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How to criticize? On Honneth’s method

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Abstract: This article investigates the meaning and role of social critique in the social sciences. The point of departure is that this form of theorizing has always been a significant part of the social sciences. Due to the scientific ideal of value neutrality, however, the manner in which social criticism is conducted is seldom discussed. I claim that the value-neutrality ideal rests on a conception of moral subjectivism that can be challenged by turning to some notion of practical reason. However, there is no need to turn to any strong notion of reason; instead, I use the term ‘normative reasoning’. In a scholarly context, social criticism always rests on some particular form of normative reasoning. The main question posed in the article then becomes: How do we do what we do when we reason in a normative manner in the social sciences? In order to answer this question, the first part of the article addresses Axel Honneth’s ‘Grand Social Theory of Modernity’ in Freedom’s Right. His procedure in the book is treated as a significant case of normative reasoning. I investigate his method of ‘reconstruction’ by comparing it primarily to the methods of ‘construction’ and ‘genealogy’. The second part of the article is a critical discussion of Honneth’s method of normative reasoning. My main criticism is that, despite his intentions, his procedure is overly constructivist in the sense that it prevents a disclosure of ongoing transformations of ethical life. In the conclusion, I argue for a pluralistic methodology; different ways of normative reasoning should be used to solve different kinds of normative problems.

Key words: Axel Honneth, critical theory, immanent critique, normative reasoning, method, practical reason, reconstruction, social criticism, social sciences, social theory, theorizing

Introduction

In recent years, the meaning and role of theorizing in the social sciences has become a frequent topic of discussion (e.g. Abend, 2008; Swedberg, 2014). I have claimed that this new interest is related to an ongoing ‘turn to immanence’ (Carlehed, 2019). Highflying social theories developed in the last quarter of the 20th century are today recurrently denounced as ‘aprioristic’ (Lash, 2009). Rather than being understood as tools for disclosure, they are criticized for acting as blinders and imposing ‘zombie categories’ that prevent us from seeing what is happening in the world (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 203f). Conversely, few contemporary social scientists would – at least explicitly – defend a conception that suggests that it is possible to circumvent the theory-ladenness of facts. It therefore becomes necessary to address the methodological question: How do we do what we do when we theorize?

I turn to a more specific problem in this article, which must be understood as being related to the above question: How do we do what we do when we conduct a critique of society? The return of grand theory in the human sciences in the latter part of the 20th century (Skinner, 1985) included a normative turn. It was an effect of the political radicalization and the surge of neo-Marxism around 1968 (Alexander, 2000). In sociology, the ‘postpositivist persuasion’ and ‘rehabilitation of the theoretical’ (Alexander, 1982: 30) led to the actualization of ‘the founding fathers’ and, thus, of a normativity rooted in German idealism. This normative turn first started with Marxism but soon became broader. In political science, the renaissance of contract theory (cf. Rawls) offers an important example. Critique of society evolved as a special form of postpositivist theorizing. It does not have knowledge of an objective world as its primary task, but rather the disclosure of injustices in contemporary societies. Such critique presupposes some kind of theorizing because it is
impossible to take the meaning of injustice for granted and simply to observe it. Studies of prevalent social norms present an epistemological rather than a normative task. However, we cannot simply take such norms as points of departure for critique, because they themselves might be unjust. All forms of critique of society in an academic context seem to implicate a rejection of moral relativism in the strong sense. In order to make it worthwhile to criticize what is perceived as unjust, we must somehow be able to argue for this criticism. I call this kind of theorizing ‘normative reasoning’.

In recent decades, critique of society has also been accused of a kind of apriorism; in this case ‘paternalism’ (Celikates, 2006) or even ‘intellectual terrorism’ (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005: xiv). Consequently, also in this specific type of theorizing, there has been a turn to immanence (Alexander, 2000). For similar reasons, the question of how to conduct social criticism has been actualized as the question of how to theorize in an epistemological sense. On the border between social science and practical philosophy, a discussion about critique has arisen, which might be interpreted as a turn to immanence. This turn has been conceptualized as a shift from strong to weak critique or from strong to weak normativity (e.g. Jaeggi & Wesche, 2009). It challenges any neat distinction between ‘is’ and ‘ought’, between theoretical or pure reason (truth) and practical reason (justice). My question in this article, then, is how to conduct reasonable critique of society in the social sciences under such conditions.

My basic point of departure in these matters can be grounded in both the Frankfurt School of critical theory and in Foucauldian theories of power and domination. Practical normativity of some kind is inescapable. As made clear in these schools of social theory, even claims of scientific validity include more or less implicit, normative conceptions and have normative consequences. Furthermore, sociologists of science have shown that the scientific ideal of value neutrality has never been accomplished. One way of examining this discrepancy between the scientific ideal and scientific practices would be to understand normative influences as mistakes that can be avoided with a stricter application of methodological rules or with further methodological improvement. Another way would be to acknowledge the unavoidability of such influences, looking instead for practical ways to handle them. Following the recommendations of Max Weber, normative presuppositions are made explicit, separated, and somehow sealed off. Viewing the problem in this manner takes for granted that normative presuppositions must necessarily be subjective and arbitrary. But why should we stick to Weber’s subjectivist – even Nietzschean – approach to normativity? Why not consider the opposite option (i.e. some conception of practical reason)? Such suggestions must not implicate any strong notion of reason; rather, we ought to consider some weaker notion of normative reasoning in line with the turn to immanence. Such an option would not only involve acknowledgement of the unavoidability of normative presuppositions, but also reflection over them (i.e. theorization over their meaning and validity). After all, to be reflective about what we do is a basic virtue of academic scholarship of all kinds. Actually, as soon as such an option is considered, it becomes evident that this is actually what theorizing in the social sciences

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1 The later Foucault’s discussion of critique and freedom is an illustrative example (Carleheden, 2015).
2 I use the term ‘normative’ here only with reference to the right and the good; not to truth or beauty.
has often been about. At this point, it is enough merely to mention concepts such as alienation, anomie, anonymity, the iron cage, reification, colonization of the life world, governmentality, patriarchy, colonialism, racism, heteronormativity and so on. How do we theorize about such normative matters?

This question is obviously demanding. In this article, I restrict myself to an investigation of Axel Honneth’s answer in his second opus magnum, *Freedom’s Right* (2014). I begin with the observation that this book is a significant case of normative reasoning. I have chosen it for four reasons. Firstly, it is an impressive book. Honneth’s explication of the meaning of freedom and its significance for modern society is in many ways convincing and important. Secondly, as a leading representative of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, Honneth must be seen as one of the most important contemporary representatives of scholarly critique of society. His work is widely read and serves as a model. Thirdly, *Freedom’s Right* is at one and the same time a ‘grand’ theory of modernity and an explicit attempt to turn to immanence. It has been described as ‘Honneth’s sociological turn’ (Strydom, 2013). As presented below, a Hegelian ‘“sociologizing” of the categorial frame of reference’ (Honneth 2009: 29) is one of the defining features of critical theory. In *Freedom’s Right*, however, sociological and historical explorations for the first time make up a major part of Honneth’s work. Fourthly, Honneth himself has rather extensively discussed his own ‘method’ of normative reasoning in relation to other possible methods. Thus, this case opens for a discussion of its advantages and disadvantages in comparison to other methods.

**Normative reconstruction in contrast to construction and genealogy**

The critical theory of the Frankfurt School is primarily and explicitly normative. It is a ‘kind of theory which is an element in action leading to new social forms’ (Horkheimer, 1975: 216). Critical theorists have always understood this normativity as immanent in some sense and to some degree (Honneth, 2009: chapter 2). Not only was the original aim of *Institut für Sozialforschung* to connect practical philosophy and interdisciplinary social science, but the philosophical part was based on Hegel’s critique of a pure and separated kind of normative reasoning (e.g. Locke or Kant). This intellectual heritage in and of itself provides good reason to choose Honneth’s thinking as a suitable contemporary case for the topic of this article. Furthermore, in *Freedom’s Right*, Honneth is explicitly critical about Habermas’ bending of critical theory in a more Kantian direction (Honneth, 2014: 5; 35; 42f). Honneth’s general intention is to steer critical theory back to its ‘Left Hegelian’ roots and make this kind of theorizing relevant today:

One of the major weaknesses of contemporary political philosophy is that it has been decoupled from an analysis of society, instead becoming fixated on purely normative principles. Although theories of justice necessarily formulate normative rules according to which we can assess the moral legitimacy of social orders, today these principles are drawn up in isolation from the norms [*Sittlichkeit*] that prevail in given practices and institutions, and are then ‘applied’ secondarily to social reality. This opposition between

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3 The amount of applications and discussions of his work is overwhelming. Surprisingly, there are only a few extensive discussions of his method of normative reasoning; however, see (Strydom, 2010, 2011) and Pedersen (2015).
what is and what should be, this philosophical degrading of moral facts, is the result of a theoretical development that started long ago, one that is closely linked to the fate of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. (Honneth 2014: 1).

As already mentioned, *Freedom’s Right* consists of considerable parts historical and sociological investigations. In order to understand the role that such investigations play in the book, however, it is crucial to see that the Hegelian method of normative reasoning depends on ‘the living good’ (Hegel 2008: §142) or ‘(t)he objective ethical principle’ (ibid: §144). Honneth’s method is based on Hegel’s conception of an internal relation between practical reason and normative reality. However, he uses somewhat different terminologies when discussing the two parts of this relation, such as ‘theory of justice’ and ‘theory of society’, ‘practical reason and existing social relations’, ‘empirical disciplines and philosophical analysis’ (2014: 5); ‘historical and social circumstances and rational considerations’, ‘reflections’ and ‘empirical determinations’ and ‘a theoretical concept and the historical reality’ (2014: 56). The relation between them actualizes one of Hegel’s most discussed statements: ‘What is rational is real; And what is real is rational’ (Hegel, 2008: 18). It is tempting to claim that an understanding of Honneth’s method is almost all about making a sensible interpretation of this Hegelian dictum.

Honneth frequently uses the term ‘method’ to describe his reasoning in *Freedom’s Right*, reasoning to which he refers as ‘normative reconstruction’. Before discussing this method critically, I will present Honneth’s understanding of it. I will begin with an earlier essay by Honneth in which he, in contrast to *Freedom’s Right*, distinguishes this method from what he sees as the two major alternative methods (Honneth, 2009: 44ff). We should, he claims, differentiate between three general contemporary methods of social criticism:

- Construction
- Reconstruction
- Genealogy (or deconstruction)

*Construction*

The constructive method relates to ‘strong critique’. It was certainly important for overcoming normative subjectivism and thus for the rehabilitation of normative reasoning in the social sciences in the final quarter of the 20th century. Today, however it is often seen as paternalistic and despotic.

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4 Surprisingly, Honneth does not discuss Habermas’ conception of ‘reconstruction’. Compare, for instance, Habermas’ distinction between ‘empiricist’, ‘normativist’ and ‘reconstructivist’ concepts of legitimation (Habermas, 1979: Chapter 5). This neglect might be due to Honneth’s ambivalent attempt to include Habermas among the constructivists rather than the reconstructivists (2014: 5; 35; 42f). This is a problematic suggestion despite Habermas later turning towards Kantianism. As far as I can see, Habermas has in many ways remained a Hegelian in method. He developed his theory of communicative reason in relation to ordinary language practices and his normative conception of democracy in relation to existing democratic practices (even on a transnational level). In other places, Honneth also claims that Habermas is perusing immanent critique (Boltanski et al. 2014: 569, Honneth 2009: Chapter 2). However, there are undoubtedly important methodological differences between the two. In this article, I cannot systematically compare them (see instead Pedersen 2015).
(Honneth 2009: 44). With this method, a normative yardstick is constructed, high up in the thin air of philosophy (pure practical reason), and only after completion used to assess the conditions of the social world. The relation between reason and reality is dualistically understood as external. In the attempt to escape paternalism, the users of this method pay the price of formalism and thus tend to retreat from formulating a critical theory of society and to be content with a theory of procedures and abstract rights. Kant is seen as the classical model and early Rawls’ theory of justice as the most clear-cut contemporary example (Honneth 2009: 47; 2014: 5).

The constructive form of normative reasoning presupposes a hierarchical order between theory of justice and theory of society. The classical liberal conception of ‘the contract’ as the basic social theoretical metaphor fits this method well. A contract is first formulated, and only thereafter (a well-ordered) society arises. Hegel was one of the first to reject this notion of a social contract. On this point he was only predated by Scottish enlightenment philosophy and its paradigmatic criticism of contract theory (Eriksson, 1993). In contrast to Kant, Hegel was influenced by the Scotts and certainly would have agreed with Adam Ferguson, quoting Montesquieu: ‘Man is born in society (...) and there he remains’ (Ferguson, 1773: 27). Eriksson’s distinction in this regard between contract theory and sociological theory can be used to highlight the different socio-ontological assumptions related to the constructive and reconstructive methods. As often stated, the former – in contrast to the latter – seems to implicate some kind of anthropological atomism (Taylor, 1985), that is, what Sandel called a conception of an “unencumbered self” in his criticism of Rawls (Sandel, 1984). Such assumptions have normative implications. Habermas (Habermas, 1971: 72) once called Hobbes – the modern inventor of social contract theory – ‘the actual founder of liberalism’, and in Freedom’s Right both the ‘negative’ (economic liberalism) and ‘reflexive’ (political liberalism) models of individual freedom are placed in relation to the constructive method. Conversely, unfolding the ‘social’ model of individual freedom requires a reconstructive method.

**Reconstruction**

Normative reconstruction should rather be related to ‘weak critique’. In Freedom’s Right, Honneth explicates this method in four steps. The first is a social theoretical step, where the task is to decide the primary subject matter of the social analysis. While injustice is the raison d’être of critical theory, it presupposes some conception of justice. In this case, we also require a yardstick to determine what injustice is. In the first instance, Honneth turns to Hegel and his conception of ‘the objective spirit’ of a society (i.e. to ethical life: Sittlichkeit) but proceeds to classical sociology to find a ‘post-metaphysical equivalent’ to Hegelian idealism (Honneth, 2015: 207).

The basic point of departure for classical sociology is, then: How is modern society possible? This brings us back to ‘the Hobbesian problem of order’ (Parsons, 1968: 89ff). As mentioned above, sociology in this sense is to be seen as an alternative to social contract theory and involves a rejection of atomism and a dualistic understanding of the relation between the individual and society. Hence, Hobbes’ normative model of negative freedom – that is, freedom from society – cannot be the answer. Rather, human beings must be seen as ‘always already’ social. According to classical sociology, ‘social reproduction hinges on a certain set of shared fundamental ideals and
values’ (Honneth 2014: 3). Thus, the starting point for a critical theory – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – should be the common norms that are constitutive for the reproduction of a society.

According to Honneth, however, the social theoretical focus should not lead us to think that reconstruction presupposes a conception of a homogenous and consensual society or of a harmonious social development.5

(N)ormative ideas have the ability to shape and remodel social reality in accordance with their own content. It is in and through social struggles that their claims to validity come to fruition. (Honneth 2015: 207)

We are here dealing with conflicts, but of a special kind; that is, ‘the moral logic of social conflicts’ (Boltanski, Honneth, & Celikates, 2014: 567f; Honneth, 1996: chapter 8). We must distinguish – at least analytically – struggles for recognition from struggles for self-preservation.

Whereas the first step distinguishes the reconstructive method from crude conceptions of materialism, the second distinguishes it from crude conceptions of idealism. According to the second step, a theory of justice should be introduced on the same level as the theory of society. The normative basis for critique is not to be understood as a transcendent philosophical construction, but rather as being immanent in society. Thus, a theory of justice is to be worked out in close relation to a theory of society of the kind presented in step one. Thus, this second step is the crucial one when distinguishing reconstruction from construction. This is why Honneth, when working out a theory of justice, places so much emphasis on social theory. This might seem obvious; we cannot be critical of something without knowing what we are criticizing. In that simple sense, however, the theory of society is reduced to an object of application. It remains external and secondary to the theory of justice. Rather, the second step says that a theory of justice must take its point of departure in the ethical life of a particular society. However, a reconstructive theory of justice involves more than merely describing what goes on in our shared ethical life; not just any part of it is of interest. Honneth (2014: 10) refers to ‘overarching’ and ‘generally accepted’ values, which are constitutive for the reproduction of society. Reconstruction is about identifying these constitutive values.

Such reconstruction cannot remain on the surface. We must be able to work out the meaning of these values. Also in this respect, Honneth follows Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, basically agreeing with Hegel’s point of departure: ‘the right (…) of subjective freedom, constitutes the middle or turning-point between the ancient and the modern world’ (Hegel 2008: §124). Individual freedom is the constitutive value of modern societies. But what does freedom mean, presuppose and imply? Honneth’s answer is an elaboration of Hegel’s answer: We must distinguish between three interdependent but different notions of freedom; ‘negative’, ‘reflective’ and ‘social’ freedom. The first notion can be clarified by turning to Hobbes’ liberal notion of ‘freedom from’, which is a kind of freedom that can be protected by abstract rights and law. In Berlin’s terminology, the other two

5 Compare the common (from the late 1950s and onwards) sociological conflict-theoretical critique of what Bauman entitled ‘Durksonianism’ (Bauman, 1976).
are positive notions of freedom; that is, ‘freedom to’ (Berlin, 1969). The second can be explicated instead using Kant’s notion of self-determination. It is based on subjective morality and conscience and implies a ‘retreat to the inner citadel’ (ibid). The third notion, on the other hand, can be understood by turning to Hegel’s critique of Kant. It is an intersubjective idea of freedom, which includes the relation to others in a social situation. The latter form of freedom obviously becomes the key for an immanent theory of justice. Freedom must be seen as internally related to the ethical life of a society.

The third step is based on the idea of social freedom. It is about drawing a distinction within our shared ethical life between significant values, on the one side, and ‘social routines’ and ‘social practices and institutions’ on the other. We must be able to analyze the relation between these two sides of ethical life. Here, normative reconstruction ‘means categorizing and ordering these routines and institutions according to the impact of their individual contribution to the stabilization and implementation of these values’ (2014: 6). On this point, Honneth updates Hegel’s social theory in Philosophy of Right and distinguishes between three basic institutions of modern society: personal relationships, market economy and democratic will-formation.

The fourth step clarifies in what sense the reconstructive method is a method of critique. Here, the question becomes whether routines, practices and institutions ‘contribute to the realization of universal [allgemeinen] values and ideals of modern societies’ (2014: 8). The ‘generally accepted values’ constitutive of ethical life offer a point of departure when criticizing routines, practices and institutions. The significance of critique becomes apparent when we ask about the extent to which a society is institutionally organized in a manner that makes the realization of immanent ideals possible (i.e. in this case, freedom). If society is organized in a way that does not support or even undermines the realization of shared fundamental ideals and values, ‘social pathologies’ or ‘misdevelopments’ arise. Critique should be directed against institutions, practices and routines that ‘block or interrupt’ the realization of such ideals (Honneth 2009: 20). According to Honneth, modern society is criticizeable, on the one hand, when negative (legal) and reflexive (moral) notions of freedom dominate over social notions of freedom and, on the other hand, when the institutions of social freedom are underdeveloped or developed in the wrong direction. In some ways, reconstruction resembles Horkheimer and Adorno’s conception of dialectics. In the section of legal freedom in Freedom’s Right, Honneth (2014: 83) writes: ‘We could even say that

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6 These distinctions lead us to the content rather than to the method of Honneth’s theory. It cannot be further discussed in this article.

7 Honneth (2015: 214ff) has revised his understanding of the relation between social pathologies and misdevelopments. On the one side, we have the relations between the three forms of freedom (negative, reflexive and social) and on the other, we have the relations within social freedom between the three institutions of freedom (personal relations, market economy and democratic will formation). How one should relate these two relations is a complicated task and I cannot address it here. However, the aim of critique cannot be to replace negative and moral freedom with social freedom. They are to be seen as interdependent. The normative question is, rather, how to understand their relation in the right way. Further, it seems difficult to deny that the institutions of social freedom (and the relation between them) are also influenced by the dominating understanding of the relation between the three notions of freedom. Thus, it is difficult to uphold any sharp distinction between the two kinds of critical relations at play.
the law promotes attitudes and practices that block the exercise of the kind of freedom it enables’. This is a good example of the main thesis of *Freedom’s Right*. The modern social order is based on the ideal of individual freedom, but this ideal can undermine itself in different ways. One aspect of freedom can dominate over another in such a manner that freedom is damaged. One might claim that Honneth is working out a kind of dialectics of freedom located somewhere between Hegel and Horkheimer and Adorno. This attempt explains why not only social science but also history plays such a prominent role in *Freedom’s Right*. Honneth is just as critical about Adorno’s negative Hegelianism as Hegel’s philosophy of history. He argues for a more empirical approach. We should investigate how and to what extent the realization of individual freedom is ‘blocked and interrupted’ by the actual understanding and institutionalization of this constitutive ideal of modernity.

**Genealogy**

Foucault’s development of Nietzsche’s genealogy has played a significant role in the general turn to immanence in social theory. Also in this case, transcendent claims of reason, truth and justice are historicized and sociologized. Further, also in this case immanent normative conceptions have been in focus. Honneth’s explication of the specificity of genealogy is brief:

> Here we do not find the critique of ideology’s confrontation of idea and reality but, rather, the exposure of society as a social happening that has long been bereft of any normative justification through credible ideals. (Honneth 2009: 48)

The general aim is ‘to criticize a social order by demonstrating historically the extent to which its defining ideas and norms already serve to legitimate a disciplinary or repressive practice’ (ibid). Thus, it does not take immanent ideals as points of departure for institutional critique, turning instead the critical gaze towards these ideals, deconstructing their historical roots and revealing them as a means of domination. Genealogy is a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, as Ricoeur once wrote.

> Genealogy does not resemble the evolution of a species and does not map the destiny of a people (…) The search for descent is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself. (Foucault, 1977)

Thus, from what has been said thus far, it seems doubtful if genealogy should be seen as a form of normative reasoning at all. Nevertheless, deconstruction also depends on a particular ontology:

> So what is the principle that explains history? First, a series of brute facts, which might already be described as physico-biological facts: physical strength, force, energy, the proliferation of one race, the weakness of the other, and so on. (Foucault, 2003: 54)

Genealogy is built on an ontology of power (Saar, 2008: 304; 2010: 14). The socio-ontological and anthropological implications are neither compatible with reconstruction and classical sociology nor with construction and contract theory. In contrast to the constructive method, genealogy takes part
in the immanent turn and its conception of subjectivation shows that it – as much as the reconstructive method – presupposes the fundamental sociality of the individual. However, sociality in the former case is to be understood as a ‘strategical situation’ (Foucault in Saar 2010: 15); that is, individuals are understood as involved in struggles for ‘survival and self-preservation’ rather than for recognition (Saar 2008: 303).

The blurring of the distinction between moral conflict and struggle for self-preservation seems to undermine any critical point of departure. Genealogy, Honneth claims, is ‘a parasitical critical procedure, since it lives by presupposing a normative justification that it does not itself try to give’ (Honneth 2009: 48). Hence, Honneth appears to support Habermas’ critique of Foucault’s thinking as ‘crypto-normative’ (Habermas, 1987).

In the conclusion to the 2009 essay, however, Honneth (2009: 51) does not simply dismiss genealogy. He understands reconstructive critique as the distinguishing method of the Frankfurt School but claims that ever since the shocking experience of Nazism by the first generation of this school, Nietzsche’s genealogical perspective has not been alien to critical theory. Still, in view of his criticism of Foucault, Honneth’s conclusion is somewhat surprising:

[S]ocial criticism that has learned from the dialectic of enlightenment simultaneously delineates the norms at its disposal from two sides. On the one hand, the norms must satisfy the criterion of being socially incorporated ideals at the same time as they are the expression of social rationalization; on the other hand, it must be tested whether they still possess their original meaning. Today, it is no longer possible to have social criticism that does not also use genealogical research as a detector to ferret out the social shifts of meaning of its leading ideals. (Honneth 2009: 53)

He completes the essay with the following:

What thus emerges at the end of my reflections is the irritating circumstance that Critical Theory in a certain way unites all three of the models distinguished in this essay into a single program. The constructive justification of a critical standpoint is to provide a conception of rationality that establishes a systematic connection between social rationality and moral validity. It is then to be reconstructively shown that this potential rationality determines social reality in the form of moral ideals. And these moral ideals, in turn, are to be seen under the genealogical proviso that their original meaning may have socially become unrecognizable. I fear that what Critical Theory once meant by the idea of social criticism cannot be defended today, short of this extremely high standard. (2009: 53)

One might imagine why Honneth finds his own conclusion irritating. In most of the essay, he has tried to convince us about the superiority of the reconstructive method before suddenly seeming to realize that we cannot do without the other two. In Freedom’s Right, he continues his one-way criticism of the constructive method. Genealogy is not even mentioned. Thus, he would appear to
have abandoned the conclusion of the 2009 essay; that is, the reconstructive method is after all Honneth’s answer to the question of how to conduct normative reasoning in the social sciences.

**Discussion**

I will begin my critical discussion of Honneth’s method of normative reasoning with the peculiar discrepancy between his conclusion in the 2009 essay and his actual way of procedure in *Freedom’s Right*. In so doing, it becomes possible to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of this method in comparison with the constructive and genealogical methods.

Firstly, can normative reconstruction do without normative construction in some sense? This question actualizes the role of scholarly critics in the critique of society. From a methodological perspective, it is unclear how Honneth proceeds when he determines the normative point of departure of critique. While a sociologist might have expected, for instance, a discussion of the World Value Survey and Ronald Inglehart’s work (e.g. Inglehart, 1997), Honneth (2014: 6) emphasizes that this task cannot be left ‘to the empirical studies of social scientists’. As we have seen, when claiming that individual freedom is the core value of modernity, he can be said to be following in Hegel’s footsteps. The specificity of Hegelian theorizing can be elucidated further by quickly comparing it to two schools of critique that we have yet to discuss: communitarianism and French pragmatism. They are both close to the reconstructive method, but, according to Honneth, make excessively radical turns to immanence.

Honneth takes Michael Walzer as the representative of the first school and claims that his purely interpretive method of critique ‘cannot really justify what makes the ideals from its own culture chosen to be a reference point normatively defensible or desirable in the first place’ (Honneth 2009: 50). In the 2009 essay, Honneth argues that his own method can do just that due to its basis in a Hegelian notion of reason. According to this notion, reason is at work in the shared ethical life of ordinary people and in history through learning processes (i.e. reason is real). However, there is an interesting terminological shift in *Freedom’s Right* as compared to the 2009 essay. In the latter, the concept reason is central whereas the concept of justice is absent. In the former, justice takes the place of reason. This shift in terminology should probably be read as a further attempt to draw a distinction to Hegelian metaphysics and to radicalize the turn to immanence. In one of the few places in *Freedom’s Right* where Honneth uses the concept of reason (within brackets!), he writes: ‘the criterion of ‘rationality’ [is] applied to those elements of social reality that contribute to the implementation of universal [allgemeiner] values’ (2014: 8).8 Thus, in the theoretical context of *Freedom’s Right*, reason now can be exchanged for ‘institutions that guarantee freedom’ (ibid: 1). An appeal to reason is an appeal to the value of freedom; that is, to a value that is to be understood as immanent in modernity. However, is not a consequence of this shift that Honneth’s critique of Walzer, quoted above, also could be directed against *Freedom’s Right*? Or might we go one step further: If negative and moral conceptions of freedom are dominating modern society rather than

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8 In the 2009 essay, ‘vernünftig’ is translated as ‘reason’ but in this book as ‘rationality’. I am also skeptical about translating ‘allgemein’ as ‘universal’. Maybe one could have chosen the less strong ‘general’.
social – as Honneth claims – how can we criticize the former conceptions when claiming to proceed in an immanent manner?

French pragmatists give a crucial role to justification practices in ordinary social interaction. From the perspective of Honneth’s non-metaphysical conception of reason, it is tempting to interpret On Justification as a book about the reality of reason (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). However, even though Boltanski and Thévenot acknowledge the significance of ordinary normative reasoning, they are deeply ambivalent concerning academic scholars conducting critique. According to Honneth, they go so far in the direction of replacing what they see as paternalistic Bourdieuan critical sociology with a sociology of critique (i.e. their version of a turn to immanence) that they are no longer able to pursue a critique of society – ‘(a)s if they were driven by the bad conscience’ (Honneth, 2010: 385). In order to avoid paternalism, like the communitarians, they tend to restrict the possibility of reconstruction to interpretation and articulation of critical practices in ordinary society. Critical theory, on the other hand, cannot be content with – in Habermas’ terminology – an observer perspective. Its defining self-understanding includes the role of being a participant in the critique of society. This is its Marxist heritage. Critical theory is founded on what might be called an activist method of reasoning. Here again, however, the criticism that Honneth directed against Walzer can be turned around; what does Honneth methodologically suggest that makes it possible for the critical theorist to take this participatory role without becoming a paternalist constructivist?

My answer is that reconstruction seems to involve a theoretical logic that Honneth does not mention in his methodological reflections; that is, what Charles Sanders Peirce calls ‘abduction’ or ‘retroduction’ and Taylor ‘transcendental argumentation’. We are here dealing with a logic of inquiry based primarily neither on induction (like the World Value Survey) nor on a kind of formal deduction that is only externally connected to the empirical world. Retroduction is an ‘inference a posteriori’; it goes backwards and aims to explain the conditions of the possibility of something (Carleheden, 2014). It is a kind of analytical work, which is conducted in order to investigate the conditions of the possibility of a known fact; in our case, the ideal of individual freedom. In this way, it can logically be shown that the hegemonic understanding of individual freedom – in everyday life and academia alike – is insufficient. According to such an answer, Honneth is not primarily interested in convincing us that freedom is the constitutive value of modernity. He thinks that it is enough simply to point this out. The aim of the first part of his book is, rather, to explicate what freedom presupposes – both theoretically and institutionally. Individual freedom cannot be fully realized in its negative and reflexive form. This method of retroduction is not simply about description or interpretation. It demands normative analyses by the academic scholar, which might lead to a critique of the objective normativity of a society. Still, it is not detached from this objective normativity, taking it instead as the point of departure of the analysis. Thus, this form of inference seems to clarify a possible path between an interpretive method of critique and a sociology of critique, on the one side, and a paternalist constructivist method on the other.10

9 ‘His profession is the struggle of which his own thinking is a part’ (Horkheimer 1975: 216).
10 Retroduction is neither restricted to Honneth’s method of critique nor to theories of justice. For instance, it is crucial for Habermas’ work (Pedersen, 2011). The difference between Habermas and Honneth can be explained by the different
Secondly, does Honneth in *Freedom’s Right* abandon his earlier acknowledgement of the significance of genealogy? Pedersen seems to take for granted that he does not (Pedersen, 2015: 257). I will argue that he does.

As we have seen, in 2009 Honneth presented reconstruction and genealogy as two distinct methods of social criticism. Writing history plays a crucial role in both and I would add that both entail some kind of retroductive logic (Carlehedden 2014). The crucial difference between the two methods is that constitutive values are taken as normative points of departure for critique in the first case, whereas critique is turned against such values in the second case. In the former, we are dealing with ‘a normatively guided reconstruction of social development’ (Honneth 2014: 63). The fact that pathologies and misdevelopments play a crucial role in Honneth’s theory does not indicate that he uses a genealogical method. To test ‘the original meaning’ of constitutive values cannot be to identify a mismatch between these values and their institutional realization. As we have seen, such analytical work is part of the reconstructive method (step four). Actually, as far as I can see, the very structure of *Freedom’s Right* excludes genealogical testing. In the first part, the meaning and social conditions of individual freedom are demonstrated by means of retroductive inferences. In the second and third parts, these normative findings are applied rather than problematized.

Before discussing the consequences of this disregard of the genealogical method, I will return to the criticism of social theory for apriorism, which I mentioned in the beginning of this article. While empirical research tends to downplay the significance of normative presuppositions, social theorizing tends to downplay the significance of empirical observations.

In the first part of *Freedom’s Right*, freedom is conceptualized through an analysis of scholarly texts in the history of ideas. The three models of freedom are discussed primarily through an investigation of the works of Hobbes, Kant and Hegel, respectively, and the whole theory about the relation between these models and the different institutions of social freedom is a development of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. The use of social science and history first starts thereafter, in parts two and three. The intention in these parts is not to problematize the original meaning of freedom, which was explicated in part one, but rather its institutional realization in the history of modernity. To be sure, the Hegel-inspired philosophical analysis in part one aims to incorporate a theory of society into a theory of justice. However, this methodological strategy does not enable us to overcome the ‘extremely damaging division between theoretical and empirical knowledge’ (Joas & Knöbl, 2009: 3). Theory of society is not treated as secondary by Honneth, but empirical social science and history is. In his discussion of Hegel, Honneth (2014: 55) writes for instance: ‘...if the presupposed concept of freedom already contains indications of institutional relations, then the elucidation of this concept must produce the epitome of a just social order virtually automatically’. In order to mitigate kinds of immanent practices they take as basic points of departure; in Habermas’ case, linguistic understanding and in Honneth’s case, the ethical life of modern societies. Thus, I would not interpret Habermas’ work as constructivist; rather, his formalism should be understood as a consequence of his point of departure.

11 Strydom (Strydom, 2010: 12) seems to claim that Honneth already used genealogy before 2009.

12 Compare Pedersen’s (2015) discussion of Habermas’ concept of reconstruction in the case of an analysis of theoretical texts. Honneth has recently also briefly discussed method in this sense (Honneth, 2018).
the aprioristic implications of such a philosophical social theory, Honneth discusses the social role of both negative freedom, secured by abstract right, and the reflexive freedom of moral consciousness. These subordinated forms of freedom in Hegel’s philosophy open up for some critical distance to the institutions of social freedom, which have been determined ‘in advance’ (ibid: 58). Honneth also argues for a ‘processual’ understanding of Hegel’s conception of justice (ibid: 61). I cannot discuss these mitigations here. Ultimately, they do not change the general impression that the conception of justice, developed in Freedom’s Right, seems theoretically predetermined despite the claims of an immanent procedure. Actually, I would claim that the critique of the constructive method turns out to be a critique of atomism rather than a critique of philosophical supremacy. And further, Honneth’s abandonment of his earlier foundation in philosophical anthropology is not replaced by empirical sociology and history, but by a socio-ontology. His ‘sociological turn’ thus seems limited.

From a social science perspective, a philosophical social theory appears aprioristic. Facts are theory-laden but not theory-determined (Sayer, 1992). Sociologists inspired by Peirce understand abduction just as dependent on induction as the other way around (Swedberg, 2014; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Theoretical and empirical research should be seen as interdependent and not hierarchically related. Honneth’s way of proceeding seems to shield socio-ontological theorizing from empirical research rather than confronting the two. I will indicate the problems with such a method in a brief discussion of his theory of social change.

Classical sociology was based on a crude distinction between tradition and modernity. Social change was conceptualized in terms of a gradual transformation from the former to the latter. (Carlehedhen, 2006). Modernity was understood as one, not many (Wagner, 2000). Honneth seems basically to follow this classical conception. Of course, Honneth acknowledges and discusses contemporary social changes, but in contrast to Beck, Bauman, Wagner, Boltanski and Chiapello, Reckwitz and so many other sociologists, these observations of change do not lead to a conception of a new epoch of modernity. In this aspect, Honneth seems to be close to another neo-classical thinker (i.e. Habermas) and his notion of an ‘unfinished modernity’.

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13 In the English edition, ‘Prozessualität’ is translated as ‘procedural’, which is confusing. I have changed the translation.
14 In this manner, Hegel seems to play a similar role for Honneth as Marx did for Horkheimer in his programmatic article on traditional and critical theory.
15 Honneth speaks about his ‘social-theoretic turn’ in reference to his first major work, Struggle for Recognition, stating that his earlier ‘anthropological conception of personhood’ was ‘too psychological and insufficiently sociological’ (Boltanski et al. 2014: 573–4).
16 Habermas’ (1979) distinction between ‘the logic of development’ and ‘the dynamics of history’ would be useful for a closer analysis. His distinction is intended to create distance to the Hegelian philosophy of history. According to Habermas, the actual development of history cannot be reduced to the logic of development, although the latter does have some force. In Honneth’s work, this force is normative, i.e. the logic of freedom. This normative logic is the reality of reason at work in modern history; it can be interrupted but cannot change course. This dynamic has influence over the logic, but only in the negative sense of a force that blocks and interrupts, thereby causing pathologies and misdevelopments. The dynamics of history seem to be unable to influence the core of the normative logic of development.
Strangely, Honneth holds on to the classical conception of modern change even though he has played a key role in a research project about the ‘structural transformation of recognition’ (Honneth, Lindemann, & Voswinkel, 2013). However, social changes are here conceptualized in terms of uncertainty, indeterminacy, instability, flexibility, anomie, brutalization and crisis rather than as a rise of a new kind of normative structure (Honneth, 2012). The institutions of social freedom and recognition have, according to Honneth, become more inclusive in some aspects, but he claims that they have primarily become more fragile and unstable. Thus, his theory of structural change is a one about the conditions of the realization of social freedom (i.e. of new kinds of blockages and interruptions) rather than about the original meaning of freedom. Again, we find a sharp division between a Hegelian socio-ontology and normativity, on the one hand, and empirical investigations on the other. Thus, the question becomes why we should follow Honneth’s example on this point. If we are to proceed immanently, why not empirically investigate whether the constitutive values of contemporary society might also be included in the structural transformation of society? Might a new epoch of modernity or a postmodern (in its literal sense) social order be under development? Or perhaps the meaning of freedom is under fundamental change? Maybe the specific institutions of freedom, which Honneth points at, are not the crucial ones for realizing freedom and recognition – despite Honneth’s effort to update Hegel’s early 19th century assumptions. Perhaps the very value of freedom as such is losing its constitutive role for social integration; that is, the ethical life of society might be transforming in a fundamental way.

These are rather open questions and do not build on empty revolutionary hopes of a completely different society. They are primarily questions about method. They simply implicate that we should not shield the basic theory of constitutive values from empirical investigation. I can here only indicate the urgency of such investigations by mentioning one significant example: In one of his discussions with his critics, Honneth claims (Honneth, 2015: 209), ‘we are utterly incapable of imagining a future in which the principle of free subjectivity is replaced by some higher, superior principle’. He continues: ‘Exceptions to this rule can probably only be found in the “ecological” and “climate change” movements; it is difficult, but perhaps not impossible, to demonstrate some implicit relation to the freedom principle in these cases. Outside of these cases, however, I only see clear evidence for my position’. After this brief comment, he merely put this exception to side as if here dealing with some minor anomaly. However, climate change is surely not some peripheral incident that can be ignored. As the already extensive discussion about the anthropocene has shown, it will have a profound impact on our way of life. All three models of freedom that Honneth discusses (negative, reflective and social freedom) are without doubt deeply anthropocentric notions, which more or less tacitly reify the non-human (Carleheden & Schultz, 2020). In contrast, in the ecological and climate change movements, which Honneth acknowledges for a split second, normative conceptions of responsibility for the non-human and of human and non-human interdependence are under tentative development. In this context, freedom seems to have lost its original meaning. This development actualizes what Honneth (Honneth, 2000) once discussed.

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17 Beck (2002: 204) mentions family as an example of a ‘zombie category’.
18 Were this the case, one should perhaps take another look at Boltanski and Chiapello’s (2005) tentative method.
19 Compare Honneth’s (2015) answer to Schaub.
under the heading ‘disclosing critique’ – a form of critique that is close to genealogy and not included in Freedom’s Right.

Honneth used this concept of critique to capture the form of critique that Horkheimer and Adorno were pursuing in Dialectic of Enlightenment; that is, probably the work within critical theory that is mostly influenced by genealogy. This form of critique is about ‘transcending the given value horizons by means of world-disclosing critique’ (ibid: 118). Honneth’s understanding of this method of critique comes close to David Owen’s notion of genealogy. Owen writes about genealogy as a method to free oneself from being captured by a picture or a perspective. Here, captivity refers to our subjectivity, reflexivity, judgements, justifications and actions being dependent on a particular perspective. Through problematization, one is able ‘to free oneself from captivity to the picture or perspective in question by seeing it as one picture or perspective among many possible pictures or perspectives’ (Owen, 2002: 218). ‘Aspectival captivity’ is about a closure of what in fact are open possibilities. If we, through problematization, are able to disclose these possibilities, then they are primarily merely to be seen as other possibilities. Genealogical critique is directed against what Owen calls a ‘restricted consciousness’ rather than a false consciousness (ibid: 219). Historization is the crucial tool to escape aspectival captivity. What we see as reasonable, self-evident, natural, universal, obligatory or necessary can be shown to have an arbitrary and violent history, which also in this case is related to a particular form of life (Saar 2008). Such historization makes it possible ‘to free ourselves from ourselves’, to ‘alter one’s way of looking at things’ (Tully in Owen: 221f).

From the perspective of climate change, one might claim that Freedom’s Right offers another example of Hegel’s owl of Minerva only taking flight when a ‘form of life has become old’ (Hegel, 2008:20). Today, the anthropocentric interpretations of freedom are undoubtedly related to the most violent consequences thinkable. The planet earth, as we know it, is on the brink of eradication. It also places the historical relations between the human and non-human in modern times in a new perspective.20

Conclusion

In this article, I have turned Honneth against himself in order to reflect on the meaning and role of normative reasoning in the social sciences. I do not find Honneth’s hesitant conclusion of his 2009 essay irritating. On the contrary, if we take a step back from the history of polemical struggles between the different schools of critique and review them from some distance, it becomes obvious that they have all made substantial contributions to our understanding of injustices in the contemporary world. I cannot substantiate that claim here, but if it is true to at least some extent, then none of the methods of these schools can be dismissed as simply flawed. I agree with Abbott (Abbott, 2004), who argues from a pragmatic perspective that the choice of method should depend on the problem to be solved. There is no one procedure that can be used in all kinds of investigations. The task that Honneth takes on in Freedom’s Right is that of a ‘grand’ critical social

20 Compare, e.g., Critical Animals Studies.
theory. To be fulfilled, different methods are required to disclose different kinds of injustices and social transformations. Conversely, in some fundamental socio-ontological, anthropological and normative aspects, these schools, as we have seen, seem to contradict one another. Honneth correctly claims that it would be a huge task to fully work out the methodological consequences of the ‘extremely high standard’ that he suggests in the end of his essay. This certainly has not been done in this article. In addition to supporting the significance of reconstruction as a method of critique, however, I have tried to take a few further steps. I have shown that reconstruction includes a constructive element without aprioristic consequences by pointing out its inherently retroductive logic. I have also argued that reconstruction cannot stand alone in a social scientific context. The pure application of the results of the reconstructive method in part one of Freedom’s Right has the consequence that socio-ontological and normative theorizing are protected from empirical interrogation. A supplementation by the genealogical method and disclosing critique would make it possible to include fundamental social change in the critical investigation. Critique of society as a significant part of the social sciences presupposes a non-hierarchical relation between normative, ontological and empirical investigations.

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