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What is This?

Critical social philosophy, Honneth and the role of primary intersubjectivity

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Abstract

Gesellschaftskritik, or social philosophy that aims to provide firm criticism of pathological social practices, requires normatively grounded evaluative principles. In this article, we assess different possibilities for such principles with focus on a model that takes specific patterns of intersubjective interaction as its point of reference. We argue that in order to understand the full significance of this 'intersubjective turn' for social philosophy, and to strengthen the normative foundation of social philosophy, we need to distinguish several levels of intersubjectivity and, in particular, focus on the somewhat neglected level of primary intersubjectivity. The article will discuss the account of primary inter-subjectivity in Honneth's work. We show that Honneth's account runs into difficulties, and drawing on recent findings in developmental psychology, we suggest a rethinking of elementary recognition in terms of 'affective proximity'. This both renders the account less susceptible to criticism and provides a normative perspective that can effortlessly enter into interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords

Honneth, primary intersubjectivity, social philosophy

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Social philosophy and *Gesellschaftskritik*

In many ways, modern social philosophy emerges at a historical point where philosophers – motivated by various cases of social and political disintegration – focus on the possibilities of the construction of social and political stability, rather than on the way government should proceed to secure a 'good life'. Accordingly, for Hobbes, the mutual relation between protection and obedience is the only foundation on which contractual conditions can be established, and on which an absolutist state could establish any kind of peace and stability required for civil order (Hobbes, 1968). However, with the change of social and political circumstances and the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere, from Hobbes to the time of Rousseau, the question that motivated social philosophical inquiries underwent a fundamental transformation (see Habermas, 1989: 37–56). The focus on questions of maintaining civil order shifted to questions about the conditions for the good life and human flourishing within such an order (Honneth, 2007a; 2007b). In this setting, the emergence of a notion of human flourishing involved an idea of something 'higher' that must be realized, often conceived as something that is genuinely expressive of mankind. Both Taylor (1991) and Honneth (2007a) view Rousseau as the originator of a specific social-philosophical way of reasoning in which an idea of human flourishing provides the measure against which societal processes can be judged as distortions, or in stronger terms, as pathologies (see Varga, 2011).

The tradition of the so-called *Gesellschaftskritik*, established by key figures of the first- and second-generation critical theory movement, has in many ways continued Rousseau's version of social philosophy. *Gesellschaftskritik* distinguishes itself from the Anglo-Saxon tradition of social philosophy with regard to the scope and aims of investigating social phenomena. The Anglo-Saxon tradition increasingly focused on normative issues that arise in the nexus of civil society and state institutions, usually operating with the normative vocabulary of moral and political philosophy and relying on concepts such as 'justice' and 'injustice'. At the same time, the very notion of justice itself has been increasingly understood in a narrow manner, as mainly concerning distributive issues (Honneth, 2004). In terms of topics, this tradition narrows the domain of social philosophical enquiry and successfully addresses issues relating to the interaction between civil society and state institutions by focusing on topics such as healthcare, distribution, crime and private property. Whereas such pointed focus is in many ways beneficial, it comes at the price of restricting the ways in which particular issues can be dealt with. We can briefly mention two interconnecting points here. First, it might seem insufficient to pass a judgement on a social configuration by invoking the notion of injustice, without attempting to bring to light the distorted social or institutional practices that might have led there in the first place. Second, there are numerous forms of suffering that arise from institutional practices or patterns of social interaction, but that at the same time do not violate the principles of justice. One distinctive contribution that a *Gesellschaftskritik*-orientated critical social philosophy could make is to detect social practice constellations that obstruct the structural conditions necessary for human flourishing (Honneth, 2007a), which are not necessarily intelligible within the vocabulary of justice. This is in line with Horkheimer's definition of a critical social theory that attempts to contribute to a process in which human beings liberate themselves from the social and economic circumstances that enchain them (Horkheimer, 1982).

Clearly, in order to diagnose the distortions or 'pathologies' of social life, social philosophy as *Gesellschaftskritik* needs a firm, normatively grounded theoretical framework on the background of which such 'deformed' social practices and obstructions of structural conditions can become intelligible. The question of how to conceive of this normative backdrop will be the focus of this article.

In order to address this crucial issue, the first two sections of this article set the stage, and we assess in broad strokes different historical conceptions of human flourishing as a critical concept. Then, in the next two sections, we focus on more plausible theoretical frameworks in which human flourishing is connected to intersubjective conditions and specific patterns of interaction. We argue that pathological conditions can be specified in relation to different levels of intersubjectivity. Accordingly, as a way to strengthen the normative foundation of critical social philosophy, we distinguish several levels of intersubjectivity and in particular focus on primary intersubjectivity. While most critiques of pathologies presuppose a frame of reference based on what will be referred to as 'concrete intersubjectivity', we suggest that in order to gain a precise hold on certain pathologies, we need a notion of 'primary intersubjectivity'. In the final section, we discuss accounts of primary intersubjectivity in Honneth's work. We show that Honneth's account runs into difficulties, and drawing on recent findings in developmental psychology, we suggest a rethink of elementary recognition in terms of 'affective proximity'. Besides rendering the account more robust and less susceptible to criticism, this manoeuvre also provides a normative perspective that allows critical social philosophy to enter into interdisciplinary collaboration with recent work in the area of social cognition.

Prospective and retrospective justifications

In brief, the normatively grounded theoretical framework of such a critical undertaking can be sought either retrospectively, referring back to some original state, or prospectively, by anticipating a presumed fulfilment of human history at the end of a historical progress (Honneth, 2007a; Varga, 2011). Hegel is the most prominent proponent of the latter view. In opposition to Rousseau, for whom the process of socialization leads inescapably away from an original state, Hegel draws on his philosophy of history, maintaining that the realization of true human characteristics is to be found at the end of a historical progress. The theoretical backdrop of his account is ultimately grounded in his historical-philosophical idea of the *Bildungsroman* of the spirit, in which consciousness, after evolving through a series of 'shapes' or forms, will come to an end state. This kind of historical-philosophical attempt to normatively ground the theoretical framework for a critical social theory has lost it credence.

Anticipating the presumed conclusion of human history at the end of a historical progress has been called utopian, speculative, and theological. In contrast, a *retrospective* and anthropologically informed approach is observable in the work of Rousseau. Rousseau criticized the impact of modernization in terms of social competition and social differentiation and he questioned whether social life is able to provide the setting for human flourishing. On the public stage, the struggle for esteem, role-playing and false appearances reduces humans to 'specters and phantoms' (Rousseau, 1968: 197). While 'natural'

humans lived in the state of nature, enjoying a political, moral, economic and most of all psychological independence, with the emergence of society and mutual dependence, socialized humans have become deformed and unhappy, because they derive their 'sentiment of existence' from the judgements of others (Cullen, 1993: 38).

Rousseau's position is *retrospective* and anthropologically informed, because he maintains that pathological conditions, rather than being immanent in human nature, are produced by societal aspects, mainly by the competitive way of relating to others and by striving for acknowledgement in the public sphere. Rousseau thereby externalizes the origins of societal evil. With the growing number of instrumental interactions oriented at status gains, the natural *amour de soi* becomes perverted, reshaping social relations into dependency, inequality and even oppression (Rousseau, 1992; Starobinski, 1971). While Rousseau (1992: 22) maintains that societal evils could be prevented if we preserved 'the simple, regular and solitary lifestyle prescribed to us by nature', it becomes apparent that an anthropologically informed idea provides the measure against which societal processes can be judged as deformations.

Besides being *retrospective* and anthropologic, Rousseau's position is a *Gesellschaftskritik*, because socially induced deficits are not primarily depicted in terms of injustice, but in terms of a pathological alienation. What is harmed is not primarily justice and equality among humans. Rather, the loss of 'voice' or the 'sentiment of existence' undermines the immanent moral understanding in humans, which constitutes the very basis of social cohesion and justice. Inequality is merely a consequence of a failed realization of inherent human capacities.

Intersubjectivity and anthropology

On the one hand, we can say that Rousseau formalizes the concept of human flourishing. Instead of attempting to explicitly define what human flourishing amounts to, his work is mostly concerned to uncover the conditions of its possibility. On the other hand, Rousseau's account remains essentialist in that it builds on the questionable idea of a constant anthropological feature, a human nature independent of societal practices. While Marx continues the 'anthropological' way of reasoning, he – drawing on Hegel's thoughts – simultaneously abandons the idea of the human as an essentially solitary creature and the idea of rigid anthropological constants independent of the social and material conditions of a given society. In contrast, in Marx, the idea of human flourishing (as a critical concept against which pathologies can be detected) no longer refers to the inner realm or a self-contained self, but to institutional practices and specific patterns of intersubjective interaction that allow the genuine realization of human potential.

Greatly influenced by Hegel's systematic philosophy, his analysis of the modern society and, to a somewhat lesser degree, his philosophy of history, Marx's social philosophy transforms and extends Hegelian thought in order to address the social practices and seemingly impersonal forces that characterized emerging capitalist societies. Marx analyzes the problematic results of capitalist development in terms of *alienation,* which clearly demonstrates his commitment to the approach of *Gesellschaftskritik.* This is obvious, since he condemns alienation not because it infringes on the principles of legal or moral justice, but because it interferes with the conditions of possibility of human flourishing.

Marx maintains that humanity develops itself and its relation to the physical world through the means of self-determined labour, which is the key to securing the possibility of human flourishing. However, he argues that forms of alienation called into life by capitalist modernization obstruct and destroy the conditions for self-determined labour processes. This happens because the very capability of human subjects to objectify themselves through labour in capitalist societies is turned into the means of production. This not only leads to an alienation of the subject from the product of his or her work, which now confronts the subject as 'hostile and alien' (Marx, 1975: 324), but also to various forms of relations that alienate subjects from their human characteristics, from their own person and from other humans (Marx, 1990: 516–17).

Again, Marx strongly opposes Rousseau's idea and questions the existence of such a thing as unchanging 'human nature', independent of the social and material conditions of their society. As he maintains, 'acting on the external world and changing it, he [man] at the same time changes his own nature' (Marx, 1974: 177; Callinicos, 1996). Even though Marx rejects the idea of an unchanging human nature, he still maintains that there are criteria for human flourishing that are constant across dissimilar forms of society. In other words, he employs a *formal anthropological* idea about human nature. As he maintains, 'labour [is] the essence of man' (Marx and Engels, 1976: 333). So in opposition to Rousseau, Marx avoids the idea of a fixed and original state of being, and attempts to identify the societal conditions that should be present to secure the conditions of possibility of human flourishing and the realization of genuinely human potential. Among other aspects, by this he means the possibility of experiencing labour as a non-alienated aspect of life. In other words, rather than specifying a fixed human nature by quasi-empirical claims, Marx spells out a certain man–society–world relation (non-alienated labour) that any normatively substantial idea of human flourishing requires. Accordingly, Marx's critical social philosophy and his understanding of what critique amounts to function with systematic recourse to formal anthropological determinations (Honneth, 2007a: 15).

Importantly, in Marx, human flourishing remains a critical concept against which pathologies can be detected, but it now refers to *societal* and thus to *intersubjective* conditions. Human flourishing does not arise from being consistent with some mysterious human nature, but from specific patterns of intersubjective interaction, essentially connected to labour. Lukács, Adorno, Habermas and Honneth continue this path of reasoning, although each of them makes an 'intersubjective turn' in very different ways. While this intersubjective turn of critical social philosophy is quite well known, there is little acknowledgement that there are several particular levels of intersubjectivity involved. In order to understand the full range of this development in critical social philosophy, we suggest that it is important to distinguish between the level of *concrete intersubjectivity*, which in Hegel, Marx and Honneth is cast in terms of recognition, and a more *primary intersubjectivity*, which is implicitly present, but not explicitly discussed in Lukács and Adorno.

Concrete intersubjectivity: participation and recognition

The formalization found in Marx continues in more contemporary social philosophy. Habermas's influential theory has a clear anthropological line of argument. Habermas

focuses on identity formation, bringing together Kohlberg's and Mead's work with Hegelian models of mutual recognition. For Habermas, a stable personal identity is achieved through processes of socialization that rely on participation in forms of social practice. On the one hand, participation refers to formal settings and social situations of organized discussions, which are secured though various rights and norms, and which can be violated by different exercises of power that restrict the communicative freedom of participants. Such violations not only lead to what Habermas refers to as 'distorted' communication, but may erode some of the preconditions of the establishment of stable personal identities. Therefore, Habermas maintains that one essential duty of modern societies must be to shield those social practices that allow unconstrained participation. On the other hand, Habermas's notion of participation is broad, and hence not limited to organized discussion in formal settings or activities such as voting or agitating to influence policy. Rather, and this is emphasized in Habermas's more recent work, discursive participation also refers to second-personal interactions with others in which actors reciprocally attribute communicative freedom to each other (Habermas, 1996). Thus, discursive participation both refers to the discursive characteristic of the activity itself and the communicative framework in which the activity unfolds.

Drawing on the early Hegel, Honneth continues this line of reasoning and outlines a new conception of social philosophy, by directing his theoretical interest towards struggles for recognition that take place on various levels. Honneth is well aware that the focus on overt resistance may limit the range of social philosophical inquiry, leaving out potential problems that arise from areas of life being increasingly subjected to the imperatives of the market and bureaucratic forces. Therefore, as Habermas notes, Honneth aims at sharpening the gaze of critical social philosophy and uncovering those 'normalized' and silent pathologies, 'whose roots extend into more discreet layers of the injured integrity of groups and individuals' (Habermas, 2009).

Like the term 'participation' in Habermas, the term 'recognition' in Honneth's work refers to a specific quality of interactions and provides the point of reference for a critical social philosophy. Both continuing and changing the course set by Habermas, Honneth aims at normatively grounding social philosophy with recourse to the threefold constitutive role of recognition for the formation of personal identity. In addition, he parts ways with the attempt to ground ethical life in the moral autonomy of human beings and instead focuses on the necessary conditions under which autonomy in general can be realized (Honneth, 1995; 2007a).

Honneth's theory of recognition maintains that identity is formed in a permanent intersubjective struggle to gain recognition in interaction, and that the development of a stable self-identity in individuals depends on three forms of intersubjective recognition, which are partly enabled by societal institutions and forms of organization. The forms of intersubjective recognition refer to three dissimilar aspects of ontogenetic development that ideally enable three different self-relations. These distinctive forms of self-relation are achieved in three different modes of interaction: primary affective relations like love (and later friendship, etc.) ensure that the person achieves a measure of self-confidence in the most basic developmental sense, which at first manifests itself in the simple trust in the stability of oneself and the world. The second form of self-relation is self-respect, which is achieved through the acknowledgement of one's

universal and equal rights, legal responsibility and moral capacity. The third form of self-relation is self-esteem, which emerges from the intersubjective acknowledgements of one's distinct contribution to the flourishing of a community oriented around a set of shared values. Together, these three forms of self-relation entail both being able to relate to oneself as to a unique individual (self-confidence and self-esteem) and as one among the many (self-respect). Although these forms of recognition are different, they are hierarchically intertwined: some self-confidence is necessary in order to gain genuine self-respect, while a certain amount of self-respect is indispensable for self-esteem. Three forms of recognition can be denied in three forms of disrespect that finally account for the motivation to engage in a social struggle for more inclusive relations of recognition. The basic sense of self-confidence significantly diminishes and causes the loss of trust in the stability of self and world if one is subject to substantial violations of physical integrity. In the same way, self-respect is undermined by the denial of universal rights, for example, as an equal citizen. Finally, self-esteem is endangered in cases in which the activities of an individual are not regarded as any kind of contribution to a community. Hence, while disrespect may in some cases also be understood as an injustice that harms the autonomy of an individual, Honneth focuses on the injuries that disrespect causes with regard to the positive self-relations that can only be acquired in interaction (Honneth, 1995: 131; 1998; 2007a; 2008a).

Overall, for both Habermas and Honneth, intersubjective processes of participation and recognition represent both the means through which individuals develop a stable sense of self and through which the reproduction of the social world is secured. Also, in both thinkers, structurally universal features and processes function as the normative foundation against which the pathological societal constellations can be identified. Different from Habermas, Honneth secures the normative foundation in an anthropological manner, by identifying indispensable preconditions for non-pathological self-relation (Honneth, 1995: 173; 2007). Nonetheless, while most scholars analysing intersubjectivity in critical social theory focus on participation and recognition, a closer look reveals another and more primary level of intersubjectivity that is present in several authors in the tradition of *Gesellschaftskritik*.

Towards 'primary intersubjectivity'

Hidden 'beneath' his account of reification, such a level of intersubjectivity is present in Adorno. As is well known, for Adorno, a necessary condition for the breakaway from the universal grip of instrumental reason was 'reconciliation' with nature. In Adorno, this involved formal anthropological reflections. This is because Adorno thinks that genuine human experience of the world is intrinsically connected to 'mimesis', which refers to a specific relation to others (and the world), and through which Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin refer to a formal anthropological property (Früchtl, 1986; Huhn, 2004; Kelly, 1998). The 'mimetic faculty', which became gradually repressed in human history, involves a way of relating that is a 'non-coercive relationship of affinity', reciprocity, and a non-objectifying interchange with the other (Hansen, 1997; Jay, 2004). In Habermas's influential interpretation, mimesis refers to a kind of 'imitation' that 'designates a relation between persons in which one accommodates the other, identifies with the other,

empathizes with the other' (Habermas, 1981, vol. 1: 390; see also Foster, 2007: 198). Thus, much like participation and recognition, mimesis as a formal concept refers to an intersubjective praxis from which human flourishing and emancipation from the universal grip of instrumental reason may emerge (Varga, 2010). An additional similarity is that – as with participation and recognition – the capability of entertaining mimetic relations with others and with the world is crucial in order to achieve non-pathological self-relation.

In this context we want to emphasize that – compared to the level of intersubjectivity involved in participation and recognition – the level of intersubjectivity involved in mimesis is more basic and lacks cognitive components. Indeed, it involves a primary sense of others that can be described as a form of basic relatedness.[1] To see the difference, recall that for Habermas, the human social practices that provide the standard against which reifying practices can be addressed as negative 'distortions', are those in which the possibility of participation and perspective-taking is granted. Adorno's account of mimesis, however, points to a more basic level of intersubjectivity: the basic non-cognitive capacity for interaction with others that is the condition of being able to take over another person's perspective in the first place. Similar to Adorno, Lukács's work on reification reveals an implicit commitment to such a primary level of intersubjectivity.[2] In brief, Lukács (1971: 97) describes the 'genuine' and unmediated mode of experience of the world as constitutively 'co-experienced' (*miterlebend*). Thus, undistorted existence that is characterized by the experience of a meaningfully disclosing world constitutively involves the sense that one co-experiences the world with actual or possible others.

To sum up, implicit in the idea of mimesis (and to a lesser degree co-experience), there is a commitment to the existence of a primary and non-cognitive sense of basic relatedness to others, which enables individuals to enter into and maintain concrete face-to-face interactions in an undistorted manner. We will use the term 'primary intersubjectivity' that we take from developmental psychology to refer to this basic level.[3]

Honneth's elementary recognition

Like Lukács and Adorno before him, Honneth also makes recourse to an idea of a more basic level of intersubjectivity, which lies beneath the level of the concrete intersubjectivity, which we usually associate with processes of participation and recognition. Honneth's account of primary intersubjectivity is undoubtedly more precise and elaborated than those we find in Lukács or Adorno. In this work, Honneth continues to reconsider the critical tradition with the aim of reinvigorating the project of a social philosophy with reference to contemporary social pathologies. Habermas (2009) has recently called his attempt to actualize Lukács's theory of reification 'highly original'. Reification, rather than being a cognitive error (applying thing-concepts to persons) that violates (universal) moral principles, is, in Honneth's *gesellschaftstheoretisch* approach to social philosophy, understood as a form of distorted human praxis. He integrates the concept of reification into his recognition-based social philosophy, while resisting both Lukács's point that reification necessarily accompanies capitalist accumulation, and his Marxist idealism in which the development of a collective spirit will ultimately coincide with objectivity (Honneth, 2008a: 26–8).

The primary and non-cognitive sense of basic relatedness to others that we have seen in Adorno and Lukács is formulated, in Honneth, in terms of 'elementary recognition'. The new element in Honneth's recent work is his argument that a non-reified form of social practice or interaction is permeated by a primary or elementary recognition (Honneth, 2008a; Varga, 2010). Honneth presents a two-level account of recognition, in which elementary recognition is placed at a more fundamental level than the type of recognition that is involved in the categories of recognition in his earlier typology, like love, respect, and social esteem. Elementary recognition precedes both genetically and conceptually those second-order patterns of recognition in which the other person's specific characteristics are affirmed (Honneth, 2008a: 51, 90). For Honneth, the normatively substantial forms of recognition such as those embodied in social institutions of honour, love and law, are 'various manners in which the existential scheme opened up by elementary recognition gets "filled out" historically' (Honneth, 2008b: 152). Thus, the relation between the two levels of recognition is such that the normative forms of recognition are expressions and further articulations of the primary recognition of self and others. The sense of a basic non-epistemic and pre-reflective existential significance that is inherent in elementary recognition is a necessary condition not only for normative recognition, but also for Habermasian 'participation'. Elementary recognition is necessary in order to be able to take the 'perspective of the participant' and to appropriate moral values that guide our normative recognition of the other. It is of elementary nature in that the practical and communicative engagement with others that it harbours makes detached, third-personal observation and neutral, objectifying epistemological attitudes possible in the first place. Crucially, however, the objectifying attitude only turns into dehumanizing reification if the internal awareness of the primary affective world engagement is disrupted – if cognition is stripped of this sense of primary recognition (Honneth, 2008a: 56). Invoking Heidegger, this is the process that Honneth refers to as 'forgetfulness of recognition' (Honneth, 2008a: 68).

A terminological and conceptual problem

First, we note a confusing terminological issue. On the one hand, the term 'recognition' refers to second-order and concrete forms of intersubjective encounter which involve three different aspects (love, respect, and esteem). On the other hand, within the framework of the two-level account, recognition now also denotes the elementary level that refers to the necessary condition of concrete practices of recognition. Even though this may be considered a rather unsubstantial and merely terminological issue, it has nevertheless generated what we think are substantial misunderstandings. Butler (2008), Geuss (2008) and Lear (2008) have univocally criticized Honneth's account, maintaining that the elementary level of recognition is depicted as a positively loaded condition, which involves an overly optimistic anthropology. To be fair, we do acknowledge that in some passages Honneth formulates elementary recognition as if it involved an affirmative stance on other subjects, one that entails experiencing them as in some way valuable. For instance, Honneth (2008a: 38) notes that such an elementary recognitional stance 'embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that persons and things have in themselves'. Analogous passages suggest that elementary recognition to a certain extent

includes an element of value assessment, which to us clearly undermines the very idea of an elementary, non-cognitive relation.

In general, however, Honneth is repeatedly at pains to emphasize that elementary recognition should not be understood in strictly neutral terms, since the term 'elementary' is meant to convey that positive and negative attitudes, or even indifference towards others, depend on this prior recognition. When responding to his critics, Honneth once again emphasizes the 'non-epistemic' and non-cognitive character of elementary recognition, which involves only a minimum level of affectedness (Honneth, 2008b: 151–2). Again, a lot of this misunderstanding may be more a terminological issue that arises because the terms 'intersubjectivity' and 'recognition' are used on two different levels (Varga, 2010). Using the term 'recognition', however, has the clear disadvantage of not only altering, but also overstretching the concept of recognition, since it now refers both to the phenomena of recognition and to its transcendental condition.

Primary intersubjectivity and affective proximity

It might have been preferable and better for Honneth's main point to use a different term to refer to the primary level of intersubjectivity. Therefore, in the following, we refer to this level as 'affective proximity', which would remain true to Honneth's overall point, without overstretching the notion of recognition. Additionally, to make clear what we mean by affective proximity, in the following, we draw on recent research into developmental psychology. This approach seems to be justified for two reasons: first, it is by no means an unorthodox move within critical theory, since Honneth himself, and Habermas before him, have often relied on findings in developmental psychology to substantiate various claims. Second, it makes perfect sense to think that whatever one determines to be the case on formal or transcendental grounds, must also be reflected in empirical terms open to scientific investigation (Gallagher and Zahavi, 2008). After these preliminary remarks, let us now turn to the concept of 'affective proximity' as the basic or primary level of intersubjectivity.

In the past three decades, the idea of the asocial infant, that is, the newborn that is cut off from others, has lost its scientific credence. Such classical views of human development were championed by Piaget, Skinner and Winnicott, who held that the newborn is not yet capable of interaction as a social being. On this view, there are only some reflexes at play such as sucking or grasping, and other people are noticed only if they somehow can be placed within these primitive reflex action schemes. However, in more recent times there has been a veritable revolution in our understanding of intersubjectivity, with much emphasis placed on the innate and early developing intersubjective competences of the newborn. Far from being born as asocial beings without the capacity to enter into interaction, infants are now taken to demonstrate *primary* intersubjective competences. Such early intersubjective relations are characterized by 'affective proximity' in which interaction with the other is not based on acquired knowledge, or processes of inference or the affirmation of specific traits of the other. Rather, there is as lot of evidence to suggest that such a proximity relation should be spelled out in terms of embodied emotional and perceptual processes, and that such proximity rather than exclusively pertaining to infants, continues to characterize our adult interactions with others.

As Meltzoff and Brooks (2007) have recently pointed out, this new orientation relies on several fields of empirical findings. In the following we concentrate on the work in developmental psychology that demonstrates the *primary* intersubjective competences of the newborn and young infant, and that indicates a close coupling between self and other (see, e.g., Hobson, 2002; Hobson and Meyer, 2005; Meltzoff, 2007; Rochat and Striano, 1999; Stern, 1985; Tomasello, 1999).

More than three decades ago, Trevarthen (1979; Trevarthen and Hubley, 1978) argued that not only is purposeful, pragmatically-oriented, context-rich ('secondary') intersubjectivity a fundamental aspect of the mental development of the child, from one year of age onward, but that there is also primary intersubjectivity, a set of capacities through which the newborn is innately able to engage in interpersonal interactions. Such infant–caregiver interaction, the engaged mutual exchange of pleasure-giving movements and vocalizations, are sometimes characterized as 'protoconversational' phenomena (Bateson, 1979). Newborns are responsive to the caregiver's micro-level behaviours that include the direction of gaze, tone of voice, bodily and facial expressions, level of arousal, which are indispensable for the participation in all interactions and emotional exchange (Feldman, 2007; Muratory and Maestro, 2007).

One of the earliest phenomenon of primary intersubjectivity is *neonatal imitation* which involves bodily interaction with others (Gallagher and Meltzoff, 1996; Heimann, 2002; Meltzoff, 2006; Meltzoff and Moore, 1997). Such imitation cannot be reduced to a cognitive activity involving analysis and reproduction, something that that might entail a detached representation of the movements of the other. Even though the neonate lacks relevant visual access (e.g., via mirrors) to its own body parts, which might operate as a basis for forming analogies and drawing comparisons (Merleau-Ponty, 1996), the neonate is able to imitate based on a proprioceptive sense of its own body and an intermodally linked perceptual sense of the other as an agent that is 'like me' (Meltzoff and Brooks, 2007). Neonates are able to make a distinction between lifeless objects and human agents and respond communicatively to human faces, which is different from their response to objects. Importantly, the infant is more likely to imitate when the other person is attending to it than when the other does not attend (Csibra and Gergely, 2009).

Human infants show a wide range of facial expressions, complex emotional, gestural, prosodic, and tactile face-to-face interaction patterns, absent or rare in non-human primates (Falk, 2004; Herrmann et al., 2007). They automatically attune to smiles (and other facial gestures) with an enactive, mimetic, response (Schilbach et al., in press). They are visually attracted to biological movement and auditorily attracted to certain kinds of sounds, such as their mother's voice. Infants 'vocalize and gesture in a way that seems [affectively and temporally] "tuned" to the vocalizations and gestures of the other person' (Gopnik and Meltzoff, 1997: 131). This does not require advanced cognitive abilities, inference, or simulation skills; rather, it is based on a perceptual capacity that is 'fast, automatic, irresistible and highly stimulus-driven' (Scholl and Tremoulet, 2000: 299).

Infants are also able to detect correspondences between visual and auditory information that specify the expression of emotions as early as 5 to 7 months (Walker, 1982; Hobson, 1993; 2002). At 9 months, infants follow the other person's eyes (Senju et al., 2006), and start to perceive various movements of the head, the mouth, the hands, and more general body movements as meaningful, goal-directed movements. Baldwin

and colleagues, for example, have shown that infants at 10–11 months are able to parse some kinds of continuous action according to intentional boundaries (Baird and Baldwin, 2001; Baldwin and Baird, 2001). Such perceptions give the infant, by the end of the first year of life, a non-mentalistic, perceptually-based embodied understanding of the intentions and dispositions of other persons (Allison et al., 2000; Baldwin, 1993; Johnson et al., 1998; Johnson, 2000). Thus, long before being able to apply a 'theory of mind' to cognitively infer the mental states of others, young infants engage in second-person interactions with others, perceiving meaning in their emotions, gestures, intentions, postures and actions.

Importantly, these embodied capabilities for primary intersubjective interaction do not disappear in adulthood; they mature and become more sophisticated (see e.g., Dittrich et al., 1996). This can be clearly shown in a micro-analysis of the postures, movements, gestures, gazes and facial expressions of people as they engage with each other in a novel tasks and where communication among them comes in the very actions that they take (see Lindblom, 2007; Niedenthal et al., 2005).

Significantly, this interaction is affectively shaped. The emotional aspects of such an interaction are not just the 'icing on the cake': they are not something added to interaction. Tomasello (1999) has argued that emotional contact is at the base of the relationship and is something that is specifically a human and evolved form of social cognition. Studies by Trevarthen and Reddy (2007) show that infants are aware of themselves as objects of attention, while also being aware of others as attending beings. In line with this, Tomasello (1999) argues that such affective proximity is a major difference between humans and other primates: humans 'identify' with other human beings and primarily with the caretaker, more so than other primates (Povinelli and Giambrone, 1999). The affective capacity to identify – not present in other primates – is considered a prerequisite to full-blown sympathy and empathy (Decety, 2002; Hobson, 2002; Tomasello, 1999). Drawing on studies of infantile autism, Hobson concludes that 'there is a mode of feeling perception that is critical for establishing intersubjective relations between people … that establishes a special quality of relatedness' (Hobson and Meyer, 2005: 199; see also Draghi-Lorenz et al., 2001). This proximity to others makes possible what Neisser (1991) has called the interpersonal self, which not only enables one to learn from the other, but also *through* the other (see also Stern et al., 1985).

One important distinction between primary intersubjectivity and secondary intersubjectivity, which begins around 9 months to 1 year of age, specifically in joint attention, is that the latter involves triadic relations among self, other, and world. This co-experience of the world is a form of 'participatory sense-making' (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007; Gallagher, 2009) in which infants start to engage as they enter into the pragmatic contexts in which others are playing and working. One can start to ask, even at this early point of development, how such contexts, which are basic learning contexts and are already influenced by culture, start to shape the social practices that lead to the forms of recognition and the related social pathologies that Honneth describes (see, e.g., Gallagher and Crisafi, 2009).

We note that the concept of primary intersubjectivity as outlined here is part of a larger account of social cognition – sometimes referred to as a phenomenologically-based 'interaction theory' (e.g., Gallagher, 2001). This is an alternative account to the standard theory

of mind (or simulation theory) approaches that dominate contemporary debates. According to this alternative account, primary and secondary intersubjectivity involve basic elements that describe a strong conception of interaction that is further developed in communicative and narrative practices (Gallagher and Hutto, 2008). A fuller account than we can give here would draw a more complex picture of human interactions, social roles, and institutional practices that are all subject to pathological distortions (Gallagher, 2011).

Our intention here was to make more precise Honneth's notion of elementary recognition – not as a preliminary form of recognition *per se*, but as the affective proximity found in primary intersubjectivity as we have preliminarily sketched it here. To be clear, we do not maintain that such primary intersubjectivity and affective proximity are fully formed at birth or incapable of being shaped by development. Studies that investigate the relationship between embodied primary intersubjectivity in adults and ideological assumptions, racism and dehumanizing attitudes towards certain outgroup members reveal that the ability to enter into primary relations characterized by affective proximity is highly context-dependent. For example, the processes of smooth mimicry of others' expressions, gestures, and body postures that we usually connect to 'primary intersubjectivity' are significantly less frequent for disliked out-group members (Likowski et al., 2008). Also, the motor-resonance mechanisms that are taken to contribute to primary intersubjectivity are modulated by cultural factors and inextricably bound to group membership (Molnar-Szakacs et al., 2007).

Having said this, our suggestion to rethink Honneth's notion of elementary recognition in terms of primary intersubjectivity and 'affective proximity' has various advantages. Such an account would neither be susceptible to the criticism of implying an overly optimistic anthropology, nor of overstretching the notion of recognition. Such affective proximity should not be characterized in terms of positive or negative valence; it does not involve a cognitive assessment or a set of inferences concerning the value that others might possess: rather, positive, negative or even indifferent attitudes towards others depend on this fundamental 'non-epistemic' affectedness in regard to the other. In addition, a critical social theory that relies on such a fundamental affectedness can take into account the embodied nature of social interaction – something which has been a continuous challenge for critical theory. Moreover, the idea of a primary 'non-epistemic' affectedness that plays a crucial role in Honneth can be further articulated and additionally sustained by drawing on the recent research on developmental psychology that we have briefly presented.

Conclusion

We started this article by arguing that in order to understand the social aetiology of pathological social practices and to offer a substantial critique, critical social philosophy needs a normatively grounded, evaluative vocabulary that refers to some notion of human flourishing against which reified practices become visible and against which social pathologies can be measured. Such a normative underpinning can be achieved in several ways. After considering different possibilities, we focused on a model that takes specific patterns of intersubjective interaction as its point of reference and argued that in order to get a good grip on this 'intersubjective turn' and to strengthen the

normative foundation of social philosophy, it is important to carve out several levels of intersubjectivity. With respect to intersubjective interaction, we distinguish between two levels that condition human flourishing: concrete and primary levels of intersubjectivity. Intersubjective forms of engagement refer not only to concrete intersubjective patterns of recognition, but also to a more primary, non-cognitive and affective relation to others. Lukács, Adorno and recently Honneth all more or less implicitly make recourse to an idea of genuine, intersubjective practice that lies below the level of what we usually call recognition. By focusing on Honneth's notion of elementary recognition, we have argued that to make this primary level of intersubjectivity more precise, we can turn to developmental science and the notion of primary intersubjectivity conceived of as a basic form of interaction involving affective proximity. This allows us to distinguish primary intersubjectivity from more developed instances of recognition, but also from secondary intersubjectivity which involves both social cognition and participatory sense-making. While Honneth's account runs into certain ambiguities, we argue that these can be resolved by rethinking elementary recognition in terms of the affective proximity involved in primary intersubjectivity. This would render Honneth's account less susceptible to criticism and would provide a normative perspective that can more easily be studied in interdisciplinary collaboration with developmental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, philosophy of mind, phenomenology and psychiatry. In all these fields, growing attention is being paid to human social cognition at the deepest levels of intersubjectivity. Importantly, the possibility of theoretical enrichment goes the other way too. The mutual enlightenment of critical social philosophy and empirical work could contribute to a much-needed contextualization of these empirical findings in a larger socio-cultural framework.

Notes

1. We have to note that this primary level of intersubjectivity is far from worked out in Adorno's work. In a sense, Habermas is right that Adorno fails to provide the theoretical underpinning of how mimesis, as an experiential capacity, can counter instrumental cognition. But Habermas's suggestion, to understand mimesis within a communicative framework, would mean the loss of an appealing aspect of the account of mimesis, namely the incorporation of the level of primary and non-linguistic intersubjectivity (see also Gibson and Rubin, 2002: 78).
2. For a fuller account, see Varga (2010).
3. We take this term from Colwyn Trevarthen's developmental psychology. It seems appropriate that Trevarthen himself came to the term 'intersubjectivity' through his reading of Habermas (personal communication).

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