

Honneth on Social Pathologies: A Critique

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Over the last two decades, Axel Honneth has written extensively on the notion of social pathology. He has presented it as a distinctive critical resource of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, in which tradition he places his own work; and as an alternative to the mainstream liberal approaches in political philosophy. In this paper, I review the developments in Honneth's writing about this notion and offer an immanent critique, with a particular focus on his recent major work *Freedom's Right*. Both his early context-transcendent approach and his more recent immanent approach are found wanting, and his increasing reformism is exposed and criticized. The central distinction in *Freedom's Right* between social pathologies and misdevelopments is also shown to be unworkable. In addition, I demonstrate that Zurn's influential proposal to characterize the phenomena Honneth identified as social pathologies in terms of a cognitive disconnect does not fit (with Zurn's own description of) these phenomena. While some such phenomena, like what Honneth describes as "Organized Self-Realization," call out for conceptualization in terms of the notion of social pathology, an alternative characterization of this notion is necessary.

KEYWORDS Axel Honneth, Christopher Zurn, social pathology, misdevelopments, Critical Theory

Over the last two decades, Axel Honneth has written extensively on the notion of social pathology, presenting it as a distinctive critical resource of Frankfurt School Critical Theory, in which tradition he places himself, and as an alternative to the mainstream liberal approaches in political philosophy. In this paper, I review the developments of Honneth's writing on this notion and offer an immanent critique, with a particular focus on his recent major work *Freedom's Right*. Tracing the use of, and problems internal to, Honneth's concept of social pathology serves to demonstrate his increasing reformism. It also serves to catalogue some of the dead ends that Critical Theory should avoid in taking up the idea of social pathology.

The implication is not that this idea should be dropped. Rather, the paper is undertaking the necessary step of clearing the ground for further progress to take place on the question of what role the idea of social pathology can and should play in Critical Theory. The paper is critical in nature (and relentlessly so), but ultimately serves a constructive purpose.

I. “Pathologies of the Social”

As a first step, Honneth characterized the idea of social pathologies in a 1994 paper, called “Pathologies of the Social.”¹ He connects this idea with Rousseau, at least indirectly insofar as he presents Rousseau as the founding father of social philosophy, whereby he understands social philosophy as the diagnosis of social deviations, including social pathologies (or possibly equated with social pathologies – the German original is ambiguous on this point).²

There are four systematic points worth highlighting from this paper. Firstly, Honneth claims, plausibly, that a social pathology implies a notion of normality.³ This raises a challenging question of how, if at all, we become acquainted with (and know of) that notion and how we can justify it. Honneth notes that the tendency of thinkers is to appeal either (A) to a natural state of human beings (either as historical state or as part of an anthropology) or (B) to a projected future.⁴ He thinks that both raise (different) problems.

Secondly, the idea of social pathology is “ordered by ethical criteria,” understood (presumably following Habermas) as differentiated from moral criteria, which also means that this idea is distinguished from mainstream liberal political philosophy, focusing as it does on justice and legitimacy.⁵ Honneth ties ethical criteria to the idea of human self-realization.⁶ One might be concerned that this focus on self-realization narrows ethical criteria too much, but this depends on how this idea is understood. Given that Honneth links self-realization to talk of a fulfilled, successful, and good life,⁷ he seems to understand it in a sufficiently broad way to remove this concern. However, this, in turn, might create problems: in particular,

¹ “Pathologien des Sozialen. Tradition und Aktualität der Sozialphilosophie,” in *Pathologien des Sozialen: Die Aufgabe der Sozialphilosophie*, ed. A. Honneth (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), 9–69. All references are to the English translation (“Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy”) in *The Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. D. Rasmussen (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), Ch. 16.

² Honneth writes “es in der Sozialphilosophie vordringlich um eine Bestimmung und Erörterung von solchen Entwicklungsprozessen der Gesellschaft geht, die sich als Fehlentwicklungen oder Störungen, eben als ‘Pathologien des Sozialen’, begreifen lassen” (“Pathologien des Sozialen,” 10). This leaves unclear whether he sees all social deviations as social pathologies, or already makes a twofold distinction among them – whether “eben als ‘Pathologien des Sozialen’ [thus as ‘social pathologies’]” refers to only “Störungen [distortions]” or both “Fehlentwicklungen [misdevelopments]” and “Störungen.” The English rendering – “decline, distortions, or even as ‘social pathologies’” (“Pathologies of the Social,” 370) – not only masks this ambiguity, but also – wrongly – suggests a threefold distinction. At any rate, Honneth later – as we will see – makes the twofold distinction.

³ “Pathologies of the Social,” 387.

⁴ “Pathologies of the Social,” 390.

⁵ “Pathologies of the Social,” 371, 375, 388, and more implicit on 370. To be precise, social pathologies might also involve injustice, but they are “not simply [about] injustice” (388). Indeed, Honneth talks about social pathologies in terms of “moral impotence” (380) and “moral impoverishment” (381) – either suggesting that social pathologies have to do with moral matters after all, or accidentally slipping into talk of “moral,” where he means “ethical.”

⁶ “Pathologies of the Social,” 372, 375, 391.

⁷ “Pathologies of the Social,” 374, 376, 377, 384.

it is unclear how much work such a broad notion can still do (I return to the wider issue of empty formalism below).

Thirdly, Honneth suggests that social pathologies are characterized by a dynamic process of development, which is described in terms of an “incessant circle” and as having its own logic.⁸ Thus, the diagnosis of social pathologies is not simply the diagnosis of a state of affairs, but rather of social processes, which, if not stopped or reversed, will lead to a further deterioration – just like an infection of the body.

Finally, Honneth argues that any defensible thesis about social pathology requires a perspective “from which the social events could be determined as a deviation from an ideal.”⁹ Specifically, he turns to a formal ethic to provide this, favouring a “weak formal anthropology,” which “outlines the universal conditions of an unforced articulation of human life ideals.”¹⁰ Honneth thinks that the “knowledge-interest” of social philosophy directs it “to a universal measure for the normality of social life”; and notes that a historically limited concept of normality is too restrictive for social philosophy.¹¹

There are two possible objections to this argument. First, it is unclear why a universalistic perspective is required to determine a deviation from an ideal – after all, there is a long tradition of what is usually called immanent social critique, where certain states of affairs or developments (say the detrimental effects of increasing economic inequality on democratic politics) are criticized as deviation from an ideal which is accepted within a social context (say, in this case, democracy). It might be that immanent critique of this sort is not possible in all societies or otherwise problematic, but Honneth does not demonstrate this. (Indeed, as we will see below, he turns to it in his most recent work.) Moreover an appeal to the knowledge-interest of social philosophy is not sufficient here, since it is questionable that the knowledge-interest is of fundamental importance in this context (rather than, say, the practical interest in social transformation, which need not require appeal to a universal standard). In addition, Honneth seems to operate with a rather narrow set of alternatives here – either a culture-specific or universal measure of normality. For example Foucault and Taylor – whom he targets here explicitly – might be operating more with what might be called an *époque*-specific standard, rather than one specific only to French or Canadian culture. What they are concerned with is certain commitments internal to Western modernity – say a commitment to freedom.¹² This might actually be much closer to what Habermas and, elsewhere, Honneth affirm than Honneth’s comments here suggest.¹³

⁸ “Pathologies of the Social,” 370, 374, 383.

⁹ “Pathologies of the Social,” 392.

¹⁰ “Pathologies of the Social,” 393–94.

¹¹ “Pathologies of the Social,” 393 and 388 respectively.

¹² Consider, for example, Foucault’s claim: “Je caractériserai donc l’*éthos* philosophique propre à l’ontologie critique de nous-mêmes comme une épreuve historico-pratique des limites que nous pouvons franchir, et donc comme travail de nous-mêmes sur nous-mêmes en tant qu’êtres libres” (“Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” [1984], reprinted in *Dits et écrits Vol. IV (1980–88)* (Paris: Galimard, 1994), 562–78, here 575; emphasis in the original).

¹³ For Habermas, see *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F.G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987, originally in German [1985]); for Honneth, see *Das Recht der Freiheit: Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011); trans. J. Ganahl as *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

Second, one might dispute that a universalistic standard – if there is one at all – is accessible to us. How, given that we are socialized within specific contexts which also set limits to our language use and imagination, can we lay claim to a standard that is meant to hold outside of this context, or even universally? Indeed, the authors to whom Honneth ascribed the idea of social pathology will be among those most sceptical about this demand and also about the suggestion of a formal anthropology and ethic. To take just one example, Marx famously denied that the idea that all human beings suffer hunger is informative, since hunger satisfied in one way is radically different from hunger satisfied in another way.¹⁴ He – and Hegel before him – can be read to insist that whatever we can say about a formal ethic and anthropology will be too abstract and empty to guide us in our practical endeavours, or will just reproduce the context-specific substance from which it is meant to be independent.

As we will see later, Honneth, in effect, abandons in his most recent writings the idea of a formal ethic, and for the very reasons just mentioned: the fact that we are always historically situated and the insight that any formal ethics (or morality) is too empty until and unless it is substantiated historically (upon which it is not simply the same with details added to it).

II. Social pathologies of reason

In later papers, Honneth does not just set out the idea of social pathology, but ascribes a particular version of it to Frankfurt School Critical Theory as constitutive of its approach.¹⁵ Noteworthy in this context is his 2004 paper “A Social Pathology of Reason: on the intellectual legacy of Critical Theory.”¹⁶ Here the focus is on Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and Habermas.

Some of the same points reappear from the first paper – such as the ethical dimension of social pathologies, in contrast to the dominant liberal concern with moral categories like justice – but Honneth presents three fundamental specifications as constitutive and distinctive of Critical Theory’s use of the idea of social pathologies.

First, in a move that Honneth characterizes as “unique [*einzigartig*]” – unique, I take it, among contemporary approaches – Critical Theory insists on “the concept of socially efficacious reason.”¹⁷ Following Hegel, the idea is that a social pathology is given whenever a society falls short of the “‘objectively’ already possible rationality.”¹⁸ In contrast, “a successful form of society is only possible by

¹⁴ *Grundrisse* [1857], MEW Vol. 42: 27.

¹⁵ In this paper, whenever I refer to “Critical Theory” from now on, I mean to denote the Frankfurt School’s strand(s) of it.

¹⁶ This paper appeared originally in German (“Eine soziale Pathologie der Vernunft: Zur intellektuellen Erbschaft der Kritischen Theorie”) in *Axel Honneth: Sozialphilosophie zwischen Kritik und Anerkennung*, ed. C. Halbig and M. Quante (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 9–38; and English in *Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, ed. F. Rush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), Ch. 13. I cite from the extended version that appeared as “Critical Theory” in *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth Century Philosophy*, ed. D. Moran (London/New York: Routledge, 2008), Ch. 18.

¹⁷ “Critical Theory,” 785.

¹⁸ “Critical Theory,” 786.

maintaining at the highest level the appropriate standard of rationality.”¹⁹ Thus, both the notion of social pathology and normality are tied here to rationality and its historical unfolding.

Second, the process of a deformation of rationality has one specific cause in the Critical Theory tradition: capitalism. Here Honneth emphasizes the influence of Lukács, according to whom “Mechanized practical work and commodity exchange demand a form of perception in which all other humans appear as thing-like beings lacking sensation, so that social interaction is robbed of any attention to properties valuable in themselves.”²⁰ Such a narrowing of perception implies a narrowing of rationality – to instrumental rationality in the service of self-interest – and leads to a variety of social ills (not least the exploitative, alienating relations of capitalism). This model – though perhaps not the specifics of the content – is then adopted by Critical Theory and applied to a variety of contexts. While Honneth does not explicitly say so, the social pathologies that capitalism causes reveal it to have structural deficits, such that – at least for the first generation of Critical Theory – the only cure is to rid us of capitalism.

Third, the idea of social pathology in Critical Theory is always conjoined with an account of the emancipatory interest in overcoming it. Honneth here credits Freud with a formative influence on Critical Theory. In particular, two insights are taken over from Freud: (a) deficits in rationality always find expression, however indirectly, in experiences of suffering; and (b) this suffering motivates, and can be alleviated only by, the search for the very aspects of rationality whose suppression led to the suffering in the first place.

Honneth suggests that there are obstacles to make each of these three dimensions work, and that, if one wants to defend Critical Theory’s idea of social pathology (as he does), then one needs to reconfigure each of them. As we will see, in his own work, he has particularly reconfigured the second and third dimension. Indeed, in a recent statement about social pathologies of reason, he talks about this idea in a way that generalizes away from capitalism as a cause to such pathologies being due to the “structural organization of societies.”²¹ For example, we will see later how Honneth describes juridification as a consequence of the normative structure of legal freedom – its own tendency to become one-sided. The decoupling from capitalism as (direct) cause of social pathology happens already in Habermas²² – for him, juridification is a social pathology that can arise from the structural organization of societies, but it is not necessarily caused by capitalism (at least not directly, insofar as juridification can result from attempts to contain capitalism – see below for Honneth’s account of social rights and consumer protection as an example of this sort). Honneth also does not mention the emancipatory interest anymore.

¹⁹ “Critical Theory,” 786.

²⁰ “Critical Theory,” 799.

²¹ G. Marcelo, “Recognition and Critical Theory today: An interview with Axel Honneth,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39, no. 2 (2013): 209–21, here 219.

²² J. Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 2: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1987; originally in German [1981]). For discussion, see T. Jütten, “The Colonization Thesis: Habermas on Reification,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19, no. 5 (2011): 701–27.

Honneth states that it is questionable whether there is something that unites all theorists from (what is often called) the different generations of Critical Theory.²³ It is, arguably, particularly questionable that the notion of social pathology provides this systematic unity. It might do, notably if this notion is not – contrary to what Honneth recently claimed²⁴ – inevitably tied up with an organicist conception of society, which would have met with stern criticism from first generation thinkers like Adorno.²⁵ However, my focus here is not on this wider question, but on investigating how Honneth aims to conceptualize and defend the notion of social pathology.

III. Zurn's characterization

Whether or not there is a concept of social pathology that unifies all thinkers associated with Critical Theory is one question; but the more pressing one is whether or not there is such a concept that unifies the various specific phenomena of which Honneth speaks as social pathologies. It is to this question that I turn now.

In an influential paper, Christopher F. Zurn proposes a common structure of social pathologies (or at least of those analysed by Honneth): they are *second-order disorders*, where this means that they operate “by means of constitutive disconnects between first-order contents and second-order reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused.”²⁶

This characterization has had an important influence on the development of Honneth's own thinking, and it is, hence, useful to briefly review it here. It is also useful to do so, since the characterization turns out to be largely unconvincing, but seems to have contributed to a misframing of social pathologies as being primarily “in the head.” Moreover, this discussion will allow us to introduce some of Honneth's own examples of social pathologies prior to (and, in part, different from those listed in) *Freedom's Right*.

Zurn's structure fits best (his characterization of) Marx's articulation of a theory of ideology: those subject to false consciousness are not “cognisant of how those beliefs come about,”²⁷ and this disconnect is pervasive and socially caused (involving “hiding or repressing the needed reflexivity of the social participants about the structures of belief formation and the connection of those cultural-cognitive structures to the material ordering of the social world”).²⁸ Yet, when it

²³ “Critical Theory,” 785. On the idea of generations, see, for example, J. Anderson, “Situating Axel Honneth in the Frankfurt School Tradition,” in *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, ed. Danielle Petherbridge (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2011), Ch. 1. I leave aside here the question of whether Honneth's characterization of this systematic unity by way of the three-fold specification of the diagnosis of social pathologies does really differentiate Critical Theory from other (contemporary) approaches. In particular in relation to Foucault, one might doubt that this is so, but nothing in this paper hangs on this.

²⁴ A. Honneth, “Die Krankheiten der Gesellschaft. Annäherung an einen nahezu unmöglichen Begriff,” *WestEnd* 11, no. 1 (2014): 45–60, here 46 n. 1, 59.

²⁵ See, for example, his *Introduction to Sociology* [1968], trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 43.

²⁶ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” in *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays*, ed. D. Petherbridge, Ch. 12, here 345–46. We will see later that Honneth has recently endorsed Zurn's schema as capturing what he means by social pathologies – wrongly as I argue in the main text.

²⁷ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 347.

²⁸ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 347.

comes to the real target for this schema – the social pathologies Honneth analyses (as listed by Zurn: misrecognition, maldistribution, invisibilization, rationality distortions, reification, and organized self-realization) – Zurn’s schema is a poor fit, other than perhaps reification.²⁹ Specifically, in the way Zurn himself (accurately) describes the phenomena Honneth analyses, they are more about a disconnect between reality and certain ideals (which exist as promises and rational potential inherent in practices and institutions),³⁰ or about a disconnect between different norms, than about a cognitive disconnect at the level of the individual.

Consider first misrecognition: this concerns – on Zurn’s own account – cases where “there is a substantial gap between the evaluative acknowledgement or promise that the act centres upon, and the institutional and material condition necessary for the fulfilment of that acknowledgement or promise.”³¹ Zurn insists that this by itself would not be a social pathology, unless there would also be a cognitive disconnect: “Without the second-order disorder, what we might generically call ‘bad’ acts of recognition (misrecognition, non-recognition) are not ideological and so cannot count as social pathologies.”³² However, Zurn’s reasoning here is not convincing. First, something could be non-ideological *and* a social pathology (for Honneth). In particular, if misrecognition, which Honneth clearly takes to be detrimental to individual self-realization, is pervasive and socially caused, then this would seem to be a social pathology for him, even if it is not accompanied by the inability of those misrecognized reflectively to be aware of this. Also, second, it is possible that those perpetuating the misrecognition are subject to ideological beliefs. If this were so, then misrecognition would involve ideology, albeit not by the misrecognized. (As we will see below, Zurn himself accepts something similar in another case: invisibilization). Thus, even if ideology were a necessary condition for social pathologies, the fact that the misrecognized are not subject to ideology would not be sufficient to exclude that the misrecognition they suffer is a social pathology.

Take next maldistribution and social esteem³³ – here too, the disconnect is (again according to Zurn’s own description) between certain ideals or norms and reality, specifically “between the regnant evaluative schemas connecting individual achievements to esteem recognition, and the social institutions that practically function to recognise or denigrate the actual achievements and worth of individuals.”³⁴ Zurn then adds that the failure to be recognized appropriately for one’s contribution to social cooperation also might involve that the individuals themselves do not recognize their contribution, but it is not convincingly shown

²⁹ See Zurn’s discussion of reification particularly on p. 357 of “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders.”

³⁰ Indeed, the one example of what Honneth considers a social pathology that Zurn does not discuss also concerns the interrelation between ideals and reality: Hartman and Honneth suggest that neoliberal capitalism transformed the normative potential of social-democratic capitalism in such a way that – paradoxically – neoliberalism’s promoting of this potential decreases the probability of actually realizing it (“Paradoxes of Capitalism,” *Constellations* 13, no. 1 (2006): 41–58; originally in German [2004]).

³¹ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 349.

³² “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 349; my emphasis.

³³ For Honneth, this is just a particular instance of misrecognition of the sort discussed in the previous paragraph.

³⁴ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 351.

that *only then* would it be a social pathology.³⁵ Is it not detrimental to my self-realization and well-being that socially pervasive forces make it the case that social esteem is withheld from me despite the fact that I genuinely contribute to society (a fact I correctly perceive)? Given how various avenues for self-realization are connected to social esteem, it would be surprising if lack of social esteem were not detrimental to self-realization, even if the person her-/himself did not misrecognize the contribution s/he made to society. Such socially caused detrimental effect suffices to make it a social pathology (for Honneth).

Then, Zurn turns to group-specific invisibilization, and here he identifies a two-order structure – the active looking through another, which presupposes a taking cognisance of the presence of the other in the first place – but it is not the one of the cognitive disconnect he started with. Indeed, here he admits as much explicitly himself: “in the case of social invisibilisation those who directly suffer from the social effects are not the same as those subject to the problematic form of reflexivity.”³⁶

Zurn’s treatment of the pathologies of rationality – deficits in the social realization of historically available rationality – also does not fit his schema: the disconnect is again not (primarily) about lack of reflexivity of individuals, but one “between social institutions and the available level of rationality” and between “the broadly accepted sense of what is rational, just, and possible and the latent potential of reason.”³⁷ Moreover, it is rather odd to list pathologies of rationality among the other cases because they are not really specific instances of social pathology for Honneth, but one element of his general characterization of social pathologies (as Zurn admits).³⁸

Finally, consider the phenomenon which Honneth describes under the heading of “organised self-realisation.” In a nutshell, a combination of various social factors since the 1970s have led to self-realization’s being co-opted into the capitalist production process, such that people have to feign self-realization activities to become employed and promoted, and end up experiencing feelings of inner emptiness and meaninglessness. It *seems* at first as if they fit Zurn’s schema – as one’s own mode of self-realization requires reflective endorsement to be authentic,³⁹ one could imagine a case where the latter second-order reflexivity could be undermined by social processes. However, the way the actual phenomena is described is such that the pathology becomes worse by a cognitive *connect*: it is “often itself vitiated by the individual’s own recognition that the demand for individualised self-realisation is itself a productive force, a functionally useful innovation of post-Fordist capitalism, one playing an ideological role in furthering neo-liberal deinstitutionalisation and deregulation.”⁴⁰ If cognitive disconnect is essential to social pathology, the recognition noted in the quotation could not vitiate the social pathology, but would end it – whatever would be bad about it

³⁵ In this context, Zurn also muddies the water by talking about “distributive injustice,” where social pathologies are meant to be about the good and self-realization, not justice and legitimacy. Still, perhaps this can be clarified insofar as the social pathology is one about esteem, and only causally related to distributive injustice – as a sort of side-effect of it.

³⁶ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 352–53.

³⁷ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 353.

³⁸ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 353.

³⁹ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 359.

⁴⁰ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 360.

could not be characterized by talk of social pathology on Zurn's definition of it. This goes against what Honneth intends.

It is worth considering this in more detail, since Honneth's discussion of organized self-realization is perhaps the best example of how the idea of social pathology might be applied to a recent phenomenon. In "Organized Self-Realization: Paradoxes of Individualization,"⁴¹ Honneth does not argue that these paradoxes are (or indicate) a social pathology because individual reflection on the ideals of self-realization pursued is blocked. Just the opposite: Honneth's argument relies on people's awareness of the false (or at least not authentically accepted) first-order content (the modes of self-realization). In fact, for him, this awareness is not just a vitiating factor, but part and parcel of the pathology in question – leaving us either to feign authenticity or flee into depression.⁴² In this way, the interesting suggestion of this rich text is that social pathology does (or at least can) consist in the process by which the pursuit of an ideal (here self-realization) sabotages its own realization due to certain social conditions.

It is to the credit of Honneth during his middle period that he identifies a whole range of social pathologies. As shown in this section, Zurn's attempt to systematize them into one schema is unsuccessful. Zurn locates social pathologies too much at the reflective level of individuals (too much "in the head," so to speak), not at the level of reality – it is true that pathologies might find expression in a cognitive disconnect, but they need not. They are *not essentially* located at the reflective level of individuals ("in the head"). Unfortunately, Honneth in his more recent work falls into a similar trap – as we will see now. He ends up systematizing and relocating the phenomena in ways that are problematic and fall behind the level of insight reached in his earlier diagnoses.

IV. Freedom's Right

The idea of social pathology plays an important role in Honneth's recent major work, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*.⁴³ However, there are a number of changes to how this idea is conceived and to Honneth's overall view.

One of the novelties of this book compared to the earlier work on social pathology is that Honneth now articulates his views in terms of a conception of justice, no longer couching them in ethical criteria understood as different from justice and other moral criteria. Rather than eschewing the idea of justice altogether, Honneth's strategy is now to expand it beyond the procedural notions he thinks have dominated the literature for too long – basically the notions operative in the work of Rawls and those writing within his basic framework as well as (albeit for somewhat different reasons) in Habermas's theory of justice.⁴⁴ The significance of this novelty vis-à-vis

⁴¹ I cite the reprinted English translation in *The I in We* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), Ch. 9; originally in German [2002].

⁴² "Organized Self-Realization," 167.

⁴³ See footnote 13. References first to the English and then the German edition.

⁴⁴ The shift to a broader conception of justice is not entirely novel to Honneth's corpus, but can be backdated at least to "The Fabric of Justice: On the Limits of Contemporary Proceduralism" (in *The I in We*, Ch. 3; originally in German [2009]). It is, arguably, already part of Honneth's stance in N. Fraser & A. Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Verso, 2003). The papers on social pathology cited above, however, operate with a narrower conception of justice – as should be evident from the German title of the collection of papers in which the first appears ("Das Andere der Gerechtigkeit [The Other of Justice]").

the earlier work ought not to be exaggerated, for justice is actually not playing a big role in the argument. The emphasis is on freedom, specifically social freedom, and this remains tied to notions of self-realization. Honneth also continues to contrast social pathologies with injustices,⁴⁵ either suggesting an inconsistency in his stance on justice or that the contrast is now with procedural justice only. Charity suggests the second reading.

A second, more important novelty is that Honneth eschews formal anthropology and ethics, and opts instead for a historically specific account of the norms with which he operates. Part of the reason for this is that Honneth conceives of his book as basically an updated version of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, and thereby ties his outlook much more closely to the actual historical developments of modern liberalism (especially in Germany) than in his earlier work. The English title of the book is actually more fitting in this regard than the German one (which is closer to Hegel's original title of his philosophy of right, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*): instead of suggesting an instance of theorizing (a sketch or ground plan), the English title reveals the importance of actual social reality, of "social foundations," for Honneth. This change is far more significant than the first change to a broader conception of justice. *Freedom's Right* is devoid of any reference to formal anthropology and a formal ethic of self-realization, which – as seen above – were crucial for his initial discussion of social pathology (and also for his first major work, *The Struggle for Recognition*).⁴⁶

Given its significance, let me illustrate this point. Honneth begins his book by lamenting the "decoupling" of most of today's political philosophy from the analysis of society.⁴⁷ The idea of pure normative theorizing – and thereby of deriving a standard (supposedly) independent of one's own society – is clearly rejected. Indeed, those who aim to provide a moral standard independently from considerations about the historical and social context – like (on Honneth's reading) Rainer Forst – are accused of producing a theory of justice that is "completely empty."⁴⁸ Similarly, Korsgaard and Habermas are accused of overlooking the socio-cultural conditions of moral reasoning, not least the thick descriptions of social roles, like being a friend or a teacher.⁴⁹ Without such thick – and thereby inevitably historically contextual – descriptions, moral reasoning becomes empty or otherwise indeterminate.

Honneth does not fully appreciate what this move entails. In particular, he does not realize that this move speaks against the viability of the ambition – which he

⁴⁵ *Freedom's Right*, 86/157.

⁴⁶ Originally in German, *Der Kampf um Anerkennung: Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1992); translated as *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* by J. Anderson, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). In an interview, Honneth recognizes this point, saying that in *Freedom's Right* "the anthropological impulse that drove my earlier work has taken a back seat to a more immanent 'grammatology' of modern recognition orders" (R. Willig, "Grammatology of Modern Recognition Orders: An Interview with Axel Honneth," *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 13, no. 1 (2012): 145–49, here 148). See also Marcelo, "Recognition and Critical Theory today," where Honneth also distances himself from "an anthropological misunderstanding" invited by "a certain ambivalence" in *Struggles of Recognition* and suggests that his three spheres of recognition have historically developed and might be novel to modernity, not universal (210–11).

⁴⁷ *Freedom's Right*, 1/14.

⁴⁸ *Freedom's Right*, 337–38 n. 6/39 n. 6.

⁴⁹ *Freedom's Right*, 100, 108ff/183, 197ff.

retains in *Freedom's Right* – to offer a rational justification of the substance of his theory of justice that is independent from social foundations (something which, if successful, would distance his view from the theories of Walzer, Miller, and MacIntyre).⁵⁰ He aims to fulfil this ambition by appeal to a metaphysically abstinent variant of Hegel's philosophy of history. To see how this falls foul of his move against Forst *et al.* (as well as facing other problems), we need to look at Honneth's appeal in more detail.

Honneth asserts that "The fact that subjects actively preserve and reproduce freedom-guaranteeing [*freiheitsverbürgenden*] institutions is theoretical evidence of their historical value."⁵¹ This is a pivotal passage insofar as Honneth wants to maintain a version of Hegel's historical teleology and specifically his view of the modern state as the most progressive human formation merely on the basis of the active support of its citizens for this formation, jettisoning Hegel's metaphysical foundations. For – so Honneth reasons – if the population actively support the current social institutions this must mean that they see them as the most progressive there have been, making any metaphysical arguments to this effect unnecessary (which is fortunate, since these arguments, in Honneth's view, are no longer convincing).

This reasoning cries out for criticism, especially on the basis of the ideology critique so important to the (first generation of the) Critical Theory tradition. It does not follow from the mere fact that institutions guarantee some freedoms and people actively reproduce them, that these people think that the institutions are the best there ever have been; nor, indeed, that the institutions deserve the active support they receive. False consciousness can make us actively support what we would not so support, but instead oppose, if we were free from this false consciousness.⁵² The mere fact that a society guarantees some freedom does not suffice to show that it does not generate false consciousness.⁵³

Moreover, even leaving aside false consciousness, Honneth's claim does not stand up to critical scrutiny: if I practically support a particular set of institutions then this does indeed commit me to thinking that these institutions are better (or less bad) than some other set of institutions that is historically available now, but this need not mean that I need to view them as the best there ever have been. Thus, for example, I can actively participate in the institution of peer-review assessment of research excellence which is decisive in the allocation of research funds to universities in the UK (and elsewhere) simply because the likely alternative – a

⁵⁰ For Honneth's criticism of their conceptions of justice as lacking such an additional step, see *Freedom's Right*, 2/16.

⁵¹ *Freedom's Right*, 59/112; translation amended. The German "*freiheitsverbürgenden Institutionen*" is not well-captured by "free institutions" (As Ganahl's official translation has it). Honneth's point is that these institutions make freedom possible by offering certain guarantees. An authoritarian state might – say in preventing a civil war – make certain freedoms (such as freedom of religion) possible, but need not be itself free – it can be "*freiheitsverbürgend*," but nonetheless "*unfrei*."

⁵² One might reply here by saying that Honneth allows – even insists on – the possibility of false consciousness insofar as he suggests that people can misunderstand and misapply social norms (indeed, this is central to his revised version of social pathology; see main text below). Interestingly, however, Honneth does not even consider this possibility when it comes to active support of freedom-guaranteeing institutions, but takes this support simply at face value. This is symptomatic: he presupposes that the fundamental social norms of current liberal societies are defensible and merely require fuller realization – indeed, this has become so axiomatic for him that he suspends critical scrutiny of the support of these norms in the very attempt to defend them.

⁵³ See also Schaub, "Misdevelopments, Pathologies, and Normative Revolutions," *Critical Horizons*, this issue.

metrics-based assessment – strikes me as even worse. This does not mean that I view peer-review assessment – or *have to* view it – as the best possible system for such an allocation. For example, I might prefer an allocation simply on the basis of the number of researchers employed in a university compared to either of these two alternatives – this was the allocation mechanism that preceded the current system in the UK. However, I might judge a return to it politically unfeasible in current circumstance, and hence actively support the peer-review mechanism as the least bad available option.

In addition, even if one granted for argument's sake Honneth's claim that active support for existing institutions showed that the individuals in questions were committed to the view that these institutions are the best there have ever been, this would not suffice for his purposes. In effect, Honneth faces a dilemma here (in the wake of his move against Forst *et al.*): whatever criteria individuals use to judge past arrangements as worse than the current ones they actively support are either (1) historically inflected in various ways or (2) too empty to be of any use to us. Either way Honneth's appeal to a metaphysically abstinent Hegelian teleology cannot generate rational or moral validity independent from the existing social foundations. This also means that Honneth fails in distancing himself from Walzer, Miller, and MacIntyre – like them, he can only make judgements about progress in terms of context-*immanent* criteria. Any other candidate criteria would not be genuine criteria because too empty and formal.

Without a working independent foundation that shows that existing social norms are the best there ever could be (or at least the best currently available ones), Honneth's reformist commitment to these norms is unwarranted by his own standards. Restricting oneself to context-immanent criteria need not exclude radical social critique – for example a society might be shown to systematically fail to live up to its own standards, or harbour within it social movements that point beyond it.

Honneth's overcommitment to a merely reformist project becomes clear when we consider his discussion of Marx. According to Honneth, any unfreedom and exploitation of workers should be addressed *within* the capitalist system because no practical alternative to it is currently identifiable.⁵⁴ Here he abandons another key insight of (at least the first generation of) Critical Theory and, indeed of Marx (and even Hegel): anticipating what the alternative would be is neither necessary in order to engage in radical critique, nor possible. Such an alternative is only going to emerge from actual practical struggles; and only in retrospect can it be theoretically grasped. Theorizing on its own is too abstract and indeterminate to anticipate what radical shifts in normative orientation and social organization would amount to. Indeed, this insight has been important for Honneth's own work, specifically the pride of place he has assigned to struggles for recognition, not least due to the role they can play in normative and institutional innovations or even revolutions.

⁵⁴ *Freedom's Right*, 196/356–57.

The point can be amplified, if we consider again the possibility of ideology: *status quo*-reinforcing false consciousness might not just be a bad guide for deciding whether active support of social practices renders them progressive, but might extend so far that even our faculties of theorizing and imagination are chained, ultimately, to reproducing the *status quo*. Instead of genuine alternatives, all we can conceive of is a tax reform or granting mothers an extra year towards the qualifying condition for the state pension. In sum, if we treat “the fact that there do not seem to be practical alternative to the economic system of the market” as decisive, then we are no longer doing context-transcending critique (whether it be guided by immanent standards or not).⁵⁵ Then, we let how things socially appear determine our theorizing (and associated practices), rather than trying to look behind the social façade as Critical Theory aspired to do and search for practical innovations and social struggles that point to a radical alternative.

It is thus unsurprising to see that Honneth in *Freedom's Right* does not think of social pathologies and other social aberrations as indicting our social world in such a way that revolutions are required to address them. Rather, they are now understood on the model of an immanent critique with a reformist orientation: as deviations from norms that are already embedded in the social fabric and that could be realized without fundamental changes to it.⁵⁶

There now emerges more clearly than in the earlier papers, or possibly as a third novelty,⁵⁷ a distinction between two kinds of social deviations: social pathologies and “misdevelopments [*Fehlentwicklungen*].” The latter are social problems which are also not well-captured in terms of (procedural) injustice. The difference from social pathologies is that social pathologies have to do with internal features of the spheres of legal and moral freedom in which they arise (law and morality), whereas misdevelopments are due to the influence of external factors on the spheres of social freedom, which, according to Honneth, cannot be pathological.⁵⁸ By way of example, Honneth regards the phenomenon that people end up seeing everything through the lens of how it will help them in litigating others as a social pathology insofar as it is, at least in part, due to how the notion of legal freedom lends itself for becoming absolutized in such a way; on the other hand, he regards certain deformation of the public sphere as not due to the notion of democratic will-formation or what this notion lends itself to, but due to external influences (such as by unregulated media empires).

In the following, I immanently criticize both (a) the characterization of social pathologies in *Freedom's Right* and (b) the distinction between social pathologies

⁵⁵ A critique can be immanent, but context-transcending, for example, because it involves showing how by criteria accepted within a social context (say regarding freedom or democracy) that social context cannot but fall significantly short of these criteria.

⁵⁶ See also “Die Krankheiten der Gesellschaft,” 56, 58. One might think that I am here stepping beyond the immanent strictures of critique of Honneth to which I committed myself – after all, his Hegelianism may only allow reformist social critique. In reply, I note that Hegelianism need not be quite as restrictive – it can allow for the possibility that a society is so immanently contradictory as to require revolution and/or reconstruct not just the practices central to reproduction of the society as it is, but also those within it that point beyond it. For further discussion of these issues, see Schaub’s contribution to this issue (“Misdevelopments, Pathologies, and Normative Revolutions”).

⁵⁷ See footnote 2.

⁵⁸ *Freedom's Right*, 66, 128–29/125, 230–31.

and misdevelopments (or, at least, the application of this distinction to the specific examples Honneth provides for each).⁵⁹

IV. 1. Critique of the new characterization of social pathologies

In the first substantial discussion of social pathologies in *Freedom's Right* (i.e. when discussing pathologies of legal freedom), Honneth basically adopts something like Zurn's characterization – indeed, he explicitly refers to the latter in a way that signals his agreement with it.⁶⁰ Unlike (procedural) injustices, where people are wrongly excluded from social processes of cooperation, the problem in the case of social pathologies has to do with the “reflective access” to the actions and norms that constitute these processes. Specifically, due to systematic social influences (not limited to capitalism), participants misunderstand these actions and norms, or their significance.⁶¹ Strictly speaking, this deviates from the schema Zurn operates with insofar as the disconnect is not between the first-order beliefs of people and their second-order reflection on them, but instead between the norms of practices and people's reflection on these. Whether it is still helpful to speak of second-order disorders here – when the first-order referent has changed such that it is not of the same kind as the second-order referent (it is not merely about beliefs, but institutionalized norms) – is questionable, but I leave that aside in what follows.

The important point is that in *Freedom's Right* there is a disconnect between the actual rationality of norms in social practices and the participants' reflexive uptake of these norms (or of their significance) – a disconnect that is itself (purportedly) caused by some internal dynamics of the norms in question (in contrast to misdevelopments, where the disconnect is caused externally). This disconnect, which affects how people participate in social practices, then also leads to violations of social rationality. Thus, in a way social pathologies are, according to Honneth's most recent account, more “in the head” of the participants, albeit that the cognitive misunderstanding has real effects on the objective rationality actually achieved by social institutions and practices.

This new account does not fit well the examples Honneth analysed prior to *Freedom's Right*, such as notably the case of organized self-realization introduced earlier: in that case, the first-order content (the modes of self-realization) is false *qua* being inauthentic, rather than – as it should be on the new account – true as appropriate norm for the domain in question. Also, the second-order awareness of this falsity is not a misunderstanding of the first-order content – just the opposite: the suffering comes from the truthful recognition of the falsity of the first-order content and the social pressures of pretending to take it up nonetheless.

Here we also see how the new account has tamed social pathologies considerably – rather than the diagnosis implying an indictment of the “new spirit of capitalism” (as in the case of the organized self-realization), on the new account the implication of

⁵⁹ Further problems with Honneth's reformist agenda are discussed in Schaub's contribution to this issue (“Misdevelopments, Pathologies, and Normative Revolutions”).

⁶⁰ *Freedom's Right*, 86/157.

⁶¹ See also *Freedom's Right*, 113/206.

such a diagnosis is that there are tendencies towards one-sided and therefore mistaken interpretations of norms and practices, where these norms and practices, if adequately contained, are completely acceptable.⁶² The problem is how people interpret the world,⁶³ not that it needs changing at a fundamental level. The radical potential of the diagnosis of social pathologies has been swallowed up by Hegelian actuality.

The four social pathologies Honneth now lists, correspondingly, lack any explosive potential for the current social world. In the sphere of legal freedom, two forms of juridification can occur, namely (a) when people view everything through the lens of how it will help them to successfully make claims in court (with the 1979 film *Kramer vs. Kramer* as paradigmatic example) or (b) when people become totally paralysed and indecisive (with B. Kunkel's novel *Indecision* as paradigmatic example). In the sphere of moral freedom, the two are (c) rigid moralism (as captured in the novels of Henry James) and (d) morally motivated terrorism (as in the RAF member Ulrike Meinhof). Each of these requires efforts to enable participants to gain a better understanding of the norms in question and containment of the norms by social freedom; the response to none requires a different social world – with different underlying norms – altogether.

Before turning to the critique of Honneth's distinction between social pathologies and misdevelopments, we should discuss one further novelty of *Freedom's Right*. Honneth now characterizes social pathologies as different from "social accumulation of individual pathologies or psychological disorders."⁶⁴ One might think that Honneth means to exclude *mere* accumulation of individual disorders – in contrast to *socially caused* accumulation. Yet, Honneth seems to want to go further: for him, social pathologies are not socially caused individual ills, but social ills that may or may not be also appear as individual ills.

This impression is confirmed in Honneth's most recent discussion of social pathology. In "Die Krankheiten der Gesellschaft" (published after *Freedom's Right*), he clearly states that it is society which is ill when we speak of social pathologies – not individuals (or a sufficiently large accumulation thereof). He also provides two examples of how society can be ill without its individual members (also) being ill – Arendt's account of how consumerism leads to a growing disinterest in public deliberation about public and common affairs; and Durkheim's suggestion that anomie will undermine social solidarity. However, Honneth admits that some form of individual suffering – albeit perhaps not suffering that is medically recognized – is necessary for the purpose of the *diagnosis* of social pathology. The picture seems to be that such suffering is the symptom which alerts us to the illness, but not itself part of that illness.

⁶² Nor would it help to reply that the phenomena like organized self-realization are merely rebranded as misdevelopments – as such, they would also be part of a reformist agenda, since they would then concern negative external influences on norms and practices (of social freedom) which are also deemed completely acceptable in themselves and that can be protected from such influences by reforms.

⁶³ This is not to say that the problem is merely "in the head" – rather the wrong interpretation leads, on Honneth's new account, to sub-optimality in existing social institutions. My point is that even these problems "in the world" are from the outset so conceptualized in *Freedom's Right* that they cannot call this (social) world and its norms into question at the fundamental level.

⁶⁴ *Freedom's Right*, 86/157.

This strikes me as implausible. My worry is here *not* motivated by methodological individualism – I am happy to grant that society might be a collective actor which cannot be adequately captured in a way that reduces it to the actions of individuals. Rather, it is motivated by *normative* individualism: if something is not bad for individuals at some level, then it is not bad at all.⁶⁵ Applied to the issue of social pathology: society can only be ill if, in some broad sense, individuals within it (or affected by it) are ill (in the broad sense that their well-being and/or self-realization is detrimentally affected). This need not mean that the ill that befalls society is exactly the same as that that befalls individuals. It need also not mean that the individuals realize that they are ill because society is ill, or even that they realize that they are ill at all. It even need not mean that the social processes in question have to negatively affect the individuals directly involved in carrying these processes out. But it does mean that if, for example, consumerism is a problem because it leads to disinterest in common affairs, this must involve, however indirectly, that consumerism is bad for individual human beings – not just so that we can find out that society is ill, but as part of what it is for society to be ill.

I cannot hope to demonstrate this conclusively here, but let me once more adopt the strategy of immanent critique to show that even Honneth ought to accept it. Honneth points out that the analogy with illness that talk of social pathology rests on requires that certain core features of illness are replicated in the notion of social pathology. Following Mitscherlich, he counts among these core features the “experience of a restriction of the opportunities for freedom [*Erleben einer Verengung von Freiheitsspielräumen*].”⁶⁶ And he suggests that this could be captured at the level of society, when its different functional spheres – such as, presumably, legal freedom and social freedom, or even different practices of social freedom (personal relationships, market society and democratic will formation) – do not work harmoniously together. Whatever merit this suggestion has, it is implausible that the various functional spheres could “experience” the lack of harmony existing between them without individuals experiencing it at some level (i.e. not necessarily consciously or in a way that is epistemically transparent in the sense of revealing the problem and its causes to them). Thus, even on Honneth’s own notion of what illness involves, it is implausible that society can be ill without individuals being ill.⁶⁷

IV. 2. Critique of the distinction between social pathologies and misdevelopments

To recall, in *Freedom’s Right* Honneth introduces (or at least makes explicit) a distinction between social pathologies, which are due to internal developments of

⁶⁵ One strong objection to this view concerns non-human nature. This would require more space to discuss than I can devote to it here, but I would either include non-human living objects among individuals or adopt an appropriate modification – for example to qualify the claim, such that it says that only *intra*-human infliction of bads can be fully captured by normative individualism.

⁶⁶ “Die Krankheiten der Gesellschaft,” 58–9.

⁶⁷ Not only is a view that ties social pathology necessarily to individual illness (broadly conceived) more plausible as a view about illness than Honneth’s latest view, it also would not be committed to an organicist conception of society. Hence, it would be compatible with the work of first generation critical theorists.

the norms and practices in question, and misdevelopments, which result from external influences.⁶⁸ On the face of it, this distinction does not exclude the possibility that the same norms and practices could be affected by both social pathologies and misdevelopments, but Honneth's overall theoretical architecture in *Freedom's Right* excludes this. Instead, social pathologies are related to legal and moral freedom – the two inferior forms of freedom, which for Honneth (as for Hegel before him) are important ingredients of a good and well-ordered society, but whose importance and standing should not be exaggerated. Only as part of, and means to, an overall social freedom do they have a place in a good and well-ordered society, and social pathologies result exactly whenever these two freedoms are taken as more than that. On the other hand, social freedom – roughly modelled on the idea of love, such that the pursuit and realization of your ends is reciprocally implied in the pursuit and realization of my own ends, and *vice versa* – is not just a superior freedom which provides the proper framework and the preconditions for the other two, but is so innocent and pure – just like love is often thought to be – that it can never be at fault when things go wrong within its practices and institutions. In this way, misdevelopments are reserved for the practices of social freedom, and only legal and moral freedom's deviations are due to their internal structure.

It is harder to keep track of the misdevelopments that Honneth discusses in *Freedom's Right* than of the social pathologies he lists and also harder to know whether (and how) one should bundle or disaggregate them. With this caveat, let me suggest that there are thirteen misdevelopments discussed in *Freedom's Right*. In relation to the market, there are: (1) corporations controlling our needs (rather than our controlling corporations in line with our needs);⁶⁹ (2) immiseration in the early phases of the capitalist labour market;⁷⁰ later on, (3) deskilling of the workers and the impossibility of their feeling recognized as making meaningful contributions to social cooperation;⁷¹ and, more recently still, (4) the deregulation of the labour, capital and finance markets, along with cuts in social and legal protection of workers and their real income as well as an intensifying individualization of responsibility.⁷² In relation to democratic will-formation, there are various possible misdevelopments in relation to the public sphere – (5) commercialization of the media;⁷³ (6) the related developments of the media's controlling the way people perceive reality and to what aspects of it they pay attention;⁷⁴ (7) fragmentation of the public sphere into mutually isolated niches (perhaps in part due to the internet);⁷⁵ (8) alternatively, the uniformity of the public sphere;⁷⁶ (9) consumerism

⁶⁸ There is an irony here to the choice of terms: in the medical context from which the metaphors are borrowed, pathologies typically involve an external pathogen, whereas in this context misdevelopments are often due to genetic and thus "internal" causes.

⁶⁹ *Freedom's Right*, section 6.2.2, especially 203, 219–20/370, 403–4.

⁷⁰ *Freedom's Right*, 233–34/410–11.

⁷¹ *Freedom's Right*, 234/411.

⁷² *Freedom's Right*, 243–53/451–70, most explicit on 246–47, 252–53/458, 468–70; see also Hartmann & Honneth, "Paradoxes of Capitalism."

⁷³ *Freedom's Right*, section 6.3.1, notably 273/507–8.

⁷⁴ *Freedom's Right*, 295–97/551–54.

⁷⁵ *Freedom's Right*, 276, 303/513, 565.

⁷⁶ *Freedom's Right*, 276–77/514–15.

that leads to political apathy and disinterest;⁷⁷ (10) nationalist misappropriation of the public sphere;⁷⁸ misappropriation of the rule of law, be it (11) nationalist or (12) class-based in character.⁷⁹ Indeed, even (13) the state-led corporate capitalism of, for example, post-WWII West Germany is presented as a misdevelopment in that it contributed to financial crises (presumably especially sovereign debt crises) and led to political apathy due to the increase in the influence of lobbies and the way political parties turned into cartels of political power.⁸⁰

I cannot here do justice to the wealth of this material, but let me at least make some critical observations, starting with two smaller ones. The first one is that a number of social problems that prior to *Freedom's Right* were counted by Honneth as social pathologies – notably (2) and (3) above – have now become misdevelopments. This might seem to be merely a rebranding of them. However, in one sense it is even more reformist than the new account of social pathologies is: reframing these problems as misdevelopments suggests that the sphere in which they occur – the market – and its associated norms are itself unproblematic and should merely be protected from external influences (rather than overcome or at least contained in virtue of an in-built tendency to generate social pathologies). The sphere and its norms are removed from critical view, with a sole emphasis of critique on external influences.

The second observation is that it is not clear that all of the above can be differentiated from (procedural) injustices – indeed (11) nationalist or (12) class-based misappropriation of the rule of law are clear examples of what we commonly would view as injustices. They also meet Honneth's own definition of injustices (“unnecessary exclusion from or restriction on opportunities to participate in social processes of cooperation”).⁸¹ There is a real danger here that social deviations from norms – be they social pathologies or misdevelopments – become an amorphous catch-all category.

More importantly, the distinction between social pathologies and misdevelopments is problematic at least insofar as it is not clear that the sorting of the phenomena by Honneth into one or the other category is defensible, even on his own characterization of them. Indeed, this might indicate a more fundamental problem: that we cannot say in a sufficiently robust and clear way what is caused internally and what is caused externally to a system of action (and its norms) to mark the distinction Honneth is after.⁸²

⁷⁷ *Freedom's Right*, 280–83/521–26. While Honneth would view this as a misdevelopment if it had materialized, he seems sceptical about its actually materializing.

⁷⁸ *Freedom's Right*, 264–66, 284, 308/490–93, 527, 573–74.

⁷⁹ *Freedom's Right*, section 6.3.2, notably 306–8, 309, 311–14, 318–21/571–74, 576–77, 581–85, 594–99.

⁸⁰ *Freedom's Right*, notably 324–26/604–8.

⁸¹ *Freedom's Right*, 86/157.

⁸² One might reply that this leaves in place the second criterion by which Honneth distinguishes social pathologies from misdevelopments, namely that the former pertains to individual (legal and moral) freedom and the latter to social freedom. However, there is no rationale to distinguish between social aberrations affecting individual and social freedom respectively, if these norms were *not also* distinguished as to whether or not they have in-built tendencies to produce aberrations. For the former distinction on its own is not one about the nature of social aberrations – we would have the same *kind* of aberration pertaining to (what might be) different spheres. Also, Honneth anyway does not draw the distinction between individual and social freedom in a clear-cut and stable way. For example, he holds that the expansion of individual rights (such as consumer rights) – that is the expansion of *individual* (legal) freedom – was “doubtlessly a normative advance” in a sphere of *social* freedom (*Freedom's Right*, 230/425).

Let us start with his new account of social pathologies. In relation to moral freedom, he talks of it as both (a) generating its own one-sidedness⁸³ and (b) as containing an “internal boundary” which subjects do not grasp in the cases of its two social pathologies (rigid moralism and moral terrorism).⁸⁴ The former fits with the characterization of social pathologies as due to internal causes, but the latter point suggests a different picture, according to which the subjects misapply a principle, which is itself internally limited in its application and hence not at fault for such misapplication. Indeed, it is this latter picture which is dominant in Honneth’s account of rigid moralism, which he describes as arising only when we forget our context and selves and when we overextend the principle of self-legislation.⁸⁵ Honneth at least owes us an account of why the principle of self-legislation that is both context-bound (as he argues against Korsgaard and Habermas; see above) and internally delimited nonetheless by itself leads to its misapplication (or has a tendency to do so). Indeed, in the case of morally motivated terror that Honneth discusses – the RAF and especially Ulrike Meinhof – one wonders whether the overextension of the principle of self-legislation has not more to do with the specific configuration of the political and media landscape of the 1960s and 1970s – and thus with factors external to moral freedom (on Honneth’s account).

Now consider misdevelopments, which allegedly are due to external factors. Among the thirteen examples discussed by Honneth, there are cases which seem to fit this schema. For example, Honneth in a somewhat surprising move blames the introduction of social rights and consumer protection at the individual level for the demise of the consumer cooperatives, whom he views as much more effective to counter corporations’ control of our needs and also as better instantiation of social freedom in the consumption sphere. If he is right about the causal nexus here, then this would seem to provide an example of how an influence external to social freedom – namely legal freedom – brings about a misdevelopment of social freedom. However, even this case is not straightforward: for one thing, is not the initial problem the increasing control corporations have over what we desire and need, and if so, is not this problem generated internally to the consumption sphere (and thereby, if Honneth is right that it is a practice of social freedom, internal to social freedom)? Also, are not the introduction of social rights and consumer production results, at least in part, of the exercise of social freedom in the sphere of democratic will-formation, so that, even if the influence is *via* legal freedom, in fact it is generated within social freedom itself, just a different sphere or practice of it? And, indeed, how would we conclusively decide whether such influences, given the complex causal nexus they likely exhibit, are internal or external to social freedom? Might they not be internal in one respect and external in another, and if so, which respect should be determinative?

⁸³ *Freedom’s Right*, 104/190. Unfortunately, this does not come out as clearly in the translation, since the crucial clause “*von ihrer selbst beförderte*” which precedes “*Vereinseitigung*” is omitted from the English version.

⁸⁴ *Freedom’s Right*, 114/207.

⁸⁵ *Freedom’s Right*, 116, 117/210, 213.

To take another example, the experience of Nazi Germany provides a clear instance of the sort of nationalist misappropriation of the public sphere that Honneth has in mind, and he, indeed, refers to it.⁸⁶ Yet, Honneth himself insists that the development of the democratic public sphere was helped along by the formation of nation states and national background cultures.⁸⁷ This suggests that the nationalist misappropriation of the public sphere is an *overextension* of the social freedom of democratic will-formation at a particular point of its development, rather than an external distortion of it.

The key point here is that empirical examples, to which Honneth invariably refers, regularly manifest complex and multiply construable features. It is often difficult to discern the precise nature, and causal history of these problematic social developments. In cases like these the application of the distinction between social pathologies and misdevelopments does little to clarify the situation; indeed, it often adds an extra layer of complexity which becomes even more difficult to disentangle. As a consequence the application of the distinction becomes of limited use; and the distinction itself (in its failure to map onto real world examples) begins to appear questionable.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have reviewed the various ways the notion of social pathology has been conceptualized by Honneth and Zurn, and subjected them to criticism on the basis of their own aims and argumentative moves. In the work of the early Honneth, this notion is tied to a model of critique that is based on a formal ethics and anthropology. I suggested that he was too quick in excluding more immanent, historically specific, and context-dependent approaches. Interestingly, Honneth in his recent work has moved to a more immanent approach, albeit while retaining the ambition for universalist validity. This ambition, I have argued, is in conflict with his own criticisms of context-independent justifications (such as those advanced by Forst). Moreover, the particular immanent approach he has adopted is problematic in constricting, without adequate justification, the possibility for social critique in a way that breaks with the tradition of (the first generation of) Critical Theory, contrary to Honneth's intention of continuing this tradition. Finally, Honneth's development of the notion of social pathology and social deviation more generally faces, I have shown, further problems insofar as he severs (counterintuitively and contrary to his own standards) the link to individual suffering and introduces a separation between two kinds of deviation that is difficult, if not impossible, to uphold. These problems are fuelled in part by Zurn's influential attempt to offer a general schema for social pathologies, which, as I have also demonstrated, does not fit well with the core cases Honneth advances (and Zurn aims to capture).

This paper has been relentlessly critical. There is, I believe, a place for such papers. Instead of breaking here with this critical spirit, I will indicate what negative conclusions I do *not* believe to be warranted by what I have argued. In particular,

⁸⁶ *Freedom's Right*, 271, 278/503, 517.

⁸⁷ *Freedom's Right*, esp. 262ff/487ff.

nothing I said implies that the notion of social pathology cannot be conceptualized differently within the Critical Theory tradition. Indeed, phenomena like Honneth's proposed case of organized self-realization strike me as calling out for such conceptualization. My point has been that an alternative proposal of how to do this is necessary – one that leaves space for radical social critique and that conceptualized them in terms of detriments to individual well-being that is socially caused. This need not mean that it invokes context-independent or universalist criteria – just the opposite: I think the empty formalism worries that the later Honneth advances against Forst and others speak decisively against this option. Instead, one live option is to return to the middle period of Honneth's work and the broader notion of normative reconstruction he operated with then, which encompassed not just the social institutions involved in the reproduction of the existing social world, but also the countercurrents to it. Alternatively – or perhaps additionally – one might approach social pathologies less as a unified set of phenomena with the same necessary and sufficient conditions than as a set of related and partly overlapping phenomena. For this – what Zurn calls – “mid-level methodological eclecticism” might be most apt.⁸⁸ The task would be to carry out a research programme of a constellation of phenomena that mainstream liberal theory either cannot capture at all or only inadequately – a programme that, at the same time, does not domesticate social critique or eschew normative individualism.

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⁸⁸ “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders,” 369.

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