempt to break the stranglehold of this subjection through practices of cultural self-affirmation can play an important role in anticolonial struggle as long as they remain grounded and oriented toward a change in the social structure of colonialism itself” (RWSM 147).

In his turn, Coulthard voices his own concerns with Fanon, because the latter

viewed the decolonial potential of Indigenous cultural politics as fundamentally undercut by its *ressentiment*-directed orientation toward the past. ... Although Fanon eschews an evolutionary anthropological theory of historical development in which societies are viewed as developing along a linear path from primitive to civilized, he remains wedded to a dialectical conception of social transformation that privileges the “new” over the “old.” (RWSM 153)

What Coulthard proposes instead is “indigenous resurgence”:

Unlike Fanon’s notion of self-affirmation ... , the resurgence paradigm ... does not require us to dialectically transcend Indigenous practices of the past once the affirmation of these practices has served to reestablish us as historical protagonists in the present. (RWSM 154)

But ultimately Coulthard, like Fanon, does not want to abandon the politics of recognition altogether. As Coulthard notes in his concluding remarks:

Does it require that we vacate the field of state negotiations and participation entirely? Of course not. Settler-colonialism has rendered us a radical minority in our own homelands, and this necessitates that we continue to engage with the state’s legal and political system. What our present condition does demand, however, is that we begin to approach our engagements with the settler-state legal apparatus with a degree of critical self-reflection, skepticism, and caution that has to date been largely absent in our efforts. It also demands that we begin to shift our attention away from the largely rights-based/recognition orientation that has emerged as hegemonic over the last four decades, to a resurgent politics of recognition that seeks to practice decolonial, gender-emancipatory, and economically nonexploitative alternative structures of law and sovereign authority grounded on a critical refashioning of the best of

Indigenous legal and political traditions. (RWSM 179)

This is the politics of recognition that Coulthard advocates in the end. Absolute refusal and disengagement would not be conducive to decolonial practice. Such practice must be rooted in alternative ways of being and of fashioning in the world, alternatives that Coulthard thinks we should find in traditional indigenous ways of being and making the world.

Conclusion

Axel Honneth relies on Hegel to animate his normative project. He acknowledges colonial societies, but sweeps them into the fold of modernity. In other words, he *recognizes* the (post)colonial subjects as human, as equal citizens, and tries to solve their problems in just the same way as Euro-American metropolitan subjects. This is analogous to the politics of recognition employed by the state, which tries to settle claims of justice through the accounts of recognition as equals. What Fanon and Coulthard teach us is that there is an underside to this politics of recognition, which is that of objectification. Honneth would say that this is just an example of a failure of a social institution to live up to the ideals it embodies, and in normative reconstruction it would be correctly identified, criticized, and rectified.

But there is a deeper problem with the politics of recognition. That is its blindness to basic, incommensurable difference. The settler-colonial state's "recognition" of Native people and communities doesn't just objectify them. In making them *legible* to the state, it also flattens their difference. This is what Honneth just doesn't seem to grasp: the "traditions of historical others" (to borrow Scott's phrase) are basically different in ways that can't just be integrated into the same framework of Euro-American modernity. To treat (post)colonial subjects as *subjects* means to recognize them as inhabiting their own traditions, their own life-worlds.

The solution is a careful dose of self-recognition — Fanon’s turn to Negritude, Coulthard’s “indigenous resurgence.” This is why I have offered Coulthard’s reflections on the politics of recognition. We “listen” (Scott) to voices of non-Western theorists like Coulthard to push towards an alternative politics of recognition. No matter how well-meaning and “inclusive” the multicultural settler-colonial state or theorists like Axel Honneth might be, we need to go beyond equality and sameness in the politics of recognition.