

Interviews

Education, Freedom, and Emancipation from the Standpoint of the Recognition Theory

INTERVIEW WITH AXEL HONNETH

By Krassimir Stojanov

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AIMS AND CONTEXT

The main aim of the interview is to articulate and clarify Axel Honneth's critical conception of democratic and emancipative education in the contemporary age and to clarify how this conception is related to classical philosophers of education such as Kant, Hegel and Dewey. Initially it was intended to conduct the interview in-person by the end of March at the Columbia University in New York where Honneth is currently serving as Professor of Philosophy. However, the COVID-19 crisis made this meeting impossible. Instead, the interview has been conducted via email.



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In your paper on “Education and the Democratic Public Sphere: A Neglected Chapter of Political Philosophy” (Honneth, 2015) you distance yourself—following Durkheim and Dewey—from the nowadays dominating view that the primary goal of school attendance is the development of individual autonomy. At the same time, you insist that the educational process should aim at cultivating of freedom. In which sense, then, “freedom” differs from “autonomy” as educational goal?

Axel Honneth

This is a good and relevant question since certain formulations in my text could easily lead to misunderstandings. When I’m using “autonomy” in that article I mainly refer to the Kantian tradition that is characterized by a tendency to view the individual subject in isolation from all others; this can be understood as a heritage of Kant’s transcendentalism that takes its departure from the constitutive powers of an ego perceived as extramundane and therefore void of all worldly appearances, including other subjects. If the primary aim of schooling is understood in such terms, the risk is given to believe that what children have to learn is to primarily develop a cognitive and moral independence, a capacity to form their own, autonomously created judgments. The danger therein is to ignore the dependency of our intellectual development from the cooperation with others. So, when I speak in my article of “freedom” as the primary goal of education I mean something very special that we find articulated in the tradition of Hegel, Dewey and others, namely a form of communicative freedom that consists in our being together with others whom we take as cooperative partners in our daily transactions and endeavors. With regard to schooling this means to grasp of the educational goal as helping the child or pupil to develop a communicative attitude, a sense for the advantages of a cooperative mode of problem-solving over an individualistic style of dealing with cognitive or moral challenges. The best word for the kind of freedom children should become acquainted with at school would be “social freedom”, an individual freedom that I can gain only and exclusively together and in cooperation with others.

Krassimir Stojanov

You seem to adopt a predominantly Kantian view on freedom as main goal of education. According to this view, which you link also to Dewey, the child is initially unfree, since she is “governed by nature”, or subjected to the rules of nature. Some educational theorists call this view pejoratively “developmentalistic”, for it adopts a linear understanding of



growing as moral progress and ascribes a lower moral status to children. Just like you, those theorists refer in their argumentation to Dewey's pragmatist conception of education, but they interpret it in quite different way. According to this interpretation, children are in some sense more free than adults since the former are characterized by plasticity and spontaneity, which the latter do not possess anymore. I am wondering how you can reconcile Dewey's emphasis on childish freedom with Kant's quite rigid and negative notion of childhood?

Axel Honneth

If such a "developmentalistic" understanding of children is what you think I'm arguing for in my article, then I have articulated myself very wrongly. I'm very far away from accepting the idea that we have to measure the cognitive capacities and practical skills of children only in terms of our own, adult faculties and proficiencies; quite the contrary, I believe that children have capacities at their disposal that we adults have unlearned due to the pressures of coping with the daily challenges of life. As I have argued in an article that is, unfortunately, not translated in English (see Honneth, 2020), it is one of the cognitive privileges of children to still dispose over imaginative powers that we have lost—something Adorno always stressed when maintaining that children have not yet separated themselves cognitively from their environment and therefore can imagine what later will be a pure "object" for them as still equipped with life and reactive attitudes. On the other side, would it be wrong simply to dismiss our attempt to raise children so that they can become the future democratic citizens, which implies to equip them with skills and proficiencies needed for fulfilling that role? The true wisdom in any education of children therefore is to harness their imaginative powers and creative potentials for letting them cooperatively acquire the capacities required for later being able to participate without anxieties and shame at the democratic will-formation—something easier said than accomplished in practice.

Krassimir Stojanov

You spell out education basically as development of self-respect and self-esteem within the individual; an development which enables the individual to participate as equal citizen at democratic deliberations, and which itself requires to design schools as cooperative communities characterized by relations of mutual recognition. Could you please explain how this recognition-based concept of education is related (if at all) to the more traditional or "classic" understanding of it as emancipation? This understanding is still pivotal for various forms of critical pedagogy today.

Axel Honneth

"Emancipation" is an ambivalent notion, its meaning is changing with the intellectual context in which it is used. Basically, it means the process of liberating oneself from dependencies and determinations that one cannot reflexively affirm, that one after sober deliberation cannot agree to. The ambivalence within the notion stems from the



indecisiveness regarding whether the agent of such a reflexive liberation has to be understood as a single, monolithic subject or a cooperative group—in the first case the activity of freeing oneself is perceived as being performed by an isolated individual or a unified collective, like Marx’ “proletariat” or the human species; in the second case it is perceived as being performed by a group whose members have different voices and intentions. The more “emancipation” is understood in the first sense the more its usage in pedagogical contexts tends to produce the illusion that the child has to learn to become independent and autonomous on his or her own—as if the child has by him- or herself sufficient powers to overcome not-agreeable dependencies. To avoid this misunderstanding I stress the dependency of the child on others—be it peers or adults—by pointing out that his or her moral and cognitive development is deeply relying on different forms of recognition, starting in early childhood with love and care, followed by esteem in its many forms, and finally respect. In summary I might say that I do not differ from the pedagogical ideal of “emancipation” with regard to its goal or telos, but with regard to how the process to reach this goal or telos is imagined; by emphasizing the reliance on recognition I’m again stressing the communicative or cooperative structure of all processes of “Bildung” or education.

Krassimir Stojanov

You lament that during the last years the focus of formal education shifted away from democratic participation and cooperation to training for employability and encouragement of competitive behavior through the implementation of standardized tests. You argue against that trend by quoting certain outcomes of the PISA-Study which seems to suggest, that less selective and more democratic or cooperative national educational systems perform better also in terms of students’ academic achievements. However, for many philosophers and sociologists of education the PISA-Study is the main tool for the worldwide promotion of “neo-liberal” policies of marketization and standardization of education. So, these philosophers and sociologists of education may label you a “defender of neo-liberalism” because of your endorsement of PISA. How would you respond to them?

Axel Honneth

I’m neither a specialist on nor a big fan of the PISA-Studies. My knowledge of the standards and the methods applied by these annual comparative studies are extremely limited. I was mainly using certain outcomes of them to emphasize my point that public education in most countries has shifted away within the last couple of years from democratic goals and is meanwhile accentuating employability and competitive attitudes. This in itself manifests a trend that is conducive to what is called the neoliberal spirit of capitalism, namely emphasis on the individual actor as a self-employer individually responsible for his or her own success or failure on the capitalist market. When I was employing some data from the PISA-Studies I therefore aimed at a kind of criticism that I share with those who are now criticizing these studies—and I do not see why we shouldn’t use an empirical study in order to turn it against the spirit it itself manifests. Is it not reasonable to make usage of official statistics for criticizing the same empirical developments they probably want to hide?



Krassimir Stojanov

A couple of years ago you mentioned two main challenges for school education today—digitalization and multiculturalism (Honneth, 2015). But isn't the case that the current Corona-crisis added new challenges, which could be even more difficult to handle? For example, what about the replacement of classroom teaching by online homeschooling, which seems to blur the boundaries between public education and family life, and to amplify educational inequalities? In more general terms: Do you think that the Corona-crisis will have a long-term impact on public education, and if yes, which forms of that impact we should expect?

Axel Honneth

It is much too early to predict what the social, cultural and economic impacts of the current Corona-crisis will be in the long run—you know as well as me that there are enough weakly based predictions today prophesizing either progressive, emancipating impacts or regressive, devastating impacts. It might be, to give you an example, that we will learn in the course of the crisis what kind of work is truly of importance for our communal well-being so that in the future we will recognize these forms of work financially and culturally much higher than today—or we will later return quickly to the established forms of honoring and rewarding labor by setting again priorities on financial speculations, on occupations within the legal domain, and on economic management. The best we can do right now is to abstain from unjustified speculations on the impacts of the crisis in the future and instead concentrate on communicatively finding out what we don't want to be those impacts. In such a process of deliberation I would raise my voice against all efforts to diminish the central role of public education by either strengthening elements of on-line homeschooling or by weakening the role of in-person teaching. The first development would blur, as you have said, the boundaries between public schooling and family-life and would increase social inequalities, the second process—that of reducing teaching in a physical classroom and replacing it by online-teaching—would increase the individualization and isolation of the children.

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AXEL HONNETH SHORT BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Axel Honneth was born 1949 in Essen, Germany. Since 2011 he is Jack C. Weinstein Professor of the Humanities at the department of philosophy at Columbia University. He is also a Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the Goethe University Frankfurt. Between 2001 and 2018 he was director of the Institute for Social Research, which is historically the intellectual and the institutional centre of the Frankfurt School. Honneth developed further the critical social theory of that School by conceptualizing a recognition approach to social pathologies. His main monographs include:

The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory (MIT Press, 1991 [1985]).

The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts (Polity Press, 1995 [1992]).

Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange. Co-authored with Nancy Fraser (Verso, 2003).

Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life (Columbia University Press 2015)

His newest essays collection, *The Poverty of our Freedom* (published in German as “Die Armut unserer Freiheit” in August 2020), addresses also issues of education, childhood and socialization in the late-modern society.



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