

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>**Special Section: “On the politics of social suffering”****Grounding social criticism: from understanding to suffering and back****Onni Hirvonen**

University of Jyväskylä

**Submission date:** November 2018**Accepted date:** December 2018**Published in:** April 2019**RECOMMENDED CITATION**

HIRVONEN, Onni (2019). “Grounding social criticism: from understanding to suffering and back”. In: Arthur BUENO and Mariana TEIXEIRA (coord.). “On the politics of social suffering” [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 23, pp. 1-10. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy]. <<http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i23.3160>>



The texts published in this journal are – unless otherwise indicated – covered by the Creative Commons Spain Attribution 4.0 International licence. The full text of the licence can be consulted here: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

**Abstract**

This paper critically examines John Dewey's and Axel Honneth's critical social philosophies in order to highlight two different normative sources of social struggle: scientific understanding and social suffering. The paper discusses the relations of these sources with each other and aims to show to what extent the normative sources of Dewey's and Honneth's critical social theories are compatible. A further aim is to use the comparison between Dewey and Honneth in order to argue for a desiderata for critical social ontology. The argument is that we want to consistently include both elements – suffering and understanding – in critical social theory as only by having both will critical theory grant a clear enough direction and good enough motivational normative core for a social struggle.

**Keywords**

social suffering, critical social ontology, Dewey, Honneth, critical theory

**Fundamentar la crítica social: del entendimiento al sufrimiento y viceversa****Resumen**

*Este artículo analiza críticamente las filosofías sociales críticas de John Dewey y Axel Honneth con el fin de resaltar dos fuentes normativas diferentes de conflictos sociales: el entendimiento científico y el sufrimiento social. El artículo discute las relaciones entre estas fuentes y busca mostrar hasta qué punto son compatibles las fuentes normativas de las teorías sociales críticas de Dewey y Honneth. La comparación entre Dewey y Honneth se usa con el objetivo de argumentar una desiderata de la ontología social crítica.*

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

*El argumento es que queremos incluir de manera consistente ambos elementos —el sufrimiento y el entendimiento— en una teoría crítica ya que solo teniendo ambos se le puede garantizar a la teoría crítica una dirección lo suficientemente clara y un núcleo normativo motivacional lo suficientemente bueno.*

### Palabras clave

*sufrimiento social, ontología social crítica, Dewey, Honneth, teoría crítica*

## Introduction

It is true that the development of *science* has increased our fund of knowledge about education; but it is much more important that it has been responsible for new methods and a new attitude, that it has made it possible for us to move out from under the cloud of pessimism, passivity, conservatism, dishonesty, and disregard for facts, into the sunlight of new hope and new courage and a new dimension of honesty, where men are capable of discovering the truth, of discerning the causes of events, and of mastering methods for remedying deficiencies and overcoming difficulties. (Dewey, 1973, p. 243-244, author's emphasis)

Despite the horrors of the Great War, which had just recently finished before the *Lectures in China* were given in 1919 and 1920, John Dewey managed to stay positive. In his mind, science would serve in a key role to help humanity to reach a better future. On the other hand, it should be no surprise that this kind of scientific optimism was disregarded by more pessimistic thinkers, like those of the early Frankfurt School. Indeed, historically speaking, it seems that the pessimists were right: in the hundred years that have passed, we have not reached the golden age of reason. Instead, we are faced with the era of 'post-truth' and 'alternative facts' with outright hostility towards the achievements of sciences like climate science or evolutionary science to name but a few. How is it then that Dewey's social philosophy has found more and more purchase in the minds of contemporary critical theorists?<sup>1</sup>

This essay compares Dewey's account with that of Axel Honneth's who has recently taken interest in Dewey but also uses the Hegelian idea of recognition as a central reference point for social criticism. On the surface-level both authors hold optimistic attitudes towards social progress. However, the aim here is to see if there is potentially a deeper disjoint at play underneath; namely, the normative grounds that are used for social criticism might ultimately end up being different in the Deweyan and the Honnethian pictures. If this turns out to be the case, it makes it

questionable as to how useful Dewey is for the project of critical theory or if his ideas can be easily incorporated into the critical social philosophy of the likes of Axel Honneth.

With this approach in mind, this essay has two purposes. First, it aims to outline (in section 1) and compare (in section 2) the normative grounds of critique in Dewey's social philosophy and in Honnethian recognition-theories. This comparison aims to show differences in the approaches – namely, contemporary recognition theories ground criticism heavily on the experiences of social suffering, while Dewey's emphasis is on the theoretical understanding of social issues – but also highlights the relevant similarities as well. The second, more programmatic and general, aim is to use these two approaches to social criticism in order to glean desiderata for a critical social ontology (section 3). Drawing inspiration from the comparison between Honnethian recognition theorists and Dewey, it is possible to draw an outline of those theoretical commitments that any emancipatory critical theory has to make to be successful. The essay finishes with a short conclusion (section 4).

## 1. Two grounds for social criticism

### Example case 1: John Dewey's scientific optimism

The purpose in here is to give a condensed view of the way in which social criticism figures in Dewey's philosophy. A good place to start is Dewey's description of social change in his discussion on social and political philosophy (Dewey, 1973, p. 77-78). He identifies three phases of social reform. A society might start from the stage of *tacit acceptance* in which institutions function without any major hiccups. However, as nothing good lasts forever, this phase is followed by a *challenge* in which new problems and dysfunctionalities are brought into light. A successful social reform ends in *fruition* where new ways of arranging social life are being institutionalized and, again, become tacitly accepted. Then the cycle begins anew.

1. Dewey has recently found place, for example, in Axel Honneth's (2017) attempt to revive the idea of socialism. Similarly, Italo Testa (2017a, 2017b) interprets Dewey in order to develop his own critical social theory. Arto Laitinen and Arvi Särkelä (2018), in turn, find inspiration from Dewey's work in their analysis of social pathologies.

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

But why would the stage of tacit acceptance be disturbed in the first place? Dewey points to changes in other fields of society or technology that reveal injustices, which went undiscovered, unnoticed, or misunderstood before: "New knowledge comes to light, and people begin to think in ways different from those which they have been accustomed. 'Facts of nature' turn out not to be immutable after all, and presupposed 'universal truths' begin to totter" (Dewey, 1973, p. 77). In this sense it could be said that for Dewey, institutions and practices precede theory. Changes in the institutional setting cause and demand changes in the understanding of those institutions. Nevertheless, understanding has a central role as it is precisely through it that we get a direction for social struggles. It is notable that for Dewey, scientific understanding does not concern merely material facts or institutional facts of a society but we can also achieve a new understanding of morality as well.

Dewey emphasises the fact that institutions are products of their time. When times change, their original functionality – which is tied to a particular historical situation – may begin to break down, and we get functional deficits of society that lead to disorder and disintegration (Dewey, 1973, p. 47). These, in turn, force us to challenge the existing institutional order and struggle for renewed forms of social order. Thus, functionality of institutions is one of the key criteria for a good society. However, from which direction should we look for it? Dewey outright rejects philosophical approaches that try either to conservatively retrieve the old functionality and old forms of institutional world, or those individualist approaches that would radically dismantle the old institutions. He calls his own suggestion a 'third philosophy', which puts greater emphasis on critical social analysis and empirical sciences:

What mankind needs most is the ability to recognize and pass judgment on *facts*. We need to develop the ability (and the disposition) to look for particular kinds of solutions by particular methods for particular problems which arise on particular occasions. In other words, we must deal with concrete problems by concrete methods when and as these problems present themselves in our experience. This is the gist of what we call the third philosophy. (Dewey, 1973, p. 53)

As the focus is in human institutions and human life, the scientific focus should also be directed towards facts about actions of humans. The third philosophy relies on "objective study of observable human behavior and scientifically derived hypotheses about its changing trends" (Dewey, 1973, p. 85). The aim of Dewey's project is not merely to observe but also to direct human behaviour with the knowledge gathered from human sciences.

However, the earlier question of the direction of the desired development still remains. To what end and which direction should institutional development aim? And who should do the directing? Dewey defends democratization and this gives the answer for the

latter problem: we should strive for collective self-directionality and self-control. The normative issue is, however, trickier and it seems that here Dewey has no general overarching normative stance that would tell us what to do in any particular situation. Instead, he adopts a pragmatist line of thinking according to which social issues should be solved case by case, taking into account the particularities of each situation (see, e.g., Dewey, 1973, p. 58). However, the case by case analysis cannot remain completely normatively empty or neutral. Indeed, Dewey posits a certain form or ideal of collective life – associated living – as the standard of judging social developments: "The chief source of our criteria for judging lies in associated living, inasmuch as cooperation and interaction are possible only when people live in associated groups with shared interests" (Dewey, 1973, p. 85). Although it is partly unclear what the exact definition of associated living is, Dewey tends to include in it some of the most common values and features of liberal societies like free intercourse, unhampered exchange of ideas, mutual respect, friendship, love, and so forth. "In short [...] those modes of behaving which make life richer and more worth living for everybody concerned" (Dewey, 1973, p. 90; see also Testa, 2017b). Whereas associated living promotes a richer life, its opposite can be found in social suffering and especially alienation, which is "an antonym of associated living" (Dewey, 1973, p. 91). The emphasis of critical social theory should be on recognizing the social interests of the different parties of social struggle in such a way that everyone can feel 'at home' in communal life.

In introducing the concept of associated living Dewey moves towards what could be called an anthropological or a psychological grounding for his social theory. This is clear especially when he describes the effects of alienated or non-recognized life. According to Dewey the forms of organizing collective life in a dominating fashion between masters and their servants "makes the development of personality extremely difficult, if not impossible – and strangely enough, this is as true of members of the dominant group as it is of those in the subservient group." (Dewey, 1973, p. 92). This result is drawn from the Hegelian dialectics of lord and bondsman in which it becomes – more or less – clear that neither party will reach adequate self-certainty if its recognition is either forced or non-existent. Dewey uses this as a basis for arguing that authoritative forms of governance that are based on force, rather than will, will end up causing psychological damage to all the parties of such social life. Its psychological effects range from states of deprivation to dissatisfaction, dislike and even hatred, "frequently approaching the level of neurosis, often of psychosis" (Dewey, 1973, p. 96).

Authoritarian 'bad' societies create 'bad' mentalities that are tailored for coping in such circumstances. The 'slaves', bondsmen, servants – those in weaker positions – will begin to show servility, cunning, deceitfulness while the powerful answer with cruelty, despotism, arrogance, and extravagancy. What is 'bad' for Dewey in these cases is that while life in an authoritarian society could

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

be in some sense liveable, it inhibits the realization of individual potentialities. A democratic society based on will instead of force, associated living instead of coping with alienation, is then naturally seen as the direction towards which to go.

Overall, Dewey's critical social theory starts from the scientific understanding of human practices. As Testa summarizes: "Intelligent thinking and appraisal are valued precisely because they may free habits from the reified form that blocks their vital force and therefore emancipate and implement their energy" (Testa, 2017b, p. 242). However, to show what forms of social life are free or unfree, Dewey turns towards the Hegelian (and recognitive) idea of master-slave dialectics and argues that the negative effects that follow from forced forms of association function as a kind of a grounding for criticism. However, this does not imply a metaphysical normative core. As Roberto Frega states in his reading of Dewey's social philosophy: "critique takes pride of place over justification as the overarching normative goal" (Frega, 2017, p. 262). Whereas some normative grounds can be found from the fact that humans are social animals, the crux of Dewey's charge lies in enabling internal critique – not in stating fixed endpoints or standards for good life. In short, "the task of social philosophy is to carry further the process of reflective valuation which is found as an integral part of social phenomena, apart from general theorizing." (Dewey, according to Frega, 2017, p. 263)

## Example case 2: Axel Honneth's Phenomenology of Social Suffering

Compared to Dewey, Axel Honneth's theory of recognition presents a partly similar but, in some central ways, different account of critical social philosophy and, since the publication of the seminal *The Struggle for Recognition* in 1992 (1995 in English), Honneth, along with several other critical theorists, has continued working on the themes of recognition and related issues in a great number of publications. The presentation here does not aim to give a full account of Honneth's recognition theory – others have done it extensively elsewhere<sup>2</sup> – but rather attempts to condense some of the central points on the grounds of social criticism in Honneth's – and contemporary Honnethian – recognition theory.

In this respect, disrespect and misrecognition come to the fore as central concepts. Honneth (1995, ch.6) understands experiences of disrespect as moral experiences that result from a lack of recognition. Further, as social recognition is necessary for humane life and flourishing, being left without it creates a motivation for a struggle for recognition. The shared experiences of violated recognition expectations can therefore function as a

driving force behind political movements strive for recognition. But where do the expectations of recognition come from? There are at least two lines of explanation available here. On the one hand, expectations are historical and institutional. How one expects to be treated depends largely on personal history of socialization and on the particular historical social setting in which one lives. In this sense, recognition expectations are historically contingent. On the other hand, recognition expectations can be spelled out as 'anthropological constants': it is part of the human life-form to demand recognition and it is part of the constitution of human persons to be recognized (see, e.g., Ikäheimo, 2011). Without a particular kind of social recognition, we would not be the kinds of persons we are in that particular social setting, but there is also a deeper claim that we are, as human persons, essentially dependent on recognition and without it we would also lack humanity or personhood altogether.

Honneth has both of these elements present in his theory. Recognition is essential for the human life-form but at the same time recognition comes in historically shifting modes or forms. In any particular historical situation, we live under an institutional setting that can be interpreted as a 'normative framework of recognition', which defines the expectations of what kind of recognition we are due.

Socially caused suffering in the form of experienced lack of recognition is the driving force of social struggles, but mere individual suffering is not enough. First, the root of criticism and social change can be found from the *shared experiences* of socially caused suffering: "[A] struggle can only be characterized as 'social' to the extent that its goals can be generalized beyond the horizon of individuals' intentions, to the point where they can become the basis for a collective movement" (Honneth, 1995, p. 162). Thus suffering needs to be generalizable enough to allow for a social movement and social change.

Second, not all negative experiences – even if socially shared – can function as yardsticks for social change. It is well possible that, for example, when unjustifiable social arrangements crumble, those who were previously in positions of power feel psychological distraught as a result of the threats to their previous lifestyle. In short, not every negative experience is a good measure of what is just. Indeed, it could be claimed that a theory of recognition needs an accompanying account of justice that would tell which recognition claims are legitimate. Furthermore, even legitimate suffering in itself does not seem to provide a particular direction for social movements.

Here critical social theory has a specific twofold role. The first element is summarized well by Emmanuel Renault who states that: "Only a social critique consciously taking on the role of spokesperson for the various sufferings can enable the dominated

2. See, for example Deranty, 2009; Petherbridge, 2013; and Zurn, 2015.



<http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

and the excluded to recognize their particular situation as unjust and similar to that of other dominated and excluded people" (Renault, 2002, p. 32). Critical theory provides conceptualizations of negative social experiences and creates a semantic link between these experiences and possible collective action (Honneth, 1995, p. 164). Secondly, although Honneth's focus on suffering could be criticized through stating that it does not necessarily offer any positive conception of good life, this is in fact a part of the whole enterprise of Honnethian recognition theory. The aim is not to give a substantive view of any particular form of ethical life but rather provide a formal conception of good life. As Christopher Zurn states, the theory of recognition is "intended to broaden the notion of individual autonomy by articulating the structural features of the good life" (Zurn, 2000, p. 118). In other words, the theory of recognition discloses the intersubjective conditions of relating positively to oneself and also aims to provide compelling conceptualizations and disclose those conditions that work against it. That is, instead of prescribing any particular form of good life, Honnethian social theory outlines the conditions that need to be fulfilled for any particular substantive form of good life to be even attainable.

Formulated in this way, recognition-based critical social theory does not seem to rely on a metaphysical normative grounding. It starts from the lived negative moral experiences that are linked to a particular institutional setting and combines these with philosophical-anthropological claims about conditions of possibilities of a good life. Arguably, an endpoint of emancipation or a will to freedom seems to be built into the anthropological background of the theory. However, even this does not need to be taken as a metaphysical ground for criticism. Rather, according to Honneth's (2014a) normative reconstruction, freedom and autonomy are already parts of our self-understanding, embedded in the everyday institutional world. They can be taken as the 'institutional promises' of modernity that characterize the self-understanding of modern individuals.

The normative backbone of Honneth's critical social theory is evidently in the so-called 'negative phenomenology' of social life. However, it should be clear from the above characterization that knowledge and theory have an important role in a recognitive account of social criticism as well. Whereas Dewey started from scientific knowledge, Honneth, in turn, starts from the experiences of disrespect, but in order to make these experiences a ground for emancipatory movements, he needs to introduce a form of

theoretical understanding that creates a semantic link between experiences and political action.

The negative experiences that provide the motivational element in Honneth's account are under-determined in the sense that they can be harnessed equally by right-wing populists, anarchists, or liberal emancipatory movements. The political sphere can be understood as a field of competing formulations and explanations for the experiences of disrespect. It is here that the theory-side of critical theory has a key role: "We cannot merely skip over the 'lagging' consciousness of citizens, because we have to win them over for our project" (Honneth, 2017, p. 101). In other terms, critical theorists ought to give compelling – and also accurate and truthful – explanations for the experiences of disrespect in such a way that points a way for critical social movements.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Finding similarities, evaluating differences

Both strands of critical social theory presented above include elements of experiences of social suffering, outline conditions of liveable life, and give a role for science and theoretical thinking. If we imagine a continuum with scientific understanding at one end and lived experience, emotions, and suffering at the other end, Dewey's scientific optimism has theoretical understanding as its starting point, but it needs to complement the understanding with emotional and motivational elements. Honneth's social theory, in turn, begins with the experiences of social suffering but needs to shift towards critical understanding to provide a direction for these experiences. Perhaps then, the differences between Dewey's and Honneth's critical theories might be considered as akin differences in emphasis rather than deeper differences in normative grounding.

To be sure, both authors would be sceptical of the possibility of metaphysical normative grounding. Neither aims to provide an ultimate answer to the question of 'how to evaluate society?' Neither looks for an external normative point of view, a God's perspective, from which societies can be evaluated. Instead, both are committed to the idea of immanent critique, a critique that draws its normative grounds largely from the actual understanding of our current social world and from the norms that are already present in its institutions.<sup>4</sup>

Immanent critique is but the first shared theme between Dewey and Honneth. The second can be found from looking at

3. How well have critical theorists actually succeeded in doing this is a different question. Nevertheless, this highlights the role of critical social theorists as public intellectuals who need to have an input in the public discussions. Jürgen Habermas has clearly succeeded in this role, but it remains to be seen how well recognition-theoretical claims will be taken up in the political sphere.

4. Although both philosophers follow a form of immanent criticism, their critical approaches are not without their methodological differences. Whereas Dewey understands the historicity of any critical approach, he is much more directed towards understanding the contemporary situation through scientific experimentalism. Respectively, Honneth's method can be characterized as 'normative reconstruction' which is more interested in outlining the normative underpinnings of current institutional order.

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

the so-called endpoint of criticism. First, both philosophers refrain from positing a singular substantive model of a good society that critical social theory is directed towards. There is no need, nor is it even possible, to set utopian models of a good life that social struggles should strive for. Instead, both adhere to a more general commitment to freedom as the core value of modern societies. In short, freedom is the historically acquired core norm that provides a suitable leverage for a critical social theorist. In Honneth's case, this is especially prevalent in *Freedom's Right* (2014a) in which he argues that while we do understand freedom as the core value of modern societies, we have misinterpreted the social conditions of freedom: it ought to be understood in social, rather than in atomistic sense. Also Dewey argues for freedom and, in parallel with Honneth's argument, he sees that freedom ought to be understood in relation to institutions and culture – with an emphasis on the cooperative nature of human beings (Dewey, 1939, p. 13, 22). Both can be thus understood – in a broad sense – as philosophers of (social) freedom.

The third point of connection can be found from similar remedies for institutional problems. Dewey's scientific optimism resides largely in free communication and scientific experiments. Only through active communicative life and scientific research can we achieve the knowledge we need for reforming the institutional setting. Honneth (2017, ch.3) adopts this stance directly from Dewey in his recent defence of socialism, in which Honneth argues that institutional change could be best achieved through experimentalism and by carefully documenting the results of these institutional experiments. In complex social systems we have uncountable different options for policy changes and practical institutional realizations. At the same time, we cannot be completely sure what follows from any particular change in any particular setting. Thus, well-documented experimentation will provide much needed knowledge of the actual effects of practical policy-changes, and anchors the theory to actual historical process instead of becoming a mere ideology. The focus on communication also lends itself naturally to a defence of deliberative forms of democracy, and here again Honneth explicitly draws his model of democracy from Dewey's philosophy (see, for example, Honneth, 2007; Honneth, 2017).

Fourth – beyond the philosophy of freedom, the scientific experimental method, and the focus on free communication and democracy –, Dewey and Honneth find normative sources from the human lifeform: they both defend the idea of a 'normativity of life'. In Honneth's case this is reflected in his philosophical anthropology, which offers a normative framework focusing on the conditions of human existence that are required for the possibility (of our understanding) of a good life. Dewey, in turn, referred to associated life as the perspective that provides the normative grounding for his social theory. As Italo Testa formulates it: "[A]ssociated living may have some immanent standards, and even deploy them in the form of prescriptive norms, but as the

source of these standards and norms is not itself a norm but is barely the human form of life" (Testa, 2017b, p. 243). In short, both authors can be interpreted as making claims about human anthropology or certain conditions of the human lifeform that ought to, at least partially, give positive content for our normative considerations. However, both are careful to not lock in any particular substantive form of a good life.

Whereas both authors extract norms from the human life, it is here that we can see a potential difference in their theoretical orientation. For Honneth, the key ideas are personal integrity and personal self-relations. His normative theory has the individual as its main referent, so much so that he has been challenged on these grounds. For example, Michael Thompson's charge is that "the pragmatist theory of the self and society that Honneth utilizes is one that relies on the lifeworld at the expense of system; that over-invests recognitive relations with the capacity to generate an ontological view point for critique" (Thompson, 2018, p. 577). Dewey, in turn, focuses much more on the functionality of the society as a whole and his reference point is the struggle between groups from the very beginning.

Does this indicate that Honneth's and Dewey's social theories harbour incompatible social ontologies? In one possible interpretation they answer differently to the question 'whose life matters?' For Honneth the reply is that of the individuals, while Dewey is worried about the status of the associated life in itself. If this is the case, their social theories would have radically different normative sources, two different accounts of what counts as relevant life. This is not, however, the obviously right interpretation. For example, Honneth (2014b) has also done his part to rehabilitate the concept of society as a living being, and Dewey still discusses the flourishing of individual subjects (and the inhibition of individual potentialities) in his analysis of the master-slave relation (Dewey, 1973, p. 96). Perhaps then, the difference is only superficial and merely a difference in emphasis.

To make a strong statement of the compatibility of social ontologies would require a much closer reading of their respective ontologies than is possible in this context. Hopefully, however, this short outline of the role of science, suffering, and related theoretical commitments has highlighted the need to take a closer look at the ontological commitments in critical social theory. In the next section, I shall suggest that we are in the need of a critical social ontology that would, in a consistent way, include the desired structural and anthropological elements in a critical social theory.

### 3. Desiderata for a critical social ontology

Gleaned from what has been said above, the challenge that Dewey and Honneth have been dealing with is precisely how to connect social order with individual psychology in such a way that enables criticism of the social order. This is to say, what they

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

(and we) want from a critical social theory is, first, an accurate description of the institutions of the society and the structural forces that individuals are subjected to. Second, these elements should be connected to the psychological formation of individuals. Pathological structuration should be, at least in part, reflected in the individual psyche(s) and, similarly, the more positive promise of individual freedom should already be included in the formulation of the institutional sphere.

These are themes that come under analysis in what has recently been called 'critical social ontology'. In outlining the task of this enterprise, Thompson states that it should:

provide us with a foundational framework to build a comprehensive and unified critical theory that can unite the *diagnostic* function of critical theory, or one that seeks to understand and theorize social pathologies [...] and the *normative* function of critical theory that should provide us with a means by which we can articulate a critical theory of judgment and thereby provide an emancipatory theory of society as well. (Thompson, 2016, p. 184)

It is debatable how comprehensive or how unified a social theory needs to be, but the central claims here are that it should be able to provide an analysis of the social world, give a related account of social suffering, and also provide normative grounds to evaluate these 'pathologies'. Formulated this way, the task of critical social ontology stays true to the Deweyan-Honnethian view of the role of social theory. However, in order to emphasize the role of scientific knowledge, a third desired feature could be added; namely, critical social ontology should also be *descriptive*. In addition to the normative and diagnostic functions, we also want to have a truthful picture of the interrelations of the individual and structural elements within a social realm. Now, combining these three elements, it is possible to give stipulative desiderata for critical social ontology:

*Immanent critique that provides political impetus through (correct) interpretations of (1) social suffering and (2) its connections to the institutional structuration of the society.*

Presenting a full theory that would fulfil all the desiderata would be a task that is well beyond the scope and purposes of this paper (or even the lifework of a single social theorist). Nevertheless, what can be done is to give an outline of the directions from within which we could build a critical social theory that takes seriously all the elements related to social suffering and the science of institutions and structures. Ideally critical social ontology would have it all: explanatory force over structures and social suffering, and room for emancipation and freedom.

We can start by spelling out the reasoning that lies behind 'immanence'. First, there is the practical claim – realpolitik of social

criticism – that critique has more weight behind it if it is based on those norms and assumptions that are already accepted in the setting that is being criticized. Related to this is the idea that, immanent critique provides a motivational element: after all, if persons within a social setting are actually committed to certain norms, then a critique that draws from those very same norms should have a direct motivating force in the eyes of the persons who are part of that particular normative order. In the least, the critique ought to provide reasons for action to the agents who have also a commitment to the same norms that the critique is based upon.

Herein lies a relevant and complicating question: what institutions should critical social theory direct itself towards? Also, what are those social settings or institutional structures that ought to be taken into focus in critical social ontology? Any given society can be thought of as being constituted of social institutions or institutionalized social practices, but not all of these are equally relevant for the existence of a society. That being the case, what is the institutional core or the 'basic structure' of a society that critical theorists should be interested in? Which institutions provide the relevant normative core that can be used in arguing for social transformation? Or, to formulate the same questions in slightly different words: what are the central institutions of a society and what is the criteria for centrality? Is the criteria, for example, continuous reproduction and functionality of the society? How can we philosophically demarcate central institutions from inconsequential ones?

One possibility is to altogether disregard the issues of centrality and instead focus on all those institutions that cause arbitrary suffering. However, some of the normative force of avoiding social suffering seems to diminish if the institution in questions is by no means necessary and especially if participation in it is voluntary. Whichever approach one chooses with regard to centrality, the question of which particular institutions are relevant for critical social theory will have at least partly an empirical and historical answer.

The Deweyan-Honnethian picture includes one possible understanding of the institutional realm. Both theories take their lead from Hegelian philosophy within which it has been common to distinguish between institutions of care, institutions of production that are based on merit, achievements, and work, and legal and governmental institutions that order broader society. In other words, the division between family, markets, and civil society is taken to be central for a modern society.

An obvious downfall of this (neo-)Hegelian institution-model is that it leaves broader normative frameworks – which have occasionally also been called institutions – outside of its analysis. Cultural frameworks, language, and deeply rooted habits of behaviour (or habituation) are left outside of the 'Hegelian corporations'. Further, it can be argued that the Hegelian institutional model does not have sufficiently clear criteria for

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

distinguishing the central institutions from the non-central, nor the central institutions from each other.<sup>5</sup>

Critical social ontology should be able to do two tasks with regard to the basic structuration of the society. First, it ought to identify the basic structure and, second, it should also be able to state the ontological standing of the basic structure. In short, what is the sense in which social institutions exist? Although analytical social ontology includes multiple competing accounts of social reality, there are some internal limitations to the way that critical social ontology can understand social reality. The challenge is no less than to solve the agency-structure problem in the way that connects structural explanations with social suffering and leaves room for individual freedom, both at the same time. This might well prove to be an impossible task, but nevertheless, the tools of analytical social ontology can help critical social theory to make explicit its underlying ontological assumptions, and this might make it easier to explicitly bridge the gap between individual experiences of suffering and structural explanations.

As if the task of explaining the nature of social reality would not be enough in itself, critical social ontology faces the daunting task of doing it in a way which would keep the idea of emancipation and potentialities of individual freedom alive – even from the internal point of view of the institutions themselves. Notably, there are two lines of thought present in the contemporary critical theory that point the way towards this kind of account. The first is to give an account of freedom that is compatible with a strong account of social structures. Traditionally freedom has been understood either as negative freedom – lack of external obstacles – or as positive freedom, which aims to capture the sense self-directionality and self-realization (see, e.g. Berlin, 1969; see also Fromm, 1994, p. 103–134). However, both of the conceptions of freedom hone in on the individual agent and leave the larger social setting underanalyzed. Thus, it is no surprise that it is challenging to fit them together with such social theories that give a central (and constitutive) role to structures and institutions. Against the individualistic accounts, it is possible to outline freedom in terms of *social freedom*. This conception has been recently defended by Honneth (2014a) and he emphasises how it is important to focus on those institutional conditions that make it possible for us to see ourselves as self-understanding and self-directional individuals.

The second promising line of thought comes in the form of normative reconstruction. Namely, even if we do have an accurate view of what are the central institutions of any given society, and even if we know how to best conceptualize freedom in a way that would fit institutional-structural explanations, it is not guaranteed that freedom is possible in the current society or that

we would know where to find potential developmental routes for emancipation. For that to be possible, we would need to, as Honneth states, “search for the real expression of the future wherever trace elements of desired progress in the expansion of social freedoms can already be found in existing institutions” (Honneth, 2017, p. 73). For example, are family, markets, and civil society such institutions that enable freedom and promote emancipation – even potentially? Here we see another limitation for a critical social ontology. To stay within the bounds of immanent critique – for the reasons that the critique should be understandable and compelling – the potential for freedom should already be found from within the existing structures.

Here, concepts like ‘normative surplus’ become helpful as they allow us to see how it does not need to be the case that the promised potentials and the underlying understanding of the institutional realm are actually realized in the existing institutions. As the commonly accepted ‘collective acceptance’ model of institutions states, institutions can only exist through collective acceptance and connected normative promises (see, e.g. Searle, 1995; Tuomela, 2007; Pettit, 2003, p. 177). In other words, institutions need to further some shared ends and fulfil some hopes and needs because otherwise agents would not identify with them or accept them and the normative frames that come with them. Critical social ontology has the task of showing that these promises include the desired normative grounding. That is to say, if the basic structure of a society is to be analyzed as potentially emancipatory, it should already harbor the promise of freedom in itself. This is an idea that is generally defended by ‘philosophers of freedom’ – as exemplified by Honneth’s (2014a; 2017) recent work – but it is a position that is in no way self-evident. For example, to what extent institutions like the labor market aim at a good life and freedom instead of material production and efficiency? One task of the critical social ontology is thus to find philosophical defences for the claims that modern institutions can ultimately be seen as promising freedom.

One potential route is to state, like Dewey and Honneth do, that a vague normative grounding can be found from looking back to the human lifeform and philosophical anthropology. A kernel of this idea that came already to the fore in Testa’s (2017b, p. 243) reading of Dewey – quoted in section two –, where he stated that the immanent standards of associated living have their source in the human form of life. The connectedness of anthropology and institutional realm is, in turn, succinctly outlined by Renault:

The idea of the normative presuppositions of social life implies that the argument belonging to philosophical anthropology

5. One attempt to do this is to identify institutions with different spheres of recognition. However, counterexamples for this attempt are easy to find. For example, if family is defined through love and care, we can point out that many practices around it are based on legal relations of respect or esteem and achievements.



<http://digthum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

(some institutions are essential for human life) is associated with an argument that is belonging to social ontology (some behaviours are essential to institutions). (Renault, 2010, p. 236)

Here, the normative grounding of the structuration of society is ultimately grounded in the human lifeform. Whereas it does not provide any particular explicit direction for normative critique, it does strongly suggest that arbitrary suffering is a state which we want to avoid.

## 4. Conclusions

After the rather roundabout trip through Dewey's and Honneth's critical social theories, the main claim of this essay has been that both of them touch something very central to critical social theory, but not in a way that would be explained well enough. Critical theory ideally harnesses and uses as a guiding force the experiences of social suffering. However, it also needs to be able to connect that force to a theoretical and correct understanding of the social reasons for sufferance. The hope is that this is done in a way that does not require an external point of view and in a way that leaves room for real emancipation and freedom. A further hope is that the theory includes a compelling theory of suffering that does not reduce the experiences to mere feelings – but rather manages to explain the intertwinements of reason and suffering, and give a holistic account of these in a way that almost necessitates practical action on the part of those who understand what is being done wrong to them and others.

## References

- BERLIN, I. (1969). "Two Concepts of Liberty". In: I. BERLIN (ed.). *Four Essays on Liberty*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 118–72.
- DERANTY, J.-P. (2009). *Beyond Communication. A Critical Study of Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy*. Boston: Brill.
- DEWEY, J. (1939). *Freedom and Culture*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- DEWEY, J. (1973). *Lectures in China, 1919-1920*. Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii.
- FREGA, R. (2017). "A Tale of Two Social Philosophies". *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 260–272.
- FROMM, E. (1994 [1941]). *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Henry Holt.
- HONNETH, A. (1995). *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. (Translated by Anderson, J.). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- HONNETH, A. (2007). "Democracy as Reflexive Cooperation: John Dewey and the Theory of Democracy Today". In: A. HONNETH, *Disrespect*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 218–239.
- HONNETH, A. (2014a). *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- HONNETH, A. (2014b). "The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept". *Social Research*, vol. 81, no. 3, p. 683–703.
- HONNETH, A. (2017). *The Idea of Socialism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- IKÄHEIMO, H. (2011). "Holism and Normative Essentialism in Hegel's Social Ontology". In: H. IKÄHEIMO and A. LAITINEN (eds.). *Recognition and Social Ontology*. Boston: Brill, p. 145–209.
- LAITINEN, A.; SÄRKELÄ, A. (2018). "Four Conceptions of Social Pathology". *European Journal of Social Theory* [Online first]. <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431018769593>>
- PETHERBRIDGE, D. (2013). *The Critical Theory of Axel Honneth*. Lanham and New York: Lexington Books.
- PETTIT, P. (2003). "Groups with Minds of Their Own". In: F. F. SCHMITT (ed.). *Socializing Metaphysics. The Nature of Social Reality*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., p. 167–193.
- RENAULT, E. (2002). "La philosophie critique: porte-parole de la souffrance sociale". [Translated as Critical Philosophy: A Spokesperson for Social Suffering.] *Mouvements* 2002/5 (No. 24), p. 21–32.
- RENAULT, E. (2010). "A Critical Theory of Social Suffering". *Critical Horizons*. Vol. 11, no. 2, p. 221–241.
- SEARLE, J. (1995). *The Construction of Social Reality*. New York: The Free Press.
- TESTA, I. (2017a). "Dewey, Second Nature, Social Criticism, and the Hegelian Heritage". *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], IX-1. <<http://ejpap.revues.org/990>>
- TESTA, I. (2017b). "The Authority of Life: The Critical Task of Dewey's Social Ontology". *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. Vol. 31, no. 2, p. 231–244.
- THOMPSON, M. (2016). *The Domestication of Critical Theory*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- THOMPSON, M. (2018). "Axel Honneth and Critical Theory". In: B. BEST, W. BONEFELD and C. O'KANE (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*. London: Sage, p. 564–580.
- TUOMELA, R. (2007). *The Philosophy of Sociality. The Shared Point of View*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- ZURN, C. (2000). "Anthropology and Normativity: A Critique of Axel Honneth's 'Formal Conception of Ethical Life'". *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. Vol. 26, no. 1, p. 115–124.
- ZURN, C. (2015). *Axel Honneth. A Critical Theory of the Social*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<http://digithum.uoc.edu>

Grounding social criticism...

**Onni Hirvonen**

(onni.hirvonen@jyu.fi)

ORCID: 0000-0001-8493-7420

University of Jyväskylä

Hirvonen is a Senior Lecturer in philosophy at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy in University of Jyväskylä. His main interests include Hegelian philosophy of recognition and social ontology. Hirvonen's recent publications include 'Populism as a Pathological Form of Politics of Recognition' (with Joonas Pennanen) and 'Groups as Persons? A Suggestion for a Hegelian Turn'.

Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy  
PO Box 35  
FI-40014 University of Jyväskylä



UNIVERSIDAD  
DE ANTIOQUIA