

Aesthetic Freedom and Democratic Ethical Life:

A Hegelian Account of the Relationship between Aesthetics and Democratic Politics

Abstract

This paper presents a novel Hegelian view of the relationship between aesthetics and democratic politics. My account avoids the drawbacks associated with approaches that (like Rancière's) reconceive all of the political in aesthetic terms or (like Rockhill's) reduce the aesthetic to art. Instead, I maintain that the aesthetic is best understood as a distinct recognition relationship of individual freedom. My argument proceeds by highlighting shortcomings of Honneth's account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* and then addressing these impasses by integrating aesthetic freedom into the picture. The first two steps of my argument concern the fact that the form of life outlined by Honneth aspires to be a form of free life, yet his account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* gives rise to two dimensions of unfreedom. The first problem of unfreedom pertains to the *scope* of freedom. The relationships of freedom incorporated into Honneth's account fail to turn given social roles into the subject matter of a sufficiently unrestricted practice of freedom. The second problem of freedom concerns *conformism*. In a final step, I complete my argument that Honneth's account is unsatisfactory and incomplete by showing that aesthetic freedom is socially valid and thus ought to form part of our accounts of democratic ethical life.

Introduction

In this paper, I outline and defend a distinct Hegelian position in the current debate about the relationship between aesthetics and (democratic) politics.¹ In doing so, I also argue that we have to revise our accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit*, of democratic ethical life. The approach I am defending is Hegelian in two senses (but it is neither Hegel's own nor that of any of his contemporary followers): First, I conceive of democratic societies as realising a distinct form of ethical life for which equal freedom provides the overarching normative horizon. Following authors like Honneth, I understand democratic societies as being composed of different relations of recognition or freedom which, taken together, ensure equal freedom for all. Second, I argue that the aesthetic is best understood as a variant of individual

freedom that complements other relations of freedom and forms part and parcel of democratic ethical life. In a nutshell, such aesthetic freedom consists in an engagement with the world that is at once passive-receptive, disinterested, and active-creative (see I.3 below).

My Hegelian approach is particularly suited to explain the distinct contribution aesthetic freedom makes to democratic life and to account for why aesthetic freedom has a legitimate place in it. My position avoids shortcomings that are characteristic of two common alternative ways to conceptualise the relationship between aesthetics and (democratic) politics. Rancière's strategy to reconceive the political in its entirety as an aesthetic phenomenon can serve as an illustration of the first alternative model (e.g. Rancière, 2004, pp. 7-15). For him, there can be no "aestheticization" of politics ... because politics is aesthetic in principle' (Rancière, 1999, p. 58). He conceives of the political, which is made up of the antagonistic relationship between the police and politics, in terms of a distribution of the sensible (Panagia, 2010). Police is Rancière's name for a socio-political order that is understood as a 'configuration of the perceptible' (Rancière, 1999, p. 29), since it defines the ways of being, seeing, acting, speaking, etc. that form part of this order. Politics, on the other hand, denotes an 'activity antagonistic to policing' (ibid.) that aims to re-configure the police. Whatever the benefits of Rancière's conceptualisation of the political in terms of a distribution of the sensible might be, the drawback of this strategy is that it turns *all of social life* into an aesthetic phenomenon. As a result, it becomes impossible to even ask how the aesthetic interacts with other domains of socio-political life, such as the moral, legal, political, or economic domain. This is shortcoming is significant, for one can only account for the distinct contribution the aesthetic makes to democratic life, if one is able to describe how the aesthetic intervenes in the various other dimensions of social life. However, this presupposes that one has the conceptual resources to distinguish the aesthetic dimension from other dimensions of social life. My Hegelian approach, which conceives of the aesthetic as one among a number of distinct relations of freedom that jointly make up democratic life, achieves this.

This brings me to the shortcoming of another common way to approach the relationship between aesthetics and politics, namely, to conflate the aesthetic with art or the artistic.² Of course, there is nothing wrong with exploring the relationship between art and politics, especially since in modern times art in the singular emerged as a distinct domain that is separated from all others (e.g. Rockhill 2014, pp. 26-7; Shiner, 2001). The questions of whether and how art can be of political relevance under these circumstances is therefore pertinent. My reason for rejecting this framing is that it is too narrow for the purpose of

shedding light on the role and place of aesthetics in democratic life. I do think that art is underpinned by what I call exercises of aesthetic freedom, but not all exercises of aesthetic freedom are artistic. Equating the aesthetic with art, or artistic practices, therefore gives rise to the following problem that my account avoids: non-artistic exercises of aesthetic freedom fall outside the scope of such approaches. As a result, they are unable to account for, or reflect on, the contributions non-artistic exercises of aesthetic freedom make to democratic ethical life. By contrast, my understanding of the aesthetic makes room for taking into consideration both artistic and non-artistic exercises of aesthetic freedom.

In what follows, I account for the place and role of aesthetic freedom in democratic ethical life, using Axel Honneth's *Freedom's Right* (2014) as a backdrop. This monograph is the most advanced and systematic attempt to update the project Hegel pursued in his *Philosophy of Right* (1821) for contemporary Western liberal-democratic societies. Drawing on the architecture of relations of freedom identified by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*, Honneth provides an outline of these societies as realising a distinctly *democratic* form of *Sittlichkeit*.

My argument proceeds negatively and in three steps. Each step highlights a shortcoming of Honneth's account and then proceeds to show that each impasse could be addressed by integrating aesthetic freedom into our account of democratic ethical life. The first two steps of my argument identify shortcomings that concern the fact that the form of life outlined by Honneth aspires to be a form of free life, yet his account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* gives rise to, and lacks the resources to deal with, two dimensions of unfreedom. The first problem of unfreedom pertains to the *scope* of freedom. The relationships of freedom incorporated into Honneth's account of democratic ethical life are unable to turn given social roles and norms themselves into the subject matter of a (sufficiently unrestricted) practice of freedom. As a result, we cannot understand these roles and norms as being expressive of our freedom. The second problem of freedom concerns *conformism*, or the way in which we inhabit our social roles. This problem arises from the fact that role-mediated relationships have an in-built 'tendency for conformism' (Honneth 2014, p. 384, n.476) that threatens to undermine our freedom. In order to underpin my claim that Honneth's account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* is unsatisfactory (as an account of a form of free life) and incomplete, I show in the third step of my argument that aesthetic freedom is socially valid and as such has to be recognised as part of our accounts of democratic ethical life. Despite professing to track *all* the dimensions of the value of freedom that have 'taken on an institutional shape' (Honneth, 2014, 66), Honneth omits at least one of them: aesthetic freedom understood as a

variant of individual freedom. This is a problem, since the ambition to be comprehensive forms part and parcel of any attempt to outline an account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*. What emerges from this line of argument is that aesthetic freedom belongs to democratic ethical life and makes a distinct contribution to rendering it a life of freedom by providing the resources for addressing the two above mentioned dimensions of unfreedom. Indeed, it will become apparent that aesthetic freedom accounts for distinct characteristics of democratic life, for instance, its openness for radical self-critique and self-transformation.³

I. Democratic *Sittlichkeit* and the Problem of Scope Unfreedom

I.1 The Idea of Democratic Ethical Life

To say that societies instantiate a distinct form of ethical life implies that they share a form of ‘practical meaningfulness’ (Pippin, 2008, p. 6). “*Sittlichkeit*” means ‘the achievement and maintenance of such a form of intelligible life’ (ibid.). The study of ethical life thus proceeds by way of a reconstructive elucidation of the norms that underpin social institutions (even if they are inadequately realised by them).⁴ ‘Hegel’s strategy’ consists in ‘picking up on values and ideas already institutionalized’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 63). Ideal-theoretical approaches, by contrast, aim at ‘justifying principles of justice without taking account of the facticity of social relations, in order to then re-establish a connection – at a second (or third) stage – with current social conditions by gradually introducing empirical circumstances’ (ibid.). There is another respect in which viewing societies in terms of ethical life sets apart Hegelian from mainstream approaches to political philosophy. The ‘point of reference’ of *Sittlichkeit* are ‘all institutional social spheres’ (ibid.), whereas mainstream liberal approaches tend to focus on the political sphere more narrowly conceived.⁵ Furthermore, unlike many contemporary political philosophers, Hegelians are value monists. They take it to be a feature of modern societies that their normative horizon is formed by ‘one value’, namely ‘the ethical idea’ (ibid., p. 64) of freedom. As a theorist of *democratic* ethical life, Honneth stresses the egalitarian dimension of this commitment: ‘all subjects must enjoy equal support in their striving for individual freedom’ (ibid.; also p. 15). Against this backdrop, theorists of democratic *Sittlichkeit* maintain that all social institutions jointly making up modern democratic societies ‘do represent specific functional embodiments of the one universal value of individual freedom’ (ibid., p. 345, n.1). The differentiation of social institutions is thus assumed to track the differentiation of the value of freedom (ibid., p. 65). It is an upshot of the last point that working out an account of democratic ethical life entails a commitment to comprehensiveness. Accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* aim for completeness, and for them

to be complete they have to reconstruct *all* ‘socially valid’ (ibid., p. 63) dimensions of freedom. The task of normative reconstruction is thus to ‘gradually etch into relief those individual spheres of action in liberal-democratic societies in which the value of individual freedom has taken on an institutional shape’ (ibid., p. 66; also p. 330). Finally, theorists of *Sittlichkeit* are holists. They believe, on the one hand, that different social spheres realise different dimensions of freedom and, on the other, that these dimensions complement and depend on each other (ibid., pp. 84, 86-94, 96, 113-20, 128-9, 273). In their view, the ‘social system of democratic ethical life ... represents a complicated web of reciprocal dependencies, where the realization of freedom in one sphere of action depends on the realization of the principles of freedom underlying the other spheres’ (ibid., p. 330). For instance, ‘democratic will-formation presupposes’ (ibid.) that freedom is already (sufficiently) realised in the personal and economic sphere. For unless individuals have already developed a sense of self-confidence, self-worth and independence, their ability to appear in the public sphere and to contribute to democratic will-formation will be stunted (ibid., p. 332).

Having introduced these formal features of *democratic* ethical life, I can now turn to its substance: different institutionalised relations of freedom. For Hegelians, *all relations of freedom are also relations of recognition*. Freedom always has a social dimension and a normative dimension, since relationships of recognition are *mediated by social norms and roles* that are constitutive of social practices. Through recognition, individuals acquire a social ‘status that entitles’ them to ‘consideration shown them by other subjects’ (ibid., p. 124). This status licences them to engage in specific kinds of acts. On the basis of his conceptual and sociological reconstruction, Honneth distinguishes between two *kinds* of relationships of recognition or freedom: relations of social freedom and individual freedom.⁶ Each kind encompasses different *variants* of freedom. In the case of social freedom, we are concerned with the social status of being a (full-fledged) participant in a substantive context of action in which a dimension of freedom is realised. Social freedom is therefore freedom in the modality of ‘reality’ (ibid.). With regards to modern societies, Hegelians distinguish between three variants of social freedom: personal, economic and political freedom. In these three social spheres, relations between individuals are mediated by norms of recognition in such a way that their actions complement each other. In personal relationships (of love and friendship), we enable one another to ‘freely articulate’ and satisfy our ‘actual [emotional] needs and interests’ (Honneth 2016: 89). In productive social cooperation, we relate to each other in such a way that we can satisfy our material needs and desire to be esteemed for our contributions to shared goals. Finally, in the sphere of democratic will-formation, we relate to

each other in a way that we can understand individual expressions of opinion as contributions to a common project of the ‘intersubjective exploration of a common will’ (ibid., p. 36). In short, as a result of processes of functional differentiation, there are different relations of social freedom that are concerned with different dimensions of freedom. What they have in common is that they all denote substantive contexts of action that structure the relations between individuals such that they act for one another (see Honneth, 2014, pp. 127-128).⁷ Social freedom is freedom as realised *in* the social.

Relations of individual freedom are of a different kind as they denote a socially granted freedom *from* the social. The point of the two variants of individual freedom that form part of Hegelian accounts of ethical life – i.e. legal and moral freedom – is to ensure that we can regard our *participation in relations of social freedom itself as free*. In Honneth’s own words: ‘the prerequisite for *freely* participating in these spheres [of social freedom] is an entirely *different category of freedom*’, namely individual freedom (ibid., p. 71; my emphasis). Unlike relations of social freedom, relations of individual freedom do ‘not generate any new substantial contexts of action’ (ibid., p. 123) in which dimensions of freedom are realised. They denote a socially granted possibility to withdraw from, or scrutinise, extant relations of social freedom. Relations of individual freedom are thus about suspending one’s ordinary participation in relations of social freedom. Since freedom is only realised in relations of social freedom, individual freedom is freedom in the modality of ‘possibility’ (Honneth, 2016, p. 69; also p. 124), not reality.⁸ Legal freedom is underpinned by a ‘negative conception of freedom’ (Honneth 2014: 65). Being recognised as a subject of rights enables individuals to withdraw, at least temporarily, from their relationships of social freedom and to ‘act on their own unreflected preferences’ (ibid.) within the space opened up by their rights, that is, without having to justify to others why they act in the way they do. In terms of social ontology, legal freedom is strongly institutionalised, since rights are enforceable (ibid., p. 96). Moral freedom, on the other hand, is a ‘reflexive’ (ibid., pp. 29-41; 65) variant of individual freedom. Being recognised as a moral subject licenses an individual to interrupt her or his ordinary involvement in relations of freedom in order to scrutinise whether ‘social demands’ originating from given interpretations of social roles and norms are ‘unreasonable’ (ibid., p. 98) and to demand, if applicable, that less biased interpretations of these roles and norms are adopted. Compared to legal freedom, moral freedom is only weakly institutionalised, for we are dealing with a culturally granted opportunity that is not backed by state power (ibid., p. 96).

1.2 On the Limited Scope of Legal and Moral Freedom

With these clarifications in place, I can substantiate my first claim. There is a problem with the *scope* of freedom in Honneth's account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* that aspires to outline a life of freedom. This account falls short of its aim since legal and moral freedom (on their own) do not turn existing social roles and norms into the subject matter of a practice of freedom (in a sufficiently unrestricted fashion). As a consequence, individuals cannot regard given roles and norms – through which they realise their freedom – as being expressive of their freedom. Instead, they appear – and are presented by Honneth – as social or 'institutional facts' that individuals are 'constantly compelled to antecedently recognize' (Honneth 2014, p. 111). If this diagnosis is correct, then the account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* outlined by Honneth is shown to be inadequate as an account of a free form of life, for it lacks the resources to adequately deal with the problem of scope unfreedom. Against this backdrop, I argue that by integrating another variant of individual freedom, namely aesthetic freedom, into the architecture of relations of freedom we can overcome this impasse, since aesthetic freedom brings extant roles and norms themselves into the remit of a practice of freedom.

Let me now explain why the two variants of individual freedom that form part of Honneth's picture are unsuited to adequately deal with the problem of scope unfreedom. I consider the case of legal freedom first. Like Honneth, I think that being recognised as a subject of rights contributes to rendering one's participation in relations of social freedom free, since it enables individuals to withdraw themselves, at least temporarily, from relationships of social freedom. Civil rights, for example, empower individuals to end personal relationships like marriages or friendships. It is for this reason that we can regard our continued presence in such relations as freely chosen. Similarly, I can only regard the distinct way in which I contribute to social cooperation as being expressive of my freedom, if I have the right to quit my job and change my career.⁹ What matters for the purposes of my argument are, however, the limits of subjective rights in relation to addressing the first dimension of unfreedom. Subjective rights license individuals to *withdraw* from relationships of social freedom, but they do *not* denote (at least not on their own) a variant of individual freedom that empowers individuals to *transform* the very social roles and norms that underpin extant relations of freedom. Despite providing other benefits of freedom, legal freedom is thus unable to address the problem of scope unfreedom plaguing Honneth's Hegelian account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*.

The only other variant of individual freedom available to deal with this problem (in Honneth's existing account) is moral freedom. Being recognized as a moral subject implies that one is 'always free ... regardless of social position ... to question' (Honneth, 2014, p. 98) demands associated with social roles and norms. In the case of moral freedom, the point of the 'interruption' of one's ordinary participation in relations of freedom is to 'gain reflexive distance' (ibid., p. 112). As modern subjects, we regard ourselves as 'free' only 'to the extent that we obey universalizable norms' (ibid., p. 104). By implication, our participation in relations of social freedom is only free, if our social status as moral subject licenses us to engage in this particular 'reflexive' (ibid., p. 65) activity: to 'test' the 'social universalizability' (ibid., p. 98) of extant social norms and roles, to 'reject unreasonable social demands' (ibid.; also pp. 97, 103), and to propose 'new', more reasonable 'systems of norms' (ibid., p. 104). Moral freedom thus has a passive-receptive and an active-creative dimension. The former dimension consists in being attentive to those aspects of roles and norms that cannot be justified to all affected by them on the basis of 'universalizable reasons' (ibid., p. 116). The latter dimension refers to the activity of generating, and demanding the adoption of, less biased interpretations of social roles and norms. Moral freedom is thus imbued 'with a transformative power that legal freedom does not have' (ibid., p. 112). As a result, *moral freedom constitutes part of the answer to the problem of scope unfreedom*. However, it remains the case that moral freedom's transformative potential cannot on its own provide a fully satisfactory answer to this problem. To see why that is, we have to distinguish, as Hegelians tend to do, between pathological and benign exercises of moral freedom.

In its pathological form, moral freedom denotes the self-undermining attempt to realise the creative-transformative dimension of moral freedom, while abandoning its receptive dimension. It is characteristic for pathological exercises of moral freedom that those engaging in them completely abstract from extant social roles and 'social rules that determine the nature of the relation between the subjects in specific spheres of society' (ibid., p. 111). As a result, one is left with nothing but the form of universality itself and the 'abstract perspective of universal humanity' (ibid., p. 115). This creates two impasses: first, one is deprived of the substance with which alternative social roles and norms could be construed; second, it is hard to see how one can reconnect such pathological exercises with the fabric of our social world.¹⁰ Honneth illustrates this with 'the example of a university professor who notices a relatively harmless act of plagiarism on the part of a close colleague and considers the appropriate action to take' (ibid., p. 110). In such a situation, one cannot identify the right

course of action if one completely abstracts from the ‘role in which the subject is faced with a moral conflict’ (ibid., p. 111) and the point of the social practice at hand. In sum, in its pathological form, moral freedom undermines its transformative potential, as it abstracts completely from extant roles and norms. By implication, it fails to address the problem of scope unfreedom.

The benign version of moral freedom avoids these impasses by acknowledging that its ‘perspective ... is tied to the *role* in which the subject is faced with the moral conflict’ (Honneth 2014: 111; my emphasis). Benign moral freedom treats ‘the constitutive norms’ and roles ‘of our form of society that underpin extant spheres of freedom as ‘*institutional facts*’ that we are ‘constantly compelled to antecedently recognize’ (ibid.; my emphasis). However, this means that the receptivity of moral freedom is restricted. In benign exercises of moral freedom we take our commitment to these roles and norms for granted and only pay attention to how they do, or could, affect individuals. By implication, moral freedom’s creative dimension is also restricted. All it aims to do is generate less biased interpretations of given roles and norms (ibid., pp. 112-116). These receptive and creative restrictions have implications for moral freedom’s capacity to provide a satisfactory answer to the problem of scope unfreedom. Benign moral freedom’s transformative reach and ambition are limited, since it ‘accepts’ extant roles and norms from the outset ‘as institutional facts’ and thus as ‘restrictions on moral self-legislation’ (ibid., p. 112; also pp. 113-117). It merely aims to ‘exercise influence on the ... *interpretation*’ (ibid., p. 113; my emphasis) of extant social roles and norms, but does at no point even consider replacing or radically transforming them in ways that go beyond rendering them less biased. A paradigmatic example of an exercise of moral freedom is thus generating a notion of marriage that does not, unlike the traditional notion, discriminate against non-heterosexual couples. For the point of this intervention of moral freedom is to test whether the extant *interpretation* of marriage can be justified to ‘*all those potentially affected*’ (ibid., p. 109) by it. Due to benign moral freedom’s limited transformative ambition, it cannot on its own provide a fully satisfactory answer to the problem of scope unfreedom. For such an answer would require a more unrestricted variant of individual freedom capable of turning roles and norms themselves into objects of practices of freedom. As long as extant social roles, norms, and institutions like marriage are treated as ‘institutional facts’ (ibid., p. 111), as is the case with moral freedom, they cannot be regarded as being fully within the remit of our freedom.

This result is not substantially altered by the fact that the transformative potential of benign moral freedom arguably reaches a bit farther than I just presented the case: it can

generate less biased interpretations of extant social roles and norms not just on an atomistic basis, but by looking at the social whole as a whole. For exercises of moral freedom can also be about adjudicating conflicts between different roles and norms. In such cases, moral freedom's task consists in giving *all extant* social roles and norms due consideration and to re-interpret them in such a way that their negative impact on each other is minimised as well as justly distributed among them.¹¹ Even if we acknowledge this additional transformative dimension, exercises of moral freedom still do not amount to a fully convincing answer to the problem of scope unfreedom, for it remains the case that they are about re-interpreting given social roles and norms (by adopting either an atomistic or a holistic perspective) against a backdrop of an antecedent commitment to them (and merely aim to generate less biased interpretations of them, or deal with conflicts between them in an impartial fashion). However, a fully adequate response to the problem of scope unfreedom requires a variant of freedom capable of turning given roles and norms themselves into the subject matter of an unrestricted practice of freedom. The upshot of my point is that a society in which nothing is left to do for benign moral freedom (since all roles and norms are impartially interpreted and all conflicts between them are dealt with in an impartial fashion) can be nonetheless one that is marred by the unfreedom.¹²

It has been established that legal freedom, on its own, has no bearing on the problem of scope unfreedom, and moral freedom by itself cannot adequately deal with this problem either. There are only two options available to Hegelians to resist the conclusion that a Honneth-style picture of democratic *Sittlichkeit* is unsatisfactory as a life of *freedom*. They could either look for additional variants of individual freedom or deny that there is a dimension of unfreedom that is left unaddressed by benign moral freedom.

I argue that the way forward is to take the former route and integrate aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic ethical life, for the latter is not promising. In order to deny the existence of scope unfreedom, Hegelians would have to defend a very demanding philosophy of history that encompasses an "end of history" thesis. For their purposes, it is not enough to argue that equal freedom provides the ultimate normative horizon and that freedom is realised in relations of social freedom. I am happy to grant both assumptions (see Honneth, 2015, p. 209). Additionally, they would have to rule out, as a matter of principle, the possibility that an alternative framing of relations of social freedom could result in a more comprehensive realisation of equal freedom for all than one achievable within the currently existing framework with its distinct understanding of personal, economic and political relations. Honneth needs an "end of history" thesis that is strong enough 'to rule out' *ex*

ante ‘the possibility’ that any gains in terms of the realisation of freedom can be achieved by transforming ‘the normative structure’ of ‘modern society’ (ibid.; also p. 210) in a fashion that goes beyond re-interpreting extant social roles and norms. Given human finitude and the finitude of our historical experience, on the one hand, and the recognised right of subjectivity to question and explore alternatives to historically inherited determinations of relations of freedom, on the other (e.g. Rebentisch, 2016, pp. 94-99), I simply cannot see how such a justification could look like.

In fact, in *The Idea of Socialism* (2016) Honneth himself seems to acknowledge that changes in ‘the normative structure’ of a ‘modern’ democratic ‘society’ (Honneth, 2015, p. 209; also p. 210) could reap benefits in terms of freedom. For in this book, he tells the story of how a range of concrete, negative, historical experiences with the normative structure of, and life in, post-revolutionary democratic societies led the socialists to innovate and push for a radical transformation of this very structure. Honneth presents this socialist project as a progressive contribution to democratic life, despite the fact that it cannot be understood as emerging from an exercise of legal or moral freedom, as it aims for more than a re-interpretation of the social norm that was already underpinning the newly established capitalist market sphere. According to Honneth, the French Revolution overcame the estate-based order and put in place a novel normative horizon. This horizon encompassed the ideals of ‘freedom, equality and fraternity’ (Honneth, 2016, p. 6), which were reflected in key post-revolutionary social institutions like the capitalist market. Honneth argues that the socialists ‘discovered an internal contradiction in the principles of the French Revolution’, for the ‘merely legal or individualist understanding of freedom’ underlying the capitalist market was ‘far too narrow for it to be reconcilable with the principle of fraternity’ (ibid., p. 11; also p. 51). Against this backdrop, the socialists came up with an ‘original, groundbreaking idea’, namely, the idea of social freedom that ‘boldly’ unifies ‘the three partially conflicting principles’ of equality, liberty and fraternity ‘by interpreting individual freedom as a kind of freedom in which each person complements the other’, thus ‘completely resolving this freedom with the demands of equality and fraternity’ (ibid., p. 25).¹³ The socialist critique is thus not about generating a less biased interpretation of the negative conception of freedom underlying the economic sphere, or dealing with the conflicts between negative freedom and the values of equality and fraternity in an impartial fashion, but about replacing the idea of negative freedom with a *different* notion of freedom. This radical transformation cannot be understood as an exercise of (benign) moral freedom, for the notion of social freedom to which it gives rise is not a less biased interpretation of the notion of legal freedom, but an

‘alternative model’ (Honneth 2016: 20; also 24) of freedom.¹⁴ Honneth endorses the radically transformative socialist project emerging from the concrete negative experiences with the normative structure of post-revolutionary society, despite the fact that it aims ‘to *replace* individual freedom with social freedom’ in the economic sphere ‘in order to fulfill all the necessary prerequisites for relations of solidarity among members of society’ (ibid., p. 54; my emphasis). Honneth himself thus provides us with an example of a *progressive* project that aims at *transforming the normative structure of democratic societies from within*. Why then rule out *ex ante* that something similar could happen in the future? Why assume that the negative experiences our and future generations make with a given normative structure cannot in principle inspire alternative ways of conceiving relations of social freedom that, if adequately implemented, could have a positive legacy in terms of realising equal freedom? For instance, in the light of the ever-growing inequalities and ecological challenges (like climate change), it seems sensible to explore novel ways of re-integrating the political and the economic sphere.

In sum, legal and moral freedom on their own are unable to adequately address the problem of scope unfreedom. This means that accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* that simply copy the architecture of relations of freedom from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* fail to live up to their inherent aspiration to outline a life of freedom, since individuals cannot understand the roles and norms through which they realise their freedom as being themselves expressive of their freedom. Given this impasse, the only promising way forward for Hegelians is to look for another, hitherto neglected, socially valid variant of individual freedom that, together with moral and legal freedom, has the potential to render our participation in relations of social freedom fully free.

1.3 Aesthetic Freedom and the Problem of Scope Unfreedom

Given the taxonomy of relations of freedom provided above and the discussion of the limits of legal and moral freedom, it cannot come as a surprise that in my view aesthetic freedom is best characterised as a distinct *variant of individual freedom*. As such it is both linked with a practice of ‘recognition’ and a distinct mode ‘of action’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 96). Being recognised as an “aesthetic subject” entails a distinct social status that licenses the recognised individual to engage with her social world in a unique way. Like other variants of individual freedom (i.e. moral and legal freedom), aesthetic freedom does not denote a substantive context of action in which freedom is realised (ibid., p. 123), but a distinct mode of intervening in, or interrupting, other relations of freedom. Moral freedom empowers

individuals to scrutinise given interpretations of practices of social freedom. Aesthetic freedom licenses individuals to interrupt their ordinary involvement in these relations in order to contemplate and play with extant social roles and norms. In terms of social ontology, aesthetic freedom and moral freedom are similar since both are weakly institutionalised. Both are backed by an ‘opportunity, granted by the culture’ (ibid., p. 96), to engage in ‘the performance of’ distinct kinds of ‘acts’ that can be ‘performed by every ... subject’ (ibid., p. 65).¹⁵ Supporting my claim that aesthetic freedom is a distinct variant of individual freedom requires, among other things, to explain what is distinct about the aesthetic – as opposed to the moral or legal – way of relating to the world.

It is worth recalling that the notion of the ‘aesthetic’ emerged in the second half of the 18th Century. Arguably, it found its most influential expression in Kant’s (2000) *Critique of the Power of Judgement* from 1790. What is important for my purposes is that Kant, on the one hand, presents a systematic argument to the effect that aesthetic-reflexive activity is different from moral-reflexive and theoretical-reflexive activity and, on the other hand, that it realises particular dimension of freedom. For Kant aesthetic-reflexive activity denotes a distinct way of freely relating to the world. Preventing individuals from engaging aesthetically with their world therefore amounts to diminishing their freedom as a distinct and free way of relating to the world is made unavailable to them. Aesthetic discourses like Kant’s thus encourage us to recognise each other as ‘aesthetic subjects’ who are licenced to engage in aesthetic-reflexive activities. Another feature that is relevant for my purposes is that theorists of the aesthetic have argued from early on that the relevance of aesthetics is not confined to art, but extends to the moral and socio-political dimension of human life. Friedrich Schiller, for instance, stated in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1794) that the notion of the aesthetic has to bear ‘the whole edifice of the art of the beautiful, and of the still more difficult art of living’ (Schiller, 2005, p. 131) freely in community with others.

With these remarks in place, I can come back to the task of explaining what is distinct about aesthetic relating, so that it becomes clearer what distinguishes exercises of aesthetic freedom from exercises of moral freedom. My aim is not to say something novel or surprising about aesthetic freedom, but to remind readers of familiar features that can be found in theorist of the aesthetic from Kant and Hegel to Adorno and Rancière. In this regard, it is heuristically useful to distinguish (1) a passive-receptive, (2) a disinterested and (3) an active-creative dimension, even though all three interact in exercises of aesthetic freedom.

(1) Aesthetic freedom is passive-receptive as it denotes a mode of relating to the world that is characterised, on the one hand, by a heightened awareness for how the world appears to us in all its manifold detail (Seel, 2005) and, on the other, by a willingness to let oneself be impressed and affected by how it appears to us (Seel, 2007). In principle, everything can become the object of aesthetic contemplation, for instance, ‘persons, institutions, ... landscapes, cultures, and the dramas of politics and the arts’ (Seel, 2014, pp. 270-271); and in aesthetic contemplation nothing that appears is filtered out as irrelevant. In comparison with aesthetic receptivity, moral receptivity is much more limited, for its attentiveness is – at least in Honneth’s account – restricted to features related to extant interpretations of social roles and norms that bear on their general acceptability as well as conflicts between roles and norms. However, it is not only the unrestricted receptivity that link exercises of aesthetic freedom with a particular dimension of freedom but also the willingness to ‘let something happen’ to us in the aesthetic-receptive ‘exploration’ (ibid., p. 276) of how the world appear to us and how we appear to ourselves. When we engage aesthetically with the world, we are open to be moved and transformed by it. As a consequence, we can gain a distance from ourselves (or whom we took ourselves to be), for we can become aware of different aspects of our social world and ourselves. The unrestricted aesthetic receptivity is thus capable of opening up a space for the emergence of self-difference, ‘self-encounter’ and self-reflection; a ‘space that cannot be anticipated’ (ibid.; also pp. 270, 271, 277, 280; also Rebenitsch, 2010, p. 180).

(2) Aesthetic receptivity is not only unrestricted but also *disinterested*. Kant elucidates this feature by way of juxtaposing our aesthetic with theoretical or practical engagements with the world. The two latter activities aim at ‘controlling their object theoretically or in practice’ (Seel, 2014, p. 271; also Guyer, 1996, p. 3), whereas aesthetic-reflexive activity is characterised by a suspension of, or emancipation from, the practical or theoretical aims that normally frame our participation in practices and our engagement with the world. Exercises of (benign) moral freedom, for example, are not disinterested, since a commitment to extant social roles and norms is constitutive of them. In exercises of moral freedom, our aim is to control these roles and norms by way of identifying the most generally and reciprocally justifiable version of them and demanding their implementation. In exercises of aesthetic freedom, on the other hand, we suspend our commitment to social roles and norms and with that the interpretative-evaluative schema that typically conditions our awareness of and engagement with the world. In short, aesthetic receptivity is both unrestricted (since nothing that appears is filtered out as irrelevant) and disinterested (as

preconceived interpretative-evaluative schemata are suspended). Both aspects set apart exercises of aesthetic freedom from exercises of (benign) moral freedom and enable an unrestricted practice of freedom that can turn social roles and norms into their subject matter.

(3) This brings me to the active-creative, or meaning generating, dimension of aesthetic freedom that is underpinned by its unrestricted and disinterested receptivity. Kant referred to this dimension as the “free play” of understanding and imagination, others call it ‘interpreting attentiveness’ (Seel, 2014, p. 275; also p. 273). Exercises of aesthetic freedom involve a ‘play of imagination’ that is neither autonomous nor heteronomous as it suspends any given ‘law and normativity’ (Menke, 2013, p. 155; my translation). The ‘play of imagination’ characteristic of exercises of aesthetic freedom is thus not a norm-guided activity, but a ‘metamorphic game of unceasing transformations and developments’ (ibid.; my translation). However, these creative transformations are grounded in aesthetic freedom’s passive-receptive dimension. Paying attention to and taking seriously how the world appears to oneself thus underpins and inspires this ‘metamorphic game’ whose unrestricted, or free, character sets it apart from the more limited creative-active dimension of (benign) moral freedom. Moral freedom’s creative-active dimension is limited, on the one hand, by its restricted receptivity, which make it pay attention only to features related to the impartiality of interpretations of extant social roles and norms, and, on the other, by its interested character, for its ambition to generate less biased interpretations of extant social roles and norms (or to fairly adjudicate conflicts between them) is grounded in an antecedent commitment to them.

Aesthetic freedom’s features both set it apart from moral freedom and make it such that its exercises afford a distinct experience of freedom. In relating aesthetically to the world, we become aware of ‘the determinability of ourselves and the world’ (Seel, 2014, p. 271; also p. 276) because we experience it as indeterminable. This experience of indeterminateness is the effect of aesthetic freedom’s unrestricted receptivity that opens up the ‘wealth of the real’ (ibid., p. 271) and its disinterestedness that suspends preconceived interpretative-evaluative schemata. We then respond to this experience of indeterminateness by generating meaning. In this fashion, exercises of aesthetic freedom reassure us of ‘our ability to determine’ (ibid.) the world, including social norms and roles. The three aspects of aesthetic freedom just outlined are characteristic of exercises of aesthetic freedom in general. However, since the focus of this paper is to identify and address dimensions of unfreedom left unaddressed by Honneth’s account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*, I only concern myself in

what follows with exercises of aesthetic freedom pertaining to extant roles and norms, that is, the ‘loadbearing structures’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 66) of social institutions.

What is distinct about the phenomenology of aesthetic relating is that we experience it as our task to make sense of the world, while also experiencing this task as, in principle, interminable or inexhaustible. Hence the talk of fullness of meaning that is often associated with aesthetic experience. In aesthetic relating, the object of aesthetic contemplation is experienced as both inviting interpretation and eluding it; or, to be more precise, we experience it as ‘resistant to any single meaning’ (Gero, 2006, p. 5). It is for this reason that exercises of aesthetic freedom, ‘despite being sensually conditioned’, give rise ‘to an unlimited freedom of intellectual activity to engage in a kind of play that is not constrained by any conceptual determination and from which no subject is excluded’ (Bubner, 1989, p. 38; my translation). This playful activity is unlimited because the ‘*tension*’ or gap ‘between being *sensually affected*’, on the one hand, and being reflexively ‘*creative*’ (ibid; my translation), on the other, can never be overcome or closed. This feature of aesthetic freedom leads to its excessive character, as it motivates a boundless attentiveness and an endless succession of interpretations; interpretations that always overshoot what appears to us. For in aesthetic relating we always see more than there is to see. This ‘nonempirical surplus’ is the effect of the creative-interpretative activity that forms part and parcel of aesthetic relating. Aesthetic freedom thus ‘plays along the sensual empirical, but never manages to get to it’ (ibid., p. 43; my translation), or to be fully determined by it. In exercises of aesthetic freedom one therefore ‘moves back and forth between the expectation that there is something to be comprehended and the indeterminacy of what is to be comprehended’ (ibid., p. 44; my translation).

Comparing moral with aesthetic freedom along the lines of receptivity, disinterestedness and activity enables us to appreciate what is distinctive about exercises of aesthetic freedom. What is more, we can now see why aesthetic freedom as a distinct variant of individual freedom supplies us with the resources to address the scope problem of unfreedom that mars Honneth’s account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*. Exercises of aesthetic freedom can turn existing roles and norms themselves into the subject matter of an unrestricted practice of freedom (for examples of this, see the two case studies below (II.3 and II.4)). At the same time, such exercises of aesthetic freedom do not simply abstract (like exercises of pathological freedom) from given roles and norms, but are grounded in taking seriously how inhabiting these roles and living according to these norms appear to us. Like the other two variants of individual freedom, aesthetic freedom is a recognition relationship

that is associated with a social status that licenses individuals to engage in a distinct activity. All variants of individual freedom grant some form of freedom *from* the social within the social. Aesthetic freedom complements the distinct contributions that legal and moral freedom make and addresses the residual unfreedom associated with the limited scope of legal and moral freedom. In sum, integrating aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* enables us to make good on the promise of democratic ethical life to be a life of freedom.

II. Democratic *Sittlichkeit* and the Problem of Conformism

I can now proceed to the second problem of unfreedom: conformism. The issue of conformism is different from the problem of scope unfreedom. In the latter case, what is at issue is whether there is a variant of freedom that can turn given social roles and norms into the subject matter of a sufficiently unrestricted practice of freedom, whereas in the former case we are concerned with *how* we inhabit social roles. Unlike in the case of the scope unfreedom, Honneth acknowledges in one footnote that there might be a ‘tendency for conformism’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 384, n.476) in-built in role-mediated relationships. He even suggests that in the light of this tendency one ‘might be tempted to view “aesthetic freedom”’ as ‘an independent category of freedom’ (ibid.; Rebentisch, 2016) capable of countering this tendency. Unfortunately, Honneth does not attempt to answer the questions this aside raises (in *Freedom’s Right* or anywhere else): What exactly is conformism? How does it undermine our freedom (and thus democratic ethical life’s aspiration to be a life of freedom)? What features of role-mediated relationships give rise to this ‘tendency for conformism’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 384, p. 476)? Does aesthetic freedom constitute a distinct variant of freedom? And why should we consider aesthetic freedom a counterforce to conformism? In this second step of my argument I outline answers to all of these questions.¹⁶

II.1 Conforming vs. Conformism

In order to make sense of this tendency for conformism, we need to first clarify what is meant by ‘social role’. Honneth embraces not only Talcott Parsons’ structural functionalism (e.g. Parsons, 1951; Honneth, 2014, pp. 3-4) but also his structural role theory. As a consequence, he understands ‘social roles’ as bundles of normative expectations and ‘behavioural demands’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 126; Callero, 2008, p. 275). However, as interactionists like Ralph H. Turner have pointed out, these expectations and demands typically only amount to

‘general patterns’ (Callero, 2008, p. 276) that ‘leave a great deal to individual discretion’ (Turner, 2002, p. 235). Creatively addressing this ‘degree of uncertainty and discretion’ (Callero, 2008, p. 276) is thus constitutive of playing roles. For example, while most parents understand that affection and discipline are key elements when it comes to raising a child, they are also aware that they need to generate their own interpretation of these underspecified notions in their day to day interaction with their child.

Having clarified the notion of social role and what is involved in conforming with roles, we can move on to the next question: How can we tell apart conformist conforming (in short, conformism) from non-conformist conforming with normative expectations associated with roles? Like Honneth, I am committed to the view that conforming with roles need not be conformist and thus freedom undermining.¹⁷ After all, talk of a ‘tendency for conformism’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 384, n.476) only makes sense if non-conformist conforming is possible. In short, we cannot infer from the fact that individuals are conforming with role expectations that they do so in a conformist fashion. The difference between conforming and conformism must therefore lie in *how* one is inhabiting one’s social roles and meeting behavioural expectations associated with them. I propose that individuals conform in a conformist fashion, if they are not guided by how playing roles appears to them, when addressing the question if they should continue playing a role, or how to creatively interpret the (always to some degree underspecified) behavioural expectations associated with it. The expression ‘how playing a role appears’ to role incumbents might seem unclear and unfamiliar to the reader. It is meant to be more or less synonymous with ‘how one experiences playing a role’.¹⁸ By contrast, individuals conforming in non-conformist fashion remain attentive to how they experience playing their roles and draw on these experiences when creating, and reflecting on, possible alternative (interpretations of) roles.

A similar thought can already be found in Hegel, for he speaks of the ‘death of the individual’ in cases in which individuals merely follow ‘*custom*’ without habitually ‘asserting’ (Hegel, 1991, § 151A, p. 195; translation amended) themselves. Furthermore, what I call conformism denotes a problem that exercises authors like Emerson, Mill and Cavell who are associated with a perfectionist strand in democratic theory. Like Hegel, these authors link conformism with unfreedom as it engenders a form of self-loss (Cavell, 1990, pp. 26-7; Mill, 1991, p. 78). For if one does not take how one experiences playing a role seriously in relation to whether, and how, one interprets and plays one’s roles, then one has no claim to be taking oneself seriously. By implication, if one is not taking oneself seriously, one cannot be said to realise *oneself*, or one’s freedom, in those role-mediated relationships.

Emerson thus stresses the importance of ‘self-reliance’ (Emerson, 1990, p. 131), Mill the relevance of cultivating ‘the person’s own character’ (Mill, 1991, p. 63) and Cavell the ‘idea of being true to oneself’ (Cavell, 1990, p. 1). What is more, another elective affinity between these perfectionist authors and me consists in the fact that they also argue that conformism not only undermines individuals’ freedom, but threatens the ‘democratic aspiration’ (ibid.) of being a life of freedom. For this presupposes the full development of a democratic society’s capacity for self-critique and self-transformation.

Mill, for instance, characterises conformist individuals as conforming to and creatively interpreting the behavioural expectations associated with their roles without ‘ask[ing] themselves--what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition?’ (Mill, 1991, p. 68; also p. 77). Mill stipulates that to some it might simply ‘not occur to ... have any inclination, except for what is customary’ (ibid., p. 68). As a result, they ‘conform to custom, merely *as* custom’ (ibid., p. 65). Others are aware of their ‘feelings and character’ (ibid.) and recognise aspects of their individuality bringing them at odds with their roles (or certain interpretations of them). However, a conformist individual responds to such a tension by ‘rendering’ her or ‘his feelings and character inert and torpid’ (ibid.), as opposed to taking these negative experiences seriously, that is to say as a starting point for a critical and creative re-evaluation of her or his roles. What these and other guises of conformism have in common is that the individuals in questions play their roles without really ‘consulting’ themselves ‘on the state of’ their ‘consent’ (Cavell, 1990, p. 28; also pp. 2, 27; Mill, 1991, p. 65) when creatively interpreting the underspecified expectations associated with their roles.¹⁹

There are a number of different strategies available to individuals to generate conformist interpretations of social roles. One option mentioned by Mill is to imitate others inhabiting the same role (Mill, 1991, p. 64; also p. 68). As a university lecturer, I can respond to the increasing pressure to get very high students satisfaction ratings by imitating my highest scoring colleagues. As a result, I might change my teaching style (e.g. how I interact with students, how I link what I teach with current events), the modes of assessments (e.g. I could replace essays or exams with group presentations), or the way in which I deliver feedback (e.g. I could replace written comments with video files). As a conformist, I would implement these changes without consulting myself, or taking seriously how it would be like for *me* to teach like this. Note that even imitating others requires a degree of creativity. Transposing what others do to one’s own situation involves making all kinds of determinations. My class sizes might be different from those of colleagues who come out on top in student evaluations. Furthermore, they might be teaching a different subject (or

specialisation of my subject), or students in different years, etc. Let us now consider a different conformist strategy. I could also reinvent myself as a teacher by inventing novel teaching styles, assessments and feedback procedures (instead of imitating successful colleagues). Assuming that I do all this in order to do well in student assessments and without taking seriously how teaching like this appears to me, I would still play my role in a conformist fashion. What this example brings out is the difference between being creative and exercising aesthetic freedom. The latter always entails the former, but the former does not suffice for the latter. For a creative interpretation of a role to qualify as an exercise of aesthetic freedom, it has to be guided by ‘one’s own experience’ (Cavell, 1990, p. 2), or one’s own ‘voice’ (ibid., p. 27).

Entailed in these remarks is already explanation as to why conforming need not be conformist. The decision to conforming with a (creative interpretation of a) social role can be expressive of individuals’ ‘consent’ if it is grounded in a process of them ‘consulting’ (ibid., p. 28) themselves. Sociologists speak in this regard of a ‘*personal* stage in which one develops an idiosyncratic version of the role that suits the individual’s unique disposition’ (Turner, 2002, p. 248). If this happens, individuals will not experience playing their roles as confining, or to the extent they do find it confining, they might be unable to imagine alternative roles, or interpretations of them, which they, all things considered, regard as less confining. For this reason, exercises of aesthetic freedom – that is, taking seriously how playing roles appears to oneself, letting these experiences guide oneself when generating, and reflecting on, possible alternatives to them – can result in the re-affirmation of given social roles, or certain interpretations of them. Exercises of aesthetic freedom are thus neither biased in favour nor against the *status quo*. They engender the potential for radical change, but can also underpin resistance to change. However, the decisive difference between conformism and reaffirmation can only emerge in the wake of exercises of aesthetic freedom (e.g. Rebentisch, 2010, p. 183; Rebentisch 2016, pp. 84-85).

II.2 From Conforming to Conformism

With the distinction between conforming and conformism clarified, we can now turn our attention to the question of why role-mediated relationships engender a ‘tendency for conformism’ (Honneth 2014: 384n476) which threatens to undermine our freedom. As might be expected, there are many ‘factors contributing’ to this tendency (Hogan, 2001, p. 1), that is, a ‘broad range’ of mechanisms, ‘forces, beliefs and desires’, some ‘blatant’, some ‘subtle’, some ‘mutually reinforcing with great cumulative effect’ (ibid.). Given this complexity, I

have to confine myself here to providing some backing for the claim that such a tendency exists and illustrating some of the factors underpinning it. In other words, I want to point to some forces that render individuals less disposed to take seriously how playing a role appears to them and to creatively explore, on this basis, alternatives to given roles (or interpretations of them).

At this stage in my argument, it makes sense to turn to findings in sociological role theory supporting the alleged in-built tendency for conformism or ‘accommodation’ (Turner 1990: 90). One such finding states that once a role is established, there is a ‘tendency for the broad outline of roles and sometimes quite specific role elements’ (Turner, 2002, p. 235) ‘to persist in spite of changes in the actors who play the role’ (ibid., p. 241). Role theorists invoke a number of factors to explain this tendency: First, they postulate an interest in maintaining stability which, in turn, discourages engaging with established roles in ways that could potentially open them up to radical changes. For ‘changes in a focal role threatens the stability of relationships and force some changes in relevant alter roles’ (ibid., p. 235). Second, role theorists identify an interest in ‘predictability’ (ibid.). Since predictability is regarded as ‘essential for social relationships’ (ibid.), this interest serves again as an obstacle to opening up roles to practices of freedom that could bring about ‘radical changes’ (ibid.) and thus ‘provoke anxiety’ (ibid.). Typically, not even the individuals in favour of role change are initially aware of where the process of drafting an ‘unattained but attainable self’ (Emerson, 1990, p. 115) on the basis of diffuse and underspecified negative experiences will lead them. Third, role theorists tell us that it is normal for an individual to form an ‘attachment’ to the ‘particular roles’ (Turner, 2002, p. 242) she or he plays, in fact, the ‘individual tends to merge self with given roles’ (ibid., p. 248). Again, this tendency fuels a disposition to disregard negative experiences with a role (or a given interpretation of it). Role theorists have identified a number of forces that account for the propensity to form attachments to roles or merge with them. For a start, there is ‘a tendency ... to view ourselves as others’ (ibid.) see us. Instead of paying attention to how playing a role appears to us and what we can infer from this for who we take ourselves to be, we tend to focus on, and identify ourselves with, how others view us as role incumbents. In addition, we tend to ‘identify ourselves most strongly with roles in which we experience ... favourable evaluations’ (ibid.). And the stronger one identifies with a role, the more one will be inclined to disregard one’s negative experience with (aspects of) that role. This observation is linked with a worry expressed by recognition theorists. They highlight that our desire for recognition, or being (highly) esteemed, entails a tendency for alienation and unfreedom

(Neuhouser, 2008, pp. 57-89; Rousseau, 1997, pp. 111-231). On the one hand, we tend to prefer roles that confer a higher social status over those with a lower associated status. On the other hand, the craving for favourable evaluations fuels an inclination to perform roles (e.g. as a teacher) in such a way that one expects to solicit the most positive responses from others. Our sense of alienation can therefore be rooted in the fact that we do not let ourselves be guided by how we experience playing roles. Finally, we tend to most strongly identify 'with those roles in which we have made the greatest investment' (Turner, 2002, p. 248). Again, the stronger our degree of identification with a role, the more inclined we become to disregard experience with our roles that bring us at odds with them. It is important to appreciate that all of the above factors that account for a tendency for conformism pertain to role-mediated relationship in general. By implication they also apply to relationships of social freedom. Moreover, all of these factors even affect individuals who experience playing their roles, or given interpretations of them, as limiting.

It is important to appreciate further that these general factors can be amplified by historically and contextually specific mechanisms. For instance, specific formal and informal negative or positive sanctions can have an impact on whether individuals feel encouraged to contemplate how they experience inhabiting their roles and to playfully explore alternatives to (given interpretations of) roles. For example, in a context in which engaging in non-heterosexual intimate relationships entails the possibility of criminal charges and/or social ostracizing, individuals with non-heterosexual inclinations have a motive to render themselves unresponsive to them. However, there are also more subtle ways of interfering with the process of relying on one's 'own experience' (Cavell, 1990, p. 2). Consider, for instance, a phenomenon Honneth (2004) calls 'Organized Self-Realization'. Since the 1970s, it has become more and more common to expect, or socially demand, that individuals applying for and doing jobs display certain emotional attitudes (e.g. enthusiasm) and present their professional life as essential to their self-realisation. In this way, the ideal of self-realisation is turned into its opposite. It is supposed to licence individuals to take seriously how inhabiting a role appears to them and, on this basis, to creatively and critically reflect on their roles. However, in its co-opted form, the demand for self-realisation confronts individuals with a social expectation pertaining to how they ought to feel about their job. Individuals are thus faced with a situation in which they are encouraged to engage their emotional life as part of their professional role, while, at the same time, the emotional states they ought to display are scripted for them. In this manner, it is implicitly communicated to individuals that contemplating and expressing how they actually experience performing their

role is not appropriate (especially if their experiences are at odds with the emotions they are expected to display). Furthermore, individuals are led to believe that a ‘misfit between role and person’ (Turner, 1990, p. 99), that is between how their role appears to them and how they ought to feel about their job, amounts to a personal failure. As a consequence, they will habitually cover up what they experience as a personal failure by faking certain emotional states. This, in turn, encourages the development of a disposition to disassociate oneself from how playing one’s role really appears to oneself. At the same time, one feels forced to turn one’s emotional experiences into a resource. For one has to tap into experiences made in other areas of one’s life (e.g. experiences of enthusiasm), in order to fulfil expectations associated with one’s professional role (i.e. to display one’s enthusiasm about one’s professional role). All of this can give rise to ‘symptoms’ like an acute sense of alienation, ‘inner emptiness, ... and of absence of purpose’ (Honneth, 2004, p. 463). What is more, organised self-realisation crowds out genuine exercises of aesthetic freedom (under the pretence of inviting them). In sum, a whole range of general features of role-mediated relationships as well as historically and contextually specific mechanisms (such as the demand for self-realisation) fuel a tendency for roles to ‘become ossified’ (Turner, 2002, p. 252). We therefore have, pace Honneth, no reason to think that relationships of social freedom ‘are safe from the danger of’ conformism, or of ‘becoming passively petrified’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 66).

Against the backdrop of this account of conformism and (some of) the factors fuelling it, we can also appreciate why aesthetic freedom is a counterforce to conformism and the unfreedom it brings in its wake. Being (genuinely) recognised as an aesthetic subject means that individuals are culturally granted the opportunity to engage in a distinct and multi-dimensional activity. Exercises of aesthetic freedom encourage us to pay heightened attention to how the world (e.g. our social roles) appear to us. What is more, exercises of aesthetic are not only unrestricted in their passive-receptive dimension they are also disinterested, which turns them into a counterforce to the ‘tendency’ to keep in place the ‘broad outline of roles and sometimes quite specific role elements’ (Turner, 2002, p. 235). The previous two dimensions are complemented by an unrestricted active-creative dimension which means that exercises of aesthetic freedom, guided by experiences of negativity with extant roles, generate alternatives to given (interpretations of) roles (Turner, 1990, p. 90). Aesthetic freedom as a socially valid variant of individual freedom thus accustoms us to remain, or become time and again, unaccustomed to given roles and norms (Seel, 2014, p. 278; also p. 276; Menke, 2013, pp. 153-155), hereby bringing about a historic ‘dynamisation’

(Rebentisch, 2010, p. 185; my translation) of role-mediated relationships.²⁰ Aesthetic freedom thus sustains a distinct register of democratic self-critique and self-transformation, whereby the ‘possibility or necessity of transforming of oneself’ is seen as connected to the ‘possibility and necessity of transforming ... of one’s society’ (Cavell, 1990, p. 2; also pp. 27-28). For the individuals who experience their roles as limiting and ‘redraw’ (ibid., p. 4) them in attentive-creative exercises of aesthetic freedom also need to imagine ‘a transformation of society’ (ibid., p. 7). That is, they have to imagine a transformed society in which they could realise themselves as their ‘next self’ (ibid., p. 9). Fully realising ‘democracy’s capacity for criticism from within’ (Conant, 2000, p. 227; also Cavell, 1990, p. 3) therefore presupposes that aesthetic freedom forms part and parcel of the fabric of democratic life. This entails appreciating the representative potential of exercises of aesthetic freedom. In democratic life ‘anyone is entitled’ (Cavell, 1990, p. 10) to rely on and communicate how their social world appears to them. And as fellow citizens we have to remain open to the possibility that others’ exercises of aesthetic freedom uncover experiences that are ‘representative of certain facts or conditions’ (ibid., p. 24; also Mill, 1991, pp. 71-75) that undermine our freedom. Democratic *Sittlichkeit* as a life of freedom thus requires, among other things, that we, as Cavell points out ‘manifest for the other the other way’ (Cavell, 1990, p. 31) by paying attention to negative experiences with social roles and playfully generating, guided by these experiences, objects of comparison and contrast to them. For instance, Cavell understands the character Nora in Ibsen’s play as someone who manifests problems that are, at the same time, deeply personal and representative, as these problems are inextricably linked with the limiting nature of roles available to most women (and men) at the time (ibid., pp. 109-112).

II.3 Case Study 1: The Aesthetic Dimension of the Socialist Critique of the Capitalist Market
Against the backdrop of the above discussion, I now want to move on two case studies that show aesthetic freedom in action as a counterforce to conformism and as a force that expands the transformative scope of freedom beyond what is enabled by exercises of moral freedom. First, I would like to come back to Honneth’s depiction of the socialist critique of the capitalist market in order to shed light on its the aesthetic dimensions. In particular, I would like to invoke aesthetic freedom’s three core features and relate them to this instance of radical critique.²¹

First of all, the socialist critique presupposes the unrestricted receptivity characteristic of exercises of aesthetic freedom. For the socialists let themselves be impressed by all kinds

of aspects of post-revolutionary social reality: how workers experienced their relationship to themselves, their peers and their employers, how the kind of work they had to do affected them, how they experienced their relationship to the products of their work, etc. In other words, the socialists' attentiveness was not limited to what workers needed to pay attention to in order to fulfil their role obligations, given the extant definition of their social role. Secondly, the socialists' engagement with their social world was also disinterested. They suspended their commitment to extant social roles and norms in their exploration of how their social world appeared to them. As a result, the socialists attended to many negative experiences related to the capitalist economy, even though they could not account for the negativity or badness of these experiences in terms of the norm of legal freedom underpinning the capitalist market. Since their engagement with their social world was disinterested, they were not bothered by the fact that many of the experiences that showed up to them as negative were rooted in the very norm that was mediating relationships in the capitalist market sphere, namely, the 'largely legal notion of individual freedom' (Honneth, 2016, p. 11). Only because the socialists suspended their commitment to this norm underlying the economic sphere, could this norm itself appear to them as part, or source, of the problem. Finally, the socialists' active-creative engagement with their social world was grounded in this unrestricted and disinterested receptivity. They not only contemplated but playfully explored how the elements that made up their extant social world, as well as the relationships between them, could be re-conceived or rearranged. From this aesthetic engagement with post-revolutionary social conditions emerged many poetic inventions, that is, new ways of seeing and speaking about this social world. Notions like alienated labour (ibid., pp. 89, 99, 107), reification, exploitation or commodity fetishism, to name but a few, were generated in exercises of aesthetic freedom that attentively and creatively played along how life in the capitalist market appeared to those involved in it. Notions like socialism, social freedom, phalanstères, proletariat, or the idea of an 'association of free producers' (ibid., p. 20) are for this reason (also) products of exercises of aesthetic freedom. They are innovative alternative models or interpretations of how individuals and their activities in the productive-cooperative sphere could be unified (in a less oppressive way).

II. 4 Case Study 2: The Aesthetic Dimension of Feminist Consciousness Raising Groups

Consciousness raising or 'CR groups' played an important role in the women's movement of the 1960s and 70s. They also provide a powerful illustration of aesthetic freedom's non-conformist tendency and transformative potential. CR groups, which often were co-extensive with or later 'became writing groups' (Reed, 2005, p. 99), were arguably the 'major

technique of analysis, structure of organization, method of practice, and theory of social change of the women's movement' (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 5) in this period. My claim is that the best way to make sense of CR and writing groups is to regard them as a *collective* exercise of aesthetic freedom, since they instantiate all three features of relating aesthetically to the world (e.g. Reed, 2005, p. 89).

First of all, the receptivity at work in 'consciousness-raising ... groups' (Reed, 2005, p. 76; Ware, 1970, pp. 108-119) was both unrestricted and disinterested. Their point was 'the close examination of the individual lives of group members' (Ware, 1970, p. 100) and their 'personal experiences' (ibid., p. 112; MacKinnon, 1982, p. 23). Literally, every aspect of women's lives, or how it appeared to them, became the object of aesthetic contemplation. This process of 'opening up' and 'sharing' (Reed, 2005, p. 89) was disinterested as the women engaging in it intentionally suspended the established male-dominated framework of perception, interpretation and evaluation.²² The 'method' of CR meetings was designed to enable women to get to know their lives and social world 'in a different way', that is, 'within yet outside the male paradigm' (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 22). CR was the 'collective speaking of women's experience, from the perspective of that experience' (ibid., p. 6). Realising this aim required women to be poetic, since they had to find their own words to describe and share their experiences.²³ 'Poetry was' therefore regarded as essential to 'consciousness-raising' and understood as a 'feminist practice' (Reed, 2005, p. 92) that underpinned a 'process' that was 'transformative as well as perceptive' (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 29).²⁴ We can make sense of this transformative dimension along the lines of the unrestrictedly-creative, meaning-generating activity that forms part of exercises of aesthetic freedom. Subsequent to sharing their personal experiences, the participants in CR groups collectively interpreted and analysed them. Together they explored connections between various experiences, their roots and how the elements that make up women's lives could be reconceived in order for these lives to form a different, less oppressive unity (Ware, 1970, p. 44). Characterising the activities of the SCUM (Society to Cut Up Men) CR group, Ware states that the members perform 'a poetic leap of the imagination forcing new insights into the roles women and men play' (ibid., p. 113) and could play.

In short, the 'feminist method' of 'consciousness raising' (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 29) is best understood as a collective exercise of 'interpreting attentiveness' (Seel, 2014, p. 275) that is underpinned by an unrestricted, disinterested receptivity: a willingness to let something happen to oneself in the process of opening up to one's own world and accounts of others' experiences. One cannot adequately make sense of this 'collective critical

reconstitution of the meaning of women’s social experience’ (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 29) that takes place in CR groups, without invoking the notion of aesthetic freedom. In these exercises of aesthetic freedom, participants of CR groups re-experienced their social world as one that is indeterminate or still to be determined by them through playful aesthetic exploration and collective action. This is what links ‘the close examination of the individual lives of group members’ with the ambition ‘to determine how society must be changed to eliminate the oppression to which all women can testify’ (Ware, 1970, p. 100). What is more, the fact that women, like the socialists, took recourse to a collective practice of aesthetic freedom tells us something about this variant of freedom, namely, that it was culturally available to them, which, in turn, suggests that it formed part of the relations of freedom making up democratic ethical life. This brings me to the third and final step in my argument.

III. The Social Validity and Historic Effectiveness of Aesthetic Freedom

Accounts of democratic ethical life aim to reconstruct *all* dimensions of the value of freedom that have ‘taken on an institutional shape’ (Honneth, 2014: p. 66). For only a comprehensive account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* provides an adequate description of the ‘complicated web of’ (ibid., p. 330) relations of freedom that makes up democratic life. I have already supported the claim that aesthetic freedom denotes, conceptually speaking, a distinct variant of freedom, or way of relating to the world. However, in order to underpin my case that Honneth’s account of democratic *Sittlichkeit* is *incomplete*, I also need to show that aesthetic freedom is ‘socially valid’ (ibid., p. 63).²⁵ In addition to my remarks on the socialist critique of the market and the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, I therefore provide further historical and sociological evidence that suggests that aesthetic freedom has been, from the very beginning, a socially valid and historically effective force in modern democratic life.²⁶

III.1 Case Study 3: Artist Critique and Its Co-optation

The idea of the aesthetic – like the notion of moral freedom as autonomy – emerged just before the modern democratic revolution in the 18th Century and thus belongs to its intellectual and praxeological context.²⁷ The ‘aesthetic revolution’ (Rancière, 2002) is not just an event in intellectual history, it has a practical dimension since it is linked with ‘certain “aesthetic” behaviors’ (Shiner, 2001, p. 132) that are different ‘from moral and utilitarian ... behavior’ (ibid., p. 133). Members of modern societies aspired to familiarise themselves with this distinct type of aesthetic behaviour.²⁸ As a consequence, the history of the aesthetic has

also become a subject matter for sociologists. If one studies the social validity of aesthetic freedom in modern democratic life over the last two hundred years from a sociological perspective, one can learn not only that the aesthetic discourse ‘enjoys broad social consensus’ (Chiapello, 2004, p. 585; also p. 588; Chiapello, 1998) but also that it has underpinned a distinct variant of social critique. Chiapello refers to this variant of critique as “Artist critique”, even though artists ‘were not the only ones’ (Chiapello, 2004, p. 585) engaging in it. “Artist critique” is used here as ‘an umbrella term, synthesising ... many forms of critique first levelled against the new industrial, capitalist, and bourgeois society of the nineteenth century’ (ibid.). It is grounded in exercises of freedom that are neither reducible to moral nor legal freedom, despite the fact that “Artist critique” is also made ‘in the name of freedom’ (ibid.). But unlike in the case of moral and legal freedom, artist critique is ‘free’ in the sense of being ‘emancipated from all forms of [social, J.S.] constraint ... and *convention*’ (ibid., p. 588; my emphasis).

Sociological studies like Chiapello’s thus confirm that exercises of aesthetic freedom have been recognised as forming part of modern democratic life since its inception. Furthermore, she establishes a link between aesthetic freedom and a distinct relation of recognition, for the ‘formulation of [the artist] critique presupposes the existence of a speaker whose *status is such that other people feel they have to listen to what she/he has to say*’ (ibid., pp. 587-588). What we can learn from Chiapello is that (at least some) members of democratic societies have always assumed to have, or claimed for themselves, a social status that licensed them to relate aesthetically to aspects of their social world, and to do so in a publicly visible fashion.

Theorists of democratic *Sittlichkeit* therefore have reasons to revisit the history of modern democratic life in order to get a better sense of the social struggles surrounding aesthetic freedom and their contributions to democratic ethical life. The history of political freedom, for example, is often told as a struggle for inclusion (*qua* overcoming of exclusions based on property or sex, etc.). There are clues that similar struggles for progressive inclusion have taken place with regards to aesthetic freedom. For relating aesthetically to one’s social world was up to the late 19th Century regarded as the privilege of ‘artists and writers’, that is, individuals who occupied a distinct ‘position in the field of cultural production’ (ibid., p. 589). However, their aesthetic practices were then ‘copied by other types of actors’ such as ‘intellectuals, journalists, and many other media professional’, before ‘anyone ... demanded for him- or herself’ the licence to engage in artist critique in the wake of the ‘1968 ... student protest’ (ibid.). What is needed, in other words, is a critical review of the history of exercises

of aesthetic freedom in modern democratic life to learn more about the struggles for its progressive ‘democratisation’ (ibid., p. 585).

Of course, we also need to take seriously sociological studies, focussing in particular on the economic sphere, that argue that the artist ‘critique of capitalism’ has lost ‘much of its poignancy’ in the past two or three decades, due to it having ‘been mimicked’ by ‘neo-management’ practices (ibid.; also pp. 589-593; Boltanski/Chiapello, 2007, pp. 419-472; Honneth, 2004). In response to such findings, I would like to stress firstly that they strengthen my case, since what led to these attempts at co-opting aesthetic freedom was arguably its ‘success’ and progressive ‘democratisation’ (Chiapello, 2004, p. 585) – otherwise co-opting it would have been pointless. Secondly, my claim that aesthetic freedom is a socially valid part of democratic ethical life is compatible with acknowledging that aesthetic freedom can be misused, or turned against itself, or take on pathological forms (that undermine rather than contribute to our freedom). Shedding light on such social misdevelopments is something that critical theorists have always considered to be one of their main tasks (e.g. Freyenhagen, 2015; Honneth, 2009; Zurn, 2011). Honneth, for instance, explores how the idea of self-realisation that was linked with non-conformist, ‘experimental processes’ was turned into a social demand ‘issuing from without’ (Honneth, 2004, p. 474) that undermines freedom.

III.2 Case Study 4: The Increasing Openness of Social Roles

Another social development that supports aesthetic freedom’s social validity and historical effectiveness is the fact that social roles have been progressively opened ‘to interpretation’ and thus are expected to ‘leave’ more and more ‘room for social negotiation’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 126). This social tendency cannot be understood as being driven by moral and legal freedom. Furthermore, these variants of individual freedom do not provide us with the normative resources to underpin the familiar evaluation of this development as bringing in its wake an increase in terms of freedom. The fact that we ‘offer’ increasing ‘opportunities for intersubjective interpretation’ (ibid., pp. 126-127) of social roles is best understood as the result of successful struggles for democratising aesthetic freedom, that is, a form of freedom that turns social roles and norms into the subject matter of a practice of freedom. This is a development that brings in its wake ‘increasing individualization, ... social deviation and rearrangement’ while decreasing ‘the rigidity of these roles’ (ibid.). Despite being aware of the phenomenon, Honneth fails to appreciate that it is a legacy of aesthetic freedom that we grant each other more and more opportunities to negotiate social roles and to generate ‘individual interpretations’ of them, interpretations that would have been ‘unthinkable’ (ibid.,

p. 127) a couple of decades earlier. As part of democratic ethical life, aesthetic freedom opens up social roles *generally*. Moral freedom also opens up social roles, but in a much more limited sense. For it only supports transformations of social roles that render them less biased. Whereas aesthetic freedom is a force that counters the tendency for roles to ‘become ossified’ (Turner, 2002, p. 252). The increasing openness for role change illustrates yet again the social validity and historic effectiveness of (struggles for) aesthetic freedom. Furthermore, we can learn from this case study that integrating aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic ethical life not only renders them more complete, it also has *explanatory benefits*, for aesthetic freedom can drive social developments and account for why certain social changes are seen as generating benefits in terms of freedom.

Conclusion

In this paper, I presented an argument to the effect that aesthetic freedom denotes a variant of individual freedom that forms part and parcel of *democratic* ethical life and provides us with the resources to deal with three shortcomings of Honneth’s account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*, which copies the architecture of relations of freedom from Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*.

In a first step, I showed that integrating aesthetic freedom into our accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* enables us to address the problem of scope unfreedom. For democratic ethical life fails to live up to be a life of freedom if it relies only on legal and moral freedom as variants of individual freedom, for these two variants of individual freedom are, on their own, unable to turn roles and norms themselves into the subject matter of sufficiently unrestricted practices of freedom. In a second step, I explained why role-mediated relations such as relationships of social freedom entail a ‘tendency for conformism’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 384, n.476) threatening to undermine our freedom and demonstrated that aesthetic freedom can serve as a counterforce to conformism. Finally, I argued that accounts of democratic *Sittlichkeit* omitting aesthetic freedom remain incomplete, since aesthetic freedom denotes a distinct and socially valid variant of individual freedom.

What emerges from this line of argument is a novel Hegelian view of the relationship between aesthetics and democratic politics. This position is unique since it first, conceptualises the aesthetic as a separate variant of individual freedom that is linked with a distinct relationship of recognition. Second, this approach to aesthetics and democratic politics takes into account the fact of social functional differentiation, for aesthetic freedom is understood as forming part of a ‘complicated web of’ (ibid., p. 330) different relations of individual and social freedom. Against this backdrop, it becomes possible to identify the

location, or distinct relation of freedom, into which exercises of aesthetic freedom intervene. Finally, it is another virtue of this approach that it provides a straightforward answer to the questions of why aesthetic freedom has a legitimate place in democratic ethical life at all. For it argues that in order for democratic *Sittlichkeit* to live up to its aspiration to be a life of freedom, relations of social freedom have to be complemented not only by moral and legal freedom, but also another variant of individual freedom: aesthetic freedom.²⁹

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¹ See for instance, the collection edited by Kompridis (2014) entitled *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*.

² The most sophisticated recent contribution to this tradition is Gabriel Rockhill's (2014). Inspired by Foucault, he argues for a historicist analysis of the relation between art and politics.

³ In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth simply copies the architecture of relations of freedom that Hegel outlined in his *Philosophy of Right*: relations of social freedom (i.e. personal, economic and political relationships) are complemented by relations of individual freedom (i.e. moral and legal freedom). However, he fails to address the question of whether this architecture is suited for generating a distinctly *democratic* account of *Sittlichkeit*.

⁴ For accounts of such inadequate realisations – i.e. what Honneth variously calls 'social pathologies' and 'misdevelopments' – see, e.g. Freyenhagen (2015), Schaub (2015) and Zurn (2011).

⁵ This difference in scope is not the result of embracing a normative-reconstructive method, but the effect of understanding a social order in terms of *Sittlichkeit*. Habermas, for example,

endorses a normative-reconstructive method without adopting the *Sittlichkeit* outlook. As a result, he sees no problem in limiting the scope of his study of the ‘the modern constitutional state’ to the political and legal sphere (Habermas, 1996, pp. 64ff; Honneth, 2014, p. 345, n.1).

⁶ Honneth’s terminology has the disadvantage of making it appear as if individual freedom was not social (despite it being linked with relations of recognition).

⁷ Honneth defends a particularly demanding understanding of what it means to “act for one another”. For him, social freedom requires not just ‘mediating institutions that inform subjects in advance about the interdependence of their aims’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 65), but they have to act with the intention of fulfilling the others’ aims. When it comes to the economic sphere, this means that participants are ‘intentionally producing for each other on the basis of their mutual recognition of each other’s needs, thus performing their own actions for the sake of those needs’ (Honneth, 2016, p. 20; also p. 19; Brudney, 2014, p. 454; and Jütten, 2015).

⁸ For instance, my right to quit my job makes it possible for me to take up another occupation, but this opportunity does not guarantee that I will actually be able to find a more rewarding form of employment.

⁹ Of course, for this right to be more than formal, it is important to have recourse to social rights guaranteeing an adequate degree of social welfare and income. Following T.H. Marshall (1950), Honneth (2014, pp. 78-79, 258-259) distinguishes different types, or generations, of rights (i.e. civil, political, and social rights), highlighting their distinct roles in bringing about the social pre-conditions for individual self-realization.

¹⁰ See Honneth’s criticism of Forst’s constructivism which re-enacts the empty formalism objection that Hegel levelled against Kant (Honneth, 2014, p. 111; also Freyenhagen, 2012). For Honneth, the abstract criterion of ‘mutual justifiability . . . is of little use’ and ‘remains entirely empty’, since it is impossible to judge whether forms of concrete behaviour are “‘justified” . . . [w]ithout taking account of . . . normative conditions’ like extant social roles, ‘which represent the object of normative reconstruction’ (Honneth, 2014, p. 338, n.6; also pp. 64-66; Forst, 2011).

¹¹ When moral freedom impartially adjudicates conflicts between established roles and norms, it does so by way of re-interpreting them. Moral freedom does not treat such conflicts as an occasion to replace the conflicting elements with something else, or transform them in ways that go beyond rendering them less biased. Doing this would amount to no longer treating extant roles and norms as social facts. Responses to conflicts between roles and

norms that are radically transformative therefore fall outside the scope of moral freedom. See my discussion of the socialists' critique of the capitalist market below.

¹² For another argument to the effect that an internally coherent social whole can be deficient, see Freyenhagen (2013).

¹³ Honneth's evaluation of the socialist legacy is not entirely positive. He regards the exclusive focus on the economic sphere as a deficit 'in the original socialist program' (Honneth, 2016, pp. 25-26). Furthermore, he identifies the burdening of the 'socialist project ... with a metaphysical theory of history' (Honneth, 2016, p. 26) as a drawback. This last assessment is curious, since it does not match up with Honneth's above-mentioned defence of a variant of an "end of history" thesis.

¹⁴ Curiously, the story Honneth tells about the economic sphere in *The Idea of Socialism* is incompatible with the account provided in *Freedom's Right*. In the latter book, he argues that the notion of social freedom has been underlying the market sphere from the very beginning (Honneth, 2014, pp. 176-252), whereas in *The Idea of Socialism*, he claims that the notion of social freedom – understood as a form of cooperation in which 'each person is concerned about the self-realization of the others for non-instrumental reasons' (Honneth, 2016, p. 24) – is a conceptual innovation and creative response to negative experiences with the capitalist market and its underlying norm of legal freedom. This is, however, not the place to address the question of which of the two positions is more plausible.

¹⁵ My claim is not that moral or aesthetic interventions are always welcomed or tolerated, but that democratic *Sittlichkeit* supplies subjects with the justificatory resources to explain why depriving them of the opportunity to relate morally or aesthetically to aspects of their social world amounts to an unacceptable restriction of their subjective freedom. Like other variants of individual freedom, aesthetic freedom denotes freedom in the modality of possibility. We can therefore not infer from the fact that playful transformations of social roles and norms take place that the emerging alternatives will eventually become socially valid (or that it would always be a good thing if it did).

¹⁶ In the previous section, I answered the question of whether "'aesthetic freedom" ... represents an independent category of freedom' (Honneth, 2014, p. 384, n.476) in the affirmative. Unlike Honneth who refers to the 'significance of art for the revitalization of the public', I propose an understanding that makes it clear that aesthetic freedom is not confined to 'art' or artistic production. In contrast to Honneth, I highlight that interventions of aesthetic freedom are important to counter the tendency for conformism in *all* role-mediated

relationships, whereas Honneth only mentions that aesthetic freedom might be capable of revitalising political relations, or the ‘the sphere of the democratic public’ (ibid.).

¹⁷ We are, therefore, not facing the following *aporia*: we can only realise our freedom through role-mediated relationships, however, conforming with roles always undermines our freedom.

¹⁸ This usage of ‘appearing’ is inspired by Martin Seel’s (2005) monograph *Aesthetics of Appearing* in which appearing is presented as the beginning of aesthetics.

¹⁹ I argue that conformist individuals have a disposition not to take themselves seriously, but I say nothing here about why they develop such a disposition and whether we can hold them responsible for doing so. Addressing this issue would require, among other things, to look into the distinct forms of subjectivization to which they were exposed, the shape of the social practices into which they are socialised.

²⁰ The claims of subjective freedom can only be adequately protected if there is an institutionalised variant of individual freedom that, like aesthetic freedom, forestalls that an individual ‘*capitulates* before its everyday understandings and roles, without any’, or sufficient, ‘resistance or detachment’ (Seel, 2014, p. 279). However, like other *variants of individual freedom* (i.e. moral and legal freedom), aesthetic freedom presupposes substantive contexts of action in which it can then intervene (Honneth, 2014, p. 123). For this reason, exercises of aesthetic freedom can never be ‘*purely* aesthetic’, for ‘aesthetic freedom only exists in a contradictory unity with practical freedom’ (Menke, 2013, p. 156; my translation), as it temporarily suspends and plays with given social roles and norms.

²¹ Recall, this critique was radical, as it involved the generation of an ‘original, groundbreaking idea’ (Honneth, 2016, p. 25), namely the idea of social freedom in the economic sphere. It was also radical since its goal was to replace the legal notion of individual freedom underlying the capitalist market with the idea of social freedom.

²² It is absolutely fascinating to see the explosion ‘of feminist issues that emerged from formal CR groups’ (Reed, 2005, p. 92; also MacKinnon, 1982, p. 15; Ware, 1970, p. 31). Many of them later became ‘issues for the agenda of women’s liberation’, such as ‘domestic violence’, the longing for ‘equal sexual pleasure for women’ or the ‘sense of social “double jeopardy” of being a woman and of color’ (Reed, 2005, p. 89). See in this respect also the poetry dealing with every aspect of women’s lives that burst out of CR and writing groups in this period (see, e.g., Morgan, 1970; Cade, 1970; Howe/Bass, 1973).

²³ See, for example, accounts of the collective poetic work that went into coining now common concepts like “sexual harassment” (Fricker, 2007, p. 150; also Brownmiller, 1990, p. 280-281).

²⁴ Statements of participants like the following are therefore telling: ‘We do not rush to speech. We allow ourselves to be moved.’ (Susan Griffin quoted after MacKinnon, 1982, p. 22; Ware, 1970, p. 44).

²⁵ One way to think about this third step is as an answer to a possible objection that could be raised in response to the first two steps of my argument. The objection I have in mind is the following: A reader might agree that we need something else than legal and moral freedom to deal with scope unfreedom and conformism. Furthermore, she or he could acknowledge that aesthetic freedom is *prima facie* suitable for completing the account of democratic *Sittlichkeit*, yet she or he might still insist that in order for this not to be just abstract theorising, aesthetic freedom has to be socially valid, but it is not. In order to address this possible objection, I need to demonstrate that the final claim is mistaken, i.e. that aesthetic freedom is socially valid in having at least weak institutional shape.

²⁶ Readers might wonder why I am not also considering ethical freedom as another variant of individual freedom potentially missing from the outlined picture of democratic *Sittlichkeit*. The reason for this is implicit in the Hegelian outlook which does not regard the ethical as a distinct variant of freedom. For freedom, or self-realisation, as the overarching value of democratic ethical life is itself regarded as being ethical in character. The good life is equated with the free life, and (ethical) freedom is realised through participation in a web of relations of recognition or freedom. Of course, it is possible to argue against and reject this picture, but to defend it is not the task I set myself in this paper.

²⁷ See for a genealogy of the idea of moral autonomy, e.g., Schneewind (1998, esp. chs. 22-23), and for the notion of the “aesthetic”, e.g., Shiner (2001, esp. ch. 7).

²⁸ See, for instance, the popular guidebooks from the late eighteenth century (Link, 1992).

²⁹ I would like to thank a reviewer for this journal for providing insightful comments on a previous version of this paper. The comments made me appreciate that I need to clearly distinguish between what I now call scope unfreedom and conformism. The reviewer also encouraged me to develop what I mean by conformism and explain why a tendency for conformism is in-built in relations mediated by social roles. She or he also pointed out to me the elective affinity between my worry about conformism and the Romantic and post-Romantic critique of conformity developed by authors like Emerson, Mill and Cavell.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge that the reviewer suggested to me the above used example of parents needing to generate interpretations of affection and discipline.