

Axel Honneth: Vivisektionen eines Zeitalters: Porträts zur Ideengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts

Suhrkamp Verlag, Berlin, 2014, 308 pp, €18.00 (paperback), ISBN: 978-3-518-12678-3

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Published online: 7 August 2015
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Axel Honneth provides us with an insightful compilation of essays that sketches a unique picture of twentieth century intellectual history by assembling eleven independent, yet subtly linked portraits of thinkers who, in widely diverging ways, all attempted ‘vivisections’ of their present age. Even though, at first glance, the juxtaposition of theorists like Franz Rosenzweig and John Dewey, Amitai Etzioni and Quentin Skinner appears unusual, if not arbitrary, Honneth successively brings out important commonalities between their intellectual biographies and, more importantly, their theoretical projects. Not only is their work decisively marked by the shared historical space of experience of what Eric Hobsbawm has famously described as the ‘age of extremes’; these thinkers also resemble each other in terms of their self-conception as socially and politically engaged scholars: their incisions, dissections, and biopsies of ‘the living body of society’ (cf. 8), their (often urgent) operations are characterized by both diagnostic and therapeutic aspirations with regard to this body’s manifold ills.

Because this book is a mosaic-like assemblage of multiple perspectives, this review does not attempt to summarize it entirely but confines itself to selectively highlighting key themes and focal points of Honneth’s essays. To begin with, what the majority of works discussed in this volume have in common is their peculiar history of reception, their being marginalized and overwritten by more seminal strands of socio-political thought. For instance, Siegfried Kracauer’s studies on capitalist mass society as reflected in the organization of the working world or in its anonymous, ‘geometrical’ aesthetics, according to Honneth’s reading, amount to an ‘anticipation’ of central motifs of the *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (cf. 138)—most

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importantly, the motif of a one-sidedly instrumental rationality the dominance of which results in the simultaneous technological submission and ‘mythological re-enchantment’ of nature. The essay on Kracauer, one of two never-before-published texts included in the collection (the other examines Albert Hirschman’s critique of the *homo oeconomicus*), also reveals the technique Honneth employs in order to situate and make accessible a body of thought that has been neglected, even forgotten: against the foil of more influential theoretical endeavors—here, Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *magnum opus*—he brings out its specific profile, its comparative strengths and shortcomings.

Another strategy of organizing the individual texts becomes particularly apparent in Honneth’s thoughtful analysis of Franz Rosenzweig’s writings on Hegel. For it is with the help of a nuanced contextualization that Rosenzweig’s position and status within the German intellectual landscape of the pre- and the post-war period—between his early being influenced by Friedrich Meinecke and his own influence on Joachim Ritter—is mapped out. Besides reconstructing Rosenzweig’s 1920 *Hegel and the State*, aimed at comprehending Hegel’s concept of the political, Honneth seeks to understand its limited success during the Weimar period. For him, it is not only Rosenzweig’s turn to the philosophy of religion that covers up his work in political philosophy; rather, it is the subtlety of his interpretation of Hegel that does not fit into the contemporaneous field of highly ideologized theoretical debates which necessitates unambiguous political stances (cf. 42, 45). By describing Hegel’s political thought as ‘the ambivalent result of a politico-theological interpretation of human history’ (cf. 39), by interpreting his remark on the relation of the real and the rational as neither affirmative nor dismissive of the Prussian state, and, thus, by refusing to label Hegel as either a restorative or a revolutionary thinker, Rosenzweig’s differentiated reading cannot be integrated into the confrontation between radical left-wing and right-wing intellectuals who both aim at a political instrumentalization of Hegelian philosophy.

The essay on Aurel Kolnai, entitled *Phenomenology of Evil*, merits a more detailed discussion as it brings together two guiding themes of this volume: first, the varied formative personal and theoretical experiences that, taken together, add up to a scholar’s biography in incalculable ways; and secondly, the possibilities to approach current social and political problems that ‘vivisectors’ of the past century have opened up. Honneth attributes the ‘elasticity’ (cf. 77) of Kolnai’s personal, political, and philosophical commitments to his life-long exposure to historical and academic experiences too heterogeneous to allow for harmonious integration. Born into a liberal Hungarian-Jewish family but converted to Catholicism early on, Kolnai, in the course of his wanderings that eventually lead him to London invests his intellectual energy into research that cuts across the predefined lines of academic disciplines and philosophical traditions. Shaped by diverse thinkers such as Freud, Durkheim, and Chesterton, Scheler, Husserl, and Schlick, the phenomenological investigation into negative affects is at the heart of Kolnai’s work. In a series of essays, originally published around 1930 and restated in 1970, he analyzes disgust and hatred as essential modes of aversion. The former—characterized as related, yet irreducible to anxiety and fear—is described as a limit experience that allows for the confrontation of humans with their own finitude, their own ultimately decaying

materiality. According to Kolnai, disgust leads one to apprehend the notorious vulnerability of existence and, thus, constitutes a ‘metaphysical’ experience. Similarly, hatred indicates the ‘tragic,’ abyssal character as well as ‘the imperfectability of human life’ (cf. 109): being directed at either humans or human-made ideas, it reveals a latent, ineradicable ‘will to annihilate.’ Here, Honneth does not satisfy himself with a mere reconstruction of Kolnai’s key ideas; instead, he suggests a critical application of these ideas to contemporary phenomena in the social and political realm: following Kolnai’s lead who had used his phenomenology of hatred to analyze Nazi ideology,¹ he proposes a re-appropriation of this approach in light of current forms of terrorism (cf. 105).

The themes of vulnerability and imperfectability also inform the essay on Judith Shklar. In carefully comparing Shklar’s writings with those of Hannah Arendt, Honneth traces the contours of a liberalism that is not guided by the lofty ideals of Aristotelian or Kantian political thought but by a realistic concern with the avoidance of worst cases, i.e. of outbursts of violence that result in human suffering. Thus, Shklar—affected, as so many other Jewish intellectuals from Europe, by the personal experience of flight and exile—modernizes and democratizes essential insights of Machiavellian and Hobbesian thought by emphasizing the significance of ‘individual virtues and vices’ (cf. 251) and, especially, of fear: in her bottom-up approach to politics, she consistently adopts the perspective of the weak, the disadvantaged and attributes outmost importance to their fear as to tyrannical political power. In marked contrast to Arendt’s exclusive concept of the political as the concerted, communicative practice of freely modeling political life, Shklar understands the protection of the individual’s freedom from fear (of death, of violence, or, in modern working societies, of economic dependence) as the fundamental task of the liberal state.

Although some of Honneth’s essays—e.g., the text concerning Dewey’s rather well-known reflections on the connection between Kantian philosophy and (aggressive, fanatic) German collective mentality or the rather schematic remarks on ‘socialist tendencies’ in Etzioni’s communitarian thinking—are primarily reconstructive and do not offer new interpretive insights, the merits of this collection are considerable. In particular, in his battle against the contingencies and ‘injustices’ (cf. 77) of an often forgetful history of reception, Honneth taps a rich reservoir of possibilities for thought: without assuming the pompous attitude of unearthing hidden treasures, he cogently points to underappreciated, yet relevant forms of social critique beyond ‘canonical’ critical theory, of an ethically and politically applicable phenomenology independent of the ‘founders’ of the discipline, or of a more pragmatic liberal political philosophy as an alternative to the ventures of Arendt and Rawls. Thereby, Honneth seems to apply a Nietzschean distinction—a distinction based on which he assesses Quentin Skinner’s work in the second to last essay—to his own cross-sections through the historical, political, and intellectual layers of a past age: instead of presenting a merely ‘antiquarian’ history of ideas, his essays are meant to be ‘critical.’ Indeed, perhaps the greatest strength of the book is the way in which Honneth, in repeatedly alluding to concerns central to

¹ Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (London: Gollancz, 1938).

his own thinking on the distortions of recognition and the ‘barbarizations’² of freedom and reason in late-capitalist societies, discloses the emancipatory potential of Kracauer’s, Kolnai’s, or Shklar’s projects with regard to our age which still bears the traces of the previous century and which does not cease to produce its own pathologies in need of ‘vivisections’ by the sharp-cutting tools of critique.

² Axel Honneth, “Verwilderungen des sozialen Konflikts: Anerkennungskämpfe zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts”, in: A. Honneth/O. Lindemann/S. Voswinkel (eds.): *Strukturwandel der Anerkennung: Paradoxien sozialer Integration in der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2013), 17–40.