

CORRADO PIRODDI

# Toward a Critical Social Ontology

A Study on Pierre Bourdieu and Axel Honneth



CORRADO PIRODDI

Toward a Critical Social Ontology  
*A Study on Pierre Bourdieu and Axel Honneth*

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

To be presented, with the permission of  
the Faculty of Social Science  
of Tampere University,  
for public discussion in the auditorium A1  
of the Main building, Kalevantie 4, Tampere,  
on August 28, 2020, at 12 o'clock.

# ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

Tampere University, Faculty of Social Science  
Finland

<i>Responsible supervisor or/and Custos</i>	Professor Arto Laitinen Tampere University Finland	
<i>Supervisor</i>	Senior Lecturer Onni Hirvonen University of Jyväskylä Finland	
<i>Pre-examiners</i>	Assistant Professor Danielle Petherbridge University College Dublin Ireland	Professor Robin Celikates Freie Universität Berlin Germany
<i>Opponent</i>	Professor Jean-Philippe Deranty Macquarie University Australia	

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

Copyright ©2020 author

Cover design: Roihu Inc.

ISBN 978-952-03-1657-0 (print)  
ISBN 978-952-03-1658-7 (pdf)  
ISSN 2489-9860 (print)  
ISSN 2490-0028 (pdf)  
<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-03-1658-7>

*To my Finland*



# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am firmly convinced that the progress of science and philosophical thought is never the merit of the effort of individuals. It is always the outcome of a collective enterprise, in which human beings can achieve meaningful results only if they trust each other and cooperate in a disinterested manner. Therefore, I like to think that this dissertation embodies and mirrors not my ideas, but all the intellectual and emotional contributions of the persons who have walked on my side during my doctoral studies.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors, Arto Laitinen and Onni Hirvonen, for their remarkable work and guidance, which made my research and the writing of the dissertation a pleasant and empowering experience, and for their friendliness, which made our work meetings joyful moments.

I wish to thank the pre-examiners, Robin Celikates and Danielle Petherbridge, for their valuable comments, which improved meaningfully the philosophical quality of my work, and Nicholas Kirkwood for his proofreading.

My thanks go to the staff of Tampere University, the staff of the University of Jyväskylä, the members of research-project 'Philosophy and Politics of Recognition', and the Finnish Cultural Foundation. Without their economic and logistic support, my life in Finland and my studies would have not been possible.

I want to be frank. I must admit that I do not how to express my gratitude and love for all the persons that made me a better person and scholar during the last four years. Writing down a list of names seems pointless to me. Too many new friends. Too many old pals. A family, my family, that never stops to grow up and sustain me, despite my flaws.

Never-ending conversations during seminars and conferences. Hardcore gigs and fancy dinners. Weddings and applications. Reading groups and walks into the forest. Beers in Vakkari under the snow. Cocktails in Reggio Emilia and Sardinia, burning in the summertime. Birth and mourning. People swimming with me in lakes and the Mediterranean Sea. Together on the sand. My life between the south of Europe and the North Pole.

Each one of you gave me something priceless. The margins of these pages are too narrow to include you all. My mind and heart are not.





# ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation has three main aims.

First, it tries to reconstruct and compare Axel Honneth's and Pierre Bourdieu's critical thought along three thematic vectors: *the problem of social reproduction and stabilization, the problem of social conflict and transformation, and the issue of the origin and actualization of social agency*. The purpose of the first four chapters of this work is to highlight that, despite the meaningful differences, the ideas of the two authors concerning the three aforementioned topics tend to converge, overlap, and complete each other.

Second, the thesis seeks to reinterpret Bourdieusian concepts of '*symbolic capital*', '*field*', and '*habitus*' through the lens of the paradigm of recognition developed by Honneth. In this regard, chapters 5, 6, and 7 can be seen as a philosophical attempt to illustrate that recognition is also a matter of power. As such, recognition can also be interpreted through the lens and vocabulary of the relations and structures of power. Similarly, it could be said that the same chapters constitute an effort to illustrate in which way human agency is mediated by structures that are constitutively susceptible to intersubjective forms of recognition and their development.

Third, the *definitions of 'domination' and 'emancipation'* which are illustrated in the final chapter strive to embody and express such an intuition, whose corollary is the following: domination cannot be considered coextensive to power and that emancipation does not entail the disappearance of relations of power among individuals or groups, or between individuals and groups.



# TIIVISTELMÄ

Tällä väitöskirjalla on kolme päätavoitetta.

Ensinnäkin, tavoitteena on rekonstruoida ja vertailla Axel Honnethin ja Pierre Bourdieun kriittistä ajattelua, kolmea temaattista ajatuslinjaa seuraten: *sosiaalisen reproduktion ja stabilisaation ongelma*, *sosiaalisen konfliktin ja transformaation ongelma* sekä *sosiaalisen toimijuuden alkuperän ja aktualisoitumisen ongelma*. Huolimatta näiden kahden ajattelijan kantojen merkittävistä eroista, neljän ensimmäisen luvun tavoitteena on korostaa kuinka näiden kolmen teeman suhteen Honnethin ja Bourdieun kannat voivat yhtyä, limittyä tai täydentää toisiaan.

Toiseksi, väitöskirja pyrkii uudelleentulkitsemaan bourdieulaiset käsitteet *symbolinen pääoma*, *kenttä* ja *habitus* Honnethin kehittämän tunnustamisen paradigman kautta. Tältä kannalta, luvut viisi, kuusi ja seitsemän voidaan nähdä filosofisena yrityksenä osoittaa, että tunnustuksessa on myös kyse vallasta. Näin ollen, tunnustaminen voidaan tulkita myös valtasuhteiden ja -struktuurien käsitteistöä käyttäen. Vastaavasti, nämä samat luvut pyrkivät havainnollistamaan sitä, millä tavalla inhimillinen toimijuus välittyy sellaisten struktuurien kautta, jotka ovat konstitutiivisesti avoimia tunnustamisen intersubjektiivisille muodoille ja niiden kehityksille.

Kolmanneksi, herruuden (dominaation) ja emansipaation määritelmät, jotka esitetään väitöskirjan viimeisessä luvussa, ilmaisevat intuitiota jonka mukaan herruus (dominaatio) ja valta eivät ole yhteneviä alaltaan, eikä emansipaatio merkitse yksilöiden välisten, ryhmien välisten, eikä ryhmien sisäisten valtasuhteiden katoamista.



# CONTENTS

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Part I .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>1 Honneth and Bourdieu's research methodology and interest .....</b>	<b>31</b>
1.1 Honneth's immanent reconstructivism and Frankfurt School critical theory .....	32
1.2 Bourdieu's critical sociology between objectivism and subjectivism .....	38
1.3 One irreducible methodological difference, a large set of common outcomes .....	46
<b>2 Honneth and Bourdieu on society and social reproduction .....</b>	<b>53</b>
2.1 Honneth's account of social reality and reproduction.....	54
2.2 Bourdieu's account of social reality and reproduction .....	66
2.3 Concluding remarks.....	77
<b>3 Honneth and Bourdieu on social struggle and social transformation .....</b>	<b>80</b>
3.1 Honneth's account of social conflicts and transformation.....	82
3.2 Bourdieu's account of social conflicts and transformation .....	87
3.3 An ontological account of social conflicts and transformation .....	93
3.4 Concluding remarks.....	100
<b>4 Honneth, Bourdieu, and the theory of social action.....</b>	<b>103</b>
4.1 The preconditions of social action.....	104
4.2 How we learn to behave socially: Socialization and experiences of recognition .....	111
4.3 What we learn in the process of socialization: Interested and disinterested actions .....	114
4.4 Intentionality and social action: A crucial incompatibility between Bourdieu and Honneth? .....	123
4.5 Concluding remarks.....	129
<b>Conclusion part I: The background for critical social ontology .....</b>	<b>134</b>









# INTRODUCTION

The present study could be labelled as a small contribution in the large field of philosophical social theory, which could be considered, in turn, as a set of rather wide-ranging philosophical branches (theory of justice, philosophy of right, social ontology, ethics, gender studies, critical theory, and so on) that take into account, from different perspectives, the study of particular social processes, entities, and actions. More precisely, this work intends to discuss *the problem of social reproduction and stabilization, the problem of social conflict and transformation, the issue of origin and actualization of social agency, and the ontological nature of the conditions of emancipation and domination*, as well as develop some new concepts (*'recognitive capital', 'field of recognition', and 'habitus of recognition'*) that aspire to represent some small but meaningful steps toward the development of a *critical social ontology*. The latter should be conceived as a social ontology for critical theory that, following the suggestion of Italo Testa, differs from the analytic social ontology for its analysis of non-intentional and pre-intentional factors that affect the actualization of social agency, as well as for its focus on the relations between social transformation, social structures, and domination.<sup>1</sup> Under this premise, this dissertation may constitute an interesting study both for critical theorists (who deal with the study of the nature of unfair social systems, mechanisms of domination, and pre-conditions for achieving emancipation and good life) and scholars interested in social ontology, in so far as they feel the need for analyzing topics that are usually underestimated or sidestepped by analytic social ontology.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See Italo Testa, "La Teoria Critica Ha Bisogno di un'Ontologia Sociale (e Viceversa)?", in *Politica & Società*, no. 1 (2016): 69-71.

<sup>2</sup> Analytic social ontology is usually conceived as a descriptive and foundational discipline that precedes moral and political questions faced by critical social philosophy, political philosophy, and the theory of justice. It aims to describe the general features that characterize social institutions, individual and collective agency, groups, and social classes. In other words, analytic social ontology is devoted to the

As mentioned above, the first object of study concerns the pre-reflexive features of social action. Instead of approaching the realization of social actions as an outcome of intentional and rational choices of individual and collective agents, this study will privilege the analysis of the pre-reflexive and non-rational elements that can affect the actualization of the social behaviors of human beings. For instance, what is the role of emotions that are generated by experiences of social exclusion and humiliation in causing situations of social conflict? In which way do social habits and customs (which are not usually subjected to agents' reflexive scrutiny) affect social reproduction, facilitating the recursive actualization of collective social actions, or support domination and subordination?

The second problem concerns the idea of social transformation. Instead of thematizing the appearance and disappearance of every social structure in terms of increment and loss of epistemic consistency of social institutions (or focusing on the degree of social acknowledgment that social institutions and practices receive from social agents), the dissertation will assume that the emergence and evolution of new social systems and behavior rely on features and patterns of previous or existing social structures. From this point of view, for instance, the progressive social and political acknowledgment of non-heterosexual marriage does not correspond to the disappearance of the family, but to an extension of its boundaries. The increasing loss of the political power of the democratic-representative state does not necessarily prelude to its decline but instead preludes its metamorphosis.<sup>3</sup>

The third topic that this thesis aims to discuss regards the role of social conflicts in social life. Whereas some branches of social and political philosophy ground their

---

elaboration of formal theories that can describe the invariant and permanent structures of social objects and facts. In this respect, we can say that social ontology privileges a formal and non-historical point of view in which the social consensus and the rational choices of social actors (individual and collective ones) seem to play an eminent role in explaining the existence of social reality. As a clear example of this stream of thought see John R. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> The strong, a-historical, formal, and substantial nature of analytic social ontology has been described by Emmanuel Renault, "Critical Theory and Processual Social Ontology", in *Journal of Social Ontology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 17-32, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2015-0013>.

models on a purely positive idea of collective acceptance, this study will give prominence to the categories of ‘*conflict*’ and ‘*contradiction*’. In fact, a socio-ontological approach that wants to explain the historical process of social transformation by suggesting continuity between the past, the future, and the present, should take seriously the following idea: our social reality depends on the action of different forces. These forces can follow opposite directions, determining the appearance of social struggles and antithetical tendencies, and even the mutation of social facts, practices, and institutions. However, it is worth underlining that to assume the idea of contradiction as the starting point of a critical social ontology does not mean to deny the possibility of social stability (namely, an absence of conflict) grounded on coercion, pragmatic agreement, or moral and political consensus among social agents. It simply means that the achievement of widespread social cohesion is always something temporary and contingent.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, this work wants to address the question of social domination. The need for a deeper discussion regarding such a topic stems from the fact that, often, in the wide-ranging field of social philosophy there is an unclear or partial conceptual analysis of the relation between terms like ‘*power*’, ‘*domination*’, and ‘*emancipation*’. On the one hand, for instance, analytic social ontology, as a descriptive approach, is not committed to any normative or critical claim that regards the nature of social domination or the achievement of social emancipation. Power is conceived mainly as a descriptive term that can be used to qualify the causal powers of a living being or more complex social entities, as well as social abilities whose existence is dependent on constitutive rules, acceptance by the members of society, and collective intentionality.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the notions of ‘*power*’ and ‘*domination*’

---

<sup>4</sup> Renault, “Critical Theory and Processual Social Ontology”, 30: “In so far as a critical theory wants to locate tendencies and contradictions at the core of social reality, it will have to refuse the assumption that there is more reality in the permanence of institutions than in their transformations”.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of the causal power of human beings and social institutions see Dave Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For an account of the concept of ‘social power’ as dependent on constitutive rules and collective intentionality see John R. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

are often used as synonyms in critical theory and critical sociology.<sup>6</sup> A critical social ontology should provide not only a reasonable account of those mechanisms that regulate the access and exclusion of those symbolic, cultural, and political resources that allow the creation and distribution of social powers. These mechanisms, in fact, could block or slow down processes of social transformation in an emancipatory sense. Such a critical-ontological perspective should try also to answer questions like, “When can we consider a social system as oppressive?” without assuming that power is always coextensive with domination and that emancipation always implies the absence of asymmetries of power.

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars interested in critical theory and, especially, in the paradigm of recognition developed by Habermas and Honneth have tried to approach problems that are typical of this tradition of thought from an ontological point of view. Nowadays, it is possible to read articles, books, and essays that describe the process of recognition in its micro-constitutive features and phases,<sup>7</sup> the relationships of recognition that happens at intra-group and intergroup levels,<sup>8</sup> or the role of social recognition in the constitution of the social world.<sup>9</sup> Other works deepen the philosophical understanding of concepts that belong to the

---

<sup>6</sup> On this particular use of the notion of ‘power’, see Martin Saar, “Power and Critique”, in *Journal of Power* 3, no. 1 (2010): 7-20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540291003630320>.

<sup>7</sup> See Heikki Ikäheimo, “On the Genus and Species of Recognition”, in *Inquiry* 45, no. 4 (2002): 447-462, <https://doi.org/10.1080/002017402320947540>; Heikki Ikäheimo, Arto Laitinen, “Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement, and Recognitive Attitudes towards Persons”, in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, eds. Bert van de Brink and David Owen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33-56; Arto Laitinen, “Interpersonal Recognition: A Response to Value or a Precondition of Personhood”, *Inquiry* 45, no. 4 (2002): 463-478, <https://doi.org/10.1080/002017402320947559>.

<sup>8</sup> See Onni Hirvonen, “Groups as Persons? A Suggestion for a Hegelian Turn”, in *Journal of Social Ontology* 3, no. 2 (2017): 143-165, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2016-0019>.

<sup>9</sup> See Titus Stahl, “Institutional Power, Collective Acceptance, and Recognition”, in *Recognition and Social Ontology*, eds. Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011): 349-72.

Marxist and critical tradition, like ‘alienation’,<sup>10</sup> ‘ideology’,<sup>11</sup> and ‘social pathology’,<sup>12</sup> by using a method of analysis that recalls metaphysical and ontological approaches. In other words, the main interest of the previous studies is to establish if such concepts refer to phenomena and processes that exist in the social world and what their constitutive characteristics are.

One of the main hypotheses of this work is that the development of a well-founded critical social ontology, which can provide a fruitful perspective for the discussion of the previous questions, can be reached by reinterpreting Pierre Bourdieu’s critical sociology through the lens of Axel Honneth’s critical theory of recognition or, if you prefer, through a Bourdieusian appropriation of Honneth’s theory of recognition. As we will see in the first part of this thesis, these two theoretical approaches seem the most suitable for building up such a critical social ontology due to their focus on problems like the reproduction of social systems, the relations between oppositional agency and social transformations, the pre-reflexive and non-utilitarian conception of the nature of social actions, the study of the mechanisms behind social emancipation, and domination.

The idea that Bourdieu’s thought could intersect Honneth’s is not new. First, Honneth himself praises Bourdieu for his focus on the cultural side of class struggle, although he criticizes the French sociologist for a supposed crypto utilitarianism that would affect his proposal.<sup>13</sup> More recently, theoretical and philosophical reflections

---

<sup>10</sup> See Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> See Axel Honneth, “Recognition as Ideology”, in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*; Arvi Särkelä, “Ideology as Artificial Respiration: Hegel on Stoicism, Skepticism and Unhappy Consciousness”, *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 25, no. 2 (2015): 65-81.

<sup>12</sup> See Christopher F. Zurn, “Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders”, in *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays. With a Reply by Axel Honneth*, ed. Danielle Petherbridge (Leiden: Brill, 2011): 345-370; Arto Laitinen, Arvi Särkelä, “Four Conceptions of Social Pathology”, *European Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 1 (2019): 80-102, <https://doi.org/10.1177/02F1368431018769593>.

<sup>13</sup> In this regard, see Axel Honneth, “The Fragmented World of Symbolic Forms: Reflections on Pierre Bourdieu’s Sociology of Culture”, in *The Fragmented World of the Social. Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 184-201. Regarding Bourdieu’s tendency to conceptualize symbolic action and the struggle for symbolic capital in an economic, reductionistic, and ultimately utilitarian register, this criticism about Bourdieu’s work is somehow too harsh and slightly out of focus. As explained, especially in chapter 4, part 3, Bourdieu’s critical

that are consistent with this hypothesis seem to increase gradually but constantly. Mauro Basaure has asserted that: “Whilst Honneth rejects what he considers to be the socio-ontological foundations of Bourdieu’s sociological theory, he draws upon the Bourdieusian approach and considers it as an expression of an exemplary sociology”.<sup>14</sup> In her doctoral dissertation, Cécile Lavergne has shown that it is possible to combine Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power and Honneth’s normative concept of ‘recognition’ when describing and evaluating it from a normative point of view that focuses on identity – based conflicts.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Louis Carré has stated that “any black and white opposition between Bourdieu’s anti-recognition and Honneth’s pro-recognition perspectives needs to be nuanced”.<sup>16</sup>

In this respect, there is a further, original contribution that the present work can provide. Honneth’s critical philosophy and Bourdieu’s critical sociology not only provide the most promising building blocks for sketching the general outlines of a critical social ontology. To bring the two approaches into dialogue could be mutually helpful and beneficial for both of them at the conceptual level. Generally, Bourdieu focuses more on the problems of domination and social reproduction of unequal societies. In this regard, Bourdieu mainly identifies how it is possible for a specific social group in a dominant position to shape and model institutions and symbolic hierarchies according to its own group’s interests. For this reason, Bourdieu has been charged with underestimating the necessity of developing a thorough theory of social transformation in terms of progress and emancipation that is consistent with his

---

sociology is more complex and refined. It does not exclude that disinterested actions are sociologically possible and refuses to reduce the practical logic of social practices to a utilitarian conscious calculation and economic rationality.

<sup>14</sup> Mauro Basaure, “The Grammar of Ambivalence: On the Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu in the Critical Theory of Axel Honneth”, in *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*, eds. Simon Susen, Bryan S. Turner (London-New York: Anthem Press, 2011), 203.

<sup>15</sup> Cécile Lavergne, “Violence, Identités et Reconnaissance: Penser une Philosophie Sociale de la Violence avec Pierre Bourdieu et Axel Honneth” (Ph. D. Diss., Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> Louis Carré, “An ‘Enchanted’ or a ‘Fragmented’ Social World? Recognition and Domination in Honneth and Bourdieu”, *Critical Horizons*, (2019) DOI: 10.1080/14409917.2019.1616481.

critical sociology.<sup>17</sup> The French sociologist, in fact, identifies the structural conditions that prelude to the emergence of social changing, namely a mismatch between the dispositions of the habitus and the shape of the objective structures that compose social reality. However, as Michael Burawoy underlines

there is no systematic account of how that mismatch is produced, whether it is produced *situationally* through a cultural lag (hysteresis), i.e. through habitus cultivated in one field clashing with the logic of another field, or *processually* through the very dynamics of social structure. Nor is there an analysis of the consequences of that mismatch, whether it produces accommodation or rebellion. In other words, Bourdieu points to the possibility of social change but has no theory of social change.<sup>18</sup>

Such deficiency seems strictly related to the conception of social agents that is implied by Bourdieu's critical sociology. In fact, as we will see in chapter 1, Bourdieu tends to take into account social agents' perspective only in a limited sense. He mainly focuses on them as bearers of a subjective, bodily structure, the habitus, which makes social agents themselves blind toward and largely unaware of the objective nature of the social world, allowing at the same time the ontological permanence of social reality itself. Such an idea drives Bourdieu to underestimate the critical skills of social agents and, consequently, their role concerning the existential preservation of social reality and its change and amelioration.

On the contrary, Honneth seems more interested in discussing the connection between social transformation and social struggles for the interpretation of norms that rules our interaction and social activities. Honneth's interest in the normative reconstruction of the Western social institution pushes him to overlook an analysis

---

<sup>17</sup> Besides Michael Burawoy, also Richard Jenkins and Dylan Riley seem to move this kind of criticism against Bourdieu's critical sociology. See Richard Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu* (London/ New York: Routledge, 1992), 88: "There is something profoundly social going on here—explained by neither the critical marketplace nor the 'intrinsic' power of individual 'genius' (although in all of my examples there is that, whatever 'that' is, too)—but Bourdieu never quite gets round to broaching the topic. There is rebellion in his model but, alas, no revolution"; Dylan Riley, "Bourdieu's Class Theory", *Catalyst* 1, no. 2 (2017): 1-22. Riley's criticisms concern also Bourdieu's class analysis and theory of reproduction.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Burawoy, "The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci", in *Sociology* 46, no. 2 (2012): 204, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511422725>.

of social reality in terms of power and social domination, as several scholars have noticed. For instance, Michael J. Thompson argues that Honneth seems unwilling to admit that recognition “can [...] become a means of legitimating the prevailing power relations rather than serve to undermine or call them into question, as when we recognize our role obligations with references to others within a hierarchical social context that has legitimate authority”.<sup>19</sup> Lois McNay, instead, argues against the necessary connection that Honneth gives the impression to trace among experiences of social suffering, the emergence of oppositional consciousness, and cultural-symbolic agency. According to McNay, Honneth overlooks the fact that social suffering can be internalized in terms of “resignation, frustrated rage or boredom”;<sup>20</sup> or that it can be disempowered, as a motivational force for struggling, by symbolic strategies that tend to limit the expressivist means through which the oppressed can articulate publicly their discontent or malaise.<sup>21</sup>

This dissertation aims to show that it is simplistic to flatten their respective theoretical contributions in this sense. On the one hand, it is wrong to consider Bourdieu’s perspective as completely detached or neutral toward the problem of social conflicts and transformation. In fact, as we will see, Bourdieu considers both social conflict and competition for the maximization of capital as an invariant dynamic that characterizes different social fields. For such a reason, in Bourdieu’s works, there is a wide focus on how some social transformations can work in favor of the *status quo*. At the same time, as Bourdieu admits, nothing prevents us from considering habitus not only as a structure that favors social reproduction, but also as a possible source of social resistance of dominated groups.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand,

---

<sup>19</sup> Michael J. Thompson, *The Domestication of Critical Theory* (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 71.

<sup>20</sup> Lois McNay, “The Trouble with Recognition: Subjectivity, Suffering and Agency”, in *Sociological Theory* 26, no.3 (2008b), 281, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00329.x>.

<sup>21</sup> Lois McNay, *Against Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008a), 138-141.

<sup>22</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc Wacquant, *Réponses: Pour une Anthropologie Reflexive*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992), 56-57, Engl. transl. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 80: “Similarly, I do not see how relations of domination, whether material or symbolic, could possibly operate without implying, activating resistance. The dominated, in any



it is also clear that Honneth acknowledges the fact that recognition can work as a vehicle of domination and as a mean for exercising unfair or arbitrary forms of power. For Honneth, in fact, socially accepted forms of recognition may reveal themselves as smokescreens that are functional for the reproduction of unjust social systems. In such circumstances, recognition can drive oppressed social agents to accept a system of norms and values that put them in a situation of subordination by realizing, for instance, a social behavior that expresses outgroup favoritism in favor of dominant groups or classes. In addition, as we will see, Honneth tends to consider social suffering that is related to experiences of lack of recognition and misrecognition as an important motivational factor for social struggles, among others. In other words, for him, socially caused negative emotions and feelings are understandable, but they are not a sufficient reason for the implementation of any form of oppositional agency.

An eventual combination of Honneth's and Bourdieu's proposals could help us to reply in a more meaningful way to the previous objections. Honneth could provide Bourdieu's critical sociology with a more complete theory of social transformation, which is able to take into account the interconnection between social struggles, the exercise of symbolic powers, and emancipation. On the other hand, Bourdieu's viewpoint could improve Honneth's position about the issue of power. In fact, Bourdieu's conceptual tools could highlight how mutual relations of recognition might be conceptualized in terms of actualization of specific forms of power of recognition, namely the human capacity of recognizing and being recognized, whose agential acquisition and actualization are determined by the influences of objective and subjective social structures (like the class composition of social environment, the specific distribution of resources among agents, and the morphology and composition of their collective customs and individual habits).

---

social universe, can always exert a certain force, inasmuch as belonging to a field means by definition that one is capable of producing effects in it (if only to elicit reactions of exclusion on the part of those who occupy its dominant positions)".

In this respect, the research will try to show how interpersonal recognition plays a crucial role in Bourdieu's critical sociology. Briefly, Bourdieu highlights a strong connection not only between struggles for the acquisition of symbolic capital and conflicts for interpersonal recognition but also between the process of internalization of habitus, the accumulation and monopoly of symbolic capital, and the human need for recognition. However, he has not developed a theory of recognition that is coherent with his sociological approach and considers the concept of 'recognition' as a primitive one. At the same, this doctoral dissertation aims to explain how Honneth's theory of recognition can be reinterpreted through the lens of Bourdieu's post-structuralism, and how such a reading can enhance Honneth's position itself. To sum up, Honneth's perspective, which is mainly a normative one, does not pay enough attention to structural questions. To what extent do irreflexive habits, customs, material and symbolic resources, and different social positions affect human intersubjective relationships? What is their role in the actualization of social practice that requires reciprocal recognition between agents? What are the elements that concur to stabilize successful forms of interaction among human beings? In what way do forms of recognition that appear healthy and successful allow the reproduction of unjustified asymmetries of power among human beings and different collective groups? Honneth's relevant problem is the lack of a convincing theory of how social structures influence human interaction, exercising some sort of causal power-over interpersonal relationships, in the light of the paradigm of recognition.

Finally, such a dialogue between Bourdieu and Honneth could also help social theorists to overcome conceptually a limit that affects both thinkers' perspectives and, more generally, critical theory: the idea that *power and domination are coextensive*.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> In the first part of the thesis I follow Bourdieu's and Honneth's own usage of these terms and, as Danielle Petherbridge has noted, it might appear that there are slippages between power and domination. This is because Honneth and Bourdieu use them coextensively. In the second part of the thesis I aim to make my own, more systematic delineation between the terms. In other words, the unclarity in the first part is related to a specific flaw in Bourdieu's and Honneth's perspectives, whose main features are analytically described and discussed in the first four chapters. Only in the second

Using Italo Testa's idea of power of recognition and Amy Allen's account of power, the thesis will try to show that *recognition is a form of power itself and that power should be used in a descriptive way* without loading it with a normative meaning. In light of this, asymmetries of power should not be necessarily conceived as the outcomes of some sort of social oppression at work in the society and, at the same time, the exercise of power is not necessarily an actualization of a form of domination. In this regard, the dissertation will argue that domination differs from power in so far as it is neither a peculiar mode of power nor a modality of exercising power, but instead it is a *matrix of unequal distribution of powers among social agents*. Now, if we accept the idea that recognition is one of the main constitutive power on which the existence of social reality is grounded, *domination* can be characterized as *a matrix of unequal distribution of powers of recognition (as power to attract and give recognition, to put an addressee of recognition in a condition of dependency, and to exercise a collective action with other peers based on reciprocal recognition) among social agents*. Thus, the analysis of domination should focus on the structural conditions (that is to say, the shape of a field of recognition and the configuration of agents' habitus of recognition) that prevent dominated social actors from accumulating recognitive capital and that exercise symbolic power in an oppositional way, over dominant agents, as outlined in chapter 8 and in the general conclusion.

In light of these considerations, it is necessary to sketch briefly the argumentative strategy and the structure of this dissertation. The latter comprises two different parts. The first part, which consists of chapters 1, 2, 3, and 4, compares and contrasts Honneth's and Bourdieu's critical thought along three thematic vectors: the problem of social reproduction and stabilization, the problem of social conflict and transformation, and the issue of the origin and actualization of social agency.

---

part does the dissertation try to delineate a better and distinctive conceptualization of power and domination.

The first chapter “Honneth and Bourdieu’s research methodology and interest” is devoted to the analysis of methodological perspectives and research objectives of both scholars, identifying three main ontological topics in which the perspectives of Honneth and Bourdieu seem to converge, overlap, and complete each other. In this regard, the chapter will show that, despite their rather divergent ways to approach and conceive critical theory, there are relevant theoretical points of agreement regarding the intersubjective roots of the reality of the social world, the important role of the results of the conflicts of recognition for the perpetuation and transformation of the social world, and the role of pre-reflexive and emotional factors in the acquisition and realization of social behavior.

The first topic, which is debated in chapter 2 “Honneth and Bourdieu on society and social reproduction”, concerns their conception of social reproduction and of the preconditions that guarantee the ontological stability and permanence of social reality. Chapter 2 tries to show how for Bourdieu, as well as for Honneth, a given society can reproduce itself only if the social practices that constitute it embody also an expressivist and symbolic meaning that can favor processes of mutual recognition among individuals.

Chapter 3 “Honneth and Bourdieu on social struggle and social transformation” focuses on a topic that is essentially connected to the previous one: the relation that both thinkers establish between the phenomena of social reproduction, social conflict, and social transformation in its conservative and emancipatory forms. In this respect, first, chapter 3 seeks to explain how both authors consider social transformation as a necessary feature for the reproduction of societal life and the central role that social struggles have in this regard. Second, it will argue that the combination of these two perspectives can provide us with a more complex and nuanced description of the different forms that social struggles (agonistic and reconciliative) and social transformation (integrative and emancipatory) can assume. Finally, chapter 3 outlines the main divergence between Bourdieu and Honneth regarding the preconditions that determine the emergence of social conflicts and the

appearance of social transformation. However, it will argue that a combination of their ideas can help us to build up a more detailed socio-ontological account of such preconditions.

Chapter 4 “Honneth, Bourdieu, and the theory of social action” mainly focuses on their respective theories of social agency. It will underline, on the one hand, how Honneth’s theory of social action can be implemented with a structuralist perspective, and the important role that interpersonal recognition plays in Bourdieu’s account of socialization and reproduction of social patterns of action. Reading Honneth’s theory of recognition through Bourdieu’s perspective, it would be possible to try to explain how social structures might influence interpersonal interactions among human beings. On the other hand, introducing the idea of recognition in Bourdieu’s picture, it becomes conceivable to discuss, from a structuralist perspective, how social experiences of appreciation, which individuals can accomplish on the interpersonal level, can affect the reproduction of objective and subjective social structures. In this way, we might seek to rethink the ontological relationship between relations of power that are inscribed in social structures and relations of mutual recognition that happen at the interpersonal level.

The second part, which consists of chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8, is meant to give shape and substance to a structuralist account of an ontology of recognition and, therefore, to provide a very limited but new synthesis of conceptual tools that could support the development of a well-founded critical social ontology. Chapter 5 “Symbolic capital as recognitive capital” deals with the reinterpretation of the concept of *‘symbolic capital’* as *‘recognitive capital’*. Starting from the intuition that social recognition is an immaterial good that can be distributed, redistributed, or monopolized, chapter 5 argues that the accumulation of recognition is of fundamental importance for the exercise of symbolic power and the redefinition of perceptive schemes and normative values that govern human social life and interaction.

Chapter 6 “Social fields as fields of recognition” provides an account of the concept of *‘field’* that is double-sided. On the one hand, it describes social fields as

social entities that can attract agents capable of entertaining relationships of recognition. On the other hand, it depicts it as a social space in which social agents can satisfy their need for recognition by pursuing an interest that is perceived as socially beneficial for the agents who are involved in the field itself.

Chapter 7 “Habitus as habitus of recognition” sketches an interpretation of the *habitus* as an embodied structure that allows social agents to actualize successful forms of recognition thanks to a set of perceptive schemes and empirical and normative expectations that lie beyond the threshold of intentionality and the reflexivity of individuals.

Applying the concepts developed in the three previous chapters, chapter 8 “A critical and ontological account of social domination and emancipation” concludes and tries to show that not every relation of power corresponds to a relation of domination, which should be conceived as a peculiar form of distribution of power that advantages one agent (either individual or collective) at the expense of others. My specific contribution to the idea of domination is the following: to conceive recognition in terms of capital, field, and habitus can help us to understand how opportunities of recognition can be unequally distributed, strengthening the position of domination of the ruling class and weakening the oppositional agency of dominated groups, without presupposing that practical forms of recognition in circumstances of domination ought to be ideological.

At the same time, coherently with this idea, the dissertation tries to explain why emancipation does not require the complete disappearance of asymmetries of power, but only the amelioration of social conditions of one or more oppressed agents. Emancipation is depicted as a win-win game in which the whole society can benefit from the end of the situation of subjugation of one or more oppressed groups.

# PART I





# 1 HONNETH AND BOURDIEU'S RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND INTEREST

In this chapter, I focus on the methodological assumptions and objects of study of Axel Honneth's and Pierre Bourdieu's social theories and critical approaches. A reflection regarding these topics is necessary as the account of the social world can change importantly depending on the methodological presuppositions a researcher adopts. What is the best perspective for describing and explaining social facts, the dynamic of our social behavior, and the process of reproduction of human societies? Does a social scientist have a privileged point of view toward the social world compared to ordinary social actors? Are the experiences and perspectives of social actors the main access point for grasping the real nature of the social world?

As we will see, Bourdieu's research method and Honneth's one, and the types of social actions and phenomena these theorists are talking about for developing their respective social theories, seem to be very different at first sight. To sum up, Bourdieu focuses attention on the nature of social domination and the preservation of oppressive social systems by assuming that only social scientists can gain an objective vision of social reality because of the pivotal perspective that they can assume toward social facts and practices. Honneth's aim, on the contrary, is the study of the relations between social amelioration and social struggle, putting first the experiences of and beliefs about the social world and the self-understanding of ordinary social agents. In the first part, the chapter focuses on Axel Honneth's normative reconstructivism in the light of Frankfurt Critical Theory and the Left Hegelian tradition. The second section discusses Pierre Bourdieu's concerns regarding the necessity to overcome the methodological dichotomy between subjectivism and objectivism in the practice of social sciences. The last part of the

chapter focuses on the differences that are related to their research methodologies and shortly sketches the method that has been adopted for developing the first part of the dissertation.<sup>24</sup>

In this regard, this chapter has thus the important function to clarify the limits and the scope of the thesis. Its main aim, in fact, is neither to demonstrate that Bourdieu's and Honneth's methodology can be reconciled nor to develop a new methodological approach, which is able to mediate the divergent assumptions of the two critical theorists. Instead, the narrow scope of chapter 1 is to highlight why the theoretical outcomes that are related to these opposing methodological views can be integrated and enrich each other, which thus introduces the topics that are discussed in chapters 2, 3, and 4. The main idea is that the methodological differences between the two scholars can work in favor of the development of a robust critical social theory that aims to address topics like domination, social transformation, and reproduction, but only as long as there is an overlapping theoretical consensus between them in conceptualizing such topics.

## 1.1 Honneth's immanent reconstructivism and Frankfurt School critical theory

For understanding the methodological backdrop behind Axel Honneth's work, it is necessary to start from the following question: what is the main task of critical theory? To provide a satisfactory answer, let us turn to Horkheimer's proposal, which is based on a distinction between critical and traditional scientific theories.<sup>25</sup> Such division is tracked in terms of how these two theoretical attitudes relate to the

---

<sup>24</sup> As Robin Celikates has noted, one of the limits of this study is that extremely complex and contested debates on methodology are not discussed extensively and exhaustively. In this respect, it is necessary to underline that the author is aware of the importance and essential function of such a methodological dispute. However, a discussion about the methodological problems of critical theory is beyond the scope of this dissertation, whose main interest concerns socio-ontological problems.

<sup>25</sup> The brief and incomplete account given here mainly refers to Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory", in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 188-243.

knowing subject and her object of study. In general, scientific knowledge should be considered as a form of human activity that allows human beings to gradually dominate and control nature, which improves, in theory, the quality of collective social life. The traditional scientific theory has as its objects of investigation nature and natural facts, which are dimensions of reality that are ruled by laws and processes that are independent of human beings but that can be influenced by them. In this respect, the main interests of hard scientists lie in the development of formal theories that can help human beings to understand and make previsions about natural phenomena, thus allowing humankind to control nature and use it for social purposes. In the traditional scientific practice, the knowing subject remains external to her object of inquiry in the sense that the knowing subject, through scientific methods, can decipher natural laws and manipulate nature without changing the essential rules that constitute natural reality. Critical theory, on the contrary, has as an object of inquiry society itself, whose norms and rules are created by human beings. Therefore, the critical theorist, contrary to the traditional scientist, has not only an epistemic interest toward his object of study. The aim of the critical social theorist is not only to describe dynamics that characterize a given society but also to promote the full realization of rationality in social practices: that is, emancipation. In this respect, critical theory self-interprets itself as a theoretical form of an extra-theoretical social activity whose invariant feature is its tendency to promote a progressive transformation of society as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

Given this picture, whereas traditional theory is an attempt to control and dominate nature, critical theory should be considered as an attempt to study those mechanisms and phenomena that slow down or impede rational evolution and amelioration of social practices. In order to fulfill such a task, critique has to be immanent. This means that the diagnosis of potential social pathologies that

---

<sup>26</sup> See *ibidem*, 246: “However extensive the interaction between the critical theory and the special sciences whose progress the theory must respect and on which it has for decades exercised a liberating and stimulating influence, the theory never aims simply at an increase of knowledge as such. Its goal is man's emancipation from slavery”.

undermine collective life (and, of course, the formulation of a possible therapy) must rely on a reconstruction of the normative values that regulate the processes of interaction among human beings. In other words, critical theorists cannot assume an external perspective in relation to the social world by describing and criticizing it from a zenithal viewpoint. As said before, critical theory's method relies on the idea that human history is characterized by a progressive and dialectical actualization of rational social practices. Thus, in order to work in favor of emancipation, the critical theorists have to ground their critical point of view on those concrete social elements (practices, norms, values, institutions) that already embody some degree of rationality and, at the same time, on the situations of social crisis and conflict that point out an impasse of societal life. Anchoring their perspective in the real social world, they can then identify those elements that constitute a deformation of the rational nature of a given set of social dynamics or hinder social amelioration. In sum, the standard for the evaluation of the rationality of a particular social situation is nothing more than the product of the social practices of human beings.

For instance, according to such an immanent and reconstructive point of view, Adorno and Horkheimer can criticize the so-called "culture industry" as a phenomenon that is produced by the particular organization of labor of Western capitalist societies. In fact, following the two German thinkers, contemporary mass production of cultural commodities obeys a form of instrumental rationality that is typical of the capitalist mode of production. Culture is no longer a space of human expressivity that is separated from the economic logic of the market and industrial production. In Western countries, cultural production tends more and more to be standardized and merchandised in order to entertain masses. Unlike the democratic and secular tradition that the Enlightenment generated suggests, the capillary diffusion of such cultural products does not have the function to educate citizens and to increase their political and social consciousness. Instead, it has the function to distract the lower classes from the situations of injustice and exploitation they suffer from. In the critique of the culture industry, the immanent reconstructive

perspective is at work to the extent that Horkheimer and Adorno underline how instrumental rationality of industrial production is employed not for enlightening lower classes and promoting their emancipation, but for keeping them in a condition of false consciousness and subjugation through a refined form of cultural doping.<sup>27</sup> Simply put, the normative idea that science and rationality have to create the conditions for humankind's flourishing and well-being is indubitably common and widespread in Western culture. In this respect, Horkheimer and Adorno employ it for identifying a concrete misuse of science and rationality and the blockade that such deviant rationality creates in societal development.

In this work, there is no space for discussing all the criticisms Honneth has leveled against Horkheimer, Adorno, and Habermas.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, there is a vast literature that already faces this debate among the Frankfurt School's representatives.<sup>29</sup> For the sake of this dissertation, it is sufficient to highlight how these methodological concerns are omnipresent in Honneth's theoretical production and deeply affect his methodological presuppositions. More specifically, Honneth has tried to improve the model of immanent critique considering the methodological limits of his predecessors. On the one hand, Honneth aims to go beyond Adorno and Horkheimer's proposal as far as he registers that their exclusive immanent focus on the practice of social labor for illustrating social reproduction is too narrow for developing a critical and emancipatory proposal.<sup>30</sup> For Honneth, it was not the case that the two thinkers ended up endorsing a radically pessimistic perspective on the possibility of human emancipation. In fact, once they diagnosed an essential and constitutive bond between the deployment of rationality and the concretization of

---

<sup>27</sup> For a complete account of the idea of "culture industry" see Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-136.

<sup>28</sup> For such criticisms, see especially Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, Jean-Philippe Deranty, *Beyond Communication: A Critical Study of Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009), 51-85; and Danielle Petherbridge, *The Critical Theory of Axel Honneth* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 16-40.

<sup>30</sup> See Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, 99: "The early Horkheimer overlooked the entire spectrum of everyday cultural action since a reductionist philosophy of history prohibited him at a conceptual level from developing any other dimension of action than social labor".

exploitation in the form of the capitalist mode of production, Adorno and Horkheimer could not provide or argue for any possible proposal for social emancipation.<sup>31</sup> For them, the same rational means that allow humankind to control and defeat the violence of nature are also those that produce violence, exploitation, and abuse among human beings and self-repression of individuals. On the other hand, Honneth emphasizes how Habermas' theory of intersubjective communication cannot fulfill completely the idea of immanent critique because of the theoretical and fictitious distinction between a normative sphere of communication that guarantees social integration and the power dimension of the economy and administration that preside over social reproduction. Through such an ontological assumption, according to Honneth, Habermas has indeed the merit to have highlighted that the moral potential of intersubjective communication is the core of social progress. However, his model does anchor the normative value of such a practice in the formal logic of communication and its invariant structures, losing, therefore, the immanent element on which a critical perspective should rely on.

Honneth's attempt to fix the shortcomings of his predecessors relies on a turn that concerns the theory of social action. Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer privileged a critique based on the centrality of social labor, Honneth tries to give more space to the cultural and symbolic dimension of social action, that is to say, to the interpretative activity through which social groups and classes establish norms and values that regulate collective and individual behavior in a given society.<sup>32</sup> Such a kind of social action refers not only to the communicative process thanks to which social agents reach an agreement about a shared normative framework, but cultural action includes also the dimension of social struggle through which different social

---

<sup>31</sup> This is especially true for Adorno. See *ibidem*, 66: "That is, so long as the compulsion toward the domination of nature is extended into the dominating order of social life, only artistic activity, since it represents an alternative to the prevailing practice of self-preservation, promises in the 'idea of the redemption of historically repressed nature' the possible future of an emancipation from civilizing domination."

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, Axel Honneth, "Introduction", in *The Fragmented World of the Social*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), XIV-XVII.

groups aim to redefine the norms and values that rule social integration and reproduction.

This last point is fundamental in order to understand both the continuity and discontinuity between Habermas and Honneth. In fact, whereas Habermas proposes a model of intersubjective communication that “equate[s] the normative potential of social interaction with the linguistic conditions of reaching understanding free from domination”,<sup>33</sup> Honneth’s idea of cultural-symbolic action as social action points to connect the empirical appearance and normative meaning of social struggles to the moral experiences of injustice that human beings can suffer from. In this respect, such human experiences of injustices constitute the immanent point of reference for the critical theorist to detect situations of social exploitation and domination and to define what kind of social value has been betrayed in the actualization of a particular social practice. Furthermore, in this way, the critical theorist can tie his social analysis to another immanent point of reference: the set of social institutions and practices that allow the implementation of such institutionalized values in a specific historical context.<sup>34</sup>

However, what is the factor that guarantees that such an immanent perspective is the proper one in order to determine how to achieve some sort of social amelioration? Honneth’s answer to this question reflects, again, the assumptions of the Left-Hegelian tradition. Social reproduction and integration are possible as they are grounded on those normative values that are shared by the members of a given society and, thus, rational. At the same time, nothing guarantees that institutions, customs, and habits that are supposed to embody such values can endlessly preserve their character of rationality. The heterosexual character of the family incorporated the process of social rationalization, and favored the reproduction of Western societies, for a long time. Nowadays, the gender rigidification of such an institution

---

<sup>33</sup> Axel Honneth, “The Social Dynamics of Disrespect”, in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 328.

<sup>34</sup> See Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014a), 5-11.

seems to be counterproductive. In fact, the right of achieving satisfactory relationships of love has been attributed to human beings with different gender identities or sexual preferences. In this regard, every attempt to block the institutionalization of a different idea of family in the names of the *status quo* represents a blockade. From Honneth's immanentistic viewpoint, critical theorists can criticize the conservative conception of the family starting from the consideration that the traditional family does not embody and, therefore, can no longer realize the shared social belief that every human being deserves to enjoy satisfactory love relationships and create her own family. Here, for Honneth, we can find the constructive and transcendental moment of the critique. Counting on those social values that are objective in a society, that is to say, universal inasmuch they are collectively recognized, the critical theorist can identify limits and deformation of institutions and social practices and can indicate possible emancipatory ways to transform them. At the same time, widespread forms of social suffering work as empirical markers that can support social theorists in the identification of social and political injustices and the deformations of social structures.

Having briefly made the point regarding Honneth's methodological concerns, it is time to sum up Bourdieu's idea about methodological problems and the development of sound social science.

## 1.2 Bourdieu's critical sociology between objectivism and subjectivism

Bourdieu builds up a theory of the logic of social practices that intends to face two specific questions. The first question defines Bourdieu's object of study and refers to the necessity to develop a critical but scientific perspective about the phenomenon of social domination: how is it possible that lower classes or oppressed groups of a



given society contribute to reproducing actively the same social conditions that subjugate them? In brief, how can a narrow group or class of individuals exercise domination over a majority of human beings? The second issue has an epistemological and methodological nature: what is the perspective that social theorists must assume in their scientific inquiries concerning the study of social reality? Is it possible to discuss the problem of domination from a detached and privileged perspective? In this respect, Bourdieu identifies two major methodological tendencies, objectivism and subjectivism, that appear radically incompatible and characterized by several limits and shortcomings.

With the term '*objectivism*', Bourdieu refers to a large set of philosophical and scientific approaches.<sup>35</sup> Marxism can be considered objectivist, as can Durkheim's sociology, Lévi-Strauss' structuralist anthropology, and Saussure's linguistics. Apart from their differences in terms of interpretation of social reality, all these objectivistic approaches share a specific methodological presupposition. The social scientist must assume a detached, pivotal perspective toward her object of study, a point of view that is neatly separate from the one that the participants in the social practices can assume. Following Bourdieu, the implications of such methodological assumptions are relevant in several respects. First, according to objectivism, social reality is a dimension that is characterized by regularities and laws that are independent of the intentions, beliefs, and ideas of individual social agents. For instance, the laws that characterize the economic sphere, or the rules that structure the linguistic practices of human beings, are ontologically objective in the sense that they work and exist regardless of individuals' consciousness and intentionality. Second, according to this point of view, agents totally conform themselves to such regularities. The actions that they perceive as a result of their will and free choices do, *de facto*, obey the

---

<sup>35</sup> For Bourdieu's reconstruction of objectivist approaches, I am mainly referring to Pierre Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 51-70, Engl. transl. *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge: Polity Press Press, 1990a), 30-41; and Pierre Bourdieu, Pierre Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique Précédé de Trois Études d'Ethnologie Kabyle* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2000), 234-255, Engl. transl. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977a), 1-30.

objective laws that animate social reality. Therefore, ordinary social agents do not have a transparent point of view toward the real shape and functioning of social reality. They perceive their conduct as an outcome of their conscious choices but, actually, they follow rules that are imposed on them. Third, objectivists consider social facts as objects of study that have to be grasped and described through a quantitative method.<sup>36</sup> The latter can provide a formal model of social regularities without being grounded on the subjectivity of agents' experiences. In this picture of scientific research about the nature of the social world, the common sense of ordinary men has no authority or scientific relevance. On the contrary, in order to provide a scientific explanation of social phenomena, social scientists have the duty to put into brackets the opinions and naïve beliefs that they can have as ordinary social agents.

With the notion of '*subjectivism*', Bourdieu refers to those approaches that, in opposition to objectivism, give prominence to individual praxis, rationality, or experiences in order to describe and explain social phenomena.<sup>37</sup> Like in the case of objectivism, the subjectivist approach influences an array of philosophical and scientific branches that is rather variegated: phenomenology and Sartre's existentialism, for instance, as well as ethnomethodology and rational action theory. The common feature of all these forms of knowledge relies on the assumption that ordinary social agents produce the social world and its meaning through their actions and intentions. In this regard, contrary to objectivism, subjectivism sustains that social reality is firstly ontologically subject-dependent. Thus, the comprehension of its nature mainly depends on the participants' perspective: ordinary agents' experience and interpretation of social reality is the primary source of socio-scientific inquiry. Second, given that participants, through their actions, beliefs, and decisions, constitute the social world, subjectivism assumes that social agents are completely

---

<sup>36</sup> The following characterization of the "objectivist" and "subjectivist" positions could appear as narrow and not so nuanced, but somehow it reflects Bourdieu's original criticisms.

<sup>37</sup> For Bourdieu's reconstruction of subjectivist approaches, I am referring to Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, 71-86, Engl. transl. *The Logic of Practice*, 42-51.

aware of the meaning of their actions and of the content of their beliefs. This assumption has relevant consequences for the characterization of the observer's role. According to subjectivism, in fact, the method that social scientists have to adopt corresponds to the one which ordinary actors employ for constituting a meaningful social world and, therefore, for understanding each other and interacting coherently. Contrary to objectivism, subjectivism denies the necessity of an epistemic break among scientists' position and ordinary agents' one. The social researcher cannot assume any pivotal position with respect to its object of study, that is, social reality. Instead, a social scientist should learn from the actors that are involved in a particular social practice or phenomenon the logic of that practice or phenomenon.

Following Bourdieu, such methodological tendencies respectively show shortcomings that risk undermining the scientific meaning of social research. Using Bourdieu's words, objectivism tends to confuse "the model of reality with the reality of the model".<sup>38</sup> In other words, when they downplay the role of social agents in the study of social phenomena, the objectivistic approaches do not consider the relevance of subjective experience for the actualization and the scientific comprehension of social behavior. In particular, the formal models that are provided by objectivism can lose sight of the diachronic nature of social practices and phenomena that can be grasped only by considering the perspective of ordinary agents, i.e., social agents' consciousness and interpretation. In doing so, objectivistic approaches tend to depict social practices and facts in mechanistic and deterministic terms, attributing to social laws and rules the same degree of necessity that characterizes the laws of nature. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, for instance, provides a description of gift exchange in tribal communities that can explicate the logic and the dynamic of actualization of such a practice only partially. According to Lévi-Strauss, the gift practice, in fact, coincides with the logic of reciprocity: the latter imposes on the agents the obligation to give a counter-gift if they receive something from a partner of interaction. Such an account, according to Bourdieu,

---

<sup>38</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique*, 253, Engl. transl. , 29.

substitutes an objective structure fundamentally defined by its reversibility for an equally objectively irreversible succession of gifts which are not mechanically linked to the gifts they respond to or insistently call for [...] even if reversibility is the objective truth of the discrete acts which ordinary experience knows in discrete form and calls gift exchanges, it is not the whole truth of a practice which could not exist if it were consciously perceived in accordance with the model. The temporal structure of gift exchange, which objectivism ignores, is what makes possible the coexistence of two opposing truths, which defines the full truth of the gift.<sup>39</sup>

Briefly, one of the points that Lévi-Strauss' account of the gift exchange is not able to grasp is the fact that in the experience of the agents that are involved in such a practice, to return a gift too early can constitute an offense against the donor:

To betray one's haste to be free of an obligation one has incurred, and thus to reveal too overtly one's desire to pay off services rendered or gifts received, so as to be quits, is to denounce the initial gift retrospectively as motivated by the intention of obliging one.<sup>40</sup>

The limit of an objectivist explanation of gift exchange is, following Bourdieu, double-sided. First, it is necessary to underline that Bourdieu is not arguing against the whole model of reciprocity described by Lévi-Strauss, but only against its partial character. It is true that, from an objectivist perspective, the gift exchange obeys the logic of reciprocity that determines the cycle of gift and counter-gift in terms of reciprocal obligations between donors and recipients. However, it is also irrefutable that in such a practice both actors consider a gift as a gift only because they both assume that, on the one hand, the donor is acting in a disinterested manner and that, on the other hand, the recipient does not have the obligation to return the gift immediately. On the contrary, immediate restitution of the gift is tacitly forbidden. On the other hand, for Bourdieu, the main problem of phenomenology and, more generally, of subjectivism is the lack of consideration regarding the social and historical conditions that shape the primary experience and the systems of belief of social agents:

---

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, 338-339, Engl. transl., 5.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, 339, Engl. transl., 6.

What is radically excluded from phenomenological analysis of the ‘general thesis of the natural standpoint’ which is constitutive of ‘primary experience’ of the social world is the question of the economic and social conditions of the belief which consists in ‘taking the ‘factworld’ (Wirklich-keit) just as it gives itself’, a belief which the reduction subsequently causes to appear as a ‘thesis’, or, more precisely, as an *epoché* of the *epoché*, a suspension of doubt as to the possibility that the world of the natural standpoint could be otherwise.<sup>41</sup>

This is true, especially, for the anthropological assumptions of a branch of research that is very far from phenomenology or ethnomethodology: the idea of the rational actor of the marginalist economy. This discipline is inclined to consider actors’ will to increase profit and minimize costs as an invariant feature of human nature. For Bourdieu, on the contrary, both the model of *homo oeconomicus* and the general tendency to profit maximization of concrete social agents are the product of a specific social environment, in which division of labor and economic production are organized according to the capitalist mode of production and the free market of commodities and labor. In this respect, all subjectivist approaches fail in taking into account the objective conditions (social institutions, customs, and habits for instance) that shape individuals’ desires, beliefs, and intentions. Could I aspire to become an entrepreneur in a society that is grounded on hunting and fishing? To what extent can collective practices influence my beliefs about the social world? How much do social structures influence social scientists’ perspective of the social world?

In the light of these considerations, Bourdieu tries to develop a sociological method that is able to overcome the dichotomy between subject and object, and agent and structure. For explicating this, it is perhaps useful to deepen the second question we mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. In brief, how is social domination possible? Bourdieu’s sociology can be considered as an attempt to conjugate scientific inquiry and social criticism: a rigorous analysis of the social world that is able to understand mechanisms of exploitation and that works in favor of social progress and emancipation. In this respect, it is reasonable to assert that the whole theory of social action that constitutes the backdrop of Bourdieu’s critical

---

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 239, Engl. transl., 233.

sociology revolves around a specific form of social activity, the domination that social dominants' classes exercise in a given social context, and the way such a practice affects the process of social reproduction. As we will illustrate, Bourdieu's intuition is that domination is not connected to the 'false consciousness' of the dominated; that is to say, to the manipulation or weakening of social actors' critical thinking and beliefs about the nature of the social world:

In the notion of 'false consciousness' which some Marxists invoke to explain the effect of symbolic domination, it is the word 'consciousness' which is excessive; and to speak of 'ideology' is to place in the order of representations, capable of being transformed by the intellectual conversion that is called the 'awakening of consciousness', what belongs to the order of beliefs, that is, at the deepest level of bodily dispositions.<sup>42</sup>

According to Bourdieu, the main vector of domination is located in the unconscious, pre-reflexive side of individuals, in the set of embodied schemes of perception, judgment, and action that social agents acquire through socialization. Such a bodily matrix of social action is named '*habitus*' and represents the concept that, for the French sociologist, can allow the end of the methodological dichotomy between objectivism and subjectivism.<sup>43</sup> In fact, it can be said that, against objectivism, the concept of '*habitus*' allows Bourdieu to study and analyze human social action from a sociological perspective that considers not only the objective structural factors, but also the mental and bodily properties of individual social subjects. Against subjectivism, the same notion permits the French sociologist to show how the range of possible first-person experiences of social agents is always determined by a given set of specific social conditions and, at the same time, sustains their existence. Such social conditions are, for Bourdieu, the morphology of the

---

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000a), 177.

<sup>43</sup> William Sewell considers Bourdieu's perspective as a peculiar development of structuralism, in which the *habitus* has a central role in explaining how mental structures concur to reproduce objective structures that have the form of material resources. Furthermore, Sewell belongs to the group of scholars who think that Bourdieu's perspective on social action and reproduction makes social transformations seem impossible to achieve for dominated agents. See William H. Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation", *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1-29.

social environment, the social field, in which social agents act, and the social position that they possess there. To sum up, as we will see, Bourdieu's methodology, which is based on the notions of 'field', 'capital', and 'habitus', aims to describe the role that subjective experiences have on the emergence and reproduction of social practices without disregarding the most important of objectivist assumptions. That is to say, only social scientists can grasp the objective features and dynamics of social reality if they are supported by the appropriate set of operational concepts and theoretical working tools. However, in order to do so, Bourdieu asserts that they must consider the important function that is played by the subjective experiences that social agents have of social reality.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> This particular characterization of Bourdieu's sociological method explains why his critical perspective is different from the one adopted by another important French critical theorist, Michel Foucault. Bourdieu's sociology is, in fact, an attempt to go beyond those structuralist approaches that, according to Honneth, have had an important impact on Foucault's conception of power in systemic-theoretic terms (see Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, chapters 5 & 6). Against the objectivism of structuralism, Bourdieu has always underlined that the regularities that can be registered in agents' social practices by sociologists, anthropologists, or ethnologists are not generated and governed by rules or models to which agents inspire their conduct. If there are practical regularities that can be registered empirically, it is because there is a correspondence between the mental, perceptive and bodily patterns of the habitus (second-order objectivity) and a given set of social structures, i.e., the fields with their peculiar shape and distribution of capital (first-order objectivity). Bourdieu's sociological perspective differs from systemic-theoretical approaches to the study of power as the former does not conceive practical logic and social practices as the result of the direct and simple actions of objective institutions, like the school, the prison, or the factory over social agents. On the contrary, for Bourdieu it is only the interaction between specific forms of distribution of capital in a field and the embodied habitus of social agents that generates reasonable social practices. In this respect, it is worthy to note that Bourdieu himself states that, contrary to him, "Foucault presents a simplifying vision of social constraint as discipline, i.e. as a constraint exercised upon the body from the outside ... But such analyses do not go beyond external disciplines and constraints, and Foucault ignores the whole process of inculcation of cognitive schemata of perception, appreciation and action, resulting from the internalization of the structures of the world and which, arising out of gentle violence, make gentle violence possible. In short, lacking everything that I put under the notion of 'habitus', Foucault cannot account for the much subtler forms of domination which come to operate through belief and the pre-reflexive agreement of the body and mind with the world" (Loïc J. D. Wacquant, (1993) "From Ruling Class to Field of Power: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu on 'La Noblesse d'État'", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 10(3), 34, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F026327693010003002>). In other words, unlike Bourdieu, Foucault cannot grasp the way the process of internalization of the structures relies on 'gentle violence'. In this respect, Bourdieu's critical judgment of Foucault's theory of power resembles Honneth's one, which focuses more on the discrepancy in Foucault's work between action-theoretic and system-theoretical accounts of power. For Bourdieu, Foucault's theory lacks a concept like *habitus*

### 1.3 One irreducible methodological difference, a large set of common outcomes

At this point, it is worth concentrating our attention on the differences that subsist between Honneth and Bourdieu's research methods. Robin Celikates has underlined how these approaches seem to be radically incompatible if they are analyzed considering the epistemic role of the social scientist and his relationship with social agents.<sup>45</sup> For Bourdieu, the asymmetry of perspective between the social scientist and the ordinary agents toward the social world is radical. Only the former, if supported by a proper methodology of research, can reach an integral comprehension of a given social dimension. According to Bourdieu, only the sociologist can grasp both the objective relations that structure a particular social environment and the nature of its subjective truth. The latter is nothing more than the experience that ordinary agents have of that social environment, and it hides its objective nature to the eyes of the agents themselves. Instead, ordinary agents can only misunderstand reality. They cannot get rid of the naïve experience that they

---

that is strongly related to an action-theoretic approach in a double sense. As explained in the next three chapters, on the one hand, habitus consists of a generative set of mental, perceptive, and bodily schemes of actions, which are embodied in individuals and represent *one of the conditions of possibility* of actualization of reasonable and effective social actions. The causal power that objective social structures can exercise over social agents remains unexpressed if the social agents do not have the necessary 'know-how' (that is, the habitus) for acting accordingly to them. On the other hand, according to Bourdieu's viewpoint, the reproduction of both first-order and second-order reality relies on the facts that social agents learn to act in their social world *searching for recognition*. It is through satisfactory forms of interpersonal recognition that individuals can develop their habitus. It is through successful and persistent forms of social recognition that dominant can exercise their symbolic power (that is to say, to govern the process of inculcation in the school and the family) over dominated, accumulating symbolic capital. In addition, the power that social structures can exercise on social agents should coexist with the basic idea that *social fields are always fields of social struggle*, in which dominant and dominated social agents compete for the accumulation of different forms of capital. As noted in the second chapter of the dissertation, for Bourdieu the real power of social structures that are shaped according to the interests of a ruling class does not consist of producing obedient subjects that silently accept domination. It consists in promoting forms of social conflicts that are nothing but *integrative and reproductive struggles*.

<sup>45</sup> See Robin Celikates, *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding*, (London-New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).



have of the social world because, differently than social scientists, they do not have that reflexive habitus that allows the scientific observer to go beyond common sense that operates in everyday life.

On the contrary, Honneth's immanent critique requires that the work of reconstruction takes into account the perspective of ordinary agents as the main source of identification of the normative logic that distinguishes a particular social dimension.<sup>46</sup> In fact, for Left-Hegelian legacy the process of social reproduction and integration, and, therefore, the shape of social practices and institutions depend on those values that are accepted by the members of a given community. Agents' understanding of the social world is thus the main entry for reconstructing the objective nature of the social world. In this respect, the two methodologies seem inconsistent. Bourdieu asserts that the experiences and beliefs of ordinary agents about the social world do not constitute the main source for a scientific description of the structure of social reality. Agents' perspective is useful only to understand how the objective shape of a given society remains opaque to ordinary agents themselves. Here comes the necessity for the social scientist to go beyond agents' common sense about the nature of the social world. On the contrary, Honneth bases his normative reconstruction on the idea that only social agents can guarantee immanent access to the rational organization of the social world. In this respect, agents' self-understanding and understanding of their social environment constitute some of the main empirical points of reference for the critical theorist who points to reconstruct the normative constitutive elements of social reality.

---

<sup>46</sup> As Onni Hirvonen has pointed out, to take into account the point of view of social agents is slightly different from accepting their point of view unconditionally. Honneth's methodological presupposition does not exclude that social agents can lose their epistemic and normative comprehension of the social world. On the contrary, for Honneth, the proper development of a robust critical theory always implies not only a reconstructive moment, but also a constructive effort and a genealogical phase, which are essential tasks of the work of analysis and critique of critical theorists. In this respect, see Axel Honneth, "Rekonstruktive Gesellschaftskritik unter genealogischen Vorbehalt. Zur Idee der 'Kritik' in der Frankfurter Schule.," in *Pathologien der Vernunft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), 57-69.

The point I would like to highlight in the next pages is the following: even if they start from and adopt different methodological assumptions, Bourdieu and Honneth provide two accounts of social action and social reality that seem highly compatible and combinable in terms of ontological assumptions. Consequently, in order to develop a robust ontological perspective about phenomena like social domination, social reproduction, and transformation, it could be useful to see to what extent Bourdieu and Honneth reach the same conclusions and ideas even if they adopt different research methods. First, both Honneth and Bourdieu adopt action-theoretic approaches that underline how *pre-rational and non-reflexive factors* can influence or determine human social actions. They both seek to develop a perspective on social life that goes beyond the idea of rational origins of social actions and, furthermore, methodological individualism. In fact, on the one hand, Bourdieu provides a conceptual account of social action that seeks to explain how social structures and institutions can deeply influence human beings' social behavior once social agents interiorize them in the form of pre-reflexive mental and bodily dispositions. Starting from the idea that actualization of social practice obeys "a permanent dialectic between organizing consciousness and automatic behaviors".<sup>47</sup> Bourdieu focuses his sociological research on the elements that influence the latter side of social action. For Bourdieu social actions are not only the result of a strategic and rational calculation of social agents but also the product of the interaction of different social structures, like social fields and individual habitus, that limit and affect social actors' choices. For instance, Bourdieu affirms that every social action is meaningfully influenced by the habitus, an embodied set of perceptive and cognitive schemes that social agents do not choose to adopt willingly. The habitus is capable of orienting social agents' actions unreflexively but in harmony with the objective burdens imposed by a social field.

On the other hand, Honneth builds up an account of social action that has its central core in the idea of intersubjective relationships among human beings. For

---

<sup>47</sup> Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, 135, Engl. transl., 80.

Honneth, intersubjectivity is, first of all, the basic condition for the realization of those activities that are meant to control and modify the natural environment according to human needs and ends. Collective practices and coordination are not solely outcomes of individual reflexivity. They can be actualized as they are originated by the taking-role capacity of human beings, that is to say, their natural power to take the perspective of their peers of action and acting according to the expectation of the latter. According to this picture, intersubjective interaction is ontologically prior even to individual self-consciousness. Individuals' autonomy and rationality are the product of a process of reciprocal recognition, not the original source of social behavior and social reality themselves. Reflecting upon the connection between fair interpersonal relationships and individual flourishing of human beings, Honneth seems to endorse the idea that the need for recognition is an important motivational force at the bottom of human social actions and interactions. In fact, individuals learn and internalize social duties and rules as far as they can gain a beneficial emotional life while acting accordingly with them. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Honneth stresses the important motivational role that negative experiences that are caused by social injustices have in relation to the emergence of social conflict and oppositional agency, and the implementation of social transformation. In line with this perspective, Honneth considers negative emotions that are related, for instance, to experiences of social exclusion and humiliation as fundamental motivational forces behind the appearance of social and political struggles against situations of cultural and economic injustices. To sum up, Honneth and Bourdieu emphasize the influence of pre-rational and pre-reflexive factors on the social behavior of human beings.

Second, even if Honneth and Bourdieu are not directly interested in building a social ontology, they make ontological assumptions that are consistent with each other for setting up their respective theories. They not only endorse a position that is contrary to methodological individualism and atomistic approaches, but they also talk about a social dimension that is composed of entities and objects (fields, habitus,

and capital in Bourdieu's case, institutions and spheres of recognition in the case of Honneth) with a particular ontological status.<sup>48</sup> For both authors, their objective existence is not dependent on subjective beliefs and the intentionality of individuals. Such social entities precede any individual judgment and act of self-determination and are independent of any subjective form of consciousness. This point is clear concerning Bourdieu's critical sociology, according to which the nature and morphology of social fields and the distribution of economic and non-economic capitals can significantly change only in the case of a mismatch between them and the habitus of ordinary agents. In the following three chapters, the dissertation will try to show how even Honneth, further developing his theory of justice and social philosophy, gradually moves from an anthropological conception of recognition and social reproduction to a structuralist viewpoint<sup>49</sup> and how the latter is coherent with Hegelian ideas about the nature of the social world:

Hegel was faced with the problem of having to define the substance of the aims and desires that subjects seek to fulfill in modernity within the framework of their individual freedom. He thereby seeks to determine the institutional complexes, the institutions of recognition that constitute a just order in modern society. [...] The number of institutions between which Hegel must differentiate depends entirely on the number of universal purposes he can assume individuals to have. Each of these goals must correspond to an institutional structure in which practices of reciprocity ensuring intersubjective satisfaction have been permanently established.<sup>50</sup>

Furthermore, they both support an interpretation of the social dimension as a place in which historical transformations are strongly related to the presence of social conflict. As we will see, Bourdieu argues that social conflicts are the invariant feature of different social fields that are characterized by divergent norms and rules.

---

<sup>48</sup> Here I am not asserting that Bourdieu and Honneth have explicitly clarified the ontological nature of such entities and their respective ontological commitments. My point is that their manner to characterize such social objects is not compatible with ontological atomism and methodological individualism.

<sup>49</sup> Shortly put, the reading of Honneth that will be developed in the next chapters assumes that such changing of perspective fully happens in *Freedom's Right*, in which the problem of realization of social freedom is discussed giving prominence to the analysis and description of those social pre-conditions that are necessary in that sense.

<sup>50</sup> Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 56-57.

Honneth asserts that the struggles for social recognition are an important source for the progressive amelioration of our social environment, in so far as they regard the interpretation and application of those norms that rule those interactions that consent our individual self-flourishing and the realization of our collective practices.

Finally, it is relevant that by describing the mechanisms of stabilization of social systems based on inequality and injustice, and therefore unveiling the conditions that can cause a situation of social domination and oppression, Bourdieu and Honneth understand that victims of oppression can play an active role in supporting their own condition of oppression. Bourdieu reaches this conclusion through his concept of 'habitus' and theory of symbolic domination, in which the spontaneous support of dominated social agents is of fundamental importance for the reproduction of social systems grounded on domination. On his part, Honneth does not exclude that reasonable and credible forms of interpersonal recognition may play an important role in justifying or hiding the unfair distribution of power and resources among social agents.

The next three chapters try to show how both Bourdieu and Honneth acknowledge the fact that human behavior can be affected by objective social entities that possess powers and properties that are not reducible to individuals' ones. In line with this idea, the present work will try to illustrate that, for both authors, social objects, at the same time, exist as entities that have a relational nature. They emerge in the social world as systems of relations among individuals and groups, acquiring causal powers that do not belong to any single component of the relational system itself. In addition, as we will see, both authors attribute to interpersonal recognition a fundamental role in the emergence and stabilization of the societal dimension at the symbolic and material level. In other words, Bourdieu and Honneth endorse the idea that social recognition brings social objects and structures into existence and contributes to sustaining and preserving their reality and presence.

In light of this consideration, the reconstruction of their respective social theory and conceptions of social reality will follow three main argumentative vectors: *the*

*problem of social reproduction and stabilization, the problem of social conflict and transformation, and the issue of the origin and actualization of social agency.* Briefly, the present dissertation does not offer a third methodology for developing a critical perspective on the social world and life. It is assuming that by using Bourdieu's and Honneth's methodologies simultaneously we can improve and integrate their respective ideas about the aforementioned topics and their characterization of the ideas of domination and emancipation. Using a metaphorical expression, it could be said that the reconstructive approach adopted here is based on the idea that, despite their divergent methods, a dialogue between Bourdieu and Honneth concerning those specific arguments is possible and that they can meaningfully learn from one another.

Finally, it is essential to note that the attempt (which will be developed in the next three chapters) to reconcile Bourdieu's and Honneth's perspectives on recognition is based on the analysis of some constitutive elements of reciprocal recognition (the receptive-perceptual side of recognition; the reciprocity of recognition; and the disinterested, non-utilitarian nature of recognition) that, in my opinion, the two scholars share despite their different accounts of the anthropological roots of recognition.

## 2 HONNETH AND BOURDIEU ON SOCIETY AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to compare some of Axel Honneth's and Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about social reality, social reproduction, and the mechanisms of the stabilization of society. In doing so, I refer to a specific form of agency: cultural-symbolic action. Cultural symbolic action here means the collective process of interpretation of those norms, values, and properties that regulate social interactions among individuals or between different social groups and classes. In this respect, the chapter will underline how such social practice is both related to the dynamic of recognition and influenced by social structures at the same time. Considering the conceptual dyad '*social stabilization*' and '*cultural-symbolic action*', this section will try to highlight how both Honneth and Bourdieu consider the symbolic stabilization of society as a necessary activity for guaranteeing the reproduction that happens in social spheres like the labor market or the family. In this respect, we seek to show how, for both thinkers, cultural-symbolic practices are influenced by interpersonal recognition and social structures. First, considering Honneth's idea according to which "the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition",<sup>51</sup> the following pages seek to show how such an imperative can be actualized, even in Honneth's perspective, only thanks to a symbolic framework that is embodied in objective social structures, which take the form of relational spheres of recognition. Second, describing Bourdieu's account of symbolic power as the main means for stabilizing social life, the chapter shows how the French sociologist describes the dynamic of distribution of such a power in terms of recognition that

---

<sup>51</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. J. Anderson, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 92.

the dominant can gain from the dominated. Third, it argues that both Honneth and Bourdieu converge on the idea that the reproduction of social systems, unjust or fair ones, relies on their capacity to allow individuals to enact a successful form of recognition and reach some sort of positive self-relationship.

## 2.1 Honneth's account of social reality and reproduction

According to Axel Honneth, Western capitalist societies can be conceived as an institutionalized system of different spheres of recognition.<sup>52</sup> We have the intimate sphere of the family, love, and friendship, in which social agents recognize and treat each other as persons whose happiness and well-being deserve to be supported despite any egocentric interest. There are the economic dimension of the labor market and the sphere of consumption, in which, in theory, human beings act and work in order to satisfy the material necessity of their peers, esteeming each other for their own qualities and capacities and as indispensable contributors to social welfare. Honneth identifies, finally, the public sphere of the rights and democratic participation, in which social agents respect each other as bearers of the same set of rights and as citizens that are entitled to take part in the political debate and the process of formation of democratic willing. Analyzing the historical origins of the sphere of general-will formation, Honneth stresses that:

A principle of reciprocal recognition emerged, one that must have been completely new to all participants after centuries of political tutelage and corporative [ständish] hierarchies. All adults (and usually only males) members of society should now be

---

<sup>52</sup> My account of Honneth's ideas regarding the nature of social reality is based on the assumption that concepts like 'sphere of recognition', 'institutions of recognition', or 'relational institutions' constitute an invariant feature of Honneth's account of social reality. There is no doubt that Honneth has slightly changed his account of social reality based on the paradigm of recognition during his intellectual research. For instance, in *Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth identifies three organized spheres of recognition: the sphere of love, the sphere of respect, and the sphere of social esteem. Instead, in *Freedom's Right*, Honneth labels as relational institutions the sphere of the family, the economic dimension of the market, and the politic realm of democratic society. Despite these modifications in the characterization of the different spheres of recognition, Honneth keeps the intuition according to which there are forms of complex social cooperation that are possible only thanks to such social entities which reflect and help to reproduce successful forms of interpersonal recognition.



capable of recognizing each other as equally entitled citizens within the nation-state, because the formation of a democratic will accorded the same weight to one citizen as it did to another.<sup>53</sup>

In Honneth's perspective, recognition is a mode of intersubjective interaction that constitutes the necessary basis both for the actualization of several social practices and the achievement of an integral individual self-relationship and psychological well-being.<sup>54</sup> As we will see, for the German philosopher these two aspects are strictly interconnected. Honneth, reflecting upon the connection between fair interpersonal relationships and the individual flourishing of human beings, seems to endorse the idea that the need for recognition is an important motivational force at the bottom of human social actions and interactions. In fact, individuals learn and internalize social duties and rules as far as they can gain a beneficial emotional life while acting accordingly with them. In the labor market, for instance, we realize that to be recognized as an active contributor to social cooperation can enhance our self-esteem. Following Honneth's point of view, successful conduct in a specific social context gives us the chance to experience positive feelings generated by the social recognition that we can receive from our partners of interaction. Such experiences of recognition make us inclined to re-enact the same behavior when we find ourselves involved in analogous situations. In this regard, we may assert that positive emotions related to experiences of social recognition are strong motivational elements that can reinforce our tendency to transform a particular behavioral pattern in a usual custom or habit. Experiences of social esteem that are related to our professional efforts, for instance, can drive

---

<sup>53</sup> Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 269.

<sup>54</sup> For the anthropological paradigm behind Honneth's perspective and the idea of taking-role ability, see Axel Honneth, Hans Joas, *Social Action and Human Nature*, trans. R. Meyer, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 48-70.

us to improve our skills and competencies and to be more enterprising in social cooperation.<sup>55</sup>

However, what does recognition mean for Honneth? In general, to recognize somebody means to be able to assume the perspective of our partners of interaction and consider ourselves in the role of their social addressee:

We should think of the act of recognition on the model of reciprocal action, in which two subjects ascribe to each other a certain normative status allowing them to treat each other in accordance with norms of respect and consideration.<sup>56</sup>

Following Honneth, we could say that a given society, a specific system of different orders of recognition, is capable of reproducing itself when it enables human beings to pursue their individual self-realization through forms of cooperation and collective actions that are characterized by mutuality:

the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee. [...] The aforementioned imperative, which is anchored in the social life-process, provides the normative pressure that compels individuals to remove constraints on the meaning of mutual recognition, since it is only by doing so that they are able to express socially the continually expanding claims of their subjectivity.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, Honneth seems to consider the implementation of successful forms of reciprocal recognition as the key feature of social reproduction. In other words, Honneth believes that recognition plays a constitutive role in social life. In a general sense, for Honneth (and the Hegelian tradition), it is only when human beings recognize each other as co-authors of the norms that regulate the family, the market, and the democratic public space that such social spheres can reproduce themselves. We human beings can live in a social dimension that is normatively ruled if and only

---

<sup>55</sup> On these topics, see especially Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social*; Axel Honneth, "Love and Morality: On the Moral Content of Emotional Ties", in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007b).

<sup>56</sup> Honneth, 'Rejoinder', 402.

<sup>57</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 92-93.

if we recognize each other as agents who are entitled to judge the legitimacy of the norms and rules that we share in a given social context. In light of this general definition of ‘reciprocal recognition’ as the constitutive dynamic of the social world, it is possible to specify recognition’s reproductive role in functionalist terms.

In fact, in a recent account that is related to a discussion about the notion of ‘*social pathology*’, Honneth tries to describe the process of social reproduction from a macro-social perspective. In this case, Honneth asserts that a society can reproduce itself if the institutional organs that constitute it as a whole accomplish three functional tasks: the implementation of socialization, the modification and working on external nature, and the regulation of interpersonal relations of recognition.<sup>58</sup> At first sight, also according to this account of social reproduction, the imperative of recognition is the main pivot of social reproduction. In fact, forms of caregiving between parents and children support the dynamic of socialization that emerges in the family. Through reciprocal forms of recognition that rely on love, members of a family can experience patterns of cooperation that prepare them for more complex forms of collaboration in the economic sphere and in the public one. If we focus on those social activities that aim to control and modify external nature, working in favor of the material production of goods and commodities, interpersonal recognition is of fundamental importance too. Talking about the market economy, Honneth asserts that market behavior and institutions can fulfill their instrumental function if they are “embedded in feelings of solidarity that precede all contracts and obligate economic actors to treat each other fairly and justly”.<sup>59</sup> This means that, in terms of intersubjective recognition, the activities that allow material production and the achievement of profit and self-interest must be subordinated to the capacity of social agents to recognize each other as members of a cooperative community. Finally, discussing the activity of the regulation of relations of recognition, Honneth seems

---

<sup>58</sup> For this account of social reproduction see Axel Honneth, “The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept”, trans. Arvi Särkelä, in *Social Research*, vol. 81, no. 3 (2014b): 683-703.

<sup>59</sup> Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 181.

akin to inscribe such practice in the political dimension of the democratic public sphere and constitutional state. In this case, the democratic process of general will formation, which is necessary in order to implement and actualize publicly rights and duties that are collectively acknowledged, presupposes that individuals that belong to a specific political community recognize each other “as equally entitled citizens within the nation-state”.<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, following the Hegelian tradition, Honneth conceives the social spheres of recognition as relational institutions that mediate interactions among social actors. Social orders of recognition impose roles and expectations on social agents, allowing them to realize their own intentions in harmony with the expectations of other social agents. In this way, relational institutions allow social subjects to learn to cooperate in order to realize material conditions that are necessary for the accomplishment of individual plans of each member of the social community. Thanks to institutionalized spheres of recognition, human beings learn to see in their partner of interaction not a limit or an obstacle for their individual freedom, but the indispensable condition for the realization of their ends and well-being. In friendship, for instance:

The role of obligations of which we are implicitly aware intertwine in a way that ensures mutual trust and the certainty that even our most idiosyncratic and odd desires will be taken seriously and not be betrayed. [...] In friendships, individuals can and should reveal to others the experiences to which they have privileged access, thus eliminating the boundaries required in everyday communication. When it comes to friendship, being with oneself in the other means entrusting one’s own desires in all their diffuseness and tentativeness to another person without compulsion and fear.<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, it is easy to see how, for Honneth, individual self-flourishing and social non-coercive cooperation are essentially entangled. Thanks to spheres of recognition, we learn the basic needs and social goods through which every member of our society can pursue individual wellness. In the family, for instance, we learn

---

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, 261.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, 139-140.

that parental and friendship relationships are fundamental to satisfy our affective needs; while in the labor market, we realize that to be recognized as an active contributor to social cooperation can enhance our self-esteem, driving us to improve our skills and competencies. When we understand the quality of social relations that generate the preconditions of our personal wellness and self-realization, we realize at the same time that reciprocity, the capacity to support those similar in reaching the same benefits we are looking for, is the keystone for our self-flourishing. I can appreciate the value of love relations in the family for my individual well-being only if I have relatives that are capable of loving me and that wish to receive my love. In the labor market dimension, I can enjoy self-esteem only if my partner of interactions appreciates the social value of my work and efforts, and I learn to appreciate them for the contribution they provide to me as a member of the same community. In the democratic public sphere, I can gain self-respect and consider myself as co-author of the social norms that I obey in everyday life if my fellow citizens recognize me as a legitimate member of a common political community, who is capable of providing a rational and valuable contribution to a process of collective self-legislation. In this respect, it can be said that, for Honneth, through social spheres of recognition individuals can achieve individual psychological wellness and, at the same time, actualize collective actions that are fundamental to the material reproduction of society. To sum up, social institutions like the family, market, and the democratic public sphere have a constitutive role as they guarantee the actuation of those collective social practices (sexual reproduction, commodities production, and symbolic communication) that support the full reproduction of society. At the same time, such institutions are the expression of those recognitive relations that represent the precondition for humans' individual flourishing.

To sum up, a given institutional or social sphere, like the family or the labor market, can reproduce itself, that is, the range of practices and actions that defines its nature, if and only if in such a sphere individuals actualize acts of recognition that are morally appropriate in a double sense. On the one side, the different social

spheres should favor the implementation of reciprocal forms of recognition, limiting, therefore, the selfish motives of social agents and favoring the realization of behavior that is beneficial for the collectivity. Institutionalized spheres of social recognition permit the realization of social freedom, that is to say, a form of collective action that is based on social cooperation, through which individuals realize particular ends that they cannot achieve individually. On the other side, such forms of recognition should favor also the realization of individual autonomy and well-being. They must guarantee the achievement of those psychological pre-conditions (self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem) that are indispensable for individuals to develop a positive self-relationship.

At this point, it is essential to underline two fundamental aspects of Honneth's perspective. First, it is clear how, for Honneth, the collective coordination among individuals that are involved in the reproduction of the society always happens in a particular symbolic framework that is provided by objective social institutions. The latter, on the one hand, are essential as they provide both categories of perception, evaluation, and normative criteria that consent social agents to recognize each other as partners of interaction with complementary qualities and powers. On the other, the symbolic framework allows individuals to perceive and attribute specific qualities to bodily and linguistic actions that can express interpersonal recognition. In the context of the family and intimate relationships, to receive a kiss or a hug can be interpreted as an empirical mark of the fact that our partner of interaction perceives us as subjects that deserve love and care. In the work sphere, a pay raise can testify the fact that our employer appreciates the outcomes of our work and esteems us as professionals. In this regard, the symbolic dimension that governs and consents the actualization of mutual relationships of recognition constantly mediates the reproduction of society. In the end, Honneth claims that the social world provides

the normative content to the expectations of recognition that constitute the invariant anthropological and formal element of human beings.<sup>62</sup>

Another way to express the same idea is to underline that, according to Honneth, relations of recognition are implemented in an objective social world, which is composed of tangible institutions that follow specific values and norms, and individuals with particular moral concerns and demands. In this respect, it is good to remember again that reciprocal recognition never happens in a vacuum. The expectations of the agents and the values that shape concrete forms of recognition are dependent on the historical and social context in which agents themselves are living. In this regard, for instance, the ways in which relationships of love were realized in European families during the nineteenth century (that were basically heterosexual, patriarchal, and hierarchic) were meaningfully different from those implemented in the contemporary family (that tend to be more egalitarian and inclusive in gender terms).

Second, Honneth's idea of social reproduction intuitively implies that the acquisition of socially acknowledged patterns of recognition and, thus, the motivations to act accordingly to them are entangled with the emotional sphere of individuals. To be recognized as subjects that deserve care and love, esteem for one's social contribution to the material reproduction of the society and respect as a member of a particular political community put us in the condition to receive from our partners of interaction concrete demonstrations of love, appreciation, and solidarity. The positive feelings that we experience when we feel loved, esteemed, or respected do not contribute only to the development of our individual self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect. Instead, such feelings and emotions also likely push us to re-enact those institutionalized practices through which we have the opportunity to experience states of psychological well-being, favoring the emergence of stable behavioral patterns.

---

<sup>62</sup> However, it is debatable how invariant this element is, both in reality and in Honneth's account.

In this respect, it is not surprising that Honneth acknowledges the fact that recognition can be also a powerful instrument for ensuring the reproduction of unfair social orders. Honneth's model of recognition does not exclude that socially widespread forms of recognition can hide or work in favor of the reproduction of situations of domination. In fact, in some cases, ideological narratives can depict valuable sets of social values and qualities that allow positive forms of individual self-identification and individual flourishing and that appear reasonable to social agents:<sup>63</sup>

By promising social recognition for the subjective demonstration of certain abilities, needs, or desires, they engender a willingness to adopt a web of practices and modes of behavior that suit the reproduction of social domination.<sup>64</sup>

However, it is necessary to underline that Honneth conceives such a process of social reproduction based on forms of ideological recognition as a particular type of social pathology. Ideological patterns of recognition help a dominant group or class to preserve and promote their particular interests without coercion, raising the spontaneous and active participation of the dominated in social practices that favor only a narrow portion of the society. The mobilizing power of ideological forms of recognition is dependent on the credible and reasonable nature of the evaluative vocabulary, and the norms that such patterns can offer. Therefore, the degree of normative rationality is not the element that can allow critical theorists to distinguish healthy modes of interpersonal recognition from ideological ones. As Honneth underlines, only the gap between the promises of recognition promoted by a certain ideology and their material fulfillment can help social theorists to discriminate between them and morally positive forms of recognition:

Generally speaking, such ideological forms will attain greater success the more fully they account for the evaluative expectations that point the way toward progress in the culture of reciprocal recognition. But the deficiency by which we might recognize such ideologies could consist in their structural inability to ensure the material prerequisites for realizing new evaluative qualities.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> On this point, see Honneth, "Recognition as Ideology".

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, 342.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, 346.



This is especially true, for instance, for the recent developments in the labor market. In such a context, often work is no longer experienced by social actors as burden and sacrifice, but as the main path for self-realization. At the same time, the actual market of labor tends to provide recognition and, thus, the opportunity to earn higher salaries only to those that show originality, the spirit of a self-entrepreneur, and success. The social affirmation of this conception of authenticity can give to businesses and employers the possibility to emotionally dominate their employees, compelling them to continually increase their professional commitment and performance in order to achieve a good reputation, better social position, and a higher quality of life. The downside of such a form of recognition based on professional success, admiration, and competition is that it can push employee workers to adopt a behavior that is well-suited to free-lancers and entrepreneurs, but without them benefitting from the advantages. In fact, even if she shows creativity, autonomy, and flexibility, a wage laborer hardly receives the same advantages as an entrepreneur in terms of social recognition and improvement of the material condition of life. While a manager can capitalize on his efforts in terms of economic health and social prestige, an employee can aspire only to achieve a new self-conception without acquiring more economic power and professional power.

In describing the productive power of ideological recognition, Honneth confirms the description of the process of social reproduction. Practical behavior that is actualized in the process of recognition possesses not only a functional value, but also an expressivist one. Those actions that are fundamental for reproductive and productive ends in the family, labor, and commodities market, and the public sphere of politics, also possess a symbolic value that is pivotal for guarantying the success of the dynamic of reciprocal recognition. In this respect, the reproductive cycle of a given society relies not only on its capacity to allow sexual reproduction, commodities production, and symbolic communication. The social actions that sustain such functionalist aims have to be meaningful also in light of the process of interpersonal recognition through which individuals can develop some sort of self-

flourishing and psychological well-being. Unequal and unfair distribution of power among members of society can reproduce itself without coercion and physical violence if it is supported by a set of relations of reciprocal recognition that provide the oppressed and victims of injustice with evaluative properties that are reasonable and positive for individual self-relationships.

However, Honneth gives us only the means to distinguish ideological and non-ideological forms of recognition. He does not explain which the social mechanisms are behind the social creation and dissemination of such altered patterns that ease the reproduction of social domination. In general, following Christopher Zurn's conception, Honneth seems to share the idea that social diffusion of such pathological circumstances depends on a weakening of social actors' critical skills.<sup>66</sup> When social agents act according to some ideological patterns of recognition, they are not able to grasp the fact that, in doing so, they reinforce the material conditions that determine social domination. To act accordingly to an ideological promise of recognition means to behave coherently with the interests of a dominant group, without enjoying the material conditions that are necessary for achieving integral self-realization and positive self-relationships. When dominated agents persevere in such conduct, then something is not working in their reflexive ability. They are not capable of grasping the fact that a hegemonic interpretation of a given set of norms of recognition can exclusively work in favor of a dominant minority. Such an interpretation, curiously, overlooks the structural social conditions that provoke the affirmation of ideological forms of recognition, focusing only on the pathologies of the reflexive abilities of social actors. As Arto Laitinen has suggested, such an account of social reproduction through ideological recognition does not take into account "the 'third' layer of preventive obstacles for critical thoughts stopping them

---

<sup>66</sup> See Zurn, "Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders". Zurn asserts that the etiology of social pathologies is always characterized by "constitutive disconnects between first-order contents and second-order reflexive comprehension of those contents, where those disconnects are pervasive and socially caused". Honneth explicitly praises and endorses this model of social pathology in Honneth, "Rejoinder", in *Axel Honneth. Critical Essays*, 417.

from ever becoming effective”.<sup>67</sup> More specifically, Honneth’s explanation of social reproduction and pathologies reflects a lack of attention to both subjective and objective factors that can intervene in such processes:

On the side of the subjects (a), there could be motivational or practical obstacles: the agents could be disciplined so that they ignore their second-order reflections perhaps as ‘naïve’ or ‘utopian,’ or as fit objects for ridicule. More importantly, on the side of the social reality (b), the situation could be such that effective criticism is pre-empted, critical voices doomed to be silenced in advance, or the credibility or authority of the complaints taken away by default.<sup>68</sup>

If we focus on the side of the subjects, Honneth (and, more generally, the Hegelian perspective) does not explain thoroughly the process of learning and internalization of those social norms that the members of a community have established together. On the objective side, there is no doubt that Honneth attributes an important role to social institutions and entities when he is talking about individual flourishing and social reproduction. However, he does not clarify what the properties are of these social objects. Do complex social entities like the family and the market possess some kind of agential power that individuals do not own? Otherwise, should we conceive them as social spaces that are ruled by norms that limit the intentional agency of social agents, clarifying the set of actions that the latter can implement in a given social context?

These questions will be discussed in an extensive and more detailed way in chapter 3. Instead, in the next section, I will try to highlight how Bourdieu’s account can help us to identify the social factors, objective, and subjective ones, which enables us to describe more precisely the social mechanisms and conditions that guarantee the success of social reproduction. The first one is the *accumulation of symbolic capital and power*. The second salient element is the development of agential habitus that are consistent with the objective structures of social reality. Then, I will

---

<sup>67</sup> Arto Laitinen, “Social Pathologies, Reflexive Pathologies, and the Idea of Higher-Order Disorders”, in *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 25, no. 2 (2015): 52.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*, 50.

argue that Bourdieu's ideas about social reproduction are consistent with Honneth's ones. In fact, recognition seems to play an important role also in Bourdieu's account of social reproduction, which mainly analyzes the process of reproduction of unfair social systems that are characterized by a constant situation of competition and potential struggle.

## 2.2 Bourdieu's account of social reality and reproduction

Bourdieu considers human societies as a complex system of different social spaces, or fields, which are governed by specific sets of rules, norms, and values that are independent of each other.<sup>69</sup> For instance, if we consider Western society, the dynamics that characterize the economic field<sup>70</sup> are divergent and irreducible from those that animate the scientific field<sup>71</sup> and the family.<sup>72</sup> In the economic field, individual and collective agents struggle for maximization of individual profit and accumulation of money and means of production. In the market of consumption, in which the logic of supply and demand is the prominent one, they perceive each other as producers and consumers, and the former compete for profit maximization trying to satisfy consumers' demands in the best way possible. In the scientific environment, scholars and scientists try to acquire academic credibility, i.e., scientific capital, producing research that is coherent with acknowledged scientific practices and criteria. In the family, sexual practices that are fundamental to the reproduction of the family unit itself are supposed to be consistent with values like love and care.

More specifically, for Bourdieu, society can be conceived as a multilayered set of fields that are characterized by different forms of operating principles, specific logics

---

<sup>69</sup> An in-depth analysis of the concept of 'field' is provided in chapter 8.

<sup>70</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Structures Sociales de l'Économie* (Paris: Seuil, 2000b).

<sup>71</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Specificity of the Scientific Field and the Social Conditions of the Progress of Reason", *Information (International Social Science Council)* 14, no. 6 (1975), 19-47; id., "The Peculiar History of Scientific Reason", *Sociological Forum* 6, no. 1 (1991), 3-26.

<sup>72</sup> For an accurate account of the family as a field of struggle see Will Atkinson. "A Sketch of 'Family' as a Field: From Realized Category to Space of Struggle", in *Acta Sociologica* 57, no. 3 (2014): 223-235, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699313511470>.

of action, and various forms of capital at stake. In this regard, Bourdieu can state that a field is

a field of forces, whose necessity is imposed on agents who are engaged in it, and a field of struggles within which agents confront each other, with differentiated means and ends according to their position in the structure of the field of forces, thus contributing to conserving or transforming its structure.<sup>73</sup>

According to this definition, a social field consists of a *network of positions*. In other words, the social relations of power that social agents established among themselves in a specific social environment generates a dynamic or flux of social forces that affect practically agents' behavior, determining and limiting agents' possible choices of action. Furthermore, Bourdieu characterizes the fields as fields of struggles for the allocation of capital.<sup>74</sup> Such allocation is regulated by contingent sets of norms and rules that reflect the essence of the capital at stake. Consequently, a field does not have a static and necessary form, as far as competition and conflicts among individuals may change its structure. An increase of capital for a specific agent can cause the change of her position in a given field, modifying consequently the set of relations of power that was previously operating in the same field. So, what does the concept of 'capital' label exactly? As often and rightly underlined, Bourdieu distances himself from the Marxist tradition as he provides an analysis of capital that is not solely economic. In fact, Bourdieu asserts that the types of capital are as many as the number of fields that constitute the social dimension. During his intellectual career, Bourdieu has mainly studied three genres of capital:

- *economic capital*: all those goods (commodities, means of production, financial products, etc.) which are directly convertible to money and determine the economic wealth of individuals, groups, and classes;

---

<sup>73</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons Pratiques: Sur la Théorie de l'Action* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 55.

<sup>74</sup> This characterization of the field is what distinguishes Bourdieu's critical sociology from *functionalistic approaches*. In fact, Bourdieu's sociological proposal is not based on the functionalistic assumption that a social space can reproduce itself thanks to some sort of systemic cohesion and self-regulation. That is also why Bourdieu post-structuralism is, according to the present reading, largely compatible with both an action-theoretic account of power and social actions and, as we will see, with Honneth's conceptualization of recognition and struggles for recognition.

- *cultural capital*: the set of educational resources that can be transmitted from a generation to another in 1) embodied forms (as individual attitudes, dispositions and preferences toward cultural objects, and movements and environments); 2) in objective forms (cultural goods like artworks and books); and 3) in institutionalized forms (academic qualifications, certificates of cultural and technical competence);

- *social capital*: the totality of resources related to the possession of a network of relations of mutual acquaintance and recognition. In this regard, social capital can consist of belonging to a family, a social class, a tribe, or an academy.<sup>75</sup>

The previous definition of ‘capital’ can help us to grasp in a better way the idea according to which fields are spaces of social struggle that are characterized by particular sets of norms and rules that depend on the nature of the capital at stake. For instance, the rules that define the nature of the economic fields of a given society (the market of labor and commodities, its productive organizations) are different from those that inform its religious dimension or its cultural environment. In the economic field, the rules obey the idea that social agents must maximize their economic capital in order to reach an advantageous position of power in economic competition. In the cultural field, the accumulation of the capital at stake requires the satisfaction of criteria and norms that can be inconsistent with the logic of economic profit. The acquisition of authority and power in the artistic or academic sphere can require the adoption of plans of action that go against the idea of maximization of profit. For instance, the accumulation of cultural capital in the form of academic titles can oblige social agents to make investments of money and time that are unproductive according to economic logic. Otherwise, such behavior can allow agents to reach credibility and prestige and, thus, power in the academic environment.

---

<sup>75</sup> For a precise and concise account of these types of capital see Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, in *Handbook of Theory for Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258. A more detailed discussion regarding the notion of ‘capital’ is given in chapter 5.

Finally, let us consider the notion of 'habitus'.<sup>76</sup> Broadly speaking, Bourdieu considers habitus as

a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems.<sup>77</sup>

With the term 'habitus', Bourdieu identifies the whole set of subjective mental and bodily dispositions (beliefs, perceptive schemes, and bodily skills) that allows human beings to categorize immediately specific social situations and act properly in each social field. Such a characterization of habitus is coherent with Bourdieu's idea that social actions are not solely outcomes of our pure rational calculation. In fact, in a later description of the concept, Bourdieu states that habitus are

structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.<sup>78</sup>

Although distinctive forms of practical logic (or, using Bourdieu's terms, distinctive forms of *doxa*) characterize different fields, Bourdieu states that all social fields share an invariant structural trait: the division and struggle between dominants and dominated. Inside each field, the ruling class struggles with dominated social actors, which can be dominated fractions of the ruling class or subordinated social groups, for preserving or increasing a given distribution of power in the field itself.<sup>79</sup> In the economic field, producers can try to increase their profit by decreasing the costs of production and selling low-quality commodities, while consumers can defend their interests by ensuring that the legal obligation of providing clear

---

<sup>76</sup> As for the concepts of 'capital' and 'field', also Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus is deepened in chapter 7.

<sup>77</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique*, 261, Engl. transl., 82-83.

<sup>78</sup> Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, 88, Engl. transl., 53.

<sup>79</sup> In some sense, it can be argued that Bourdieu universalizes Marxist conception of class struggle. Social conflicts grounded on conflicting interests go beyond the economy into all spheres of social life.

information about the quality and safety of products for choosing commodities are met. In the scientific field, scholars, research institutes, and universities fight each other over having their own scientific paradigms and programs acknowledged as legitimate. In the family, there can be gender conflict among parents in relation to the distribution of care work, or between parents and children related to the life-choice of the latter (the type of scholar education, professional aspirations, or marriages with partners that belong to different classes, cultures, and religions). A different allocation of the capital at stake in a given field affects the nature of the relations among agents that belong to the same class or divergent groups. This implies, for instance, the possibility of conflict for power inside the ruling class, or coordination and cooperation between classes or groups that occupy conflicting positions inside a field. In the sphere of consumption, producers presumably have more economic capital than consumer associations and, most likely, can employ it for sustaining a massive marketing campaign for manipulating the needs and desires of consumers themselves. In the scientific field, researchers and academics can use their scientific capital (credibility, position in the academy and international system of ranking, etc.) to impose on other members of the scientific community with less prestige a particular agenda of scientific investigation or prerequisites for taking part in the scientific community. In the family, for instance, asymmetric distribution of emotional capital can be determined by order of birth of children or a prominent masculine culture, which generate conflict for parental love among siblings of different ages and genders.

However, given such conditions according to which social struggles are a constant factor in our social life, how is it possible to stabilize a social order that, usually, favors a narrow dominant group and guarantee its reproduction? Clearly, in order to survive, it is reasonable to assume that a society must be able to ensure, first, its own material reproduction, which is grounded in the social division of productive and sexual labor. In other terms, on the one hand, social agents should be enabled to enact forms of collective strategies and activities that allow the creation of



commodities and goods (food, clothes, services, education, etc.) that are essential for the satisfaction of human material needs. On the other hand, it is only through the actualization of effective intimate relationships that a society can achieve a satisfying birth rate, which is indispensable for its existence. Nevertheless, in Bourdieu's picture, such practical activities seem governed by an antagonistic and competitive logic in which individuals and social groups aim to increase the capital they have in a specific field. Therefore, in which way can such a competitive dynamic be coherent with the process of social reproduction? In which way can it leave room for the actualization of complex social activities that, at first sight, seem to rely on mutuality and cooperation?

In order to answer the latter question, it is good to focus on the dynamic of the symbolic reproduction of a society and its imbrication with the process of reciprocal recognition. First, let us introduce and clarify the concept of 'symbolic power' and its role in Bourdieu's critical sociology. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu writes:

Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality, and one which tends to establish a *gnoseological* order [...]. Symbols are the instruments *par excellence* of 'social integration': as instruments of knowledge and communication [...], they make it possible for there to be a *consensus* on the meaning of the social world, a consensus which contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of the social order. 'Logical' integration is the precondition of 'moral' integration.<sup>80</sup>

Let us try to study analytically such a definition for underlining its linguistic nature. First, it is evident that Bourdieu considers symbolic power as a form of linguistic and illocutionary power through which human beings can create a social world. Symbolic power is necessary to establish and preserve social consensus, that is, a set of collectively shared beliefs about the nature and shape of social reality. To exercise symbolic power means, for instance, to promote the idea that a heterosexual family is a natural unit that is essential for the healthy development of human beings. Such a symbolic imposition can happen in different fields. The heterosexual image

---

<sup>80</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 166.

of the family may be supported by the dominant elite of a religious field (we may think about the Catholic Church and its symbolic actions for promoting a certain traditional idea of the family), but also by some fractions of the dominant economic class of a given society. This is the case, by way of illustration, when such an image of the family is useful for a successful product-placement in the commodities market, a social sphere in which entrepreneurs can increase their economic capital. In light of this, it is therefore important to underline the point Bourdieu is emphasizing when he states, “‘Logical’ integration is the precondition of ‘moral’ integration”. He affirms nothing but that the process of symbolic reproduction is not based on any form of normative agreement or rational communication between social agents that are in asymmetric relations of power. In fact, in Bourdieu’s picture, social communication is not free from relations of power. A narrow group of social agents that possess most of the capital in a specific field controls and shapes a given symbolic framework:

the dominant culture produces this ideological effect by concealing the function of division beneath the function of communication: the culture which unifies (the medium of communication) is also the culture which separates (the instrument of distinction) and which legitimates distinctions by forcing all other cultures (designated as sub-cultures) to define themselves by their distance from the dominant culture.<sup>81</sup>

However, Bourdieu clearly asserts that, in order to be effective, the symbolic representation of the social world has to be acknowledged by all the participants in the social game. More specifically, he affirms that the acknowledgment of the symbolic meaning of social reality is possible “only inasmuch as those who undergo it recognize those who wield it”.<sup>82</sup> As in the case of economic, social, and cultural power, in fact, the possession of symbolic power is related to a struggle to impose “the legitimate vision of the social world and its division”. The central role of the symbolic struggle for the process of reproduction of every social field is clearly highlighted in the final pages of *La Distinction*:

---

<sup>81</sup> *Ibidem*, 167.

<sup>82</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 122, Engl. transl., 148.

The individual or collective classification struggles aimed at transforming the categories of perception and appreciation of the social world and, through this, the social world itself, are indeed a forgotten dimension of the class struggle.<sup>83</sup>

As in every struggle, social actors fight to maximize the possession of a specific capital. In the case of conflicts for symbolic power, the capital at stake is a symbolic one. Given that, what exactly is symbolic capital? Bourdieu conceives symbolic capital in terms of social prestige and honor and, thus, recognition:

agents possess power in proportion to their symbolic capital, i.e. in proportion to the recognition they receive from a group. The authority that underlies the performative efficacy of discourse is a *percipi*, a being-known, which allows a *percipere* to be imposed, or, more precisely, which allows the consensus concerning the meaning of the social world, which grounds common sense to be imposed officially, i.e. in front of everyone and in the name of everyone.<sup>84</sup>

This passage stresses an important feature of symbolic capital: the role that interpersonal recognition plays among social actors and, consequently, in the dynamics of social games in general. The imposition of symbolic representation and, therefore, the acceptance and the subjective embodiment of sets of dispositions, which are coherent with the interests of dominant groups, do not have a merely epistemic nature. Social consensus about the dominants' symbolic framework is always the result of a previous process of reciprocal recognition among individuals, social groups, and classes. In this picture, recognition precedes the acquisition and the possibility to exercise symbolic power and, in the end, it is necessary for guaranteeing the success of interaction among objective social structures and subjective embodied dispositions:

Symbolic capital enables forms of domination, which imply dependence on those who can dominate by it, since it only exists through the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others, and can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique Sociale du Jugement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2016), 564, Engl. transl. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 483.

<sup>84</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 106.

<sup>85</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 204.

A dominant class can stabilize its social position through the exercise of symbolic power, that is to say, through the imposition of those schemes of thought, perception, and action that concur to foster dominant class interests. In turn, the control of symbolic power is dependent on the acquisition and accumulation of symbolic capital, i.e., the social recognition that dominant classes can obtain from a dominated group coherently with the historical values and norms that regulate a specific form of social life (prestige, honor, esteem, and so on).

The relevant point that I would like to underline is that such a form of group recognition must be reciprocal. In other terms, the dominants' position of material and symbolic power is not only dependent on the social recognition that they can gain from oppressed agents. It is related also to their capacity to actively recognize the dominated. This aspect will appear clearer if we focus on the effect of the exercise of symbolic power. Bourdieu's explanation takes into account the idea of collective and individual internalization of those modes of classification, schemes of perception, and categories of evaluations which depict the unequal distribution of capital among social agents as a natural fact:

Symbolic violence is the coercion [...] which, being merely the incorporated form of the structure of the relation of domination, make this relation appear as natural; or, in other words, when the schemes they implement in order to perceive and evaluate themselves or to perceive and evaluate the dominators (high/low, male/female, white/ black, etc.) are the product of the incorporation of the (thus naturalized) classifications of which their social being is the product.<sup>86</sup>

This is why, following Bourdieu, symbolic power is the most important tool through which dominants can preserve their status and the social reproduction of social asymmetries of class, status, and power. As we have seen in the previous chapter, social agents can act spontaneously and coherently in a specific field thanks to habitus; namely an embodied set of dispositions and classificatory schemes that works on the pre-reflexive level. On the other hand, to possess symbolic capital and power means to be able to shape the agents' habitus by imposing on subordinated

---

<sup>86</sup> *Ibidem*, 170.

classes the adoption of schemes of categorizations, perception, and evaluations that favor the interests of dominant groups, thus making the shape of a given society appear as a natural, necessary order. Once the categories of perception, reasoning, and judgment of the subordinated reflect the ruling class' perspective and are interiorized in the form of bodily habitus, the oppressed cannot realize that the asymmetric relations of power in which they are involved are socially construed and unfair. They perceive them as natural and necessary.

Moreover, in the process of acquisition and stabilization of habitus, the dynamics of recognition and, thus, a positive individual self-relationship of the dominated play a central role. This aspect clearly emerges, for instance, when Bourdieu talks about the conditions that determine the social diffusion and affirmation of managerial capitalism. Following Bourdieu, the objective truth, the real and material mechanism of this mode of production, that is, the unpaid exploitation of labor, works because the social actors who are involved in the economic field cannot grasp it. In fact, Bourdieu thinks that the mechanism of the exploitation of labor that is at the base of capitalism is veiled and hidden by the subjective experience that social agents have of the capitalist society:

Workers may contribute to their own exploitation through the very effort they make to appropriate their work, which binds them to it through the freedoms - often minute and almost always 'functional' - that are left to them, and under the effect of the competition born of the differences - relative to unskilled workers, immigrants, the young, women that are constitutive of the occupational space functioning as a field.<sup>87</sup>

For Bourdieu, the subjective truth about social reality, the positive subjective experience of the social world that the subordinated classes can have, has thus to rely on a symbolic system of rewards and some forms of satisfaction that are available for the dominated agents. In other words, a social system that is objectively characterized by asymmetries of power and competition (that is, for Bourdieu, a specific form of class struggle) can reproduce itself only if the dominated can enjoy

---

<sup>87</sup> *Ibidem*, 203.

“compensatory satisfaction and consolation prizes that tend to blur the perception and evaluation of self and others”.<sup>88</sup> The post-Fordist system of production, for instance,

while taking care to keep control of the instruments of profit, leaves workers the freedom to organize their own work, thus helping to increase their well-being but also to displace their interest from the external profit of labour (the wage) to the intrinsic profit.<sup>89</sup>

In this respect, we may affirm that, in a capitalist society, exploited workers are driven to endorse, willingly or not, the interests of the ruling class through a set of social rewards and gains that do not represent a threat for the process of accumulation of economic capital that is enacted by the dominant (in the specific case, employers and big capitalists). Furthermore, we can say that internalization of schemes of perception, evaluation, and action that are coherent with the interests of the dominant classes is obtained and reinforced, in every social field of a given society, by this procedure of symbolic reward itself that offers social agents in a position of subordination the achievement of some form of well-being:

Adapting to a dominated position implies a form of acceptance of domination. The effects of political mobilization itself do not easily counterbalance the effects of the inevitable dependence of self-esteem on occupational status and income, signs of social value previously legitimated by the sanctions of the educational market.<sup>90</sup>

Therefore, we can assert that the categories of perception, evaluation, and judgment that concur to depict a specific social order as natural, generalizing, and fostering the perspective of the ruling class, should be capable also to favor the self-perception of dominated agents as non-dominated subjects that are working against their social interests. More specifically, following Bourdieu's example, the post-Fordist mode of production ensures the realization of surplus labor driving waged workers to experience their own activities as a result of a free choice, as a form of

---

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, 190.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, 204-205.

<sup>90</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 448, Engl. transl., 386.

labor that is under their control. In this way, waged workers can perceive themselves as independent workers that have the right and power to sell their force labor coherently with their plans and individual aspirations. Briefly put, we could assert that, for Bourdieu, members of dominated groups tend to endorse the symbolic framework that is coherent with the interests of the dominant class as far as it guarantees them the possibility to achieve a compensatory form of positive self-relationship. If we assume Honneth's viewpoint considering this idea, we could say that the symbolic framework of a dominant class can be adopted by the dominated if it allows the implementation of relations of reciprocal recognition that are positive to the dominated themselves. We can think about several ways to reach such a condition of spontaneous acceptance by referring to successful practices of recognition.

For instance, when the dominated tend to attribute to themselves some qualities that traditionally belong to the members of the dominant class, or when ideas and values of the dominant classes do not prevent the dominated to enact successful forms of reciprocal recognition with other members of their own group. In other words, the naturalization of the relations of power in a given field or society is dependent also on the partial recognition, direct or indirect, that the dominated concede to the dominants. When the latter perceive themselves as agents that share some substantial properties with the dominant, or when they can actualize positive relations of recognition with members of the same class or group, it is reasonable to think that the dominated might tend to justify or, at least, acknowledge the dominants' system of norms and value and, thus, objective asymmetries of power.

## 2.3 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have seen how both Honneth and Bourdieu, for different reasons and starting from different pictures of social reality, share the idea that the process of reproduction and stabilization of society has one of its main mechanisms in the

dynamic of recognition. Honneth states that a given set of collective social practices can reproduce itself only if such practices obey the imperative of reciprocal recognition; that is, by supporting human beings in the achievement of a positive self-relationship and in the implementation of successful forms of collective cooperation. In this regard, Honneth admits that an unfair society is also capable of reproducing itself in so far as the interpersonal forms of recognition that characterize it can provide social agents with some sort of support for achieving some sort of positive self-relationship. However, Honneth does not fulfill the ontological commitment of clarifying the nature and status of those entities and mechanisms that allow the implementation of concrete relationships of recognition, which always happen in historical situations.

In turn, Bourdieu asserts that the success of social reproduction relies on the achievement of harmonization between the objective relations that constitute a social field and the dispositional habitus of the agents who are operative in the field itself. Such stabilization is dependent, according to Bourdieu, on the distribution of symbolic capital and power; that is to say, the ability to shape norms, rules, and values that govern the social interaction in social fields depends on the capacity of a given group or class to attract and give recognition. Once a dominating group or class succeeds in controlling the symbolic capital that is necessary for exercising symbolic power, it can shape the perceptive, epistemic, and bodily dispositions of all the agents that take part in a specific social game. Given that, for Bourdieu, the objective practical logic of a social field is shaped in such a way that the dominant group can preserve its position of power, to exercise symbolic power means to inculcate into dominated agents a habitus that is coherent with the dominant group's interest. In this respect, the chapter has highlighted how Bourdieu concedes that the amount of symbolic power a dominant group can gain is dependent on the dynamics of recognition in two ways. First, it depends on the social recognition that it can receive from dominated agents. Second, it relies on the capacity of a symbolic framework, which is usually shaped by a dominant group, to grant the dominated to achieve



some sort of positive individual self-relationship. When such conditions are fulfilled, social agents tend to develop pre-reflexive habitus that are coherent with the nature and shape of specific social fields and, therefore, with the interests of the dominant group or class. If it is so, for Bourdieu, as well as for Honneth, a given society can reproduce itself in as much as social practices embody also an expressivist and symbolic meaning that can foster processes of mutual recognition among individuals.

In the next chapter, we focus on a particular form of social action, social struggle, which plays an important role for both Honneth and Bourdieu. It has been said that, from Bourdieu's perspective, the realization of asymmetric relationships of power relies on particular forms of reciprocal recognition between dominant and dominated agents. Starting from this premise, the next chapter argues that it seems possible, in theory, to conceive the struggle for the accumulation of symbolic capital in terms of a social struggle for recognition, and that Honneth's conception can be fruitful for deepening such a hypothesis. In doing so the next pages show also how social struggle as social action emerges because of the interrelated influences of structural factors and interpersonal ones. In addition, chapter 3 is devoted to clarifying why such conceptualization is possible, showing that both Bourdieu and Honneth consider social struggle as an ontological inevitable element of social life, which is essential for supporting social transformation.

### 3 HONNETH AND BOURDIEU ON SOCIAL STRUGGLE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

This chapter tries to underline how both Bourdieu and Honneth establish a strong connection between social reproduction, social struggles, and social transformation.<sup>91</sup> More specifically, the chapter aims to highlight how both thinkers consider social conflict as an inevitable dynamic of human societal life. For Bourdieu, in fact, struggles for the accumulation of economic, social, and cultural capital are invariant social practices that, in different social contexts, aim at controlling those symbolic means which guarantee social reproduction and the preservation of the dominants' interests. For Honneth, the appearance of social struggles depends on the fact that the norms that sustain social reproduction are constitutively open to recurrent re-interpretations appealing to previously neglected needs or interests. In this regard, it is asserted that, for them both, social reproduction consists not only of mechanisms of the symbolic stabilization of our social practices. Social and symbolic transformations that are related to social struggles are an important feature of social reproduction itself.

The first two sections highlight that Honneth and Bourdieu do not limit the idea of social reproduction to the sphere of the family in which social reproduction is merely biological and connected rigidly to the idea of care work. On the contrary,

---

<sup>91</sup> The idea that social transformation might be considered, from a critical-theoretic perspective, not as an interruption of the process of social reproduction but as one of its pivotal moment was first proposed by Arvi Särkelä, "Degeneration of Associated Life: Dewey's Naturalism about Social Criticism", in *Transaction* 53, no. 1 (2017), 107-126, doi:10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.53.1.07. As highlighted by Arto Laitinen and Arvi Särkelä, in "Four conceptions of social pathology", *European Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 1(2019), 80-102, Honneth himself sketches a similar position regarding the relationship between social transformation and social reproduction in "Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy", in Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*.

they consider social reproduction as a wider phenomenon, in which social struggles have a prominent role, which concerns different social spheres and involves also the replication and modification of human symbolic and cultural structures. In this respect, the first part of the chapter explains how, emphasizing the reconciliatory nature of social struggles for recognition, Honneth underlines the effects of social conflicts at the structural level in terms of the expansion and improvement of the inclusiveness of human societies. The second section tries to point out how Bourdieu tends to underline how a social struggle can work, and very often does, in favor of a dominant class and supports the reproduction of society that is characterized by asymmetries in the distribution and the exercise of power. In doing so, I also point out their respective differences. On the one hand, the chapter underlines how Bourdieu's conception of struggle for the acquisition of symbolic capital is entangled with an antagonistic conception of the struggle for recognition, which can be depicted as a zero-sum game. On the other hand, it highlights how Honneth privileges a progressive idea of the transformation that can result from social struggle, which is mainly seen by him as a means of social amelioration. According to this perspective, dominated groups can turn values and norms, which are socially accepted and institutionalized, against dominant elites and pursue their emancipatory interest as a dominated class.

In addition, the chapter highlights which preconditions Bourdieu and Honneth identify for explaining the appearance of social change. In fact, Honneth stresses only the weight of social suffering in describing the causes of the emergence of social conflicts. In contrast, Bourdieu points out the structural conditions that can generate a situation of social struggle, without disregarding the importance of human expectations of social recognition. In this respect, it is asserted that there is the opportunity to integrate Honneth's account with Bourdieu's one.

### 3.1 Honneth's account of social conflicts and transformation

In the previous chapter, we have seen how Axel Honneth considers the realization of successful forms of recognition as the cornerstone of healthy social reproduction.<sup>92</sup> In Honneth's perspective, recognition is a mode of intersubjective interaction that constitutes the necessary basis both for the actualization of several social practices and the achievement of an integral individual self-relationship and psychological well-being. Following Honneth, it can be said that a given society consists of a specific system of different orders of social recognition that can reproduce itself when it enables human beings to pursue their individual self-realization through forms of cooperation and collective actions that are characterized by mutuality:

the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one's partners in interaction, as their social addressee. [...] The aforementioned imperative, which is anchored in the social life-process, provides the normative pressure that compels individuals to remove constraints on the meaning of mutual recognition, since it is only by doing so that they are able to express socially the continually expanding claims of their subjectivity.<sup>93</sup>

However, Honneth himself underlines the fact that the evaluative properties and normative criteria that govern the actualization of the different forms of social recognition are always historically variable and amendable. That is why, for Honneth, social struggles can arise easily and often. For Honneth, social struggle is a collective activity that emerges in human societies because “the interpretation of socially valid norms is an essentially unfinished process, in which one-sided interpretations and

---

<sup>92</sup> However, Honneth acknowledges the possibility of social spheres reproducing themselves pathologically for long periods of time without any successful forms of reciprocal recognition in place, such as the patriarchal family or nineteenth century capitalism.

<sup>93</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 92-93.

resistance to them take turns with each other”.<sup>94</sup> A given manner of recognizing and being recognized can fail in several respects. First, there can be a discrepancy between the ideal and normative expectations of social agents and the way institutions and peers realize actions that should express recognition. As an example, ethnic, cultural, and sexual minorities of liberal-democratic countries have often criticized how the situations of discrimination and humiliation they suffer from are in contrast with the principle of equal rights and respect that is supposed to be pivotal in such societies.

Second, a specific form of recognition can become socially insufficient to satisfy both individual self-flourishing and the social reproduction of a given set of collective practices. The progressive extension of suffrage to members of the working class and women, for instance, testifies to the emergence of social claims for the reinterpretation of institutionalized norms of recognition in more inclusive terms. In this regard, the process of symbolic transformation that allows the reproduction of the society is inseparable from social struggles for redefining and re-interpreting the values, rules, and norms at work in a concrete society and the best way for actualizing them:

the source of recurrent social struggles is thought to lie in the fact that any disadvantaged social group will attempt to appeal to norms that are already institutionalized but that are being interpreted or applied in hegemonic ways, and to turn those norms against the dominant groups by relying on them for a moral justification of their own marginalized needs and interests.<sup>95</sup>

In other words, even if relationships of recognition have a constitutive role in relation to the ontological existence of a society, their correct implementation is dependent on institutionalized norms and rules that can be subjected to conflicting interpretations and divergent ideas regarding the best way to realize them.

---

<sup>94</sup> Axel Honneth, “Is There an Emancipatory Interest? An Attempt to Answer Critical Theory’s Most Fundamental Question”, in *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017), 913, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12321>.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibidem*, 914.

Generally, it is possible to identify at least two types of struggles that are discussed by Honneth. The first type of social conflict concerns the way social agents should implement concretely ideal forms of recognition. In this case, the struggle between individuals that suffer from some forms of social injustice and groups that contribute to the fostering of such situations happens according to the rules of the social game and inside the perimeter that is marked by a socially accepted set of norms and values. A significant number of cultural, religious, and gender minority struggles in Western countries illustrate this circumstance. In this case, the victims of oppressions are contesting not the liberal and democratic heritage of Western societies, or its ideological character. They are simply pointing out that there is a contradiction between the conditions of social exclusion, disrespect, and humiliation they suffer from and the normative framework of the social reality in which they take part.

The second form of social conflict is more radical and aims to put into discussion the criteria and qualities that rule the access of human beings to a particular context of recognition or even the legitimacy of the normative criteria that are embodied in a given set of social institutions. The feminist struggles for broadening the voting power to women represent an example of this kind of social conflict, as well as the bourgeoisie revolution that determined the switch from a feudal system that was based on the principle of honor to a society that is mainly grounded on the principles of esteem and respect.

Both struggles can have, in turn, different outcomes. According to Honneth, on the one hand, some struggles aim at fostering the process of individual flourishing by promoting the social acceptance of new aspects of the individual that were not recognized before. On the other hand, these two types of struggle can aspire to the improvement of social inclusion, increasing the number the number of people that are included in a specific order of recognition.

Concerning such issues, three aspects deserve to be underlined clearly. First, Honneth does not assert that subjects that are involved in social struggles are never

moved by utilitarian or strategic motives, like the abolition of private property or the opposition to excessive taxation. He simply affirms that such motivations often go hand in hand with experiences of misrecognition, or lack of recognition, that can harm the psychological well-being and self-relationships of individuals. Social struggles can be a response to forms of social disregard and humiliation that can provoke psychological suffering in social agents. In this respect, the main aim of the social struggle is, for Honneth, the suppression and the abolition of unjustified and unfair forms of social misrecognition:

Groups who experience exclusion or discrimination due to a hegemonic interpretation of norms do in fact tend to call these interpretations into question and to rebel against the existing social order.<sup>96</sup>

However, Honneth also argues that experiences of suffering related to the lack of recognition or misrecognition are not enough for achieving social emancipation. The latter appears to be strongly imbricated with a reflexive process that involves social agents at an individual and collective level. Experiences of social suffering are a fundamental motivational factor behind processes of social amelioration and have a causal role in triggering social conflicts. Nevertheless, they end up being impotent, useless, or even counterproductive if they are not supported by the exercise of those reflective skills that allow individuals to change their beliefs about the objective nature of social reality.

Second, Honneth admits that socio-political injustices and domination can be related to social circumstances in which the norms and values that rule the society reflect the interests of a dominant group. The latter imposes on other social subjects a unilateral, one-sided interpretation, which works in favor of a narrow set of individuals instead of supporting the common good of the society. In line with this picture, Honneth asserts that social groups that are dominated or are victims of injustices “will periodically attempt to deepen or expand the semantic content of

---

<sup>96</sup> *Ibidem*, 914.

those norms through creative re-interpretation”.<sup>97</sup> According to him, in order to achieve some form of social emancipation, oppressed groups must realize some important epistemic achievements. Initially, they must acquire an awareness of the essential interpretative openness of established norms in the face of a stubborn social tendency toward their naturalization. Afterward, they must be capable of determining which interests underlie people’s attachment to those dominant interpretations. In other words, dominated groups must decipher the particular class interests underlying the hegemonic interpretations of dominant social norms.

Third, in Honneth’s picture, when oppressed groups are put into the condition of reinterpreting the way social norms and values should be implemented, also dominant agents are likely to benefit from such symbolic and material transformation. Through the expansion of good relations of recognition, society can guarantee the increase of collective cooperation and, consequently, the empowerment and the social expansion of those objective preconditions that are indispensable for individual self-realization. According to Honneth, different forms of social struggle should have, as an outcome, the achievement of a social reconciliation between dominating and dominated groups, the oppressors and victims of injustice. In other words, a struggle for recognition aims at reconciling opposed groups through the cooperative reinterpretations of the norms that regulate social life and the transformation of the perceptive and evaluative patterns of an oppressing or dominant group. As a result, Honneth is likely to endorse the idea that the transformation of social institutions, collective habits, and customs does not represent an interruption or a malfunction in the process of social reproduction. On the contrary, it constitutes an inevitable phenomenon in human societies that allows enhancement of the collective life of human beings.

---

<sup>97</sup> *Ibidem*, 918.



### 3.2 Bourdieu's account of social conflicts and transformation

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bourdieu depicts human societies as a set of different social fields that are characterized by a never-ending struggle between classes (and fractions of classes) for the monopolization of different forms of capital. In one field agents may compete for the monopolization of a specific economic capital (e.g., means of production), in another one for the accumulation of a cultural capital that is necessary to determine what is and is not a licit culture. For Bourdieu, the idea that social struggles are a constant dynamic of social life depends on his definition of 'social field' in terms of a field of forces. The relations that agents involved in a field establish among each other determine the particular shape of a field. In turn, the degree of power an agent possesses in the field is related to her position in the field itself, that is to say, to the volume of capital that the agent possesses at a specific moment. Therefore, for instance, an agent with a poor amount of economic capital  $C_E$  will have a different set of possibilities of action compared to an agent that possesses a relevant volume of  $C_E$ . The second agent, for instance, could make an investment that is not available to the first one, or she can acquire expensive commodities that are hardly available for the former. In the same way, in the cultural field, agents that possess prestigious academic titles have more chances to acquire intellectual credibility or decent academic positions compared to agents that have attended a professional school. Given this picture, Bourdieu asserts that agents who obtain a huge amount of capital will tend to reinforce their position by stabilizing the actual distribution of power inside the field. In the same way, social agents who occupy the less advantageous positions in the field will tend to implement strategies that can put them in the condition of reaching the best position in the field itself. Consequently, every change in the distribution of the capital at stake in a particular field determines also the transformation of the distribution of power and of agents' position in the field itself. If we accept integrally this picture, then, as already noticed, we can advance a licit question: if the social struggle for the

accumulation of different kinds of capital is endless, how is it possible for a social group or class to prevail over another one and stabilize its position of power? According to Bourdieu, both the stabilization of the structures and dynamics of a social order basically depend on the following factors. The first one is the way individuals develop a bodily habitus that is coherent with the symbolic and objective nature of a specific social order. We will focus on this particular aspect in the next chapter. The second important element, as we have seen in chapter 2, consists of the dominant groups' capacity for monopolizing symbolic capital and shaping the dominated agents' habitus according to the dominating group's interests.

At first sight, such a picture of social reproduction would seem to suggest that there is little room for the idea of transformation in Bourdieu's social theory. When a ruling group obtains social recognition from the agents that it aims to subjugate, the dominants are in the position to shape the practical habitus of lower groups and classes, forcing them to interiorize those mental, perceptive, and bodily schemes that can preserve the *status quo*. However, Bourdieu explicitly endorses the opposite opinion regarding this topic:

In point of fact, one of the functions of the theory of fields that I propose is to make the opposition between reproduction and transformation, statics and dynamics, or structure and history, vanish. [...] What we need, in effect, is a form of structural history that is rarely practiced, which finds in each successive state of the structure under examination both the product of previous struggles to maintain or to transform this structure, and the principle, via the contradictions, the tensions, and the relations of force which constitute it, of subsequent transformations.<sup>98</sup>

Given this idea that reproduction and transformation are essentially imbricated, what is the precondition for a social transformation? For Bourdieu, the stability of a social order becomes strained when a specific condition arises. Such a condition is the rupture of the harmony between the objective set of opportunities that are available for social actors in a field and the architecture of individual and collective agents' habitus:

---

<sup>98</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 65, Engl. transl., 90.

Everything suggests that an abrupt slump in objective chances relative to subjective aspirations is likely to produce a break in the tacit acceptance, which the dominated classes -now abruptly excluded from the race, objectively and subjectively - previously granted to the dominant goals, and so to make possible a genuine inversion of the table of values.<sup>99</sup>

This idea concerning the pre-conditions of social change has some interesting conceptual consequences. First, processes of social change seem to be determined primarily by structural circumstances that do not depend on the reflexivity and critical attitudes of social agents. This means that the critical consciousness of masses and groups toward unfair and oppressive social living conditions appears, in the best cases, only if a disconnection between objective and subjective social structures happens.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the appearance of any form of critical awareness among dominated subjects is still insufficient for granting the achievement of a progressive amelioration of society. In fact, for Bourdieu, the grammar of social domination is always engraved in the habitus. A society that is rooted in domination “depends profoundly, for its perpetuation or transformation, on the perpetuation or transformation of the structures of which those dispositions are the product”.<sup>101</sup>

Second, a mismatch between subjective and objective structures is not necessarily correlated to a progressive or radical transformation of the social dimension. Bourdieu’s perspective leaves open the possibility that such a discrepancy can be accommodated in favor of a dominant group through a novel symbolic strategy. In other words, through the exercise of symbolic power, the dominants can modify, for instance, the access criteria to a particular social game making it more inclusive. In this way, they give the impression of being receptive to the claims of dominated

---

<sup>99</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 185, Engl. transl., 168.

<sup>100</sup> For a meaningful example of this account of social transformation, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984), 208-242, Engl. transl. *Homo Academicus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 159-187. Here Bourdieu argues that the crisis of the French academic system in 1968 was generated by a two-sided structural condition. On the one hand, Bourdieu attributes the emergence of the crisis to the unexpected and excessive rise of the number of students and degree holders in French universities starting from 1960. On the other hand, Bourdieu considers as a constitutive element of the crisis the conservative reactions of academic professionals, which were related, in turn, to their position of domination in the academic field.

<sup>101</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 42.

classes and groups. Under social pressure, a dominant class can extend the right to participate in a social game to a wider set of social agents, gaining the acceptance of those who were beforehand excluded, without giving the less powerful competitors the concrete means for challenging the dominants themselves.

Thirdly, coherently with this idea, Bourdieu highlights that the stabilization of a specific social order in accordance with the interests of a ruling class does not mean necessarily the disappearance of the competition and conflict between the dominants and the dominated groups:

social contradictions and struggles are not all, or always, in contradiction with the perpetuation of the established order; [...] permanence can be ensured by change and the structure perpetuated by movement; [...] the 'frustrated expectations' which are created by the time-lag between the imposition of legitimate needs [...] and access to the means of satisfying them, do not necessarily threaten the survival of the system.<sup>102</sup>

Dominated groups can be driven to accept the principle of competition as a natural fact as far as they recognize themselves as social subjects that can benefit from some social qualities that belong to the ruling class. Once this happens, the social diffusion and internalization of such categories of perception can work as a principle of division inside the society. Once the members of the dominated groups interiorize such schemes of perception, thought, and action they likely tend to justify the existing unequal distribution of capital and power as an outcome that does not depend on previous objective asymmetries in the allocation of material resources and opportunities of social ascent:

Competitive struggle is the form of class struggle which the dominated classes allow to be imposed on them when they accept the stakes offered by the dominant classes. It is an integrative struggle and, by virtue of the initial handicaps, a reproductive struggle, since those who enter this chase, in which they are beaten before they start, as the constancy of the gaps testifies, implicitly recognize the legitimacy of the goals pursued by those whom they pursue, by the mere fact of taking part.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 184, Engl. transl. 164-165.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibidem*, 185, Engl. transl., 165.

Bourdieu observes that if a dominated group engages in a struggle that is regulated by norms, rules, and values that reflect the interests of the dominant group or class, the same dominated group acknowledges “the legitimacy of the goals pursued by those whom they pursue, by the mere fact of taking part.”<sup>104</sup> In doing so, subjugated agents take part in a social game that is constitutively regulated by a practical logic that favors from the beginning the dominant groups or classes. Furthermore, Bourdieu highlights the fact that those social transformations that, in theory, guarantee social mobility between members of classes or groups can ensure, at the same time, the conservation of relative gaps among dominant and dominated classes or groups. More specifically, a dominant group can preserve its social power by conserving its specific position in society by reproducing the objective disparity between itself and the adverse classes.

For instance, the democratization of the educative system in France has had, according to Bourdieu, an interesting two-sided effect. On the one hand, its public nature gave young women and members of the French working-class a very realistic and concrete opportunity to gain a higher academic title, a better education, and, consequently, at least in theory, a better job and social position compared to their parents. On the other hand, Bourdieu registered the fact that, in France, after the schooling boom, even the members of the dominant class increased the possibility to obtain a high-level academic degree. This phenomenon led to a devaluation of those academic degrees that, traditionally, were accessible only to the social elite of the country and the creation of a new, narrower set of certificates and titles that ensured that only the high-class social agents had access to the best work positions in the labor market:

the changes visible in conditions in fact conceal permanent features in the relative positions: the leveling-out of the chances of access and rates of representation should not be allowed to mask the inequalities which persist in the distribution of boys and girls among the various types of schooling and therefore among possible careers. More girls than boys obtain the baccalaureate and enter higher education, but they

---

<sup>104</sup> *Ibidem*.

are much less represented in the most prestigious sections: they remain considerably underrepresented in scientific sections whereas they are ever more represented in literary courses. [...] The same logic governs access to the various professions and to the various positions within each of them: in work as in education, the progress made by women must not conceal the corresponding progress made by men, so that, as in a handicap race, the structure of the gaps is maintained.<sup>105</sup>

This means that subordinated individuals perceive as competitors not only members of the ruling class but even other social agents that experience situations of subordination. In this way, a ruling class can prevent or, at least, reduce the possibilities of alliance and cooperation among different social agents that suffer from domination and do not benefit from the social acknowledgment of their groups' interests:

the logic of the processes of competition [...] condemn[s] each agent to react in isolation to the effect of the countless reactions of other agents, or, more precisely, to the result of the statistical aggregation of their isolated actions, and which reduce the class to the state of a mass dominated by its own number.<sup>106</sup>

In this regard, it is undeniable that Bourdieu offers an original insight in relation to the issue of social transformation from the point of view of dominating social agents. The merit of Bourdieu's account is to underline the integrative character that social struggles can assume. Bourdieu highlights the fact that a dominant class or group can maintain and reproduce its position of domination by promoting a sort of 'handicap race' in which the dominated are competing for the same kind of social aims that the dominant strive for, but without the same head start. In so far as the dominated compete in a struggle for agonistic recognition that follows the rules of the dominant class, they have little opportunity to increase their capital and power, both in symbolic and material terms. In fact, playing such an agonistic competition, dominated agents will tend to consider other subjugated agents not as possible allies against the ruling class, but as competitors in up-warding mobility. At the same time, the categories of perception, evaluation, and judgment that coalesce to depict a

---

<sup>105</sup> Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 90-91.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*.

specific social order as natural and generalizing and fostering the perspective of the ruling class, might be capable of favoring the self-perception of dominated agents as non-dominated subjects that are working in favor of their social interests. According to this conception of social struggle, recognition plays a pivotal role. In this section, we have seen that also struggles for the acquisition of symbolic power and capital, which are based on social recognition that dominant social agents accumulate, are an invariant factor of social life. On the one hand, Bourdieu affirms that the dominants' position and power are dependent on the recognition they receive from the dominated. On the other hand, the French sociologist suggests that, in case of crises, dominant groups can prevent disadvantageous processes of redistribution of power through symbolic transformations that are capable of providing some sort of positive self-relationships to members of dominated classes. In the end, we could assert that, for Bourdieu, members of the dominated groups tend to endorse the symbolic framework that is coherent with the interests of the dominant class as far as the latter tend to ascribe the dominated themselves some qualities that traditionally belong to the members of the dominant class.

### 3.3 An ontological account of social conflicts and transformation

Before illustrating how Honneth's and Bourdieu's perspectives can improve one another, it is necessary to focus on their affinities and divergences. Both Bourdieu and Honneth consider social conflict and its cultural-symbolic nature as an ontological inevitable feature of the human social-life process, which is fundamental for the successful reproduction of the society. However, it is worth noticing that, even if they both attribute to social struggles a primary ontological role in explaining the tendency of human societies to reproduce themselves through transformation, Bourdieu and Honneth concentrate on different features of social conflict. Bourdieu tends to underline its strategic and antagonistic nature, highlighting how dominant groups and classes can use and manipulate social struggles for preserving their

interests and position of power and, therefore, the *status quo*. In this regard, Bourdieu gives the impression of underestimating the eventual communicative nature of symbolic interpretation, pinpointing more the oppressive effects that the monopoly of symbolic capital can cause. In contrast, Honneth puts first the idea that the symbolic struggles have, as a natural outcome, the reconciliation of those divergent social interests that can emerge in the society. To sum up: Bourdieu underlines the antagonistic nature of the struggle for recognition, in which a group aims to increase its social prestige at the expense of other social agents. Honneth conceives the struggle for recognition as a means for broadening the social conditions of collective and individual recognition and, therefore, for achieving progressive emancipation of oppressed and dominated groups.

In Bourdieu's case, at stake is the monopoly of symbolic capital and, therefore, the exclusive control of symbolic power by a single social group. Social conflicts aim at imposing the classification methods that belong to a narrow group of social agents and reflecting their interests. For Bourdieu, struggles for recognition inevitably lead to social inequality. In Honneth's case, struggles for recognition are conflicts concerning the interpretation of a specific classification and value system that is intersubjectively recognized and socially implemented. In Honneth's case, social struggles tend to produce moral progress and new forms of social equality. At first sight, these two forms of struggle for recognition seem to exclude one another. The competitive, antagonistic character of the first form of struggle, apparently, does not allow the realization of forms of social recognition that do not reflect the interests, values, and norms of a specific group. It seems that, given the competitive nature of such a struggle for recognition, the result of the conflict is a zero-sum game, in which a group increases or monopolizes symbolic capital at the expense of other social agents, imposing its own system of classification, perception, and evaluation. At the same time, the reconciliatory nature of the second form of struggles gives the impression of having an intrinsically progressive and necessary nature for all the struggling factions.



Second, Honneth's disagreement with Bourdieu also concerns the precondition of social transformation. Bourdieu states that, in theory, a radical transformation of social structures is possible when dominated social agents cannot objectively increase the capital at stake in a field and, at the same time, cannot fulfill their subjective expectations regarding the compensatory recognition that the dominant agents usually grant them. Honneth primarily identifies the main source of social struggles in this sole second factor, namely, the lack of satisfaction of expectations of recognition that are socially acknowledged:

we become aware of the norms that regulate our behaviour in the form of 'knowing how' only in those moments when our expectations are disrupted; the interruption of our action forces us to make explicit the portion of our latent background beliefs that is ineluctable for making sense of the situation.<sup>107</sup>

In Honneth's reading, negative experiences related to a lack of recognition or misrecognition are the main motivational sources that can push oppressed social agents to enact social struggles for promoting an amelioration of their social and political conditions. Once social agents realize that the condition of suffering that they experience in their daily interpersonal relationships with other agents is socially caused, they can start an intentional battle for improving or abolishing circumstances of oppression.

According to the present reading, such incompatibilities are not insurmountable. On the one hand, an ethical struggle for recognition, which aims both to improve the process of individual self-flourishing and to make the social relationship of recognition more inclusive, can produce unintended forms of domination. The extension of the boundaries of the labor market has had a morally appraisable effect on women and different ethnic and cultural groups, allowing their progressive social inclusion in the economic sphere. However, such positive transformation has also provided more legitimation to a system of production that is based on class

---

<sup>107</sup> Axel Honneth, "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions", in *Inquiry* 45, no.4 (2000), 515, <https://doi.org/10.1080/002017402320947577>.

distinction. On the other hand, we cannot exclude that the agonistic struggle for increasing groups' power or improving their social position could generate types of social integration and amelioration that are ethically valuable and reconciliatory. For instance, during the American Civil War those who were promoting abolitionism in order to weaken the economy and military force of Confederate states could not have any interest in promoting equal treatment of slaves and Afro-Americans but worked in favor of the achievement of such social and political results anyway.

Furthermore, in line with Lavergne's account regarding the complex nature of struggle for recognition, I am inclined to think that even the positive outcome of a struggle for recognition that aims at some sort of social reconciliation requires a first phase of antagonistic recognition.<sup>108</sup> It is only when a group receives enough recognition from other social agents that it can strive to change the perceptive and evaluative patterns of an oppressing or dominant group, making the prevailing relations of recognition more inclusive. This is a point that Honneth indirectly seems to accept in his debate with Nancy Fraser. In fact, discussing the central role that the phenomenology of the experiences of injustice plays for critical theory, Honneth criticizes Fraser for neglecting those experiences and social struggles that have not crossed the threshold of public perceptibility and that benefit from public thematization.<sup>109</sup> Thus, this means that claims for social recognition and their bearers have to acquire public visibility before becoming a matter of issue in a social conflict. In this initial phase, in which they do not benefit from sufficient social attention

---

<sup>108</sup> See Lavergne, "Violence, Identités et Reconnaissance. Penser une Philosophie Sociale de la Violence avec Pierre Bourdieu et Axel Honneth", 519: "Nous défendons l'idée que plus la lutte de reconnaissance agonistique parvient à s'imposer comme une lutte pour la reconnaissance, c'est-à-dire à transformer les cadres normatifs et perceptifs dominants, et à transformer les identités et les pratiques en direction de plus de justice et d'égalité, plus la violence qui la porte se trouverait justifiée." The idea that a struggle for recognition may be not only ethical and normative, but merely strategical (when it points, for instance, to the acquisition of public visibility or to make the denial of recognition disappear) was first proposed by Emmanuel Renault, "What is the Use of the Notion of Struggle of Recognition?", in *Revista de Ciencia Política* 27, no. 2 (2007), 195-205, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-090X2007000300011>.

<sup>109</sup> Nancy Fraser, Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political Philosophical Exchange* (London-New York: Verso, 2003), 114-117.

regarding their claims, we could hypothesize that dominated groups aim not to have their identity or claims for recognition positively recognized but to acquire sufficient social recognition for exercising symbolic power in a given social context. In other words, the complete emergence of social conflicts is preceded by a phase in which dominated groups attempt to break the dominant elite's monopolization of symbolic capital and power. In this regard, it is important to highlight how, in the early phase of his work, Honneth endorses the idea that, in a class-divided society, social struggle often takes only the form of rather limited struggle for social recognition. In fact:

So long as the identity-supporting recognition structure of a collective social movement is lacking, the practical reactions to these daily experiences of injustice are limited to individual or group-specific constructions of a 'counterculture of compensatory respect' attempts, restricted to the privacy of pre-political action or even to a solipsistic world of thought, either to symbolically raise the status of one's own work activity or to symbolically lower the status of the socially higher-placed form of work.<sup>110</sup>

Concerning the issue of the precondition of social conflicts, let us focus first on the role of intentionality and reflexivity in the actuation of social struggle and transformation. Both reflexive and non-reflexive factors, intentionality, and non-intentional social components affect the implementation of our social actions. The actualization of social struggle, both in its violent and communicative sides, should not constitute an exception. The rupture of the consistency between subjective and objective structures, which is independent of the willing and intentionality of collective and individual social agents, is a necessary but not sufficient pre-condition for explaining the emergence of those social conflicts that aim to redefine the symbolic framework of a given social sphere. Bourdieu's ideas are undoubtedly useful for social theorists in order to identify the structural, pre-reflexive, and unintentional factors that precede situations of social conflict and transformation. However, they do not give us any clue about the elements that determine the progressive or integrative nature of an emergent social conflict. Bourdieu provides

---

<sup>110</sup> Honneth, "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination: Some Problems in the Analysis of Hidden Morality", in *The Fragmented World of the Social*, 218.

us with useful insights concerning the way dominant groups can rule a top-down social struggle, but he does not explain how, in the same conditions of structural crisis, dominated social agents can achieve radical or partial emancipation. Furthermore, it is also evident that, starting from the same set of considerations, Bourdieu does not develop a sound theory of social transformation that is capable of explaining how social recognition, which is fundamental in determining the monopoly of symbolic capital and power of dominant classes, can empower, in some circumstances, oppressed groups and work for social amelioration.

At the same time, to rely only on the phenomenon of social suffering for explaining the emergence of social conflicts can turn out to be unsatisfactory. First, in situations of suffering that are socially caused, oppressed groups can be driven to address their social suffering toward political and social solutions that can be characterized as unintended outgroup favoritism, if exploited individuals cannot grasp the dominants' interests behind the hegemonic interpretation about the best manner to realize a particular set of norms and values. A social struggle can turn to be irrelevant or counter-productive for the dominated if they do not understand what kind of hegemonic interpretation of social norms and values determines their condition of subjugation and suffering.

Second, the members of dominated groups that sense that something is not working in the society could be in a position that prevents them from promoting their interests in the public space. Limitations to the communicative sphere of the public opinion, the fragmentation and individualization of experiences of social living, and the internalization of ideas and beliefs that are coherent with the *status quo*, for instance, can impede the achievement of a collective consciousness regarding the social origin of a widespread and shared condition of anguish and discomfort. These objective and structural factors can bypass or deactivate the motivational force of social experiences of suffering. As Lois McNay has observed, Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' can help us to understand how the connection between suffering as a motivational force, the development of an individual and collective critical

consciousness, and oppositional agency can be nullified. In fact, the development of a habitus that is dependent on the position of social agents can affect the way social agents themselves interpret their experiences of humiliation and social exclusion. In some cases, suffering “might simply be negatively internalized in a habitus of resignation, frustrated rage, and boredom”,<sup>111</sup> impeding social agents to identify and fight against the original sources of their social anguish.

In light of these considerations, it seems reasonable to try to combine Honneth’s and Bourdieu’s perspectives. Briefly, different typologies of social struggles can appear in social contexts in which:

*a)* the disruption of the harmony between subjective and objective structures causes a systematic mortification of the practical expectations of social agents, and

*b)* the social suffering of members of dominated groups is one of the consequences of this systematic mortification and works effectively as a powerful motivational force for the oppositional agency.

In order to avoid the respective limits of Bourdieu’s and Honneth’s account, keeping in mind that both structural and emotional factors are necessary for determining the emergence of a situation of social conflicts, it is possible to hypothesize that social suffering can work as a motivational force for the oppositional agency of dominated social groups when:

*c)* experiences of social suffering are related to the incapacity of dominant groups to obtain recognition from subjugated actors and to provide them with satisfactory patterns of recognition and

*d)* the habitus of oppressed agents push them to actualize new types of reciprocal recognition among themselves, determining the appearance of practical forms of reciprocal interactions that cannot be actualized according to the hegemonic and dominant symbolic framework at work in a given field.

---

<sup>111</sup> McNay, “The Trouble with Recognition: Subjectivity, Suffering and Agency”, 271-296.

### 3.4 Concluding remarks

The chapter has tried to highlight how Honneth and Bourdieu locate a strong connection between social reproduction, social struggles, and social transformation. First, these pages have outlined how both authors consider social transformation as a necessary feature for the reproduction of societal life, and the central role that social struggles have in this regard. Bourdieu and Honneth consider social transformation not as a detrimental factor for social reproduction, but as one of its fundamental features. Talking about the nature of social conflicts, the chapter has sought to show how, for both thinkers, the stake in social struggles is the exercise of symbolic power, and, therefore, the reinterpretation of those norms and rules that regulate social relationships in a given social space.

Furthermore, it has underlined the different characterizations of social struggle that Honneth and Bourdieu provide. Honneth depicts struggles for recognition in reconciliatory terms, arguing that the outcomes of such conflicts, when they determine enlargement of social spheres of recognition, can produce beneficial effects for all the conflicting groups. Bourdieu, on the contrary, describes the struggle for the accumulation of symbolic capital in antagonistic terms, as a zero-sum game, in which only one faction gains advantages at the end of the conflict. The combination of these two perspectives can provide us with a more complex description of the different forms that social struggles can assume. In fact, both reconciliatory and agonistic struggle can aim at either changing radically the symbolic framework of a given social world or promoting a different way to actualize norms and values that are socially accepted by all the members of a community. Consequently, also the definition of the notion of 'social transformation' can assume a more sophisticated nature. In this respect, the comparison of Bourdieu's and Honneth's perspectives has highlighted that social transformation cannot only have a progressive and emancipatory nature that works in favor of the victims of oppression and domination. Social transformation can also assume the lineaments

of an integrative and conservative phenomenon, in which dominant classes and groups can redefine normative frameworks, social values, and sets of perceptive schemes in order to preserve their position of power in the society.

Finally, the chapter has outlined the main divergence between Bourdieu and Honneth regarding the preconditions that determine the emergence of social conflicts and the appearance of social transformation by considering the limits of the respective proposals. It has been argued that a combination of their ideas can help us to build up a more detailed socio-ontological account of such preconditions. Such a hybrid description should take into account structural and intersubjective features, as well as reflexive and pre-reflexive elements behind the processes of social reproduction and transformation.

The next chapter tries to establish if such a combination is conceptually possible by deepening their ideas about the ontological elements that define the actualization of social actions at the individual and group level. Such action-theoretic approaches, at first sight, appear to be incompatible for a considerable number of reasons: should we attribute ontological priority to social structures, like in the case of Bourdieu, or to interpersonal interactions, as Honneth asserts? Do human beings tend to enact social actions unintentionally and unreflexively, as Bourdieu affirms? Or, on the contrary, is intentionality a necessary feature of social actions that aim to express recognition, as Honneth seems to sustain? In this regard, chapter 4 shows that to combine the two points of view is not only possible, but also useful. It can help Honneth to answer the ontological questions that are related to its theory of recognition: forms of successful interpersonal recognition can be actualized thanks to the presence of specific objective (social institutions) and subjective (attitudes of recognition) conditions. In this respect, the structuralist conception developed by Bourdieu can help us to understand how concrete processes of recognition are always embedded in social structures that are not necessarily related to a symmetric distribution of powers and, therefore, by forms of equal and non-hierarchical cooperation. At the same time, to compare and integrate the two accounts can also

explain how Bourdieu's ideas can be compatible with critical social theories and approaches, like Honneth's, that focus on the normative nature of social actions, by emphasizing their non-strategic and cooperative nature.



## 4 HONNETH, BOURDIEU, AND THE THEORY OF SOCIAL ACTION

The main aim of this chapter is to highlight the theoretical compatibility between Pierre Bourdieu's theory of action and Axel Honneth's conception that is based on the paradigm of recognition. In this regard, the main thesis of the chapter is that these two approaches are complementary and fruitfully combinable. The following pages focus only on the ontological aspects that define both theories of social action. As mentioned, such action-theoretical perspectives seem to be rather different. In fact, Bourdieu stresses the productive role of social structures in relation to social agents' actions and interactions. For him, the trajectory of our social behavior is previously determined by objective and subjective structures that drive social agents to act coherently with norms of a specific social environment in a pre-reflective and intuitive way. In this connection, Bourdieu talks about reasonable strategies that actors enact almost unconsciously in order to maximize the power they have in a particular social situation. On the other hand, Honneth privileges the analysis of social actions primarily in terms of the expression of interpersonal relationships of recognition among persons. Consequently, Honneth tries to show how a relevant portion of the objective side of our social reality (institutions, customs, and habits) and collective social behavior somehow reflect particular forms of reciprocal recognition among persons that are ruled by acknowledged normative principles of action. A possible objection to the chapter's main thesis is the following. If we consider the role of intentionality and reflexivity in generating and guiding social actions, Honneth's and Bourdieu's perspectives seem, again, irreconcilable. Bourdieu tries to support the idea that social actions are not (or, at least, not always and solely) the outcome of a rational decision-making process of individuals. Honneth, on the

contrary, seems to think that social actions that are generated by reciprocal recognition are products of a conscious norm-observance of the social actors.

In order to show that these two considerations are not decisive for denying the validity of the thesis of the chapter, we discuss Bourdieu and Honneth's theory of action focusing on the following questions: first, what are the preconditions of social action for both thinkers (section 4.1)?; second, how do we learn to behave properly in the social dimension according to them (section 4.2)?; and third, what do we learn through the process of socialization (section 4.3)? The answer to the first issue will underline the fact that Honneth's account does state that the possibility to enact and experience any successful forms of recognition is connected to the existence of objective and subjective conditions that are independent of the intentionality and reflexivity of singular individuals. The answer to the second question highlights that interpersonal forms of recognition and the satisfaction of needs for recognition have a fundamental role in making Bourdieu's theory of action consistent, even if Bourdieu himself overlooks them. The answer to the third issue seeks to highlight how Bourdieu's theory of social action, which is apparently focused on strategic-interest actions only, might take into account and describe forms of social behavior that are intended to express reciprocity and to actualize disinterested conduct. Finally, the chapter tries to explain, against the mentioned second objection, why both Honneth and Bourdieu may accept the idea that, in the actualization of social actions, moments of consciousness and unawareness are intertwined (section 4.4).

## 4.1 The preconditions of social action

If we want to grasp the core idea of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social action, perhaps it can be helpful to think that, for most of the time, and in varied circumstances, our social actions are not implemented reflexively. Our social behavior does not exclusively depend on calculations or conscious planning. For instance, we stop at a red light instead of crossing the street without having to think about why it is

beneficial, or right, or correct to stop: simply, we are used to behaving in that way. In general, it could be said that, for Bourdieu, social practice is a “rule-bound activity, an activity which, without necessarily being the product of obedience to rules, obeys certain regularities”.<sup>112</sup> Such a definition of ‘social practice’ highlights an important aspect of Bourdieu’s idea of social action. Social agents act coherently with social rules and norms of a given social space in a spontaneous way, without thinking reflexively about the behavior that is more appropriate to adopt in a given situation. For Bourdieu, social behavior that is consistent with the logic and the shape of a specific social context is not necessarily the outcome of a rule-following attitude of the social actors. Briefly, Bourdieu states that the logic of action in the social dimension is best represented by the following equation:

$$[(\text{habitus}) (\text{capital})] + \text{field} = \text{practice}^{113}$$

Broadly speaking, we can assert that, according to this formula, social practices of individuals and collective entities are always generated by the interaction of three different structures: the habitus, the capital, and the field. Individually taken, none of these factors can determine practical actions. Therefore, strategies of action of social agents are not necessarily ruled by a conscious choice of aims and an evaluation of costs. A set of embodied, corporeal capabilities that reflect the objective social conditions under which social agents live partly determines them. On the subjective side, habitus works for the individuals as a GPS that orients their actions unreflexively but in harmony with the objective burdens imposed by the capital and social field. In other words, when it is consistent with the objective structure of social space, habitus gives to social actors the ability to perceive and estimate unconsciously the number of strategies of action that is possible to actuate

---

<sup>112</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1990b), 64.

<sup>113</sup> The formula is reported in Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 112, Engl. transl., 101. The mathematical symbolism here should not be taken too literally. For Bourdieu, the point is merely to highlight the nature of the structural factors that allow the actualization of reasonable social practices.

in a particular social field. Thus, habitus is the conceptual tool that enables Bourdieu to develop a “theory of practice as the product of a *practical sense*, of a socially constituted ‘sense of the game’”.<sup>114</sup> In general terms, we can conclude that, on the objective side, the field defines burdens and rules that generate a ‘space of possibilities’ of action for social agents; while the volume of capital disposes the position (dominant or subordinated) an agent occupies in the field and, thus, the amount of power he can employ in that field. On the subjective side, habitus puts agents in the condition to choose the behavior that can protect or increase the capital at stake in the best way possible (that is to say, in accordance with the patterns of action that objective structures impose on social agents) without constant reflexive scrutiny.

Honneth’s ideas related to the implementation of social practices seem to be rather distant from Bourdieu’s. In the previous chapters, it has been already highlighted that to recognize somebody means to be able to assume the perspective of our partners of interaction and consider ourselves in the role of their social addressee:

We should think of the act of recognition on the model of reciprocal action, in which two subjects ascribe to each other a certain normative status allowing them to treat each other in accordance with norms of respect and consideration.<sup>115</sup>

Such an account of acts of recognition implies that, on the one hand, a recognizer  $x$  perceives in a recognizee  $y$  some qualities that the former has learned to perceive as relevant and reacts by behaving in the appropriate way. On the other hand, in order to be reciprocal, a process of recognition needs to be sustained also by the recognizee  $y$ . In this regard,  $y$  must take  $x$  as a competent recognizer and grasp the meaning and the reasons behind  $x$ ’s behaviors. The condition of reciprocity means also that both  $x$  and  $y$  ought to have behavioral expectations toward one another. If  $x$  aims to express recognition to  $y$ , then  $x$  must have some expectations toward

---

<sup>114</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 96, Engl. transl., 120-121.

<sup>115</sup> Honneth, ‘Rejoinder’, 402.

$y$ 's capacity of understanding the meaning of behavior and, consequently, reacting in a coherent way. At the same time, if  $y$  perceives  $x$  as a competent recognizer, then  $y$  must have some kind of expectations toward  $x$ 's behavior once  $x$  perceives in  $y$  those positive qualities that justify the actualization of practices that express recognition:

We are to understand 'recognition' as a behavioral reaction in which we respond rationally to evaluative qualities that we have learned to perceive, to the extent to which we are integrated into the second nature of our lifeworld.<sup>116</sup>

A further salient factor is the connection between recognition and action. In this respect, a successful form of recognition always implies the subsequent intentional actualization of attitudes, behavior or social provisions (namely, the presence of material factors) that testify the authenticity of the ongoing cognitive process. For instance, we could say that, according to this second feature, the esteem given to workers has to be certified by an institutional asset that supports and protects labor rights and prosecutes forms of humiliation and economic injustice based on class discrimination. Following those conditions, we can say that recognition is successful, or a recognizer  $x$  recognizes a recognizee  $y$ , when:

- 1)  $x$  perceives in  $y$  those positive qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are objective in  $S$  at  $t$ ;
- 2)  $x$  acts toward  $y$  in a way that testifies the authentic recognition of ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) $y$ .

Finally, as it should be clear from the last quote, the process of recognition does not happen in a vacuum but presupposes a "lifeworld" that constitutes the perceptive and evaluative backdrop for social agents. In other words, Honneth believes that the dynamic of reciprocal recognition relies on some innate capacity of individuals because of our process of evolution as a species. However, Honneth also thinks that recognition "should not lead us to speak of acts that are external to

---

<sup>116</sup> Honneth, "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions", 513.

institutional reality or even of a kind of ‘pre-social’ act”.<sup>117</sup> Successful processes of reciprocal recognition always happen in a social dimension that puts individuals in the conditions to recognize and to be recognized according to acknowledged normative principles. Hence, following the Hegelian tradition, Honneth asserts that interactions among social actors subsist thanks to the mediation of social spheres of recognition that have the form of relational institutions.<sup>118</sup>

As Honneth explains especially in *Freedom’s Right*, family and friendship, labor and the commodities market, and democratic public life are the relational spheres that allow the actualization of successful forms of recognition and, thus, the realization of social cooperation in contemporary Western countries.<sup>119</sup> Such institutions are relational in the following sense: they impose a specific set of social statuses, roles, and expectations on social agents, allowing them to promote and realize their own intentions in harmony with expectations of their partners of interaction. Institutional orders of recognition provide us, on the one hand, with the framework in which our decisions and actions acquire a social meaning that is relevant for our partners of interaction. On the other hand, they establish the values and perceptive properties that regulate our social behavior. According to this picture, such spheres of recognition are objective in the sense that they precede any individual judgment and act of self-determination, and are independent of any subjective form of consciousness. Institutional orders of recognition provide us both the framework in which our decisions and actions acquire a social meaning that is relevant for our

---

<sup>117</sup> Recognition theorists can disagree on this point. Heikki Ikäheimo, for instance, makes the distinction between purely intersubjective and institutionally mediated recognition. See Heikki Ikäheimo, “On the Genus and Species of Recognition”, 447-462.

<sup>118</sup> Cfr. Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 125.

<sup>119</sup> See *ibidem*, 125-129. In this respect, Honneth seem to agree with Hegel’s perspective about the role of social objectivity in relation to the realization of the social freedom of individuals. According to Hegel, the reality of social freedom is guaranteed by the objectivity of freedom itself. In other words, in the Hegelian account, individuals can realize their own freedom if and only if there is a social reality or objectivity; that is to say an historical set of concrete institutions in which freedom is already embodied and incorporated. Honneth commits to such a point of view as far as he considers social freedom or self-realization as dependent on objective institutions of mutual recognition.

partners of interaction, and the values and properties that regulate our social behaviors and conducts. In this regard, social orders of recognition impose roles and expectations on social agents, allowing them to promote and realize their own intentions in harmony with the expectations of their partners of interaction. Therefore, a lifeworld can be considered as a coherent set of social spheres that consist of norms of recognition, which “‘regulate’ actions in a way that ensures intersubjective coordination” or “‘constitute’ a kind of action that the subjects involved can only carry out cooperatively or together”.<sup>120</sup>

One could say that, through the objective institutions of recognition, social agents apprehend what kind of behavior they can expect each other in particular social situations. For instance, in a relationship of friendship between  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $x$  will develop a certain type of expectation toward  $y$ . For example,  $y$  is inclined to listen to  $x$  regarding  $x$ ’s private problems, desires, fears, or thoughts without prejudice, something that cannot happen with her employer  $z$  (usually, we do not expect from our boss any form of intimate comprehension and interest concerning our private life). Consequently, Honneth’s point seems to be the following: our capacity to cooperate with our partners and be involved in social behavior is dependent also on the internalization of “intellectual schema of generalized other”, and acknowledgment of the “duties” that are related to the “position” we have in specific social circumstances:

In today’s families [...] children can experience early on what it means to participate as individual in shared cooperation. [...] All the abilities and dispositions that belong to this kind of ‘cooperative individualism’ can be acquired in principle by participating in the binding practice of the family: the ability to develop the intellectual schema of a generalized other, from the perspective of which inner family duties must be distributed in a fair and just manner; the willingness to actually accept the duties that are implicitly contained in one’s own position on the deliberative negotiation of such responsibilities; finally the tolerance required whenever other members of the family cultivate lifestyles or preferences that fundamentally conflict with one’s own.<sup>121</sup>

---

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*, 125.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibidem*, 175.

This means that, in the process of socialization, individuals assimilate and interiorize behavioral expectations, schemes of evaluation, and patterns of perception that are coherent with the norms of recognition at work in a specific social context. In other words, we could say that reciprocal recognition depends even on the embodied attitudes of recognition that the agents involved in the social process have developed. In this regard, insufficient forms of socialization can be connected to the lack or the partial development of a particular recognitive attitude. For instance, it is unlikely that a person  $x$  who grows up in a racist society may develop a respectful attitude toward persons of different ethnicity. In other words, in that kind of society,  $x$  cannot really learn to perceive members that belong to different communities as valuable recognizers and respectable partners of interaction and acts toward them in a way that testifies such a personal consideration.

To sum up: for Honneth, actions that we actualize in particular social spheres like the family, the civil society, and the labor market are expressions of successful forms of reciprocal recognition that have become socially relevant through the course of history. At the same time, for actualizing reciprocal recognition concretely objective and subjective preconditions are needed. In fact, we learn to recognize properly our peers against the backdrop of a lifeworld that constitutes the objective precondition for the actualization of good forms of reciprocal recognition. It is hard to believe that a human being might develop any practical knowledge of love relationships in absence of social institutions like family and friendship, or that he might understand the important role of social cooperation in absence of a labor market in which he can experience appreciation for his contribution to social well-being. Furthermore, Honneth seems to be open to the idea that realization of social behaviors that express recognition is possible only if social agents have internalized all those normative expectations and perceptive patterns that make possible such behaviors themselves. Explaining Honneth's ideas through Bourdieu's vocabulary, we could assert that social actions that are capable of expressing love, esteem, and respect can be actualized given two structural conditions. On the one hand, there must be fields



that are governed by norms of conduct coherent with such principles. On the other hand, individuals that act in those fields must own a proper set of attitudes for recognition, i.e., embodied habitus (a system of expectations, scheme of perception, and bodily skills) that allow them to recognize their partners as subjects that deserve love, respect, and esteem and to be recognized according to the same principles.

## 4.2 How we learn to behave socially: Socialization and experiences of recognition

As mentioned above, Honneth affirms that our role-taking capacity is of fundamental importance not only for ensuring the coordination that is necessary for the realization of complex social activities. Recognition also has a crucial role in our individual psychological self-realization and well-being. In his first systematic work about recognition, *Struggle For Recognition*, Honneth clearly asserts that in our society, the complete and good self-realization of human beings can be reached through three different spheres of practical relations (i.e., family, state, and civil society) and a process of mutual recognition able to guarantee the self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem of individuals. In the sphere of the family, that includes also friendship relationships, human beings can satisfy their needs for care and love, and, hence, they can achieve self-confidence. In the public sphere of the rule of law, through the institutionalization of norms that attribute to individuals the status of morally and politically autonomous persons, human beings can gain self-respect and the awareness of possessing universal dignity. In civil society, that is the dimension of the division of labor and material production, social agents can experience appreciation and esteem from their partners of interaction for their achievement and contribution to the collective well-being. In this way, individuals can recognize the worth of their particular contribution to society and, thus, develop self-esteem.

In line with this point of view, Honneth endorses the idea that the need for social recognition is an important motivational force that lies at the bottom of human social actions and interactions. In fact, individuals learn and internalize social duties and rules as far as they can gain a beneficial emotional life while acting accordingly with them. In the labor market, for instance, we realize that to be recognized as an active contributor to social cooperation can enhance our self-esteem. It is therefore clear that experiences of social recognition take on an important motivational function in the internalization and actualization of social customs and habits. Experiences of social esteem that are related to our professional efforts, for instance, can drive us to improve our skills and competencies and be more enterprising in social cooperation. As Honneth clarifies:

I currently see the connection between philosophical anthropology and social theory as lying in the normative conditions for social integration: individuals can become members of society only by developing, via the experience of mutual recognition, an awareness of how rights and duties are reciprocally distributed in the context of particular tasks.<sup>122</sup>

The human need for social recognition seems to play an important role in Bourdieu's account. As we have seen in the previous section, for Bourdieu human beings actualize reasonable practical conduct in a given social environment because they are equipped with a bodily and mental set of dispositions, the *habitus*, which reflects the morphology of those particular social surroundings. However, how do social agents internalize such dispositional properties? Bourdieu states that individuals can develop a *habitus* that is coherent with the social environment in which they act and move through a process of inculcation that happens in the sphere of the family and in school:

(1) the mode of inculcation producing a *habitus* by the unconscious inculcation of principles which manifest themselves only in their practical state, within the practice that is imposed (implicit pedagogy), and (2) the mode of inculcation producing a

---

<sup>122</sup> Honneth, "Grounding Recognition", 501.

habitus by the inculcation, methodically organized as such, of articulated and even formalized principles (explicit pedagogy).<sup>123</sup>

Particularly in *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu introduces the concept of ‘*libido*’ in order to describe the dynamic of inculcation in the family. Briefly put, libido, as original non-reflexive force, is a primary human impulse that can explain why “people are motivated, driven by, torn from a state of indifference and moved by the stimuli sent by certain fields - and not others”.<sup>124</sup> According to Bourdieu, libido takes the form of desire for recognition in the first place. In fact, human beings can develop an interest in the game of a specific field; that is to say, the *illusio*, the idea that it is worth to compete in a field for the accumulation of specific capital only if such a game can satisfy at the same time the libidinal drive for the social recognition of social actors. In this regard, Bourdieu clearly asserts that the development of *illusio* (and, thus, habitus that is coherent with a specific field’s structure) always implies that social actors can enjoy social recognition, that is to say, the ascription of a positive status by other participants in the social game:

One may suppose that, to obtain the sacrifice of self-love in favor of a quite other object of investment and so to inculcate the durable disposition to invest in the social game which is one of the prerequisites of all learning, pedagogic work in its elementary form relies on one of the motors which will be at the origin of all subsequent investments: the search for recognition.<sup>125</sup>

That is why this phenomenon is particularly relevant in the dimension of the family. In this context, in fact, children start to accept their subordinate role, parental authority, and the system of rules that govern the intimate sphere as they can receive sentimental recognition:

The work of socialization of drives is based on a permanent transaction in which the child makes renunciations and sacrifices in exchange for testimonies of recognition,

---

<sup>123</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Passeron, *La Reproduction: Éléments pour une Théorie du Système d'Enseignement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970), 62, Engl. transl., *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 2000c), 47.

<sup>124</sup> Wacquant, “Introduction”, in Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 30, Engl. transl., 26.

<sup>125</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 166.

consideration and admiration ('How well-behaved he is!'), sometimes expressly solicited ('Look at me, Daddy!').<sup>126</sup>

To sum up, for Bourdieu, it is through a process of socialization based on the mechanism of recognition that human beings learn to steer their narcissistic drives toward the achievement of social interests and ends. The approval of other human beings is therefore fundamental for developing both a persistent involvement in several social games and the practical sense that is necessary to play such games.

In both perspectives, therefore, the learning process that makes human beings capable of acting in the social dimension seems to be grounded on the satisfaction of the emotional needs of individuals. Positive experiences of social recognition reinforce the tendency of individuals to act coherently with the practical logic that characterizes a particular social dimension. In this respect, it is interesting to notice that both Bourdieu and Honneth connect those individual skills that make social behaviors possible to a learning process that has a practical nature, but they do so without directly implying a theoretical understanding. We learn how to behave in different social spaces by interacting with our peers, not (or, at least, not only) by studying textbooks and building up a cognitive understanding of social behaviors.<sup>127</sup>

### 4.3 What we learn in the process of socialization: Interested and disinterested actions

As we have mentioned in the last paragraph, Bourdieu states that implicit and explicit processes of inculcation are necessary to provide individuals with the *illusio* that it is worthy to compete in a field for the accumulation of specific capital. In other words, through the process of socialization, social actors assimilate the practical sense and logic of a particular social game, without questioning the legitimacy of the game itself,

---

<sup>126</sup> *Ibidem*, 167.

<sup>127</sup> Although Honneth puts much emphasis on the importance of reflexivity, especially in *Freedom's Right*.

the impartiality of its rules, and the fairness of its norms. Consequently, we can argue that the first thing that social agents incorporate in the habitus through inculcation are beliefs related to the aims they can pursue in a social field, the licit needs they can satisfy there, and the means they can employ to reach such an outcome. In short, social actors start developing an interest in a social game and for what is at stake in a specific social field. So, what kind of meaning is it correct to attribute to the notion of ‘interest’ in Bourdieu’s account?

the concept of interest, as I construe it, is totally disjointed from the trans-historical and universal interest of utilitarian theory. It would be easy to show that Adam Smith’s self-interest is nothing more than an unconscious universalization of the form of interest engendered and required by a capitalist economy. Far from being an anthropological invariant, interest is a historical arbitrary, a historical construction that can be known only through historical analysis, ex-post, through empirical observation.<sup>128</sup>

From the previous quote, it is clear that Bourdieu conceives his perspective as completely detached from (and irreducible to) those approaches that presuppose a utilitarian conscious calculation and economic rationality behind every social action. Interest does not coincide with the idea of self-interest. At the same time, there is no universal interest as such. There are as many interests as there are fields, and interest for maximization of profit is only one particular form of interest among others. Thus, is it possible to say exactly what interest is in Bourdieu’s account? As it is always historically determined, plural, not universal, we could define interest in two ways. In general, we can affirm that Bourdieu’s interest can be defined “as the very opposite of ataraxy: it is to be invested, taken in and by the game”. However, we can provide a narrower and more precise definition of ‘interest’ if we focus on Bourdieu’s idea of an “interest for the disinterest”. This is the case for those societies grounded on the ethos of honor and prestige, like pre-capitalist communities or European societies before the industrial revolution. In such societies, from Bourdieu’s sociological point of view,

---

<sup>128</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 92, Engl. transl., 116.

the question of the possibility of virtue can be brought back to the question of social conditions of possibility of the universes in which the durable dispositions for disinterestedness can be constituted [...] If the disinterestedness is sociologically possible, it can only be so only through the encounter between habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded.<sup>129</sup>

In other words, the particular interest of a social agent is a function that is determined by the objective set of opportunities of action that is available for the agent and the subjective expectations of the agent herself. For instance, let us consider an agent who is used to act and move in a society in which the stakes are honor and prestige. In this kind of social situation, it is likely that a competent agent possesses a set of expectations that drives her to preserve and increase the amount of social prestige of herself and her family. Such an aim could be achieved through the adoption of behaviors like spending a huge amount of money for organizing parties and celebrations, so as to sustain expenses only for the sake of showing the community the social relevance of her clan. The latter can appear counter-productive or detrimental from an economic perspective but is perfectly reasonable from the point of view of a person that gives priority to the public exhibition of a certain image of herself. In the same way, we can say that two agents that enjoy a different level of social consideration in a society that is based on honor relations may have different interests, even if they acknowledge the same rules of the game. The agent who enjoys a high form of social recognition will tend to preserve the honor that she benefits from. The agent who does not own a relevant amount of social prestige is likely prone to increase the latter through strategies that are consistent with the norms of an honor society.

Those considerations put us in the position to identify another important feature of the practical knowledge that, according to Bourdieu, we acquire by means of the process of socialization. Through the latter, in fact, we internalize in the form of habitus a specific set of expectations toward our social environment and our

---

<sup>129</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Raisons Pratiques: Sur la Théorie de l'Action* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1994), 123, Engl. transl., *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 88.

partners. An individual grows up in a high-class and is endowed with a high amount of social prestige because of the reputation of the class he belongs to. According to Bourdieu's perspective, such a person is in the position to develop an array of anticipations (toward his future social life, the behaviors he can expect from individuals that belong to his class or lower one, or the social role he can aspire to) that are significantly different from the ones that a person with less prestige can reasonably possess.

Social agents that are situated in different social classes and possess an unequal volume of capital are likely to achieve a different set of expectations toward the best way to pursue their own interests. Even if they share the same form of interest for a peculiar social game (e.g., the achievement of a higher level of social prestige), the possible strategies they can enact for pursuing it are logically different due to the unequal distributions of objective resources they have. Consequently, also the expectations they can have in regard to the consequences of their social conduct are different. For instance, in an honor society, an agent that enjoys a high amount of social prestige due to his noble origins can reasonably foresee that he will be subject to disapproval if he behaves as a member of the lower-class. In the same way, those who do not own such a considerable extent of social recognition may presume that the same behavior will not cause any form of relevant condemnation among her class peers and members of the higher classes.

Therefore, we can conclude that according to Bourdieu, through socialization, we first develop several forms of interest toward different types of social games. The development of such an interest for particular social games allows us to acquire, in the form of embodied habitus, a set of subjective expectations in relation to the possible consequences of our social behaviors. Furthermore, following Bourdieu, such an interest cannot be reduced to the economic idea of the conscious maximization of profit. Bourdieu's conception of the interest is more akin to the idea that, through the process of socialization, human beings are put into the condition of cultivating different forms of involvement toward a various range of

social praxes. In this regard, the genesis of the habitus that drives human beings to behave in an instrumental way to look for selfish advantage is related not to an invariant anthropological feature of human beings. The logic of a specific social game and, consequently, the type of interest social agents can chase when they are taking part in it mirrors peculiar objective social conditions. In this respect, the adoption of explicitly utilitarian strategies might not be successful in those fields in which it is possible to reach a dominant position following a disinterested behavior:

The behaviors of honor in aristocratic or precapitalist societies have at their origin an economy of symbolic goods based on the collective repression of interest and, more broadly, the truth of production and circulation, which tends to produce 'disinterested' habitus, anti-economic habitus, disposed to repress interests, in the narrow sense of the term (that is, the pursuit of economic profits), especially in domestic relations.<sup>130</sup>

This does not mean that in social fields like the academy, the family, or a religious community that the actors involved have no interest. Simply, the issue at stake in each of these fields cannot be reached, in theory, through an economic logic that points to maximize individual interests. To gain a dominant position in a field in which selfish attitudes are not allowed means to have an interest in behaving in a way that can guarantee the acquisition of authority among the participants in the game. In a society based on a gift economy, for instance, the power of an agent and her authority inside a given community is dependent on her capacity to give to others in a disinterested way, and to avoid attitudes that are indicative of selfish aims, like accumulating economic wellness. In this situation, that is, an economy based on mutualism and reciprocity, agents can acquire power and influence over their partners of action following the logic of taking care of others. This means that an agent can acquire a dominant position without aiming explicitly or consciously for it, offering her gifts to people who need them and trying to maximize the benefits of others.<sup>131</sup> We can conclude therefore that, according to Bourdieu, the emergence

---

<sup>130</sup> Bourdieu, *Raisons Pratiques*, 122, Engl. transl., 86.

<sup>131</sup> For a more precise account of this idea see Duran Bell, "Modes of Exchange: Gift and Commodity", *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 20, no. 2 (1991), 155-167.



of social spaces governed by altruistic logic is sociologically possible, but it is always imbricate with some sort of distribution of social power.<sup>132</sup> In such a situation in which disinterest informs the logic of actions, social status and position are not determined in relation to the possession and accumulation of material goods and commodities. Their distribution is ruled by the relationships of mutuality and altruism that agents are capable of actualizing with others.

Like Bourdieu, Honneth also rejects the idea that our social interactions are solely determined by utilitarian calculations, as rational action theorists suggest. Thus, what do we learn exactly through the process of socialization? In order to illustrate this point, I will focus again on the sphere of the family. In general, for Honneth, it is only through interpersonal recognition that we can achieve a positive self-relationship, that is to say, self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Self-confidence, for instance, can be developed only through a family environment, intimate relationships, and friendships that can guarantee the satisfaction of our affective needs. In fact, the opportunity to focus on and improve our individual relation-to-self is dependent on the fact that we can take for granted the love of our parents, children, partners, and friends. In other words, we can develop a certain degree of self-confidence as far as we are sure that our needs have significance for the persons we love and that the latter can satisfy our emotional and affective demands. As we have outlined in the previous paragraph, following Honneth's point of view, successful conduct in a specific social context gives us the chance to experience positive feelings generated by the social recognition that we can receive from our partners of interaction. Such experiences of recognition make us inclined to re-enact the same behavior when we find ourselves involved in analogous

---

<sup>132</sup> For a very interesting analysis of Bourdieu's multilayered and complex conception of disinterestedness in gift exchange see Ilana F. Silber, "Bourdieu's Gift to Gift Theory: An Unacknowledged Trajectory", *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 2 (2009), 173-190. Analyzing the way Bourdieu has developed his perspective concerning gift exchange throughout his career, Ilana F. Silber has noticed how Bourdieu switches from a conception of the disinterested gift as an obfuscating tool of domination, especially in the early phase of his ethnographic researches, to a more ambivalent and problematic perspective. In fact, in the latter phase of his studies, according to Silber, Bourdieu tends to give more space to "a positive and prescriptive valorization of disinterestedness", 184.

situations. In this regard, we can affirm that positive emotions related to experiences of social recognition are strong motivational elements that can reinforce our tendency to transform a particular behavioral pattern in a usual custom or habit. Consequently, it is undeniable that acts of recognition are functional and instrumental for achieving individual self-realization and well-being.

However, in Honneth's perspective, human beings find out how to satisfy their need for recognition through spheres of actions that are characterized by mutuality and reciprocity. When we realize that our self-confidence is impossible to achieve in the absence of any emotional support, we learn that to love somebody genuinely means to take care of our partner's well-being as an autonomous person, as an individual who is able to reach happiness only if she is certain that we love her unconditionally. For instance, talking about the inner dynamics of intimate relationships in contemporary Western societies, Honneth states:

It is essentially this future-oriented dimension of love from which many of the complementary role obligations derive that regulate the institutionalized praxis of intimate relationships today. [...] this type of relationship only fulfills its inherent norm if both partners are constantly attentive to any behavioral changes that indicate a shift in the constitutive preferences or interests of the other. [...] Only where two people mutually agree to support each other's personality development, even when it takes a direction that cannot be anticipated, can we speak of an intersubjective relationship that earns the moniker of 'love'.<sup>133</sup>

Therefore, according to Honneth, through socialization in the family and intimate sphere we learn that our individual happiness and well-being, the possibility to realize our ends and fulfill our needs, are dependent on our capacity to put aside our selfish and egocentric interests to help our beloved to pursue their personal aims and satisfy their emotional needs. When we understand the quality of social relations that are correlated with our personal wellness, we realize, at the same time, that reciprocity, the capacity to support our peers in reaching the same benefits we are looking for, is the keystone for our wellbeing. In this regard, the fulfillment for our need of

---

<sup>133</sup> Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 146.

recognition is essentially subordinate to our capacity of reacting unselfishly to our partners' emotional states, psychological needs, and normative expectations:

acts of recognition also represent the morally appropriate response to individuals' evaluative qualities; for what was initially just a 'condition' loses its purely instrumental meaning in coming to be also a matter of meeting a moral or ethical demand. [...] it is in virtue of being in accordance with individuals' potential evaluative qualities that recognition comes to be a condition for the development of their autonomy.<sup>134</sup>

To sum up, it seems that, for Honneth, both the achievement of individual well-being and social cooperation are possible only through the acquisition of a dispositional motivation of adopting disinterested behaviors toward others. In other words, we could say that the possibility to reach the goal of individual self-realization is subordinated to our capacity to suppress selfish inclinations and support others in their plans and claims. Using again Bourdieu's idiolect, we could assert that, according to Honneth, human beings recognize each other as far as they develop an "interest for disinterest". In conclusion, it could be argued that Honneth's position about interest, disinterest, reciprocity, and power is not so different from Bourdieu's one. The latter admitted the possibility of the appearance of social fields that are governed by the logic of disinterest, even if such mutual practices are always correlated to an unintended asymmetry in the distribution of power among agents. In line with such an idea, Honneth's conception of the recognitive process in terms of mutuality does not exclude that a successful and good form of recognition might be consistent with an unequal distribution of social power between recognizers and recognizees. In fact, we must notice that, for Honneth, the distribution of power at work in a given context always reflects the concrete dynamics of recognition. However, the reciprocity of successful recognitive processes does not necessarily entail an equal distribution of power among subjects. From a normative point of view, it implies only that the exercise of power in a particular social context must not violate the ethical principle that is in force in that context itself. In the sphere of the

---

<sup>134</sup> Honneth, "Grounding Recognition", 516.

family, for instance, good relations of recognition between parents and children can subsist coherently with asymmetric relations of power among them. A father can licitly exercise authority on his sons if his actions follow the principle of love and do not harm the self-confidence of his children. To provide esteem in the economic dimension does not imply that employers and employees benefit from the same amount of economic power in the labor market. In managerial capitalism and the gig economy, for instance, employees can be organized in work units that are free to set up their own work plan independently from the guidelines of the central industrial and managerial authority. This new form of management of labor can be indeed seen as a model of economic production that attributes to waged workers qualities and, thus, powers that, traditionally, were attributed only to the business elite (originality, autonomy, planned-oriented attitude, etc.). Nevertheless, such transformation of companies' pattern of production is not related to a redistribution of wages or economic capital, and workers still sell their labor force to an employer that possess the necessary capital for paying for such a commodity.

In addition, Honneth's account of recognition seems capable of taking into account forms of recognition that are characterized by mutuality, but not by the symmetry of power. In other words, Honneth's perspective on recognition is consistent with the idea that there can be forms of reciprocal recognition that are based on positional goods or positive properties that are accessible only to a narrow set of individuals. To tribute honor and admiration to somebody, for example, implies that the recognizers and recognizees involved in such particular types of recognition share specific sets of perceptive properties, expectations, and beliefs, acting coherently with a social backdrop in which honor and admiration are at stake. However, honor and admiration are forms of recognition that have a meaning as far as they are rare and exclusive to some extent. If they were liable for being distributed to everybody like respect or appreciation, both honor and admiration would lose their value. Nevertheless, it seems that the attribution of both honor and respect depends on the same conditions for the realization of successful forms of

recognition. The mutuality of the dynamic of recognition is defined not by the symmetry of the acts that are realized by a recognizer and a recognizee. As Ikäheimo and Laitinen have noticed: “If A esteems B as an excellent doctor, it is not B’s esteeming A as an excellent doctor that makes this a case of recognition [...], but rather B’s taking A as a competent recognizer or judge regarding the relevant matters”.<sup>135</sup> Mutuality is determined by the fact that the recipient of an act of recognition evaluates the recognizer who is actively attributing honor or admiration as an adequate one. In this regard, it is worthy to underline how the forms of recognition that are based on exclusion might admit different degrees of value to recognizers that have different social statuses. In a society based on caste, for instance, an aristocrat’s honor might be offended both by another noble individual and by a plebian one. However, a noble’s worthiness can only be properly recognized by an equally ranked agent. For a noble, to receive proof of honor from members of a lower class but not from his class’ peers is likely not to count as a positive situation of social recognition. Therefore, we could say that human beings that have different social origins can also have a different amount of power of recognition. If it is so, Honneth’s theory of recognition seems to be consistent with one of Bourdieu’s most important ideas, according to which the amount of social power an agent possesses rests on her position in a field, that is, namely on her dominant or dominated condition and the amount of capital she possesses.

#### 4.4 Intentionality and social action: A crucial incompatibility between Bourdieu and Honneth?

As we have asserted in the introduction, if we consider the role of reflexivity and intentionality in generating and guiding social actions, Honneth and Bourdieu’s perspectives seem irreconcilable. Bourdieu tries to support the idea that social

---

<sup>135</sup> Ikäheimo, Laitinen, “Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement and Recognitive Attitudes Towards Persons”, 38.

actions are not (or, at least, not always) the outcome of a rational decision-making process of individuals. The trajectory of social behaviors is previously determined by objective and subjective structures. Such structures drive social agents to act coherently with norms of a specific social environment in a pre-reflexive and intuitive way:

It is, of course, never ruled out that the responses of the habitus may be accompanied by a strategic calculation tending to carry on quasi-consciously the operation the habitus carries on in a quite different way, namely an estimation of chances which assumes the transformation of the past effect into the expected objective. But the fact remains that these responses are defined first in relation to a system of objective potentialities, immediately inscribed in the present, things to do or not to do, to say or not to say, in relation to a forthcoming reality which [...] puts itself forward with an urgency and a claim to existence excluding all deliberation.<sup>136</sup>

In conclusion, for Bourdieu, a rational choice process can support our conduct of action in order to achieve a specific end. However, the goals and aims of action, together with the perceptive and judgmental schemes that we acquire in the process of socialization, remain below the level of individual consciousness and rational control. In this respect, their unconscious nature “is indeed never but the forgetting of history that history itself produces by turning the objective structures it itself engenders into those quasi natures that habituses are”.<sup>137</sup> In other words, we could say that, for Bourdieu, interests, needs, and ways of perceiving and reasoning that drive our social behaviors are unconscious because they are embodied in an individual habitus. In this respect, even if they undergo a critical reflection, they appear to individuals as natural determinations rather than social products that are historically changeable.

Even if he follows Bourdieu in his criticism against utilitarian perspectives, Honneth’s point of view seems to differ significantly concerning the role of intentionality in the realization of social actions. In fact, Honneth often asserts that recognitive behaviors are products of a conscious norm-observance of the several

---

<sup>136</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 76.

<sup>137</sup> Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, 94, Engl. Transl., 136.

principles that rule the different spheres of social recognition. Consequently, in order to be considered as such, an act of recognition presupposes that a recognizer  $x$  has the intention to affirm explicitly some positive features of the recognizee  $y$  and  $y$  is able to evaluate reflexively and normatively the contents, meaning, and ends of  $x$ 's behaviors:

we can assume that such acts of recognition represent a distinct phenomenon in the social world, which cannot, therefore, be understood as a mere side-effect of an action aimed at some other goal, but must instead be conceived of as the expression of an independent intention. Whether they be gestures, speech acts, or institutional policies, such expressions or measures are always cases of recognition if their primary purpose is somehow to affirm the existence of another person or group. This basic conceptual choice rules out, for example, defining positive attitudes that are inevitably accompanied by the pursuit of a series of other interests in interaction as being a form of recognition.<sup>138</sup>

But are they effectively so radical in supporting their position regarding the issue of the connection among social action, intentionality, and reflexivity? To answer such a question is of fundamental importance as far as we have claimed that 1) the process of interpersonal recognition plays an important role in Bourdieu's perspective, and 2) Honneth's approach can be explained through Bourdieu's structuralist vocabulary.

First, let us focus on Bourdieu. The latter leaves room for the possibility that social agents can be driven to act reflexively when there is a disconnection between objective and subjective structures, that is, between the form of a field and the configuration of the habitus of social agents:

habitus has its 'blips', critical moments when it misfires or is out of phase: the relationship of adaptation is suspended, in an instant of hesitation into which there may slip a form of reflection which has nothing in common with that of the scholastic thinkers [...]. Conversely, the improvisations of the pianist or the so-called freestyle figures of the gymnast are never performed without a certain presence of mind [...] which is necessary to evaluate instantly the action or posture just produced and to correct a wrong position of the body, to recover an imperfect movement.<sup>139</sup>

---

<sup>138</sup> Honneth, "Recognition as Ideology", 330.

<sup>139</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 162.

In this respect, as Elder-Vass and Sayer have explained, to assume that a conscious process of learning determines the development of the habitus is compatible with Bourdieu's idea of the non-reflexive and unconscious nature of social behaviors:

Sayer illustrates the point nicely with the example of learning to stop at red traffic lights: this may become a habit that we reproduce unthinkingly once we have acquired it, but it is a habit we consciously develop because we understand the consequences of not doing so (Sayer 2005b: 26-8). Bourdieu, however, could presumably accept this modification of the argument while still maintaining that such learning subsequently becomes embodied, internalized and forgotten – as happens when we learn a new sport, for example.<sup>140</sup>

In the light of such a consideration, then, it would be acceptable to state that the development of an embodied habitus is dependent on a process of recognition in which acts of recognition are realized intentionally. Furthermore, Honneth acknowledges the fact that intentionality does not necessarily characterize classes of social actions that are relevant in terms of reciprocal recognition. It is the case of those struggles for recognition, in which widespread experiences of misrecognition can represent the motivational drive behind claims of social transformation or justice. One feature of Honneth's account of struggles for recognition is that it is

neutral with respect to the traditional distinction between intentional and unintentional forms of social conflict, since it asserts nothing about the degree to which actors have to be aware of the driving moral motivation of their action. Here, one can easily imagine cases in which social movements intersubjectively misidentify, as it were, the moral core of their resistance by explicating it in the inappropriate terms of mere interest-categories.<sup>141</sup>

Secondly, as Ikäheimo and Laitinen have argued, the intention to express recognition through a specific behavior is not a necessary constituent of recognition. Actions that are performed in order to express, explicitly and primarily, love, esteem, and respect belong to a very narrow set of behaviors. In this regard, why cannot we consider actions that express recognition as also acts that are not directed primarily

---

<sup>140</sup> Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, 100.

<sup>141</sup> Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition*, 163.



to affirm positive features of groups and individuals? For instance, to help somebody that we love, every time she needs, expresses our attitude of love even if our main purpose is not to show such an intention. If we accept such a form of criticism, social actions (or, at least, a limited class of them) are not necessary and sufficient elements to identify successful forms of recognition, even if they are the result of a recognitive interaction.

Thirdly, Honneth seems to accept the idea suggested by Antti Kauppinen that, in general, we act accordingly to a set of behavioral expectations

not explicitly or consciously, but rather implicitly; accordingly, we become aware of the norms that regulate our behaviour in the form of 'knowing how' only in those moments when our expectations are disrupted; the interruption of our action forces us to make explicit the portion of our latent background beliefs that is ineluctable for making sense of the situation. I see no difficulty in incorporating this suggestion with the ideas I developed earlier, regarding the basis for acts of recognition in our socially acquired background knowledge: if we think of norms of recognition as patterns of response that we master in the course of acquiring evaluative knowledge, this must be a matter of 'knowing how' that we can never completely articulate in explicit rules.<sup>142</sup>

In this respect, it seems reasonable to affirm that Honneth would accept the idea that actualization of social actions that express recognition and have become habitual can happen unintentionally. This phenomenon can occur by virtue of a harmonic concordance between the intrinsic logic of a specific sphere of recognition and the subjective dispositions to recognize and to be recognized that have been internalized by an agent. In light of the previous considerations, we can conclude that both Honneth and Bourdieu may accept the idea that, in the actualization of social actions, moments of consciousness and unconsciousness are intertwined. Ergo, the idea that these two theoretical perspectives are inconsistent because of the different role that they attribute to intentionality in terms of the practical logic of action is not relevant.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> Honneth, *Grounding Recognition*, 515.

<sup>143</sup> In an interesting comparison between Searle's concept of *Background* and Bourdieu's idea of habitus, Iordanis Marcoulatos suggests that Bourdieu depicts and considers habitus as a structure that is characterized by a nonrepresentational level of intentionality. See Iordanis Marcoulatos,

However, there is also another conclusion we could deduce from the previous observations. When it is realized, social behavior is enacted by means of the causal action of both agents' reflexivity and non-reflexive factors. The latter include habitus' dispositions that human beings develop through the process of socialization, as well as feelings and emotions that are related to individual and collective social experiences. The fact habitus operates below the level of human consciousness does not mean that habitus itself owns an irrational nature. On the contrary, it could reflect the morphology of objective social structures that are organized according to rational norms and values that could be willingly accepted by the vast majority of those social agents that are subjected to their influence. Therefore, the embodied habitus of concrete individuals could be conceived as a network of beliefs, perceptive schemes, and bodily skills that incarnates as rational or, at least reasonable, the logic of social action. In this respect, we could say that habitus can be a rational but unconscious structure that allows human beings to act reasonably and coherently with their social habitat. In doing so, habitus gives human beings the chance to act sensibly without exercising reflexivity constantly by consenting to the unconscious and non-reflexive implementation of rational social practices. At the same time, such interpretation of the habitus is consistent with the idea that we can question and modify reflexively the social dispositions that we accumulate and store at the unconscious level.<sup>144</sup> This situation can happen, as Honneth states above, when "our expectations are disrupted; the interruption of our action forces us to make explicit

---

"John Searle and Pierre Bourdieu: Divergent Perspective on Intentionality and Social Ontology", *Human Studies* 26, no. 1 (2003): 67-96, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022579615814>; "Nonrepresentational intentionality is the fact that bodily manner is immanently directional or referential; it evokes a manner of reaction by virtue of its presence. From this perspective, one's existential stance can be seen as a quasi-act of position taking, i.e., presence can be understood as intentionality, or intentionality can be perceived as presence", 75.

<sup>144</sup> For a negative position concerning the theoretical compatibility between habitus activity and reflexivity, see Margaret Archer, "Can Reflexivity and Habitus Work in Tandem?", in *Conversations About Reflexivity*, ed. Margaret Archer (New York: Routledge 2010), 123-143, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119825552>; for a positive viewpoint, see Bret Chandler, "The Subjectivity of the Habitus", *Journal of Theory of Social Behaviour* 43, no. 4 (2013): 469-491, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12025>.

the portion of our latent background beliefs that is ineluctable for making sense of the situation”. The effect of reflexivity on the structural and non-reflexive factors that influence our social practices can be different. An agent may be driven to occasionally correct conduct that is unreflexively generated by her social dispositions because of the emergence of unprecedented social circumstances. In other cases, the mismatch between objective social conditions and habitus could lead a human being to question in a more radical way her usual patterns of action, the social space in which she is living, or both.

## 4.5 Concluding remarks

The previous pages have tried to explain, on the one hand, how Honneth’s theory of social action might be implemented with Bourdieu’s perspective. In fact, Honneth asserts the idea that individuals’ flourishing, the emergence of their self-consciousness, and of collective cooperation all depend on innate, biological dispositions of human beings to recognize and be recognized. However, for Honneth, human beings always exercise such role-taking capacity on the backdrop of a social lifeworld that radically shapes the concrete dynamic of recognition among individuals. This lifeworld, which consists of a multidimensional set of objective and institutionalized spheres of recognition, provides social agents with the normative principles and perceptive properties that, in a given historical moment, are necessary to follow in order to achieve successful forms of recognition. In this regard, it is perhaps excessive to assert that these objective spheres of recognition determine causally individuals’ agency. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to adopt a weaker ontological position: such social structures determine the process of recognition and, thus, the agency of social agents in the following sense: they limit and set bound to the range of possible forms of recognition and social actions that can be realized by social agents in a given social context. It is likely that Honneth would apparently endorse the idea that between the interpersonal dimension of social interaction and

institutional entities of the social world there is a dialectical connection. In this respect, there cannot be forms of successful interpersonal recognition without the presence of specific objective (social institutions) and subjective (attitudes of recognition) conditions. In this respect, the structuralist conception developed by Bourdieu can help us to understand how concrete processes of recognition are always embedded in social structures that are not necessarily characterized by the symmetry of powers and, therefore, by forms of equal and non-hierarchical cooperation.

On the other hand, the chapter has tried to show the important role that interpersonal recognition plays in Bourdieu's account of socialization. In fact, Bourdieu acknowledges that the development of an embodied habitus that is consistent with the practical logic of a field is dependent on the fulfillment of the innate need of human beings for recognition. Individuals embody social structures as far as they can develop some sort of affective involvement for a given social practice, and such involvement is strictly tied to the recognition an individual receives when she starts to behave coherently with the logic of a particular social environment. In this regard, it is relevant to note that the internalization of a habitus that is consistent with the morphology of an objective social field is a process that is not immediate or mechanical. The individual acquisition of unconscious social dispositions that allow the reproduction of a particular social reality is mediated by interpersonal relationships of recognition. Through social recognition, according to Bourdieu, human beings address their pre-social libidinal drives toward both social interests and practices and the relationships with others. In this regard, we could hypothesize that dynamic recognition might be crucial not only for explaining the acquisition of the habitus, but also for describing its operationalization in a specific social field. In other words, we could argue that social actions that human beings actualize under the influence of objective and subjective structures own not only a goal-aimed nature, but also an expressivist character, through which social agents can obtain recognition from others, or attribute it.

In addition, the chapter has tried to underline a general, important point of overlap between these two different accounts of the logic of social action. Honneth and Bourdieu's theories converge around the presupposition that the rational maximization of our material and selfish interests cannot describe and predict every form of social action. In fact, they both argue that social actions are always influenced by external social conditions, individual schemes of perception, and judgment that are socially produced, subjective feelings of humiliation or approval, love or disrespect, and allocentric perspectives toward our partners of interaction. More specifically, Bourdieu ends up considering the purpose of social action in strategic but not economic terms. In each field, social agents act under the influence of objective and subjective structures in order to increase or preserve the amount of capital at stake in that field. Such logic of action is not necessarily shaped by selfishness or the will to maximize some profit. However, in any case, it produces asymmetries of power, and privileged and unprivileged positions among the social agents that take part in a particular social game. On the other hand, Honneth focuses on a theory of social action that privileges the analysis of the expressive meaning of social behavior, without denying the possible strategic nature of social demeanors. In fact, Honneth aims to underline how, in the social reality, cooperation and collective agency are often intertwined with a dynamic of reciprocity that grants the potential flourishing of individuals and their positive self-relationship. For Honneth, gestures, speech acts, or institutional provisions that are directed to confirm positively the identity of individuals and groups are genuine acts of recognition if and only if the recognizer has, as a primary intention, the will to recognize her partner of action in a positive way.

Therefore, it is clear that both explanations of social action are partial and one-sided, at least. Against Bourdieu's viewpoint, following Honneth's criticism, it could be said that it seems akin to depict social actions only in interest-oriented terms. Bourdieu underestimates the fact that the actualization or reiteration of a particular social behavior or lifestyle might aim to restate the worth of a particular value

complex and to gain others' approval. Against Honneth, it can be underlined that he excludes from the group of the acts of recognition those actions and performances that do not have any expressive meaning as their first scope. The result is that actions that express recognition belong, in Honneth's point of view, to a rather narrow set. Furthermore, acts that signal lack of recognition, misrecognition, or social invisibility do not aim necessarily to obtain a positive acknowledgment of a positive individual or collective identity. For instance, the expressivist and symbolic meaning of a public rally can point exclusively to weaken social and political factors that cause misrecognition, to improve the social position of a particular group or class, to guarantee them public visibility, and so on. The combination of Bourdieu's and Honneth's action-theoretic accounts could give us the possibility to develop a model of social action that can take into account the bi-dimensional nature of our social behavior. This idea then implies that a range of social practices that own a determined function can reproduce themselves if and only if such practices allow social agents to receive and provide some kind of reciprocal recognition. For instance, observing a formal dress code for taking part in an important work meeting certainly has an expressivist meaning that concerns that specific social context. Adapting to it means to pay respect to other participants and to recognize the importance of the situation. Nonetheless, to dress in a certain way can affect also the success of a work meeting. It is likely that a participant that infringes the dress code might have fewer possibilities to make an advantageous deal, while a person that shows up in a fancy outfit might have more chances to draw the attention of her audience and reach her professional aims. It has been said that the implementation of our social practices requires, from a causal point of view, both reflexivity and the action of pre-reflexive, unconscious beliefs, patterns of perception, and bodily skills. In the same way, as Stephan Voswinkel has observed, we could endorse the idea that, when they implement a specific practice, social agents "pursue certain pragmatic

purposes with interest, and in doing so, not in addition to it, they seek recognition”.<sup>145</sup>

The next three chapters focus on the reinterpretation of Bourdieu’s main conceptual tools through the lens of Honneth’s theory of recognition. Such an attempt to combine the two theoretical perspectives can be considered as a propaedeutic moment toward an original account of the ideas of domination and emancipation. It aims to combine the insights that Honneth and Bourdieu have achieved in developing their critical points of view on social life. Nevertheless, a brief recap of what has been said until this point is necessary for grasping better the next step of the present work.

---

<sup>145</sup> Stephan Voswinkel, “‘Recognition’ and ‘Interest’: A Multidimensional Concept in the Sociology of Work”, *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Critical Theory* 13, no.1 (2012a), 32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2012.640594>. Voswinkel’s position seems to be very close to the account of the concept of ‘interest’ developed in Matteo Santarelli, *La Vita Interessata* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019). Mainly focusing on the reconstruction of Dewey’s theory of interest, Santarelli brilliantly explains, on the one hand, why the concept of ‘interest’ should not be reduced to the idea of economic-strategic self-interest, and, on the other hand, how the realization of a particular interest is essentially imbricated to the achievement of some form of self-realization (see 167-171 for a short recap of the arguments that support such ideas). Furthermore, Santarelli highlights how both Bourdieu and Dewey, despite several meaningful differences, refuse to understand the concept of ‘interest’ only from a utilitarian and economic perspective (see 181-194).

# CONCLUSION PART I: THE BACKGROUND FOR CRITICAL SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

In chapters 2, 3, and 4 we have discussed and compared the social theories of Axel Honneth and Pierre Bourdieu under three different aspects: the issue of social reproduction, the problem of social transformation, and their account of social action. Considering the first topic it has been argued that, on the one hand, Honneth's paradigm of recognition can enhance Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction by deepening the process that allows accumulation of symbolic capital and embodiment of habitus at the individual level. At the same time, through Bourdieu's structuralism, it seems possible to show how the social affirmation of patterns of recognition depends on the development of objective and subjective structural conditions. These conditions can push social agents to enact behavior that expresses recognition in an unintentional and pre-reflexive way, as argued in chapter 4. In this respect, Bourdieu's post-structuralism can also clarify how successful forms of recognition can support the reproduction of unfair social systems. Once a dominating class monopolizes symbolic capital, such a class can impose patterns of recognition that can provide dominated social agents with some form of a reasonably positive self-understanding and self-relationship, pushing them to internalize a habitus that is coherent with the dominants' position of power.

In chapter 3, it has been argued that Honneth and Bourdieu consider social struggles as ontologically relevant phenomena, which are fundamental features of social transformation. In this regard, first, chapter 3 has sought to show how both thinkers share the same idea about the stake in social struggles: the exercise of symbolic power, that is, the reinterpretation of those norms and rules that regulates social relationships in a given social space, and how such struggles can be



reinterpreted in terms of struggles for recognition. Later, it underlined the different characterizations of social struggle that Honneth and Bourdieu provide. Honneth depicts struggles for recognition in reconciliatory terms, arguing that the outcomes of such conflicts, when they determine inclusive enlargement of social spheres of recognition, can produce beneficial effects for all the conflicting groups. Bourdieu, on the contrary, describes the struggle for the accumulation of symbolic capital in antagonistic terms, as a zero-sum game, in which only one faction gains advantages at the end of the conflict. The combination of these two perspectives can provide us with a more complex description of the different forms that social struggles can assume. In fact, both reconciliatory and agonistic struggle can aim at either changing radically the symbolic framework of a given social world or promoting a different way to actualize norms and values that are socially accepted by all the members of a community.

In addition, the comparison of Bourdieu's and Honneth's perspectives have highlighted also that social transformation can have not only a progressive and emancipatory nature, working in favor of victims of oppression and domination, but it can also assume the lineaments of an integrative and conservative phenomenon, in which dominant classes and groups can redefine normative frameworks, social values, and sets of perceptive schemes in order to preserve their position of power in society. Finally, chapter 3 has stated the necessity to integrate Bourdieu's and Honneth's ideas regarding the preconditions that determine the emergence of social conflicts and the appearance of social transformation. The aim is to build up a more detailed socio-ontological account of such preconditions, considering structural and intersubjective features, and reflexive and pre-reflexive elements behind the processes of social reproduction and transformation.

Considering the importance of social struggle and oppositional agency for social reproduction and transformation, chapter 4 has discussed if the action-theoretic accounts developed by Bourdieu and Honneth are radically incompatible and incommensurable. In this regard, the chapter concluded that neither approach

excludes the fact that moments of consciousness and unawareness, as well as intentionality and pre-intentional (or non-intentional) factors, are intertwined in the realization of social behavior. This means that, on the one hand, Honneth would accept the idea that proper forms of recognition might be implemented thanks to the influence of social structures. Objective structures might limit and set boundaries for the range of possible forms of recognition and social actions that can be realized by social agents in a given social context. Subjective bodily structures could consist of a set of dispositional properties that allow social agents to perceive, expect, and act in order to express recognition in a specific social context. On the other hand, Bourdieu's structuralism seems to leave open the possibility that there are circumstances in which intentionality and consciousness can determine meaningfully social agents' actions. In addition, the chapter tried to underline that for Honneth and Bourdieu the rational maximization of our material and selfish interests cannot describe and predict every form of social action. Social actions can aim at the realization of a particular interest, which is not necessarily related to a selfish goal, and possess an expressivist meaning at the same time.

This conceptualization of social action in bi-dimensional terms might have important consequences in relation to the comprehension and description of social reproduction and transformation that could be obtained by combining the social theories of Honneth and Bourdieu. First, this bi-dimensional conception of social behavior implies that a range of social practices that own a determined function and aim to realize a specific interest can reproduce themselves if and only if such practices allow social agents to receive and provide some kind of reciprocal recognition. In this respect, the interaction between social structures like social fields and embodied habitus generate social actions that are not only strategic but also symbolically relevant for the interpersonal relationships of social agents. A fair and an unfair society share the same dynamic of reproduction. Until the interaction between objective and subjective structure produces social practices that support forms of successful recognition among individuals, social systems can reproduce

themselves, be they fair or grounded on domination. As such, it is important to note that, coherently with Bourdieu's perspective, domination would not be based on some sort of false consciousness, but on forms of reciprocal recognition that are satisfactory for both the dominant and the dominated. Thus, the naturalization of social reality would be dependent on the capacity of a particular set of social structures to guarantee positive self-relationships to individual social agents, be they in a dominant or dominated position.

Second, the same bi-dimensional model of social action implies that the transformation of a given social context can occur when the interaction of such social structures is not able to produce successful and satisfying forms of recognition anymore. In this respect, social struggle as a specific form of oppositional social action is causally connected not only to experiences of suffering that are produced in intersubjective interactions, but also to a discrepancy between a given habitus with its set of expectations and the choices of actions that are available in the objective social world. When the relation between the subjective and bodily habitus of agents and the objective structures of a society is not capable of naturalizing experiences of social suffering anymore, the oppositional agency of groups and classes might appear and acquire relevance in the social world. This does not mean that social struggle will produce necessarily some sort of partial or radical emancipation of subjugated classes. Dominant groups have always the possibility to accommodate the condition of crisis to their own advantage, given the control they have on symbolic capital and power.

At this point, it is nevertheless necessary to clarify further some crucial points concerning the opportunity to reinterpret Honneth's theory of recognition using Bourdieu's main operational concepts: 'symbolic capital', 'field', and 'habitus'. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 have sought to show how dynamics related to reciprocal recognition plays an important, constitutive role also in Bourdieu's idea of social reproduction and transformation. In this regard, these chapters have tried to highlight that 'recognition' and 'struggle for recognition' are pivotal concepts for

Bourdieu on both the macrosocial and the microsocial level. Considering macrosocial dimension, recognition is the basic mechanism for accumulating symbolic capital, for monopolizing the exercise of symbolic power, and for stabilizing social orders. On the microsocial level, recognition is essential for guarantying the transmission and internalization of those subjective habitus that are consistent with the objective shape, norms, and rules of the different fields that constitute social reality.

The first problematic issue regards the possibility to reconcile *de facto* Bourdieu's and Honneth's conceptions of recognition. In fact, it is true that Honneth's model of recognition and Bourdieu's use of the notion of 'recognition' differs radically at first sight. In particular, it can be stated that often Bourdieu depicts the phenomenon of recognition in a way that is closer to Rousseau's idea of recognition as *amour-propre*.<sup>146</sup> For instance, in *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu ties the "search of recognition" to the Freudian idea of the satisfaction of the narcissistic drive of the recognizee. In this regard, it is clear how Bourdieu explains the acquisition of a habitus that is consistent with a given social environment. The approval of others is fundamental for satisfying the *amour-propre* of individuals. Once an individual experiences the pleasure of egoistic satisfaction of his narcissistic drive, he will be inclined to repeat that social behavior that has produced social approval. For Bourdieu, this psychological mechanism is the main driving force behind the socialization of the pre-social interests of human beings and the process of the reproduction of society. This conception of recognition is rather far from Honneth's paradigm, which clearly refuses any psychoanalytical interpretation of the recognition itself.

Briefly put, the strategy developed in this work was, first, to put into brackets the problems regarding the anthropological roots of recognition, and to focus instead on the *main ontological characteristics* of interpersonal recognition, its principal

---

<sup>146</sup> This problem has been underlined by Danielle Petherbridge in her response to the first draft of this thesis.

constitutive and invariant elements, identified by Honneth himself in the essay *Recognition as Ideology*. To sum up, my claim is that Honneth's ontological account of recognition is consistent with Bourdieu's idea for the following three reasons. First, Honneth's *receptive-perceptual model of recognition* is compatible with Bourdieu's perspective. According to Bourdieu, in fact

agents possess power in proportion to their symbolic capital, i.e. in proportion to the recognition they receive from a group. The authority that underlies the performative efficacy of discourse is a *percipi*, a being-known, which allows a *percipere* to be imposed, or, more precisely, which allows the consensus concerning the meaning of the social world, which grounds common sense to be imposed officially, i.e. in front of everyone and in the name of everyone.<sup>147</sup>

This point seems to be confirmed by the fact that Bourdieu asserts that:

The individual or collective classification struggles aimed at transforming the categories of perception and appreciation of the social world and, through this, the social world itself, are indeed a forgotten dimension of the class struggle.<sup>148</sup>

Second, Honneth's account of recognition seems capable of taking into account forms of recognition that are characterized by mutuality, but not by the symmetry of power, like love relationships between parents and children and esteem between employers and employees. In line with such an idea, Honneth's conception of the recognitive process in terms of mutuality does not exclude that successful and good forms of recognition might be consistent with an unequal distribution of social power between recognizers and recognizees. Similarly, Bourdieu assumes that *recognition between dominant agents and dominated ones implies reciprocal dependence* to work properly. If it is undeniable that the dominated tend to behave in society according to dominant rules and norms due to their narcissistic drives, according to Bourdieu it is also true that power and symbolic domination of dominant groups last "only inasmuch as those who undergo it recognize those who wield it".<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>147</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 106.

<sup>148</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 564, Engl. transl., 483.

<sup>149</sup> Bourdieu & Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 148.

In fact, the use of symbolic capital “enables forms of domination, which imply dependence on those who can dominate by it, since it only exists through the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others, and can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence”.<sup>150</sup> This idea seems to be confirmed by the fact that, for Bourdieu, the privileged position of a dominant group seems to widely depend on the capacity of a symbolic framework, which is usually shaped by a dominant group, to grant the dominated to achieve some sort of positive individual self-relationship.<sup>151</sup> When such conditions are fulfilled, social agents tend to develop pre-reflexive habitus that is coherent with the nature and shape of specific social fields and, therefore, with the interests of the dominant group or class. If it is so, for Bourdieu, as well as for Honneth, a given society can reproduce itself in as much as social practices embody also an expressivist and symbolic meaning that can foster processes of mutual recognition among individuals.

Third, Bourdieu admits that *disinterestedness is sociologically* possible “through the encounter between habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded”.<sup>152</sup> If it is so, then it is possible to think that forms of reciprocal recognition based on disinterest can be grasped and described, in theory, also through Bourdieu’s conceptual tools. Moreover, Bourdieu himself states that a suspension for the accumulation of symbolic (or recognitive) capital can be obtained through the social actualization of forms of reciprocal recognition

based on the suspension of the struggle for symbolic power that springs from the quest for recognition and the associated temptation to dominate, the mutual recognition by which each recognizes himself or herself in another whom he or she recognizes as another self and who also recognizes him or her as such, can lead, in its perfect reflexivity, beyond the alternatives of egoism and altruism.<sup>153</sup>

The realization of such an emancipated society based on disinterested and mutual forms of recognition does not imply, in theory, a society in which habitus, fields, and

---

<sup>150</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 204.

<sup>151</sup> See chapter 2, part 2 of the dissertation.

<sup>152</sup> Bourdieu, *Raisons Pratique*, 123, Engl. transl., 88.

<sup>153</sup> Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 111.

capital disappear. Simply, coherently with Bourdieu's perspective, this would be a society in which reciprocity and mutuality are possible thanks to "habitus predisposed to disinterestedness and the universes in which disinterestedness is rewarded". In light of this, it should be clear that to privilege analysis of recognition in ontological terms does not imply to refuse Honneth's normative account of recognition. If anything, it can help theorists of recognition to identify the ontological elements that good forms of recognition and bad or ideological forms of recognition share, thus, improving and sharpening the conceptual analysis of their distinctive features.

To conclude: the attempt to reconcile Bourdieu's and Honneth's perspectives on recognition is based on the analysis of some constitutive elements of reciprocal recognition (the receptive-perceptual side of recognition, the reciprocity of recognition, and the disinterested, non-utilitarian nature of recognition) that, in my opinion, the two scholars share despite their different accounts of the anthropological roots of recognition itself.

The second issue concerns the risk that, by merging two different notions of 'recognition', not only is the fundamentally normative (as compared to normalizing) notion of 'recognition' diminished or overlooked, but Honneth's theory of recognition becomes functionalized.<sup>154</sup> On the contrary, reinterpreting Honneth's idea of recognition through Bourdieu's theoretical lens, one of the aims of this research is to give an ethical interpretation and vocation to Bourdieu's critical sociology. In fact, his main focus of the problem of the process of reproduction of societies based on inequality and conflicts led Bourdieu to pay more attention to the following: the study of the mechanisms that concern the neutralization of social conflicts; the relationship between normalization, naturalization, and acceptance of unfair social systems; and the internalization of social practices that support the existence of unequal forms of social power, which are advantageous for a narrow set

---

<sup>154</sup> This problem has been underlined by Danielle Petherbridge in her response to the first draft of this thesis.

of dominant agents. In this regard, it is right to affirm that Bourdieu tends to underestimate the analysis of the social conditions that allow the realization of social progress and, therefore, the actualization of forms of cooperation based on equality and mutualism. This has consequences also for his account of social transformation. As explained in the introduction, one of the criticisms that can be moved to Bourdieu is that he points out the possibility of social transformation, in terms of amelioration and emancipation, without developing a sound and solid theory of social transformation in terms of capital, field, and habitus.

In addition, it is true that Bourdieu disregards the self-understanding of the agents, and thus fails to grasp the normative structure and particular logic that fundamentally characterize practices of and struggles for recognition.<sup>155</sup> Even if Bourdieu acknowledges that motivations behind social struggles can differ from the reasons provided by a strategic-utilitarian calculation, he does not thematize and discuss at all the nature of normative and, more in general, non-utilitarian claims that can motivate oppositional agency of social agents.

Nevertheless, this flaw in Bourdieu's critical sociology does not imply that Bourdieu's theoretical framework is incapable of describing forms of social life based on a fair distribution of resources and power. Bourdieu's critical sociology aims at explaining how dominated social agents can believe they are taking part in a fair and just system of cooperation, while they are acting in favor of their oppression and the exclusive well-being of their oppressors. Showing that Bourdieu's post-structuralist account of social reality and action is consistent with a paradigm of recognition that is normatively loaded can help theorists and sociologists to operationalize concepts like 'symbolic capital', 'field', and 'habitus' for studying and describing societies based on equality, fair distribution of power, and mutualism. That is why reinterpreting Honneth's idea of recognition through Bourdieu's theoretical lens could be useful. In this regard, the next part of this work seeks to highlight that the conceptual tools of Bourdieu's critical sociology can be used to address and evaluate the normative

---

<sup>155</sup> This point was underlined by Robin Celikates in his response to the first draft of this thesis.



claims related to the struggles of recognition in terms of equal distribution of opportunities to benefit from social recognition.

This last consideration allows clarification of where exactly the normative dimension of the critical social ontology, that the next pages try to sketch, comes from. The normative posture of such a critical social ontology should stem from Honneth's original but dated intuitions according to which the actualization of good forms of recognition depends on also the structural factors tied to the shape and nature of objective social reality:

The existence of a class society based upon the unequal market chances of individual productive agents, but ideologically connected to individual educational success, results in a lasting inequality in the distribution of chances for social recognition. [...] this unequal distribution of social dignity drastically restricts the possibility of individual self-respect for lower, primarily manually employed occupational groups.<sup>156</sup>

It is in light of these considerations that, in the next chapters, an attempt is made to reinterpret Honneth's theory of recognition using Bourdieu's sociological lens and tools. Reinterpreting symbolic capital in terms of capital of recognition, chapter 5 explains how Honneth's account of reciprocal recognition can be described in terms of power, the active power of recognizing, and the power of attracting recognition. At the same time, the same chapter deepens the idea that the distribution and monopolization of symbolic capital mainly depend on the dynamics of recognition. Chapters 6 and 7 try to show how social structures exercise their power at the objective and subjective levels. In this respect, the aim is to define the concept of 'field' and 'habitus' in terms of recognition: what is a recognitive field? How does it affect the dispositions of human beings considering their capacity to recognize their peers according to a given social situation?

---

<sup>156</sup> Honneth, "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination: Some Problems in the Analysis of Hidden Morality", 218.



## PART II



## 5 SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AS RECOGNITIVE CAPITAL

This chapter seeks to build an interpretation of Bourdieu's idea of symbolic capital that can incorporate the fundamental ontological component of reciprocal recognition according to Honneth's interpretation. In this regard, it aims to overcome some obstacles that can arise once we try to conceive reciprocal recognition, which is supposed to be ethically valuable and unconditional in its authentic forms, in terms of an immaterial good, as an asset that can be stockpiled and employed in social interaction and for exercising social powers. The chapter intends to show that the opportunity to realize such a conceptual combination is only apparently counterintuitive. On the one hand, in fact, the French sociologist affirms that symbolic capital (namely, honor and recognition that individuals attribute each other in the social dimension) is the main social resource that allows the exercise of symbolic power. In this respect, it is interesting to note how Bourdieu highlights a strong connection between struggles for the acquisition of symbolic capital and conflicts for interpersonal recognition:

struggles for recognition are a fundamental dimension of social life [...] what is at stake in them is an accumulation of a particular form of capital, honor in the sense of reputation and prestige [...] there is, therefore, a specific logic behind the accumulation of symbolic capital, as capital founded on cognition and recognition.<sup>157</sup>

On the other hand, Honneth concedes that recognition might be considered a form of immaterial good whose distribution and fruition can be limited or extended and, thus, as a particular form of social resource that enables social agents to use symbolic power and influence the organization of social space. In the first section, I will briefly illustrate Bourdieu's theory of forms of capital, focusing especially on the

---

<sup>157</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, 22.

relation between symbolic capital and power. In addition, considering that Bourdieu does not provide a specific definition of ‘*power*’, the section introduces a conception of power that is consistent with Bourdieu’s structuralism as well as with Honneth’s paradigm of recognition. In the second section, I sketch a general outline of Honneth’s account of ontological components of recognition, focusing on the reasons that make it a good candidate for reinterpreting Bourdieu’s account of symbolic capital. In the third section, I explain why it is possible to reinterpret symbolic capital as recognitive capital and why the latter is consistent with Honneth’s perspective.

## 5.1 Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power and capital

Bourdieu has conceived his approach not only as a development of a structuralist sociology, but also as a critical form of sociology. In this regard, we can say that the fundamental aim of Bourdieu is to discover strategies through which social and political elites can consolidate their own domination, their position of power. As we have already seen, one of the invariant elements that characterize every social field is the struggle among social agents for the maximization of capital. Let us consider the concept of ‘*capital*’. In the essay “The Forms of Capital” Bourdieu explains that with the term ‘capital’ he refers to

accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its ‘incorporated,’ embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor. It is a *vis insita*, a force inscribed in objective or subjective structures, but it is also a *lex insita*, the principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world.<sup>158</sup>

Such a definition is clearly multilayered. For Bourdieu, capital is not only the result of a process of unilateral accumulation and appropriation by social agents. Capital is also a relational entity (*vis insita*) that always reflects the relations of power within

---

<sup>158</sup> Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital”, 241.

social fields, and a principle of action (*lex insita*) that shapes the practical conducts of social agents. In the light of such characterization, we can say that, for Bourdieu, the process of accumulation of capital seems always to hide specific relations of power among social agents and principles of action that are coherent with the shape of such social forces. As often underlined, Bourdieu distances himself from the Marxist tradition as he provides an analysis of capital that is not solely economic. In fact, Bourdieu asserts that the types of capital are as many as the number of fields that constitute the social dimension, and the accumulation of a particular form of capital might obey rules that differ from those that govern the accumulation of capital in another field. To acquire cultural capital, for instance, requires choices and the adoption of strategies that could be unprofitable for the accumulation of economic capital. In some social contexts, the attainment of an academic degree or certification could require an investment of money and time that would be counter-productive in terms of the maximization of economic profit.

Furthermore, the rules that govern the distribution of capital among social agents and their reciprocal relations of power are, according to Bourdieu, always arbitrary and historically contingent, as a social field is organized according to the interests and viewpoint of the dominating agents. Given such conditions, how is it possible to stabilize a social order and guarantee its reproduction? In order to understand the latter point, it is good to clarify the conceptual account of ‘symbolic power’ and its role in Bourdieu’s critical sociology. In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu writes:

Symbolic power is a power of constructing reality, and one which tends to establish a *gnoseological* order [...] Symbols are the instruments *par excellence* of ‘social integration’: as instruments of knowledge and communication [...], they make it possible for there to be a *consensus* on the meaning of the social world, a consensus which contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of the social order. ‘Logical’ integration is the precondition of ‘moral’ integration.<sup>159</sup>

Let us try to study analytically such a definition. First, it is evident that Bourdieu considers symbolic power as a form of linguistic, illocutionary power through which

---

<sup>159</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 166.

human beings can create a social world. In this respect, symbolic power is necessary to establish and preserve a set of collectively shared beliefs about the nature and shape of social reality. The exercise of symbolic power is nothing but “the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world and its divisions”.<sup>160</sup>

Secondly, following Bourdieu, the actualization of symbolic power always coincides with the exercise of a symbolic violence, as it creates and supports social conditions of domination without using force or repressive mechanisms. As we have said before, social agents can act spontaneously and coherently in a specific field thanks to habitus, namely an embodied set of dispositions and classificatory schemes. At the same time, to possess symbolic power means to be able to impose schemes of categorizations, perception, and evaluations. Consequently, members of a dominating class that controls and monopolizes symbolic power can shape the habitus of dominated classes in a way that can guarantee the latter act according to the dominants’ interests, i.e., depicting the unequal distribution of capital, class positions, and powers among social agents as a natural fact.

Thirdly, Bourdieu clearly asserts that, in order to be effective, the symbolic representation of the social world has to be recognized by all the participants into the social game. More specifically, he affirms that the epistemic acknowledgment of the symbolic meaning of the social reality is possible “only inasmuch as those who undergo it recognize those who wield it”.<sup>161</sup> As in every struggle, social actors fight to maximize the possession of a specific capital. In the case of a conflict for symbolic power, the capital at stake is a symbolic one. Given that, what exactly is symbolic capital? Symbolic capital is conceived by Bourdieu in terms of social prestige and honor and, thus, recognition:

agents possess power in proportion to their symbolic capital, i.e. in proportion to the recognition they receive from a group. The authority that underlies the performative efficacy of discourse is a *percipi*, a being-known, which allows a *percipere* to be imposed, or, more precisely, which allows the consensus concerning the meaning of the social

---

<sup>160</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “What Makes a Social Class: On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups”, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32, (1987), 13-14.

<sup>161</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 122, Engl. transl., 148.



world which grounds common sense to be imposed officially, i.e. in front of everyone and in the name of everyone.<sup>162</sup>

This passage stresses out several important features of symbolic capital. The first one is the role that recognition plays among social actors and, consequently, in the dynamics of social games in general. The imposition of a symbolic representation and, therefore, the subjective embodiment of sets of dispositions, which are coherent with the interests of dominant groups, are always the result of a previous process of reciprocal recognition among individuals and groups. In this picture, recognition precedes the acquisition and the possibility to exercise a symbolic power and, in the end, it is necessary for guaranteeing the success of the interaction among objective social structures and subjective embodied disposition. In other words:

Symbolic capital enables forms of domination which imply dependence on those who can be dominated by it, since it only exists through the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others, and can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence.<sup>163</sup>

Therefore, even if it is undeniable that symbolic capital is necessarily rooted in some kind of material capital, for Bourdieu its existence depends also on the epistemic states of recognizers.

The second important aspect worth outlining is the omnipresence of symbolic capital in different social fields. According to Bourdieu, in fact, symbolic capital “is not a particular kind of capital but what every kind of capital becomes when it is misrecognized as capital, that is, as force, a power or capacity for (actual or potential) exploitation, and therefore recognized as legitimate”. On the basis of these considerations, we might assert that, if the invariant element of every struggle for capital is the struggle for symbolic capital, and the stabilization of the division among the dominant and the dominated in a specific field can be interpreted as the outcome of a process of recognition among social agents, then every struggle for the

---

<sup>162</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 106.

<sup>163</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 166.

acquisition of symbolic capital can be conceived also as a struggle for recognition, i.e., for the acquisition of a *recognitive capital*.

However, as we have anticipated, Bourdieu does not formulate a precise definition of ‘power’ that fits his structuralist perspective. Focusing on the nature of symbolic power, it can be noticed that Bourdieu considers power and domination as synonyms, in so far as every distribution of social powers among social agents is consistent with the interests and the conception of the social world of the dominating class, which monopolizes symbolic capital and power:

The different classes and class fractions are engaged in a symbolic struggle properly speaking, one aimed at imposing the definition of the social world that is best suited to their interests. These classes can engage in this struggle either directly, in the symbolic conflicts of everyday life, or else by proxy, via the struggle between the different specialists in symbolic production (full-time producers), a struggle over the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence, that is, of the power to impose (or even to inculcate) the arbitrary instruments of knowledge and expression (taxonomies) of social reality - but instruments whose arbitrary nature is not realized as such.<sup>164</sup>

To sum up, for Bourdieu symbolic power is a “power that can be exercised only if it is recognized, that is, misrecognized as arbitrary. [...] Symbolic power, a subordinate power, is a transformed, i.e., misrecognizable, transfigured and legitimated form of the other forms of power”.<sup>165</sup> However, this critical and radical equivalence between power and domination does not exclude that Bourdieu’s account can be compatible with a more general definition of ‘power’, but without strong negative connotations. Such a conception of power should be consistent with Bourdieu’s idea that our social agency is anyway enhanced or limited by structures whose influence transcends the rational and reflexive activity of social agents, as well as with Honneth’s conception of recognition. In this regard, such a general definition of ‘power’ should be in harmony with the idea that reciprocal recognition enables social subjects to self-identify with the social features they possess and that they consider as valuable the constitutive elements (the social features) of their personhood. In this respect, I

---

<sup>164</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 167-168.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibidem*, 170.

propose adopting a three-sided notion of ‘power’ supported, among others, by Amy Allen. Power can be intended as *power-to*, namely the capacity of an individual and collective agent to accomplish something, to realize an end or a series of ends; as *power-over*, namely the ability of an individual and collective agent to limit the set of possible actions available for another agent, and as *power-with*, namely the ability of a group of individual or collective agents to act together in order to realize shared ends and aims.<sup>166</sup> Such a three-fold definition of ‘power’ is compatible with Bourdieu’s perspective in so far as:

- it does not exclude that power-to might depend on the set of resources and structures which are available for social agents;
- the idea of power-over recalls Bourdieu’s conception of symbolic domination; and
- the idea of power-with is consistent with Bourdieu’s idea that collective action is the product of the harmony of the habitus of agents that share the same social position in the field.

At the same time, even the theory of recognition developed by Honneth seems to be consistent with such a conception of power.<sup>167</sup> In fact:

- in order to be involved in relationships of reciprocal recognition, agents must possess the power to recognize and to be recognized (to attract recognition);
- to recognize somebody can mean to exercise power-over somebody, putting an addressee of recognition in a condition of dependence, and, thus, a recognizee can achieve a positive self-relationship if and only if she is recognized by others; and
- the idea of power-with is consistent with the fact that successful relationships of recognition allow the realization of collective coordination and actions.

---

<sup>166</sup> Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 123-127.

<sup>167</sup> The idea that such a conception of power is consistent with a Honnethian theory of recognition has been proposed originally by Federica Gregoratto. Such a topic will be discussed in Federica Gregoratto, *Love Troubles: A Social Philosophy of Eros* (Forthcoming).

In the next paragraphs, reinterpreting the concept of ‘symbolic capital’ in terms of power-to attract recognition, I try to show why Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition can be applied to this interpretation of Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic capital and power.

## 5.2 The ontological features of mutual recognition according to Honneth

This section sketches some of the main ontological features of Honneth’s conception of recognition that are fundamental for the main purpose of this chapter, that is, to reinterpret the concept of ‘symbolic capital’ in terms of recognitive capital. In Honneth’s perspective, recognition is a mode of intersubjective interaction that constitutes the necessary basis both for the actualization of several social practices and the achievement of an integral individual self-relationship and psychological well-being. In the first regard, for Honneth, to recognize somebody means, first, to be able to assume the perspective of our partners of interaction and consider ourselves in the role of their social addressee:

we should think of the act of recognition on the model of reciprocal action, in which two subjects ascribe to each other a certain normative status allowing them to treat each other in accordance with norms of respect and consideration.<sup>168</sup>

Acting in a relational institution, on the one hand, we comprehend how to act coherently with the expectations of other social agents. On the other hand, we learn to cooperate in order to realize material conditions that are necessary for the realization of the individual plans of each member of the social community. Therefore, the human lifeworld can be considered as a coherent set of social spheres that consist of norms of recognition, which “‘regulate’ actions in a way that

---

<sup>168</sup> Honneth, ‘Rejoinder’, 402.

ensures intersubjective coordination” or “‘constitute’ a kind of action that the subjects involved can only carry out cooperatively or together”.<sup>169</sup>

Under the second respect, reflecting upon the connection between fair interpersonal relationships and individual flourishing of human beings, Honneth seems to endorse the idea that the need for recognition is an important motivational force at the bottom of human social actions and interactions. In fact, individuals learn and internalize social duties and rules as far as they can gain a beneficial emotional life while acting accordingly with them. In the labor market, for instance, we realize that to be recognized as an active contributor to social cooperation can enhance our self-esteem. It is therefore clear that experiences of social recognition take on an important motivational function in the internalization and actualization of social customs and habits. Experiences of social esteem that are related to our professional efforts, for instance, can drive us to improve our skills and competencies and be more enterprising in social cooperation.

Given this general picture, there are at least two ontological features of Honneth’s idea of recognition that are worth highlighting in regard to the ends of this chapter. The first characteristic is the responsive nature of recognition. To recognize means to react in the proper way to those positive qualities we perceive in individual and collective subjects, where the positive features we are called to react to in the proper way are those that are objective in specific social context *S* at the time *t*. For instance, in a society founded on the division of labor, every worker deserves esteem for his contribution to social welfare and reproduction.

The second salient factor is the connection between recognition and action. In this respect, a successful form of recognition always implies the subsequent actualization of attitudes, behaviors, or social provisions (namely, the presence of material factors) that testify the authenticity of the ongoing recognitive process.<sup>170</sup> Given the previous example, we could say that, according to this second feature,

---

<sup>169</sup> Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 125.

<sup>170</sup> Such features are mentioned in Honneth, “Recognition as Ideology”, 329-330.

esteem could be given to workers in two different ways. In the first case, the process of recognition could be purely intersubjective: the employer notices employees' good work and communicates his appreciation to them. In the second case, employees' social recognition could be realized at the institutional level, e.g., by means of an institutional asset that supports and protects labor rights and prosecutes forms of humiliation and economic injustice based on class discrimination.<sup>171</sup> Following those conditions, we can say that recognition is successful, or that a recognizer  $x$  recognizes a recognizee  $y$ , when:

- 1)  $x$  perceives in  $y$  those positive qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are objective in  $S$  at  $t$ , and
- 2)  $x$  acts toward  $y$  in a way that testifies the authentic recognition of ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) $y$ .

At this point, it is interesting to note, first, how Honneth's account of recognition is coherent with Bourdieu's idea that an agent in a dominant position is dependent on recognition from subordinated actors in order to exercise symbolic power. In fact, to support the idea that recognition has to be reciprocal to be successful means to assert that both parts involved in interpersonal recognition develop a reciprocal dependency, in spite of the asymmetries of powers among the subjects of recognition. Secondly, it is interesting to highlight how Honneth's receptive-perceptual model of recognition is consistent with Bourdieu's perspective, according to which "the performative efficacy of discourse is a *percipi*, a being-known, which allows a *percipere* to be imposed, or, more precisely, which allows the consensus concerning the meaning of the social world."

In addition, in line with Bourdieu's conception of struggle for symbolic power and capital, Honneth supports the idea that the struggles for social recognition aim to modify the normative and perceptive schemes that are dominant in a given social context. In the article "Moral consciousness and class domination", Honneth has suggested the idea that inequality does not exclusively concern the maldistribution

---

<sup>171</sup> The necessity to highlight the different nature of such forms of recognition was suggested by Onni Hirvonen.

of material and economic resources, but also the unfair and asymmetric distribution of chances of recognition:

The existence of a class society based upon the unequal market chances of individual productive agents, but ideologically connected to individual educational success, results in a lasting inequality in the distribution of chances for social recognition. [...] this unequal distribution of social dignity drastically restricts the possibility of individual self-respect for lower, primarily manually employed occupational groups.<sup>172</sup>

In this respect, Honneth explicitly endorses the idea that the struggle for the redistribution of material resources is always mediated by a struggle for recognition among different groups for the symbolic reinterpretation of the dominant scheme of evaluation and classification in society:

The rules organizing the distribution of material goods derive from the degree of social esteem enjoyed by social groups, in accordance with institutionalized hierarchies of value, or a normative order [...] Conflicts over distribution [...] are always symbolic struggles over the legitimacy of the sociocultural dispositive that determines the value of activities, attributes, and contributions [...] In short, it is a struggle over the cultural definition of what it is that renders an activity socially necessary and valuable.<sup>173</sup>

In the light of such considerations, how could we reinterpret the idea of symbolic capital using the recognition-paradigm? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand if interpersonal recognition can be reinterpreted in terms of the distribution and redistribution of resources and through the vocabulary of power.

### 5.3 Recognition, power, and recognitive capital

Italo Testa has argued that it seems possible to characterize the process of recognition in terms of power. According to Testa, recognition can be considered

---

<sup>172</sup> Honneth, "Moral Consciousness and Class Domination: Some Problems in the Analysis of Hidden Morality", 218.

<sup>173</sup> Axel Honneth, "Recognition or Redistribution? Changing Perspectives on the Moral Order of Society", *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 2-3 (2001), 54.

both in an active sense, as the power of recognizing, and in a passive one, as the power of being recognized.<sup>174</sup> The human capacity of recognizing others (as partners of collective action, as bearers of social features that are relevant in a specific social context, or as agents that can act according to some kind of subjective or objective interests), requires that the recognizee can attract the recognizer in some way. In other terms, it is logically possible to talk about active recognition only if we admit that 1) the recognizee has some kind of passive power in order to attract recognition, and 2) the recognizer possesses the passive capacity of being attracted by the recognizee herself:

Recognitive beings are first of all attractors of recognition: even when they eventually come to develop the active power of recognizing (which may never be the case for some), they can do that by way of having had, of maintaining and actualizing the passive power of being recognized.<sup>175</sup>

Considering the aim of the present study, I will not follow the model of recognition developed by Testa, which is based on the concept of ‘recognitive authority’. The most important aspect of Testa’s account of recognition is that such a perspective can be applied also to explain the emergence of power as a social relation, which is the way Bourdieu depicts relations among individuals in a specific social field. A precise definition of ‘*relational power*’ could be the following: an individual A exercises power over an individual B when A drives B to do an action *a* regardless of B’s willing, subjective desires, or objective interests.<sup>176</sup> In this light, we could say that when a recognizer *x* recognizes actively, and despite her desires or interest, a recognizee *y*, namely an attractor of recognition, *x* behaves according to the recognizee *y* because of the passive power of recognition of the latter. If we try

---

<sup>174</sup> Italo Testa, “Recognition as Passive Power: Attractors of Recognition, Biopower, and Social Power”, *Constellations* 24, no. 2 (2017), 194, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12255>: “Recognition consists not only in the power of recognizing, but also in the power of being recognized. One may say that recognition is both an active power – a power of doing something, of recognizing – and a passive power of undergoing something – that is, of being recognized.”

<sup>175</sup> *Ibidem*, 194.

<sup>176</sup> For this definition of ‘power’, which Testa defines as restricted, see Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-McMillan, 2005), 73.



to translate such an account in Honneth's terms, we could say that a recognizee  $y$  possesses a passive power of recognition over a recognizer  $z$  if  $z$  perceives in  $y$  those positive qualities  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$  that are objective in  $S$  at  $t$ ; and  $z$  acts toward  $y$  in a way that testifies the authentic recognition of  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)y$ . If we consider valid such an action-theoretic account of recognitive power, and we assume that recognition plays a fundamental role both in the constitution of the social world and the realization of social relations, then we can try to characterize the notion of 'symbolic capital' in terms of recognition.

According to Bourdieu, the acquisition of symbolic capital  $C_{SY}$  is necessary in order to exercise symbolic power  $P_{SY}$ , namely to impose those schemes of categorization, perception, and evaluation that guarantee the functioning and reproduction of a specific field according to the dominants' interests.

Given a field  $F_X$ , a capital  $C_X$ , and a habitus  $H_X$ ,  $C_{SY}$  is any species of capital  $(C_E, C_C, C_S, \dots, C_X)$  that is perceived as legitimate by actors in  $F_X$  in which  $C_X$  is at stake. When the legitimacy's condition is satisfied, the accumulation of  $C_X$  allows social actors to acquire  $C_{SY}$ . However, if we follow Bourdieu's definition of  $C_{SY}$ , its volume does not seem directly proportional to the degree of  $C_X$ . On the contrary, the process of accumulation of  $C_{SY}$  appears strictly related to the social recognition an agent  $y$  receives in  $F_X$  when he possesses  $C_X$ :

In the struggle for the imposition of the legitimate vision of the social world [...] agents wield a power which is proportional to their symbolic capital, that is, to the recognition they receive from a group.<sup>177</sup>

Thus, we can affirm that the possession of  $C_X$  is a necessary condition for acquiring  $C_{SY}$  but is not sufficient to guarantee that an agent  $y$  who possesses a certain amount of  $C_X$  may exercise  $P_{SY}$ . At this point, how could we characterize  $C_{SY}$  taking into account its nature of immaterial capital whose volume is determined by social recognition? I suggest characterizing  $C_{SY}$  as the set of those positive qualities  $(Q_1,$

---

<sup>177</sup> Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 238.

$Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are related to the possession of a certain amount of legitimate  $C_X$  in  $F_X$  and can be perceived as objective by others social actors in  $F_X$ .

In fact, on the one hand,  $C_{SY}$  is depicted by Bourdieu as the social recognition (admiration, esteem, prestige, etc) an agent  $y$  receives in  $F_X$  from other social agents. On the other hand, following Honneth, recognition is a responsive phenomenon in which an agent  $y$  can be recognized properly if other agents perceive in  $y$  those positive qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are objective in a particular social context  $S$  at  $t$ . As we have shown previously, such a process of responsive recognition can be interpreted also as an effect of the passive power of recognition that  $y$  exercises on other recognizers. In other words,  $y$  exercises a passive power of recognition on  $z$  if:

- $z$  perceives in  $y$  those positive qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are acknowledged as objective in  $S$  at  $t$  and
- $z$  acts toward  $y$  in a way that testifies the authentic recognition of ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) $y$ .

Thus, since:

- the possession of a certain degree of passive power of recognition presupposes the acquisition of ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are objective in  $F$  at  $t$ ,
- the accumulation of  $C_{SY}$  is a function of the social recognition an agent  $y$  receives in  $F_X$ ,

I suggest interpreting symbolic capital  $C_{SY}$  as recognitive capital  $C_R$ , where  $C_R$  consists of the set of those positive qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are related to the possession of a certain amount of legitimate  $C_X$  in  $F_X$  and can be perceived as objective by other social actors in  $F_X$ .

In the light of this, it is possible to affirm that the volume of  $C_R$  for  $y$  in  $F_X$  is:

- a) influenced by the amount of and position of agents that recognize  $y$  as possessors of those positive qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are objective in  $F_X$  at  $t$ ; and is
- b) proportional to  $y$ 's capacity to exercise  $P_{SY}$  in  $F_X$ , since agents wield a symbolic power in relation to the recognition they receive from the others.

To better understand such a definition of 'recognitive capital', let us consider a society in which the sphere of labor is structured around the principle of individual

self-realization. In such a field,  $C_X$  could be identified not only with the economic wealth of an individual, but also with the rank the latter reaches in the labor market, his professional successes, creativity and independence, the numbers of customers he serves, and the annual growth of his business, namely  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$ . Consequently, we could define  $C_R$  as the social admiration and esteem related to the evaluation of work achievements  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$  an agent obtains during his career. If we follow the previous reasoning, on the one hand, the volume of  $C_R$  of a social actor  $y$  in this particular field will be determined by the number and social position of competitors and peers that recognize the value of  $y$ 's performances in his work environment. On the other hand, the effectivity of such recognition will be certified by  $y$ 's capacity, for instance, to promote in his company a system of retribution that rewards only employees who excel in their job, or who influence the reform of the institutionalized systems of labor rights in a way that privileges freelance professionals, self-entrepreneurs, and creative workers.

However, is this account of recognitive capital consistent with Honneth's perspective? On the one hand, point *a*) is coherent with Honneth's idea that recognition is always a responsive process among individuals. At the same time, *a*) does not exclude the fact that the specific volume of  $C_R$  for an agent  $y$  in  $F_X$  is dependent not only on the algebraic sum of social actors that recognize  $y$ , but also on the amount of  $C_R$  that recognizers of  $y$  possess. In this regard, it is possible that, in a given  $F_X$ , an agent  $y$  that is recognized by only a few competitors or peers that possess a considerable amount of  $C_R$  may have more  $C_R$  than an agent who is recognized by a greater number of agents with a smaller amount of recognitive capital. On the other hand, point *b*) reflects Honneth's idea that an authentic recognition always implies the subsequent actualization of attitudes, behaviors, or social provisions (namely, the presence of material factors) that testify the authenticity of the ongoing recognitive process. In the specific case, the room that social agents give  $y$  to exercise  $P_{SY}$  in  $F_X$  is an empirical marker of the fact they effectively recognize  $y$  and, thus, that  $y$  has a certain amount of  $C_R$  in  $F_X$ .

Simultaneously, *b*) seems capable of respecting Bourdieu's idea that the exercise of power and a struggle for power always imply the accumulation of some sort of capital.

Furthermore, this characterization of recognitive capital seems capable of answering a possible objection concerning the nature of the passive power of recognition.<sup>178</sup> It can be said that to attract recognition is not equivalent to get or receive recognition. In other words, we can imagine a situation in which both *y* and *z*, as possessors of  $C_X$ , have acquired those positive qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are objective in  $F_X$  at *t* but do not have the same faculty to exercise symbolic power in  $F_X$ . In this circumstance, they both can attract recognition, but *z* has more symbolic power than *y*. If we accept the aforementioned account of  $C_R$ , then we can say that, while the possession of  $C_X$  is necessary to accede to the possession of  $C_R$ , namely to attract recognition, the degree of passive power to get recognition is subordinated to the variations in the volume of  $C_R$ . Therefore, we can say that the higher the volume of  $C_R$ , the stronger the passive power to receive recognition. In this respect, sensible differences in the exercise of symbolic power between two different agents with the same amount of  $C_X$  can be symptomatic of a disparity in the possession of their respective  $C_R$ . That is to say: *y* and *z* have the same power to attract recognition, but not the same capacity to get recognition, as *y* can enjoy a wider or a more powerful set of recognizers in  $F_X$ .

Finally, I would like to point out a specific advantage of such a reading of  $C_R$  as capital mainly dependent on recognition. Briefly put, the latter makes comprehensible how social agents can influence the struggle for symbolic power in a field in which they could not act as they are lacking the specific capital at stake. Let us consider the case of Martin Luther King. If we consider the battle for the extension of Afro-Americans' political and social rights, he had an incredible influence on the political field, even if he did not have the political capital (votes, institutional role, etc.) in order to act at the institutional level. However, it is

---

<sup>178</sup> This objection has been moved by Arto Laitinen.

undeniable that he was capable of exercising a strong form of symbolic power, whose efficacy was ensured by the wide social recognition and appreciation of him. In other words, we could say that King could affect significantly the political sphere, and exercise there a symbolic power, in virtue of the high  $C_R$  he had in the United States.

## 5.4 Concluding remarks

What is the advantage that the notion of ‘recognitive capital’ can produce in the economy of Bourdieu and Honneth’s theories of social action? If we take seriously such an idea, first, it is worth noting that this perspective can be useful to demonstrate, against his critics, that Honneth’s theory of recognition is highly compatible with an ontology rooted in the concept of ‘power’. It is undeniable that Honneth has never deepened the study of the connection between power and recognition. Nonetheless, to integrate his approach with Bourdieu’s ideas could be a fruitful strategy to show how the model of mutual recognition can take into account the social existence, affirmation, and effects of asymmetric systems of social power. Furthermore, coherently with the idea of recognitive capital, social struggles for the control of symbolic power always imply a struggle for recognition whose aim is not only the social affirmation of a positive collective (or individual) identity. A struggle for recognition could be interpreted also as a social action that both breaks or prevents the monopolization of recognitive capital on the part of a narrow class or group and also distributes the power to establish if a specific social practice can be qualified and evaluated as an empirical mark of recognitive capital.

On the other hand, if we consider Bourdieu’s approach, such reinterpretation of the idea of symbolic capital in terms of recognition allows us to reconsider the idea of social domination from a less pessimistic and deterministic perspective. If we assume that possession and exercise of symbolic power rely on the volume of recognitive capital a social agent possesses and, at the same time, we accept the idea that the volume of capital is dependent on the dynamic of recognition that we have

described following Honneth, then the position of power of dominant agents is always subordinate to their capacity to get recognition, not only to attract to it. In this respect, we could suppose, first, that the dominated can always weaken the dominant position of the ruling class when they begin to provide recognition to some other individual or collective subject. Secondly, we could hypothesize that the capacity to get recognition is possible only in so far as the dominants are inclined to recognize their recognizers, granting them some sort of compensatory recognition. Until such a form of recognition is reciprocal, the dominant can preserve their position of power. When it fails, it is reasonable to think that dominant social groups can lose part of their recognitive capital and, consequently, symbolic power.<sup>179</sup>

---

<sup>179</sup> As Onni Hirvonen has pointed out, an additional advantage of such an account of  $C_R$  could be this: recognition would give Bourdieu's notions a more "naturalistic" or anthropological grounding, providing at the same time better explanations for the motivations for social change.

## 6 SOCIAL FIELDS AS FIELDS OF RECOGNITION

As we have seen in the first part of the dissertation, according to Pierre Bourdieu, the human social dimension is a set of different fields in which social actors compete to maximize the amount of capital at stake in each field. The nature and extent of a field are variable: it can be a material space like the school, an intellectual discipline like science, or a public institution like the state. Also, fields are domains of activities that obey specific logics of functioning that are incommensurable if compared to each other. For instance, the economic field is governed by the logic of maximization of profit, while the scientific field is ruled by the idea that its members must provide rational and true theories in order to be part of the scientific community. In analytic terms, a field is “a network or configuration of objective relationships among positions” that deeply influences the actions of social actors. In fact, a field establishes the range of opportunities of action available for the social agents in a specific social context.

The present chapter tries to enrich the notion of ‘social field’ arguing that also the satisfaction of human expectations for recognition plays an important role in ensuring the ontological reality and stability of a social field. In particular, it is argued that actions that express recognition represent important constitutive elements for the fields themselves. In the first section, the chapter takes into account Bourdieu’s notion of ‘field’, focusing on the following features of this social entity: fields’ morphology, dynamics, and objectivity. In the second part, it illustrates Honneth’s conception of the spheres or orders of recognition, highlighting its coherence with Bourdieu’s idea of field. In the third section, the chapter tries to describe a field *F* as an objective order of recognition, whose amplitude is defined by the acts of recognition that can help us to establish who gets in a given field and who does not.

In this last part, the chapter lists some of the possible advantages of such a reinterpretation of the concept of ‘field’.

## 6.1 Bourdieu’s concept of ‘field’: Morphology, dynamics, objectivity

In order to understand exactly what a field is, and how it influences human social actions, it is worth focusing on the analytic definition of the concept that Bourdieu provides in a discussion with Loïc Wacquant. Starting from this point, this section will especially underline the three main characteristics of Bourdieu’s field, i.e., its relational nature, its inner agonistic dynamic, and the nature of its objectivity:

In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.).<sup>180</sup>

A relevant feature of fields that we can infer immediately from the previous quotation is their twofold relational nature. On the one hand, a field is a relational social space in the sense that it imposes a specific system of social relations and powers on individuals that enter it. The field’s position of each social agent depends on the volume and composition of capital an agent possesses. A high volume of capital poses a social agent in a dominant position; its scarce availability determines a condition of subordination. Thus, in general, we can say that the specific amount of capital determines the relations among agents in the field and, consequently, the kind of power the agent owns toward other actors in the same social space. As such, agents in a field can stay either in a relation of opposition if they have different interests or form an alliance if they try to reach the same aim. They can

---

<sup>180</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 72–73, Engl. transl. 97.



be in a position of domination if they possess the highest volume of capital in relation to other members of the field, or they can exercise resistance toward dominating groups and classes. On the other hand, a field possesses a relational nature because it influences the social actions of agents, generating an objective space of possibilities. It determines the range of actions an individual or collective agent can operate. For instance, on a soccer field the rules of the game and positions occupied by opponents restrict the number of solutions a forward can carry out for scoring goals. Following Bourdieu, social fields like labor markets, family, science, or academy work in an analogous way. The set of power relations that generates the field itself influences individual and collective actors' actions and choices, limiting their strategies for gaining more capital and increasing their own amount of power.

This last point allows us to introduce the agonistic nature of the field:

In a field, agents and institutions constantly struggle, according to the regularities and the rules constitutive of this space of play (and, in given conjunctures, over those rules themselves), with various degrees of strength and therefore diverse probabilities of success, to appropriate the specific products at stake in the game.<sup>181</sup>

Even if fields are multiple (following Bourdieu, we can have economic fields, political fields, religious fields, cultural fields, and so on) and historically variable in their composition, all of them share a homological, hierarchical structure. The latter is generally characterized by a ruling class that struggles with dominated social actors for preserving or reforming the distribution of material and symbolic resources and capital in the field. Actors in a dominant position will act in order to preserve their capital and position of power; while members of lower groups or classes will try either to gain more capital following the rules of the game or to transform the rules that govern the distribution of capital in the field. Furthermore, according to Bourdieu, the social struggle in a field can affect two different dimensions of our social practices. The first one is related to the accumulation of

---

<sup>181</sup> *Ibidem*, 78, Engl. transl. 102.

the specific form of capital (economic, social, cultural capital, etc.) that determines the intrinsic nature of the field. Dominated agents tend to promote equalization of redistribution of the capital, trying to limit the accumulation of capital the dominants are prone to realize. On the contrary, dominating individuals, classes, and groups tend to preserve their position of power, monopolizing the resources that constitute the capital at stake in a particular field. The other side of the social struggle has a symbolic essence and concerns the imposition of those schemes of categorizations, perception, and evaluations that rule activity in a field and, consequently, also the determination of those qualities that allow admission into the field. In this respect, the symbolic struggle in a specific field concerns the attribution of meaning and value to different social practices and the definitions of those criteria that establish who is a legitimate player in a field and who is not allowed to take part in the game. For example, women's claims for the improvement of the female condition in the labor market are directed not only to make their salary condition fairer. In their struggle for the achievement of a better social condition, the feminist movement tries also to change criteria that rule the access into the labor market, affirming, for instance, that maternity could not be a reason to be fired or excluded from the productive sphere. The idea that the social struggle is one of the basic features of every social field is certificated by Bourdieu himself when he states:

There is history only as long as people revolt, resist, act. Total institutions—asylums, prisons, concentration camps—or dictatorial states are attempts to institute an end to history. Thus apparatuses represent a limiting case, what we may consider to be a pathological state of fields. But it is a limit that is never actually reached, even under the most repressive 'totalitarian' regimes.<sup>182</sup>

Finally, such an account helps us to define the specific kind of objectivity that defines social fields. Evidently the existence of each social field, as a field of forces,

---

<sup>182</sup> *Ibidem*, 79, Engl. transl. 102.

is grounded on power relations among individual agents. From this point of view, a field

is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified. Thus we have *stakes* which are for the most part the product of the competition between players.<sup>183</sup>

In Bourdieu's perspective, the field is an outcome of an unintended and contingent process, which passes through competition among social agents for acquiring capital and improving individual and collective powers (economic resources and benefits, political roles, social honor and respect, and high cultural formation). In this regard, a field is characterized by an "objectivity of first-order constituted by the *distribution of material* resources and means of appropriation of socially scarce goods and values".<sup>184</sup> A field is objective in the sense that the position of the agents that belong to a given field, as well as their reciprocal relations of power, are determined by the distribution of capital, and they do not depend on the intentionality and beliefs of individuals. Furthermore, also the dynamic of the struggles inside the field could be labeled as objective: the relations of opposition and resistance, as well as those of alliance and cooperation among agents, are structurally influenced by the volume and composition of the capital agents possess. So, for instance, agents with a remarkable amount of capital in a field will tend to limit the opportunity of actions of their direct competitors, preserving the *status quo*. In contrast, dominated agents will tend to subvert the rules of the game, to gain capital and power inside their field, supporting, for instance, the dominated fraction of the dominant class.

Given such a conception of the objectivity of the field, it is also important to define the conditions that allow fields' objectivity itself. How is it possible for a system of relations based on conflict to acquire and preserve its own objectivity and tangible reality, as for Bourdieu to talk about social fields in sociological terms means

---

<sup>183</sup> *Ibidem*, 73, Engl. transl. 98.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibidem*, 16, Engl. transl. 7.

“to give primacy to this system of objective relations over the particles themselves”? In this regard, it is necessary to focus on the notions of ‘*illusio*’, ‘*libido*’, and ‘interest’, which Bourdieu employs to categorize the same social phenomenon: the development of the agents’ engagement for the social game in a given field. A field arises from the sum of power relations that social agents exercise over each other generating a specific set of interests that determine the objective properties of the field itself. However, for Bourdieu, a field is ontologically coherent and stable if all the actors that take part in the game in a particular field consider the social game at stake worth playing:

We have an *investment in the game*, *illusio* (from *ludus*, the game): players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief (*doxa*) in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning. Players agree, by the mere fact of playing, and not by way of a ‘contract’ that the game is worth playing, that it is “worth the candle”, and this *collusion* is the very basis of their competition.<sup>185</sup>

When both the dominants and the dominated share the same *illusio*, they compete following the same rules of the game. In this regard, it is clear that the objectivity of fields is possible as far as all game participants act according to the same point of view concerning the importance of the capital at stake. In line with the idea of objectivity mentioned above, such *illusio*, or interest in the stake of a given social game, cannot be conceived just like a reflexive acknowledgment that is related to some sort of collective intentionality. On the contrary, the *illusio* consists of a tacit agreement among competitors in the same field. Such an agreement is not related to any form of rational scrutiny or discussion, but only to an “immediate adherence to the necessity of a field”, to a “visceral commitment to it”. In this respect, it seems reasonable to affirm that, coherently with Bourdieu’s account, the interest at stake in a given social field must be such as to drive social agents to enter into the field and play according to its rules through a process that is not grounded on the exercise of cognitive and communicative skills.

---

<sup>185</sup> *Ibidem*, 73.

## 6.2 Honneth's conception of the spheres of recognition

In order to understand if Honneth's paradigm is coherent with Bourdieu's conception of the field, it is necessary to grasp if Honneth's conception of social spheres of recognition is compatible with Bourdieu's relational perspective on fields, with Bourdieu's conception of social struggle, and with Bourdieu's idea of objectivity. In this respect, it is worth remarking again how Honneth stresses the importance of the emotional involvement of individuals as sources of our social conduct. According to Honneth, recognition among human beings is two-fold. On the one hand, it is a dynamic and historical process, able to evolve in order to guarantee a more inclusive, fair, and coherent social space. On the other hand, recognition is an existential mode of intersubjective interactions that constitutes the ontological basis for every human social conduct and practice. Coherently with this point of view, Honneth states that the need for recognition is the primordial motivational force at the bottom of human social actions and interactions. In fact, for Honneth, the process of reciprocal recognition has a fundamental role not only for the development of our social world but also for the good formation of human cognitive skills and self-relationship. In this regard, Honneth states that recognition has both an ontological and conceptual priority over cognition. For instance, scientific evidence provided by developmental psychology shows how children's emotional attachment to parental figures is fundamental for human beings to develop both linguistic-conceptual capacities and symbolic thought.<sup>186</sup> Therefore, it is clear why, generalizing this point, Honneth affirms that:

our actions do not primarily have the character of an affectively neutral, cognitive stance toward the world but rather that of an affirmative, existentially colored style of caring comportment. [...] A recognitional stance therefore embodies our active and constant assessment of the value that persons or things have in themselves.<sup>187</sup>

---

<sup>186</sup> For a complete account of these arguments see Axel Honneth, *Reification: A Recognition-theoretical View. Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, Delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, March 14-16, 2005; [http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/h/Honneth\\_2006.pdf](http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/h/Honneth_2006.pdf), 113-124.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibidem*, 111.

We can say that Honneth, like Bourdieu, rejects the idea our social interactions are solely determined by individual calculations, as rational action theorists suggest. In Honneth's perspective, individual and collective social conducts are meaningfully grounded on the affective dimension of human beings. We act not only according to egocentric stances or cognitive considerations but also in response to our capacity of taking on the perspective of our partners of action. This means that, in social dimensions, human beings' actions should be considered as a reaction to their partners' emotional and normative expectations. In order to explain how individuals learn to act properly in their intersubjective relations, Honneth introduces the concept of '*sphere of recognition*'.

As it has been mentioned in chapters 2, 3, and 4, according to Honneth's account, spheres of recognition should be conceived as a set of objective institutions that embody forms of recognition that are socially accepted and established. Social spheres of recognition can be depicted as relational institutions in so far as such spheres impose interpersonal expectations on social agents, allowing them to promote and realize their own intentions according to the needs and will of their peers of action. For example, characterizing the spheres of the family, market, and democracy, Honneth asserts that:

These systems of actions must be termed 'relational' because the activities of individual members within them complement each other [...]. The behavioural expectations that subjects have of each other within such relational institutions are institutionalized in the shape of social roles that normally ensure the smooth interlocking of their respective activities. When subjects fulfill their respective roles, they complement each other's incomplete actions in such a way that they can only act in a collective or unified fashion.<sup>188</sup>

In other words, the spheres of love, right, market, and democracy are relational entities in the sense that they allow human beings to accomplish aims that they would not be able to obtain by themselves. Such aims are the achievement of a positive practical individual self-relationship and the satisfaction of those material and socio-

---

<sup>188</sup> Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 125.

political needs that requires some forms of social cooperation. According to Honneth, a fair and positive individual self-flourishing, in fact, necessarily requires participation in those intersubjective interactions in which human beings can comprehend that a positive emotional life is a necessary precondition for building up a positive self-identity. In the family, for instance, we learn that parental and friendship relationships are fundamental to satisfying our affective needs. In the labor market, we realize that to be recognized as active contributors to social cooperation can enhance our self-esteem, driving us to improve our skills and competences. When we understand the quality of social relations that generate the preconditions of our personal wellness and self-realizations, something else happens. We realize that the reciprocity, the capacity to support those similar in reaching the same benefits we are looking for, is the keystone for our self-flourishing. I can appreciate the value of love relations in the family for my individual well-being only if I have relatives that are capable of loving me and that accept my love in return. In the labor market dimension, I can enjoy self-esteem only if my partners of interactions appreciate the social value of my work and efforts, and I learn to appreciate them for the contribution they provide to me as a member of the same community.

If the relational form of spheres of recognition is clear, can we assert that there is continuity between Honneth's viewpoint and Bourdieu's concept of 'field' in terms of agonistic dynamics? According to Honneth, the emergence of social struggles is of fundamental importance for a positive evolution of different forms of recognition. Institutionalization and widespread acknowledgment of shared principles of recognition do not implicate the automatic attainment of an irenic social condition. On the contrary, Honneth affirms the complete realization of legitimate principles of recognition always involves the appearance of social struggles regarding their interpretation and the best way to actualize them. In fact, the realization and legitimation of such normative orders of recognition can be considered as the historical result of different types of struggles for recognition, whose motivational

basis can be always identified in a subjective experience of bodily pain and psychological suffering connected to disrespect, disregard, insult, or social exclusion. From an ontological point of view, as has been mentioned previously, Honneth considers the social struggle not as a constant feature but as an inevitable phenomenon of social life. The emergence of such conflicts is due to the brittle material that constitutes norms of recognition: the normative consensus regarding their interpretation and realization. What is the best way to express love toward somebody? Are relationships that are based on love and care compatible with clear-cut asymmetries of power between partners concerning the best way to realize a decent and satisfactory family life? Are refugees and asylum seekers victims of disrespect and social exclusion? Is the wage gap between male and female workers respectful of the idea of equal distribution of social esteem and appreciation?

In line with these ideas, Honneth affirms that one of the main issues at stake in a struggle for recognition is the modification of the boundaries and amplitude of the spheres of recognition. Every social struggle that fosters the broadening and inclusiveness of a sphere of recognition deserves to be considered as emancipatory and morally justifiable. Without focusing on the ethical and normative aspects of Honneth's conception of social struggle, it can be said that, according to him, conflicts for recognition affects the determination of who gets in a given social field and who does not, as well as the extent of the area of application of institutionalized norms of recognition. Should same-sex couples be acknowledged as social subjects that can legitimately enjoy those forms of recognition that can be actualized in the institution of the family? Who deserves to be esteemed as a worthy contributor in the process of production of those goods that are fundamental for sustaining social life? Is it fair to bestow appreciation to care-workers in the same way that we esteem the workers who are involved in productive labor?

Finally, it is necessary to deepen the meaning Honneth attributes to the notion of 'objectivity' when he talks about spheres of recognition and social institutions. In the first stance, from Honneth's point of view, spheres of recognition are objective



in a Hegelian sense: “For Hegel, ‘institutions’ are to be understood as a preexisting mean between two interacting subjects – not as an ‘expression’ but as an element of the process of mutual recognition”.<sup>189</sup> Institutionalized norms of recognition preexist human subjects, which, in turn, apprehend such norms through the process of socialization that happens in the institution itself. In this respect, social spheres of recognition are objective in the sense that they precede any individual judgment and act of self-determination, and they can shape individual conducts of action regardless of subjective desires and interests.<sup>190</sup> Institutional orders of recognition provide us both the patterns of recognition that allow us to realize profitable forms of interactions with other human beings, and values and properties that regulate our social behaviors and conduct. Consequently, they should be conceived as the main sites where individuals can actualize forms of cooperation without which they could not achieve their aims and self-created goals. Therefore, it seems that Honneth’s ideas regarding the actualization of successful forms of recognition are partly coherent with the conception of social agency developed by Bourdieu. The latter, in fact, affirms that social actions are meaningfully influenced by the material resources and the positions that agents possess in a field. Honneth, in turn, seems to assert that fruitful intersubjective interactions can be realized only in a normative environment, which burdens and empowers the social agency with moral norms and patterns of recognition that are objective.

In addition, there is a second meaning Honneth refers to when he talks about the objectivity of recognitive spheres. According to this second sense, the idea of

---

<sup>189</sup> Honneth, “Rejoinder”, 403.

<sup>190</sup> Honneth agrees with Hegel’s perspective about the role of social objectivity in relation to the realization of social freedom of individuals. According to Hegel, the reality of social freedom is guaranteed by the objectivity of freedom itself. In other words, in the Hegelian account, individuals can realize their own freedom if and only if there is a social reality or objectivity, that is to say a historical set of concrete institutions, in which freedom is already embodied and incorporated. Honneth commits to such a point of view as far as he considers social freedom or self-realization as dependent on objective institutions of mutual recognition.

objectivity seems strongly connected to the idea of embodiment and the material realization of recognition:

Hence, alongside the evaluative dimension of the credibility of social recognition, we must also consider the material element, which, according to the degree of complexity of a given social interaction, consists in either appropriate individual conduct or suitable institutional procedures.<sup>191</sup>

Even if Honneth does not deepen the topic, it is reasonable to assert that even the physical space in which recognition happens and is embodied strongly affects the way human subjects can achieve their existential goals. For instance, a society that acknowledges the equality of rights and treatment of disabled persons is such as provides the latter all the tools and opportunities (medical and welfare support, special measures for accessing the labor market, and wheel ramps for mobility) in order to reach individual wellness in spite of their disabilities. Coherently with Honneth's point of view, the members of a society that does not supply such material and institutional means to this group of individuals do not effectively recognize the latter as human beings endowed with goals and plans that are worthy of being achieved. The objective reality can limit the range of actions of individuals, as well empowering them and supporting the realizations of their goals, also because objective reality itself is embodied into objects and procedures that testify the effectiveness of socially shared norms of reciprocal recognition. In this regard, Honneth's spheres of recognition give the impression of having a social function comparable to Bourdieu's fields, whereas a field

as a structure of objective relations between positions of force undergirds and guides the strategies whereby the occupants of these positions seek, individually or collectively, to safeguard or improve their position and to impose the principle of hierarchization most favorable to their own products.<sup>192</sup>

Furthermore, also individuals and collective agents, in so far as they are partners of action, can be considered as part of objective social reality. In fact, only an

---

<sup>191</sup> Honneth, "Recognition as Ideology", 345.

<sup>192</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 77, Engl. transl. 101.

embodied subjectivity, through her reactions to our actions, can confirm or deny the goodness and validity of our individual behaviors and the value of the goals and plans we want to achieve. In the same way, in Bourdieu's account of the field, the spectrum of possible actions that an agent can accomplish depends also on the position of the others and the relationships that exist between them. Spheres of recognition seem to have a spatial nature whose emergence and extension is determined, at least partially, by the lower-level intersubjective interactions of individuals (and groups of individuals). In turn, such interactions are regulated by norms and values that are shared by all the participants in each sphere. For instance, the family is an objective sphere of recognition in the sense that it is a social space that emerges from the actions of participants who act toward each other according to the values of reciprocal love and care. On the one hand, the influence of those norms that regulate the actualization of proper forms of recognition based on love and care extends to the set of human beings that realize acts of recognition that are coherent with family norms. Objective spheres of recognition exist in so far as they embody a practical form of recognition that has proven to be successful in guarantying both good self-development of individuals and cooperative actions that can guarantee social production and reproduction. On the other hand, the normative influence of such a sphere over individuals ceases at the point where agents begin to relate to their peers according to different norms and values. Next, having already shown here the conceptual continuity and compatibility between Honneth's 'sphere of recognition' and Bourdieu's 'field', we try to elucidate the hybrid concept of 'field of recognition'.

### 6.3 Fields of recognition: Definition and theoretical advantages

In the previous part of the chapter, it has been explained how Honneth's idea of sphere (or order) of recognition is consistent with Bourdieu's idea of the social field. Both consider such entities in relational terms. Both identify struggle as one of the

inevitable features of such social and spatial entities. Both attribute to these entities some degree of objectivity. In light of the previous considerations, I suggest refining Bourdieu's idea of the field with the concept of 'recognition'. In other words, I propose qualifying a field not only by considering the relation between agents' in virtue of the amount of capital that they possess, and the interest at stake in the field itself. The specific features that determine the particular shape of a field should include also the set of acts and behavior that express and are worthy of recognition among agents who are taking part in a specific social game, as well as the particular feature of the personhood an agent can nourish pursuing the interest at stake in a given field. Thus, we can say that a field  $F_X$  is:

- a network of objective relations of opposition and alliance between agents that occupy different positions in  $F_X$  according to the volume of  $C_X$  they possess in  $F_X$ ;
- a social space whose burdens are determined by acts and practices that express social recognition between agents in  $F_X$  according to the volume of  $C_{R(X)}$  they possess in  $F_X$ ; and
- a social space in which agents can achieve the realization of a specific feature of their individual self, pursuing one or more interests  $I_X$  that are compatible with the logic of  $F_X$ .

Consequently, the structure of a field can be synthesized and described as follows:

-*Morphology*: the homological division between dominant agents and dominated ones. Such a division reflects the distribution of  $C_X$  in  $F_X$ .

-*Amplitude*: acts of recognition and actions that are worthy of recognition. Both classes of social actions are consistent with  $C_{R(X)}$  in  $F_X$ .

-*Dynamics*: 1) *material struggles*  $\rightarrow$  redistribution of  $C_X$  in  $F_X \rightarrow$  effects on the homological division dominant/dominated in  $F_X$ ; 2) *symbolic struggles*  $\rightarrow$  redistribution of  $C_{R(X)}$  in  $F_X \rightarrow$  effects on the boundaries of  $F_X$ .

However, what are the advantages of combining Bourdieu's idea of fields as systems of relations independent from intersubjective interactions, and Honneth's conception of objective spheres of recognition according to which the objectivity of social entities is inter-subjectively dependent? This section tries to answer such a question by offering three different reasons. First, to approach the field in terms of recognition seems to improve our capacity to describe the peculiar nature of

social fields and the form of the relationships of recognition that sustain the relations of power that characterize the field itself.

Let us consider a hypothetical economic field  $F_E$  in which the  $C_E$  at stake consists of means of production, financial tools, and liquid assets, while the  $I_E$  consists of the accumulation and maximization of  $C_E$ . According to Bourdieu, the dominants and the dominated can struggle both on a material and a symbolic level. In material terms the dominant will tend to employ their higher amount of capital for absorbing  $C_E$  of the dominated agents, neutralizing their economic capacity to compete in the economic field. On the other hand, the dominants can try to improve their position in  $F_E$  through temporary or lasting alliances, for instance, gathering the  $C_E$  at their disposal in order to compete with agents in dominant positions. In addition, Bourdieu asserts that social struggles in a field can assume a symbolic nature, which concerns the attribution of meaning and value to different social practices, as well as the criteria for accessing a field. Such struggles concern the nature of  $C_{R(E)}$ , namely the set of those positive qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that are related to the possession of a certain amount of legitimate  $C_E$  in  $F_E$  and can be perceived as objective by others social actors in  $F_E$ . In this case, dominant agents are akin to preserving the *status quo* through promoting a symbolic vision and division of the social world that favors owners of a high volume of  $C_E$ , minimizing at the same time the chances that the dominated can join forces against them. For instance, the dominants can try to socially promote forms of economic competition in the labor market and, at the same time, to exclude from this social space some categories of social subjects, like workers involved in care labor or refugees. In turn, dominated agents likely tend to support the social acceptance of symbolic tools that can bolster forms of cooperation, which might be advantageous for the dominated themselves. For example, dominated groups in  $F_E$  can try to weaken the competitive logic of the field by promoting social practices based on mutualism, or symbolic struggles that aim at attributing social value to jobs and professional figures that are not usually considered valuable in  $F_E$ , like care workers. At the

same, this could mean to involve in  $F_E$  also those social subjects that are *de facto* excluded from the game in  $F_E$ , like homemakers, nurses, and teachers.

Let us consider the evolution of a sector of the economic field in Western countries, namely the passage from a Fordist model of production to a post-Fordist one.<sup>193</sup> The first model of production was based on centralization and hierarchization, while the second privileges the dislocation of production and cooperative teamwork. In the Fordist era, the maximization of the economic capital was based on the exploitation of material production and the mere working force of individuals. Nowadays, the margin of growth of capital seems mainly determined by the financialization of the capital itself and the investment in professional specialization, cognitive skills, self-control, and self-organization of singular workers. Bourdieu's idea that a field can be described by only focusing on the distribution of capital seems to be insufficient in regard to taking into account the differences between these two distinct shapes that the economic field has taken in Western countries during the twentieth century. Both Fordist and post-Fordist fields present a structure in which a small minority of agents possesses the most part of the economic capital, while most social actors act in the field selling their labor power or cognitive skills. Furthermore, both systems of production respond to the same logic of maximization of economic capital  $C_E$ . On the other hand, the nature of relations among the upper classes and the dominated seems to be qualitatively different if we compare those two forms of production. In the Fordist mode of production, the cooperation between capitalists and the working-class was grounded on a set of social rights and welfare institutions (unemployment wage, health insurance, right of strike, and labor union negotiation) that tended to guarantee the economic security of the working-class, and a better quality of life for its members as well, without putting in question the relationships of power

---

<sup>193</sup> The present description of the passage from a Fordist model to a decentered mode of production relies on the brilliant analysis that can be found in the second part of Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello, *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalisme*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 167-464; Engl. transl. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, (London/New York: Verso, 2007), 103-342.

between the two classes. The Fordist mode of production was grounded on a rigid, centralized and vertical structure, in which workers did not have any relevant role in the organization of the system of production.

However, the aforementioned institutional means had not only a functional value (limiting the power of the dominant groups without questioning their privileged position, and improving the life quality of working-class people), but also an expressivist one. Through such social institutions, the dominant classes were expressing appreciation for the lower classes' contribution to the production of social well-being. In this way, the dominating class showed some consideration for the social qualities of working-class people as a valuable form of  $C_{R(E)}$ , which deserved that specific form of institutional recognition.

In the post-Fordist era, the asymmetric relationship of power between employers and employees seems anchored on a different kind of social esteem and, thus, of  $C_{R(E)}$ . Nowadays, an employee can achieve social recognition, increasing his  $C_{R(E)}$ , showing originality, self-responsibility, and self-control. In this case, there is a decrease of control and power on employees by employers in the process of decision-making and the planning of work projects. However, at the same time, employees assume a degree of personal commitment in their professional activity that makes them more vulnerable to the risk of justified dismissal and the precarization of work contracts. In the same way, economic benefits, like a rise in wage, tend to be dependent more on the professional performance of the singular employees, than on a welfare system that imposes on employers to raise the wages according to the length of service of workers. These qualitative diversities in the power relations can be illustrated only if we describe the functioning of the economic field in the Fordist and post-Fordist era by considering the different forms of recognition that those systems can provide and, therefore, the different forms of  $C_{R(E)}$  at stake there.

In the Fordist mode of production, the expectations of recognition that workers aimed to satisfy were related to the recognition of their efforts and their active role

in the process of material production. This particular kind of recognition, that we can call social appreciation,<sup>194</sup> was certified by the presence of a welfare system that supported the members of the working-class, allowing them to aspire to a more decent quality of life and increase their capacity of consumption on the market. In the post-Fordist system, the type of recognition provided in the economic field takes the form of admiration and is ruled by the logic of differentiation. In this respect, the expectations of recognition (ER<sub>E</sub>) at stake correspond with the recognition of singularity and the desire for autonomy and authenticity of individuals. Briefly put, to consider the functioning of a field through the lens of the concept of ‘recognition’ could help scholars to understand some aspects of fields’ dynamic that Bourdieu’s objectivistic perspective fails to grasp. Relating the pursuing of a material interest with the achievement of the flourishing of a particular feature of the self-personhood, it becomes possible to better understand why agents can tend to work in favor of ends that reflect the interests of a narrow social group of individuals. This means, at the same time, that an understanding of a field in terms of recognition can shed light also on the peculiar mechanisms that allow the reproduction of social structures that are characterized by asymmetries of power and widespread forms of social unfairness.

Second, such a characterization of the field can say something more about the extension and the burdens of a field. As we have mentioned, Bourdieu has underlined how social struggles in a field are also struggles to establish who are ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ agents.<sup>195</sup> In this respect, to consider fields as structures based on recognition could allow us to identify the objective burdens of the fields themselves and to determine to what extent the norms and rules that characterize a particular field are effective. In other words, according to the present reading, the

---

<sup>194</sup> For an illuminating characterization of social esteem as admiration and appreciation see Stephan Voswinkel, “Work, Recognition and the Changing Face of Capitalism Admiration without Appreciation? The Paradoxes of Recognition of Doubly Subjectivised Work”, in *New Philosophies of Labour. Work and the Social Bond*, eds. Nicholas Smith and Jean-Philippe Deranty (London: Brill, 2012b), 273-300.

<sup>195</sup> See Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: SAGE, 1993), 132.



field's effects should cease whereas actors who are playing in a field do not recognize other possible agents as worthy players of that particular social game. For Bourdieu:

The question of the limits of the field is a very difficult one, if only because it is *always at stake in the field itself* and therefore admits no *a priori* answer. [...] The limits of the field are situated at the point where the effects of the field cease. [...] It is only by studying each of these universes that you can assess how concretely they are constituted, where they stop, who gets in and who does not, and whether at all they form a field.<sup>196</sup>

These considerations, on the one hand, support the idea that Bourdieu endorses some sort of strong realist conception of fields, which exist independently from the social actors' perspective. Fields are ontologically objective in the sense that their inner organization and dynamics are not affected by the agents' perspective. An agent can act coherently in a field without being aware of the fact she is taking part in a specific social game. On the other hand, Bourdieu asserts that "the limits of the field are situated at the point where the effects of field cease" and that a field's boundaries cannot be determined *a priori*, but only through empirical investigation. This definition suffers from some sort of circularity. The limits of a field are determined by the extent of the field's effects, but it is not specified what these effects consist of.

In an empirical study concerning the shape and the structure of the Swedish field of culture, Johan Lindell has shown how practices that concern social recognition can help social scientists in identifying and describing the amplitude of a field. According to this study "the transactions of 'likes' between institutions on Facebook can be understood as an economy of recognition whose structure reveals the contours of a field".<sup>197</sup> In doing so, Lindell highlights how the practical logic of a field affects the way through which players not only try to pursue their interests in

---

<sup>196</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 75-76, Engl. transl.100.

<sup>197</sup> Johan Lindell, "Bringing Field Theory to Social Media, and Vice-Versa: Network-Crawling an Economy of Recognition on Facebook", *Social Media + Society*, October-December 2017, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2056305117735752>.

the field, but also how they interact with each other, testifying through reciprocal acts of recognition their belonging to a specific social environment. If to take into account acts of recognition is an effective strategy for defining the contours of a field, then we can acknowledge the fact that at least the objectivity of the field's boundaries, and thus their extension or narrowing, rely on the way actors perceive and recognize each other.

For instance, we can characterize the economic field  $F_E$  not only as a space in which the upper class' positions are determined by the possession of a high amount of economic capital. It could be argued something about the extension of  $F_E$ , which is shaped by a series of specific practices that help agents to recognize each other's recognition according to their belonging to and position in a field. Such expressivist practices are the means through which individuals can please their emotional and psychological exigencies inside the field itself. In the case of  $F_E$ , such needs are connected not only to the maximization of individual material resources  $C_E$  that constitutes the specific interest ( $I_E$ ) at stake in  $F_E$ , but also to a cluster of expectations of recognition ( $ER_E$ ) related to the achievement of social appreciation, admiration, and, therefore, development of self-esteem, which is a fundamental feature in achieving a satisfactory individual self-relationships. In  $F_E$ , social agents learn, on the one hand, that social esteem related to the contribution to the process of the material production of goods is a crucial element in satisfying their need for recognition.

On the other hand, agents realize how to achieve self-esteem through cooperation and/or competition in the labor market. Guaranteeing the satisfaction of individual needs for recognition, a field ensures also its own reproduction: in fact, the success of the process of individualization in  $F_E$  presupposes the subjective internalization of those norms, rules, and schemes of categorization and judgment that constitutes the functional core of the field itself. More precisely, the conformity to the main norms that regulate  $F_E$ , and the adoption of those practical attitudes that are coherent with  $C_E$  are stabilized by the fact that the more an agent  $y$  maximizes  $C_E$ , the more  $y$  can satisfy  $ER_E$  that are consistent with  $I_E$ . In this regard,

intersubjective acts of recognition have an important role also from the macro-perspective of the field, for defining its amplitude: to focus on the dynamics of recognition among agents who are playing in a field can also help us to determine who is allowed to take part into a specific social game and, thus, the boundaries of a field.

A possible objection to these ideas is the following: the objectivity Honneth is talking about is intersubjective dependent. In fact, norms, patterns, and values that regulate and consent actualization of successful forms of recognition in a given sphere cease to be objective as they can guarantee no longer forms of self-flourishing and cooperation that mirror the desires, aims, and ends of the participants in those specific forms of recognition. On the contrary, Bourdieu's idea of objectivity seems, at first sight, to deny this intersubjective grounding. For Bourdieu, the mental and bodily schemata that affect the subjective experience of social subjects, and their feelings, thoughts, and conduct are ontologically dependent on the objectivity of social reality. We think, perceive, and act in our social environment and toward our peers coherently with the behavioral patterns that we acquire in the social position that we occupy in the social space. Systems of classification and social representations through which we interpret our social world mirror our class belonging and the specific amount and type of capital we possess, that is to say, the objective morphology of the fields in which we take part.

However, it is reasonable to suggest that Bourdieu's account leaves some room for a partial characterization of social fields in terms of a type of objectivity that is dependent on intersubjective evaluation. This alternative depiction of the objectivity of the fields in intersubjective terms concerns a particular feature of their structure, namely their amplitude and limits. While the objectivity of the morphology of the field depends on the positions that social actors occupy (according to the volume of capital they possess), the extent to which the field relies on the perspective of the agents, as a field ceases to exist as soon as agents stop to recognize each other as players in that specific field. Furthermore, this integration with the paradigm of

recognition does not mean to deny completely Bourdieu's idea about fields' objectivity. To concede that the objectivity of the fields' boundaries is rooted in some sort of intersubjective scrutiny or dynamic does not imply that the objectivity of its morphology is integrally intersubjective-dependent. In fact, to enlarge or narrow the boundaries of a field does not necessarily cause a radical change in the distribution of the capital in the field itself and of the norms that regulate capital's logic of acquisition. In other terms, the idea that symbolic struggles affect the amplitude of a field (namely, the criteria of who gets in and who does not) does not imply that a modification in the field's perimeter is inevitably associated with a change in the relations of power between dominant and dominated agents. A more inclusive social environment does not mean the weakening or absence of asymmetric relations of power. The admission of women and disabled persons in the labor market did not change the essential asymmetrical nature of the relationship between employers and employees. In this regard, it can be said that the introduction of intersubjective interactions in field theory, as well the focus on the struggles for achieving social recognition, are coherent with Bourdieu's idea that social transformation is not necessarily progressive and emancipatory. The growth of the number of the social subjects that are included in a field can enhance the possibility of dominated groups to change in their favor the objective relations of power in a field, but it does not necessarily determine such a change.<sup>198</sup>

Third, the idea of recognition can shed light on the specific form of causal power that a field, as a social entity, can exercise over human beings. In *Réponses*, Wacquant defines the concept of 'social field' through an analogy with physical or magnetic fields. He states that the field is "a patterned system of objective forces [...] a relational configuration endowed with a specific gravity which it imposes on

---

<sup>198</sup> There are already studies and approaches that have affirmed the idea that the limits and amplitude of social fields might be considered dependent on the perspective of the agents who are taking part in a specific social practice. See especially Neil Fligstein, Doug McAdam, *A Theory of Fields* (New York: Oxford University Press 2012).

all the objects and agents which enter in it”.<sup>199</sup> In light of such considerations, we can think that, as the magnetic field can attract or repulse a particle with a specific charge  $q$ , a social field can influence individual actions by attracting or repulsing social actors. However, in Bourdieu’s picture, what is the charge  $q$  that determines interactions between field and social agents? What is the element in social agents that determines the appearance and the effectivity of the social field’s force of attraction? In the first section of this chapter, we have seen that Bourdieu introduces the concept of ‘*libido*’ (or ‘*illusio*’ and ‘interest’ as well) in order to explain the ontological permanence of a field. Briefly put, the idea of *libido* as original non-reflexive force can explain why “people are motivated, driven by, torn from a state of indifference and moved by the stimuli sent by certain fields - and not others”.<sup>200</sup> In chapters 2 and 3, we have seen that, according to Bourdieu, libido can take the form of desire for recognition:

One may suppose that, to obtain the sacrifice of self-love in favor of a quite other object of investment and so to inculcate the durable disposition to invest in the social game which is one of the prerequisites of all learning, pedagogic work in its elementary form relies on one of the motors which will be at the origin of all subsequent investments: the *search for recognition*.<sup>201</sup>

Following Bourdieu, human beings can develop some sort of involvement in the game of a specific field (that is to say, the *illusio*, the idea that it is worth competing in a field for the accumulation of specific capital) only if such a game can satisfy, at the same time, the libidinal drive for social recognition of social actors. In this regard, Bourdieu clearly asserts that the development of an *illusio* (and, consequently, of a habitus that is coherent with a specific field’s structure) always implies that social actors can enjoy social recognition, the ascription of a positive status by other participants in the social game.

---

<sup>199</sup> Wacquant, “Introduction”, in Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 24, *Engl. transl.* 17.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibidem*, 30, *Engl. transl.*, 26.

<sup>201</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 166.

If we consider again the previous analogy of social field as a magnetic one, the need for recognition of individual social actors might be conceived as the charge  $q$  that determines the actualization of that force of attraction exercised by a particular social field toward concrete individual social actors.<sup>202</sup> In this respect, we could say that, in Bourdieu's perspective, the existence of fields is meaningfully related to the degree of empathetic engagement that social subjects can experience in a specific field behaving according to the rules and norms that are at work in that field itself. It is only through a successful process of intersubjective recognition that social actors can acquire the *illusio* that is indispensable to act properly in a field. Therefore, it seems that, from Bourdieu's point of view, the material reproduction and existence of a field is rooted in its capacity to satisfy a fundamental emotional and psychological need of human beings, and their expectations for social recognition as well. Briefly put, the objectivity of a field is necessarily related to its ability to guarantee the individualization of social actors through socialization and the satisfaction of their need for recognition. In other words, the accomplishment of the interest that constitutes the core of every field is necessarily imbricated with the satisfaction of human beings' expectations for social recognition.

---

<sup>202</sup> In discussing this topic, I prefer to talk about "need for recognition" instead of "desire for recognition" for a rather important reason. In fact, Honneth is inclined to deny that recognition is essentially connected to the satisfaction of a desire that takes the form of an "appetite", that is to say, a drive whose satisfaction can be characterized in terms of annihilation of the desired object. In this regard, see Axel Honneth, "From Desire to Recognition: Hegel's Grounding of Self-Consciousness", *The I in We. Studies in the Theory of Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 3-18. In his reading of Hegel's depiction of the emergence of self-consciousness, Honneth asserts that the success of the process of recognition between two subjects is linked to subjects' capacity of self-limiting their respective desires for dominating the other. Only in this way, through a recognition based on the moral self-limitations of the other, can they satisfy what Honneth defines as their "ontological need to prove to themselves that their environment is dependent on their own intentions", 12. For different accounts of the paradigm of recognition in relation to the idea of "desire for recognition", which have been more or less directly refuted by Honneth, see, for instance, Alexander Kojève, *Introduction à la Lecture du Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992); Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1999).

Consequently, if we accept such a reading of the field, it is necessary also to determine the nature of that center of gravity in the field that attracts social actors due to their desire for recognition (the charge  $q$ ). In light of this, it might be significant to enrich the idea of the field. The latter is not only an objective system of positions “constituted by the *distribution* of *material* resources and means of appropriation of socially scarce goods and values”. A field is also a system of relations of recognition. It can attract social agents as far as it provides individuals the opportunity to enjoy some kind of positive social recognition and to realize some specific features of the self, while they pursue the interest at stake in the field itself.

In this respect, the concept of ‘field’ can help theorists of recognition to explain in what way a non-individual social entity can exercise some sort of power-over interpersonal dynamics that can happen only between human beings that are endowed with psychological and rational capabilities of expressing interpersonal recognition. Honneth asserts that recognition orders can have both an expressivist nature and a productive one. They have an expressivist nature when they reflect the content of those intersubjective forms of recognition that are actualized in everyday life. From this point of view, the social orders of recognition can exercise a regulative power-over pre-existing relations of recognition that have shown to be successful in terms of social reproduction and individual self-flourishing. Nevertheless, according to Honneth, orders of recognition are also productive in so far as they can impose patterns of recognition over individuals, constituting and promoting new evaluative qualities that do not belong yet to the praxis of a particular social environment.

However, Danielle Petherbridge has noticed how Honneth has deepened the issue of the productive power of institutionalized orders of recognition only in terms of social domination, without taking into account the possible positive and empowering features of such a power of recognition at both interpersonal and

structural levels.<sup>203</sup> Such a shortcoming is symptomatic of a more general limit of Honneth's position. His idea that spheres of recognition are endowed with a two-sided nature (they are expressions of intersubjective forms of recognition, but they can have also a constitutive capacity at the interpersonal level) is not supported by a theoretical explanation of how recognition and power are imbricated. Is recognition a constitutive feature of some kinds of social and institutional power that can be exercised in a top-down direction? In what way are social entities that are ontologically dependent on intersubjective relations of recognition productive of the latter at the same time? The definition, proposed by Italo Testa, of 'recognition' as a form of passive power can perhaps help us to improve Honneth's perspective.

In fact, a field might be conceived as a socially constituted space that works as a non-attracted attractor of recognition. A field is a social entity that is composed of individuals that are attracted attractors of recognition and can recognize each other. Ergo, it is possible to argue that a field might be endowed with an emergent property (namely, the power of attracting recognition from individuals and groups of individuals), which is ontologically grounded on intersubjective practices of recognition. A field can attract individuals, making them engaged with the particular interest at stake in the field itself, as it is partially constituted by social practices through which individuals can achieve some sort of self-realization. At the same time, to assert that a social object like a field can attract agents that are able to recognize and be recognized does not mean that such an object can recognize individuals properly, affirming their personhood through intentional acts that express love, respect, or esteem. A field is not a human being that is provided with unified consciousness, intentionality, and rational skills. It only means that a field, as a set of individuals that are engaged in social practices that can increase the opportunities of social recognition, has an unintentional and causal power-over that

---

<sup>203</sup> Cfr. Petherbridge, *The Critical Theory of Axel Honneth*, 191-200. The idea that productive power is not necessarily a detrimental form of domination can be found also in Amy Allen, *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*, Westview Press, Boulder 1999.



emerges from the practices of recognition that are exercised by the field's members. That is why, according to this perspective, a field should be conceived also as a space of recognition that is capable to ensure social integration and individualization of the players who are taking part in a specific social game.<sup>204</sup>

## 6.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has argued in favor of the consistency that subsists between Bourdieu's idea of 'social field' and Honneth's concept of 'recognition orders', considering their relational morphology, the phenomenon of social struggles, and the issue of their social objectivity. In the final part of the chapter, a hybrid concept of 'field of recognition' has been proposed, underlining how it can be useful for solving some ontological difficulties that concern both Bourdieu's and Honneth's perspectives. On the one hand, it has been shown how the idea of 'field of recognition' can account for the determination of the amplitude of a field and the deepening of the description of fields' functioning. On the other hand, such a notion seems to clarify what kind of power social orders of recognition can exercise over individuals in a way that is consistent with their expressivist characterization provided by Honneth.

---

<sup>204</sup> This account of the causal power of a field of recognition strongly recalls the description of the causal power of norm circles in Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency*, 195: "A norm circle is an entity whose parts are the people who are committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm. Operating through its members, such a norm circle has the causal power to influence people to observe the norm concerned. Those individuals become aware that they face a normative environment (and not just some specific individuals) that will sanction their behavior and this tends to create a disposition in them to conform with the norm concerned – although like any causal influence this one may be offset by countervailing influences".

## 7 HABITUS AS HABITUS OF RECOGNITION

This chapter tries to develop an interpretation of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' in terms of 'habitus of recognition'. Bourdieu has mainly conceived habitus as a methodological assumption that has to be operationalized by social scientists in empirical sociological research. In this respect, 'habitus' has often been criticized for being a sort of "black box" notion, or a flawed concept that is not capable of explaining the individual origin of social action.<sup>205</sup> The following conceptualization of habitus aspires to suggest a possible interpretation that can overcome such a critique, connecting the actualization of a set of social actions to agents' attempts to testify and experience mutual recognition.

Briefly, habitus will be depicted as a set of perceptive patterns, empirical and normative expectations, and bodily abilities whose main function is to actualize social actions that allow reciprocal recognition among social agents. In the first part, the chapter will summarize the main features of habitus according to Bourdieu's socio-ontological point of view, focusing on the inner dynamics of the habitus, which according to the following reading can be characterized by three main features: habitus as a system of dispositional properties, habitus as a set of anticipations of the outcomes of practical actions that works as motivational force, and habitus' capacity of determining individual choices and preferences according to the objective social structures that have generated the habitus itself. In the second section, the chapter explains why Axel Honneth's social theory is a suitable paradigm in order to reinterpret habitus in terms of cognitive predispositions. The third section provides a detailed account of the idea of cognitive habitus as

---

<sup>205</sup> For this type of criticism see, for instance, Sadiya Akram, "Fully Unconscious and Prone to Habit: The Characteristics of Agency in the Structure and Agency Dialectic", in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 43, no.1 (2013), 57-59, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12002>.

an individual structure that allows the exercise of power to recognize and be recognized. In addition, this section illustrates some possible advantages of this interpretation compared to Bourdieu's original account.

## 7.1 Bourdieu's habitus: Methodological considerations and ontological status

In a canonical passage of *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique*, Pierre Bourdieu defines habitus as

a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks, thanks to analogical transfers of schemes permitting the solution of similarly shaped problems.<sup>206</sup>

In accordance with this picture, habitus is the conceptual tool that allows Bourdieu to develop a “theory of practice as the product of a *practical sense*, of a socially constituted ‘sense of the game’”.<sup>207</sup> In this respect, habitus should be considered, on the one hand, as a theoretical prompt that suggests strategies of action of social agents are grounded not exclusively in their rational and reflexive choices, but in a set of individual, embodied dispositions that reflect the objective structure of social reality and predispose agents to act coherently with the latter. Put briefly, habitus has a *cognitive* role, as it shapes human mental and perceptive schemes, and possesses a *practical* function, as it enables our individual and collective actions. On the other hand, the notion of ‘habitus’ is a logical and methodological tool that can help social theorists and scientists to explain how it is possible, for human beings, to be involved in multiple social practices at the same time without a continuous reflective activity. In order to speak in Italian with another partner, for instance, I mainly employ my reflexive skills to formulate meaningful sentences and follow the

---

<sup>206</sup> Bourdieu, *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique*, 261, Engl. transl., 82-83.

<sup>207</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 96, Engl. transl., 120-121.

reasoning of my interlocutor. However, for successful social communication, we both are supposed to know *how* to speak Italian: I must know not only its basic grammar and syntax, but also the proper way to articulate words and sounds using my tongue and lips. In order to exercise those abilities, I do not have to think reflexively about them. Such skills are enacted in a non-reflexive and intuitive way, making possible a profitable conversation between my partner and I. Using Bourdieu's language, we can assert that a reasonable conversation in Italian is possible if and only if both my interlocutor and I are equipped with the appropriate linguistic habitus, namely the set of bodily and mental dispositional properties that makes possible such a social practice. Simply put, for Bourdieu, the habitus is a set of mental, perceptive, and bodily dispositions that exist and operate below the level of individual consciousness and reflexivity. On the other hand, Bourdieu asserts that operations of the habitus are possible if the agents perceive their own actions as a result of a free choice and subjective preference, and not as the result of social constraints imposed on them by the objective morphology of the social fields where they are situated. For understanding how agents adjust spontaneously but unconsciously their subjective expectations and aspirations to the objective and material resources that they possess it is necessary to deepen the way habitus operates.

The first feature of habitus we must discuss is its characterization in terms of dispositional properties. In this regard, it is worth noting that a dispositional property always implies a counterfactual conditional both at the conceptual and empirical levels. For instance, the fact that "The object  $x$  is fragile" should be analyzed as "If  $x$  were to be struck, then  $x$  would break". Such a definition of 'dispositional properties' seems to fit Bourdieu's account of habitus. In fact, Bourdieu conceives social actions as the result of the relation between the field and capital, i.e., the objective structures independent from individual social agents, and the habitus' predispositions possessed by agents themselves. In other words, social actions are actualizations of agents' individual dispositions that are coherent with:

- the “space of possibilities” of action generated by a social field considered as a set of burdens, norms, and rules of conduct of a specific social context; and
- a particular form of capital (economic, social, cultural, etc), which establishes the amount and type of power-to that an agent can employ in a field.

Therefore, if an agent actualizes a habitus’ disposition that produces behavior that is coherent with the rules of a specific field, then there is at least one objective condition, independent from subjective will and desires, which has allowed the actualization of that disposition. Nevertheless, according to Bourdieu, this does not imply the assumption of a strong causal relationship between a personal habitus and the peculiar morphology of a field. A field can offer various opportunities to realize distinct patterns of behavior or to reach the same outcome adopting different practical strategies from time to time. In this regard, it is important to note that the perceptive schemes and unconscious beliefs that compose an individual habitus do not necessarily push an agent to actualize a determined behavior every time the same social condition arises. Similarly, it is possible that the achievement of the same practical outcome might be realizable in multiple manners in so far as it can be produced by different social conditions. Briefly, the space of possible actions generated by the social structures, as well as the amount and composition of capital an agent possesses, can trigger a particular form of agency without necessarily causing its actualization. The habitus merely steers the agents toward a set of possible practical reactions that are consistent with the presence of an objective set of different practical options, but the realization of an action obeys a probabilistic logic, not to a mechanistic one.<sup>208</sup> The point that Bourdieu wants to highlight introducing the operational concept of ‘habitus’ is that, given an objective social space with its set of practical opportunities and material and normative burdens, agents enact specific behavioral patterns because they are

---

<sup>208</sup> See Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, 169-170, Engl. transl. 99: “The uncertainty which has an objective basis in the probabilistic logic of social laws is sufficient to modify not only the experience of practice, but practice itself, for example by encouraging strategies aimed at avoiding the most probable outcome”.

already prone to do so. If an agent does not possess an assortment of dispositions that are consistent with the practical logic of the objective field, it is unlikely that she can perform actions that are meaningful and reasonable in that social context. The point that Bourdieu wants to make clear is that external social conditioning can affect the practical agency of individuals, triggering social actions that are reasonable in a particular social environment, if and only if agents have developed a system of dispositions (*habitus*) that is isomorphic to the system of positions (*field*) which they have to cope with. Therefore, the real aim that the French sociologist wants to achieve by introducing the notion of '*habitus*' is to not provide an account of the mechanistic relationships that subsist between social reality and individual *habitus*. The main objective is to make explicit the preconditions that make possible the actualization of actions that are reasonable in a given social context.

In light of these considerations, it is nevertheless necessary to clarify the mechanism that allows the actualization of the behavioral patterns that are inscribed in the *habitus* in the form of dispositions. If there is not a mechanistic relation between objective structural conditions and the dispositional nature of the *habitus*, what is the logic behind the actualization of a practical disposition? According to Bourdieu, such an operational mechanism can be grasped if we focus on the idea that the *habitus* allows intuitive anticipations of the results of an action.

Briefly put, *habitus* allows the realization of the most reasonable behavior, considering a given set of external conditioning, thanks to an array of expectations regarding the possible outcomes of different practical reactions in a given social situation. Following Bourdieu, an agent can perform actions that are consistent with the practical logic of a social field (and, therefore, with both the objective system of resource that the agent possesses before enacting the action, and the limits and constraints that characterize a social field) only if she has some expectations related to the probability of success of those actions. Without such a system of beliefs that concern anticipations of the outcome of practical conduct,

an agent could not perform any action that is reasonable in a particular social context. In this regard, the habitus permits agents not only to perceive the available practical options of agency in a tangible social situation. The actualization of a potential practical disposition is not only the product of the causal relationship between the external stimuli that come from the social world and our perceptive senses. Instead, the activation of habitus dispositional properties also depends on the expectations that, as agents, we possess in relation to the consequences of the adoption of a certain line of action. For Bourdieu, the activation of a particular social disposition is operated by the habitus through a pre-reflexive, quasi-instinctual evaluation of the objective opportunities of action that is based on empirical and normative expectations that an agent has acquired through past social experiences. Therefore, it is possible to assert that external triggers that can be perceived as opportunities to perform a certain action are ineffective if the agent does not possess any expectations that can motivate the actualization of the corresponding disposition that produces such action.

Let us imagine a situation in which a waged worker in  $F_E$  gets a considerable amount of money that he could invest in some profitable assets for increasing his personal capital. The point that Bourdieu wants to clarify is that, probably, the worker will not see in this situation an opportunity for increasing his capital because he has never played on the stock market. In this case, the lack of experience of the worker concerning the financial environment results in a lack of reasonable expectations regarding the outcomes of such a practical choice and, consequently, in the absence of a motivational source that can push the worker to realize such investment. The worker has the objective opportunity to increase his capital, but it is unlikely that he would actuate strategies that can guarantee the maximization of profit because he has no expectations in that sense.

However, what is the origin of such expectations? Are they an anthropological invariant feature of every human being? Are they dependent on the peculiar nature

of a social environment? Considering the previous example, Bourdieu clearly opts for the latter explanation:

The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. [...] This means that inevitably inscribed within the dispositions of the habitus is the whole structure of the system of conditions, as it presents itself in the experience of a life-condition occupying a particular position within that structure.<sup>209</sup>

As a product of external social conditions, habitus is composed of schemes of perception and unconscious beliefs (beliefs about the state of the social world, normative and empirical expectations regarding the effects of our social conduct and others' reactions) that reflect the system of position in which agents are inserted. In this regard, the array of expectations that allow the actualization of practical dispositions determines agents' practical preferences in a conditional way. In other words, according to Bourdieu, the content of practical expectations embodied in the habitus always reflect the objective social conditions in which the agents grow up, namely their position in the social fields. Practical choices of social agents are always the expression of preferences that are dependent on external social conditioning: the content of the expectations that allows the actuation of a given disposition in a specific social context reflects the objective conditions in which a social agent has developed her own habitus. In the light of this dialectical relation, we can say that the possession of a specific habitus can be inferred by the objective conditions that make possible the realization of a particular action. Thus, we can affirm that, given a capital  $C_X$  and a field  $F_X$ , it is possible to surmise the conformation of a specific habitus  $H_X$  in relation to:

- the amount of  $C_X$  that an agent  $y$  possesses in  $F_X$  at time  $t$ , that is to say, the position an agent occupies in  $F_X$  at  $t$ ; and

- the specific nature of capital and field at stake, namely the set of norms, rules, and categories that define the structure of  $F_X$  and the distribution of  $C_X$  in  $F_X$ .

---

<sup>209</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 191, Engl. transl. 170-172.



For instance, in an economic field  $F_E$  in which the type of powers an agent  $y$  can exercise as a worker is dependent on possession  $C_E$  (means of production and material resources), we can infer  $H_E$  of  $y$ , namely the set of dispositional properties  $y$  can have in  $F_E$  at  $t$ , by looking at  $y$ 's position in  $F_E$ . Following Bourdieu, let's assume  $y$  is an employee: as such,  $y$  does possess an amount of  $C_E$  that poses her in a position of subordination in  $F_E$ . Therefore, it is possible to infer that  $y$ 's  $H_E$  will tend to drive  $y$  to save his wage in a bank instead of investing it, or to drink beer instead of wine in her free time to save money. Consequently, actors ( $w, x, \dots, n$ ) that occupy the same position as  $y$ 's in  $F_E$  will tend to assume the same  $H_E$  of  $y$ . This idea seems to be confirmed by Bourdieu himself when he studies and analyzes the tastes and preferences of cultural consumption in French society:

The true basis of the differences found in the area of consumption, and far beyond it, is the opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity. The former are the tastes of individuals who are the product of material conditions of existence defined by distance from necessity, by the freedoms or facilities stemming from possession of capital; the latter express, precisely in their adjustment, the necessities of which they are the product. Thus, it is possible to deduce popular tastes for the foods that are simultaneously most 'filling' and most economical from the necessity of reproducing labour power at the lowest cost which is forced on the proletariat as its very definition. The idea of taste, typically bourgeois, since it presupposes absolute freedom of choice, is so closely associated with the idea of freedom that many people find it hard to grasp the paradoxes of the taste of necessity.<sup>210</sup>

As a structured structure, habitus is clearly the product of the influences of those norms and rules that define the burdens and the inner dynamics of each social field. In other words, we can affirm that the habitus can generate conduct that is worthy and effective in a specific field only if we consider habitus as an isomorphic, bodily expression of structural schemes, rules and principles of action that govern a field. For example, let us consider a soccer player that, through an intensive workout, acquires good technical skills with the ball, the ability to interpret the developments of a match, and the disposition to avoid an offside position. From an ontological

---

<sup>210</sup> *Ibidem*, 198, Engl. transl. 177-178.

point of view, it would be impossible for a human being to acquire the competences of a proper soccer player if a game like soccer would not exist. The development of a set of dispositions that allows an individual to be a good soccer player has a practical significance only in a context in which, for instance, the offside rule has a meaning. The soccer player's dispositions do not produce any practical effect and have any sense in a chess match, which obeys completely different sets of norms and rules. On the other hand, when Bourdieu states that habitus is a structuring structure, he wants to point out that habitus affects also the effective functioning of social objective structures, that is, social fields. More specifically, habitus as an internalized structure represents the channel through which social agents reproduce social structures irreflexively. In fact, Bourdieu affirms that

the relation between habitus and field operates in two ways. On one side, it is a relation of *conditioning*: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of a field [...] On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or *cognitive construction*: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one's energy.<sup>211</sup>

We could say that an objective system of structures can exist if and only if people learn how to behave in a specific social field through the socialization and actuation of practical relations. Put briefly, we learn to play soccer without reading manuals or memorizing the official norms and rules that are established by FIFA. We acquire the capacity to play soccer according to the game rules by practicing the sport. Thus, we may say that soccer, namely the game in which soccer's norms and rules have sense and regulative functions among individuals, exists only if there are people that practice the game. If, at some point, people all over the world ceased to play this game, the system of rules that regulate interactions on the soccer field would also lose its significance and, thus, stop to exist as an objective structure. That is why habitus has a fundamental role also for the reproduction of objective structures.

---

<sup>211</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 102-103, *Engl. transl.* 127.

## 7.2 Habitus and recognition

The following section aims to illustrate the reasons that allow us to reinterpret Bourdieu's account of habitus in intersubjective terms. As we have seen especially in chapters 2 and 3, Bourdieu is likely to agree with the idea that both transmission and dissemination of habitus operates through mimetic socialization that involves the interpersonal level of interaction:

The constancy of habitus [...] is thus one of the most important factors in the relative constancy of the structure of the sexual division of labour: because these principles are, in their essentials, transmitted from body to body, below the level of consciousness and discourse, to a large extent they are beyond the grip of conscious control and therefore not amenable to transformations or corrections.<sup>212</sup>

And again, in *The Logic of Practice*:

the process of acquisition - a practical *mimesis* (or *mimeticism*) which implies an overall relation of identification and has nothing in common with an imitation that would presuppose a conscious effort to reproduce a gesture [...] What is 'learned by body' is not something that one has, like knowledge that can be brandished, but something that one is. [...] It is never detached from the body that bears it and can be reconstituted only by means of a kind of gymnastics designed to evoke it, a mimesis which, as Plato observed, implies total investment and deep emotional identification.<sup>213</sup>

Such a mimetic transmission of practices that involves emotional identifications seems to have a fundamental role in the process of production and reproduction of individual social conducts. In this respect, habitus' existence appears to rely on a dynamic of intersubjective recognition that could be understood in a naturalistic way; namely as a specific form of evolutionary adaptation that ensures the survival of humankind.

As we have seen already, Axel Honneth has developed a social theory that seems to be highly compatible with the latter hypothesis. His work is meaningful for our purpose as it bases the origin of social praxis of human beings on intersubjective

---

<sup>212</sup> Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 95.

<sup>213</sup> Bourdieu, *Le Sens Pratique*, 122-123, Engl. transl., 73.

recognition as well as on the assumption that the necessity for recognition is the invariant transcendental characteristic of human beings. In this regard, a relevant characteristic of Honneth's social theory is that the coherence and functioning of a particular society are dependent on society's capacity to satisfy emotional needs that are connected to our disposition toward recognition. In this respect, individuals learn and interiorize social duties and rules as far as they can gain a beneficial emotional life acting according to them. In this respect, two of the main features of recognition are its responsiveness and its relation to practical actions. In the light of the first characteristic, to recognize means to react in the proper way to those positive qualities that we perceive in individual and collective subjects, where the positive features we are called to react to in the proper way are those that are objective in specific social context *S* at the time *t*. If we focus on the second feature, a successful form of recognition always implies the subsequent actualization of attitudes and behavior that, satisfying the expectations of our peers of interaction, testify to the authenticity of the recognitive process in place. In conclusion, in Honneth's perspective, individual and collective social conducts are essentially dependent on the dynamic of the affective dimension of human beings and their role-taking capacity. At this point, how is it possible to integrate Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' with a similar intersubjective recognitive paradigm?

First, the idea that intersubjective recognition may play an important role in respect of habitus' existence and bodily acquisition seems plausible in the light of Bourdieu's perspective. As we have stated previously, the social field has a generative role in relation to individual habitus. According to Bourdieu, the social field is nothing more than a web of relations of power among individuals, whose norms and rules of functioning are determined by the nature of the capital at stake in the field itself. Consequently, to say that social agents develop a specific habitus as they act and move in a particular field means to assert that social agents acquire their habitus through interaction with other human beings. In other words, following what has been stated in chapter 6, Bourdieu's conception of the social fields seems to imply

the idea that an objective structure can generate embodied habitus only by means of the mediation of the set of actors that, through their particular relations, constitute a field in its specific form. If this is so, intersubjective negotiation seems to play an important role in mediating the relations between the objective fields and subjective dispositions of the agents in the fields. As Wendy Bottero underlines:

The milieu of the field is partly made up of other agents, so the relation between habitus and field is also an encounter *between agents*, with more or less similar dispositions and characteristics. [...] The operation of the habitus, and its intersection with field, is partly a question of the interactional properties of networks, in which our practice is subject to the contingently variable characteristics and dispositions of the people around us.<sup>214</sup>

Secondly, the importance that the paradigm of recognition attributes to the human emotional sphere seems coherent with the concept of 'habitus' itself. In this respect, it is interesting to focus on a particular function of habitus that Loïc Wacquant has recently underlined:

The third component of habitus is affective or, to speak more generally, cathectic (in the idiom of Talcott Parsons) or libidinal (in the vocabulary of Sigmund Freud). It entails the vesting of one's life energies into the objects, undertakings, and agents that populate the world under consideration. In other words, to make an adept pugilist (pianist, politician or professor) takes acquiring in practice the distinctive cognitive constructs and the skilled moves as well as developing the proper appetite for the stakes of the corresponding social game. By documenting this lustful dimension of habitus formation, *Fighting Scholars* brings out the inescapable fact [...] that the incarnate social agent is a suffering and desiring animal.<sup>215</sup>

According to Wacquant, the form of a particular habitus depends on its capacity to satisfy the libidinal appetites of human beings. In this respect, to reinterpret habitus following Honneth's approach means to describe habitus in terms of a pre-reflexive and pre-conscious structure that can contribute to satisfying the need for recognition of human beings, favoring a positive self-relation to the self. Besides,

---

<sup>214</sup> Wendy Bottero, "Intersubjectivity and Bourdiesian Approaches to 'Identity'", in *Cultural Sociology* 4, no. 1 (2010), 18-19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975509356750>.

<sup>215</sup> Loïc Wacquant, "Homines in Extremis: What Fighting Scholars Teach Us about Habitus", in *Body & Society* 20, no. 2 (2014), 9, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1357034X13501348>.

Honneth's conception of recognition is essentially hinged on the idea that successful forms of recognition are characterized by perceptive moments and the satisfaction of social expectations of the individuals involved in processes of recognition. To recognize somebody means to perceive, in other human beings, qualities that we have learned to consider as normatively relevant in a specific social context and to act consequently, i.e., according to the expectations of the person that we want to recognize. Such elements make Honneth's theory of recognition potentially combinable with Bourdieu's account of habitus, as the latter is described as a complex system in which perceptive schemes and expectations allow the actualization of specific bodily dispositions consistently with a peculiar social environment.

Finally, Honneth himself has recently diagnosed a relevant problem that affects the Hegelian paradigm of recognition and, consequently, the models that are influenced by Hegel's thought: the lack of a robust theory of habituation. In this regard, Honneth complains about the absence of a meaningful theory of the development of moral habits that can explain the process of the motivational appropriation of norms that are created collectively.<sup>216</sup> In this regard, the development of a concept of 'habitus' of recognition could be the first step toward a perspective that can illustrate the process of individual acquisition and the sedimentation of successful forms of recognition that are collectively accepted. In particular, a suitable concept of 'habitus' of recognition should take into account the idea that, through socialization, social subjects reproduce the expectations of their social environment until the point that their personal and individual preferences are consistent with those social expectations themselves.

Nevertheless, a possible objection can be raised against this hypothetical combination. It concerns the strong tie that Honneth institutes between intentional actions that express recognition and successful forms of recognition. For Honneth, in fact, it seems that we can talk about authentic acts and gestures of recognition if

---

<sup>216</sup> Axel Honneth, *Anerkennung: Eine Europäische Ideengeschichte*, (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018), 204-210.

and only if to recognize is the main purpose that a recognizer wants to achieve performing an action. Consequently:

This basic conceptual choice rules out, for example, defining positive attitudes that are inevitably accompanied by the pursuit of a series of other interests in interaction as being a form of recognition. If I have a strong desire to play chess with another person on a regular basis, I may express a certain amount of esteem for that person's intellectual abilities, but the primary purpose of my action concerns our playing chess together.<sup>217</sup>

However, as Heikki Ikäeimo and Arto Laitinen have argued, to conceive the intentionality of the action as a constituent part of recognition could narrow excessively the group of actions that express recognition. An agent  $x$  is able to grasp the esteem, respect, or love that another agent  $y$  cherishes for  $x$  even if the behavior of  $y$  is not intended to directly express recognition:

Why does A help B, when B has hard times in her life? There are of course many possible explanations, but one candidate is that A loves B. A does not need to say this to B for B to be in principle able to tell. Or what does it tell B of A's attitudes towards her that A always asks for B's help when there is some especially difficult work to be done at the office? Well, possibly that A holds B in esteem for her abilities and achievements in similar tasks. A does not have to give B a medal or a gold watch 'in recognition of' B's contributions for B to be in principle able to understand A's attitude-complex towards her as including the recognitive attitude of esteem. And similarly with respect.<sup>218</sup>

The attempt to characterize the idea of habitus in terms of recognition is in line with Ikäeimo and Laitinen's critique of Honneth's perspective: the element through which we can distinguish between authentic and inauthentic forms of recognition is not related to the explicit intention to recognize somebody by means of an expressivist behavior. The things that count are the motivations behind the attitudes a recognizer assumes toward a recognizee; namely the beliefs that recognizers and

---

<sup>217</sup> Honneth, "Recognition as Ideology", 330.

<sup>218</sup> Ikäeimo, Laitinen, "Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement, and Recognitive Attitudes Towards Persons", 45.

recognizees have concerning the respective behavioral expectations and that affect their manner they treat each other.<sup>219</sup>

### 7.3 Habitus of recognition: Definition and theoretical advantages

In order to reinterpret habitus according to the paradigm of recognition, it is of essential importance to understand if a hypothetical recognitive habitus can reflect the main features of Bourdieu's habitus: habitus as a system of dispositional properties, habitus as a set of anticipations of the outcomes of practical actions that works as a motivational force, and habitus' capacity of determining individual choices and preferences according to the objective social structures that have generated the habitus itself. We have said that recognition is successful, or a recognizer  $x$  recognizes a recognizee  $y$ , when:

- 1)  $x$  perceives in  $y$  those positive qualities  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$  that are objective in  $S$  at  $t$ ; and
- 2)  $x$  acts toward  $y$  coherently with  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)y$ .

In addition, in order to be actualized, successful forms of recognition require that the involved agents possess some reciprocal expectations toward each other, and some beliefs of the other members of their social environment. In other words, recognizers have to believe not only that the majority of the recognizers who belong to their same social sphere tend to conform to the same social behavior that expresses recognition in some specific circumstances. Recognizers must also believe that most people in their society believe that they ought to provide recognition in those circumstances.

---

<sup>219</sup> In this regard, the idea that effective forms of recognition are enacted thanks to habitus, and embody perceptive schemes and expectations and can operate unconsciously, could be seen as a different way to conceptualize Ikäcimo and Laitinen's idea of "attitudes of recognition". See *ibidem*, 40: "One answer, which we believe is compatible with Honneth's conception, is that the definition of the genus recognitive attitude is *taking someone as a person*".



The perspective about social norms and expectations developed by Cristina Bicchieri can help us to conceptualize the motivations that push an agent to follow a social norm in terms of habitus. According to Bicchieri, an agent can choose to enact an action for very different reasons. One can be motivated to act according to unconditional preferences, regardless of others' expectations or personal beliefs concerning the actions others will actualize or should enact. In this regard, I can act in a certain manner because I believe that such an action will produce a determined outcome, or because such an action is consistent with my personal moral or ethical beliefs.<sup>220</sup> On the other hand, Bicchieri highlights that other behavioral choices depend on conditional preferences that can take the form of empirical expectations or normative ones. If we follow an empirical expectation, we can start to or persist to behave in a certain way because we want to conform to social conduct that we believe is followed by the majority of our peers, like in the case of fads, despite very normative considerations.<sup>221</sup> In the case of norms that we define as social, according to Bicchieri, we have expectations that are not only empirical, that is to say, we have beliefs about the way our peers are going to act or react in a specific situation. When we conform to a norm that is social, we do so also because we believe that other people think that we should behave in that way. In other words, we adopt certain conduct not only because we believe that the people tend to conform to that

---

<sup>220</sup> See Cristina Bicchieri, *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2006), 151: "I take personal norms to be unconditional (or nearly so), as opposed to social norms. The main difference between a social and a personal norm is that expectations of others' conformity play a crucial role in the former and much less so in the latter. There is a difference between conforming to a norm because one expects others to conform (and believes others expect one to conform) and conforming because one is convinced of its inherent value. In the first case, the preference for conformity is conditional on expecting others to conform; in the second case, one's preference for conforming is (almost) unconditional".

<sup>221</sup> *Ibidem*, 13: "I take them to be *empirical expectations*, in the sense that one expects people to follow R in situations of type S because one has observed them to do just that over a long period of time. If the present situation is of type S, one can reasonably infer that, *ceteris paribus*, people will conform to R as they always did in the past".

behavior, but also because we believe that they praise such a behavior, considering it morally and socially worthy and expecting us to behave consequently.<sup>222</sup>

When Honneth connects the recognition and satisfaction of normative expectations of social agents, he is arguing in favor of the following point: we tend to conform ourselves to others' expectations in terms of reciprocal recognition neither for instrumental reasons, nor because of our subjective normative beliefs. Acts of recognition that are socially appropriate are authentic in so far as they meet the normative demands and aspirations of our peers.<sup>223</sup> According to this reading, behavioral patterns that express recognition are necessarily enacted under the motivational action of normative second-order expectations; namely our beliefs regarding what other persons, who are taking part in a specific social situation in which we ourselves are involved, consider as a normatively meaningful norm.

In this respect, it seems possible to describe recognition as a dispositional property. In fact,  $\mathcal{Z}$  has the disposition to recognize every agent in  $F_X$ , if:

( $\mathcal{Z}$  can materially express recognition to every agent in  $F_X$ )

&

( $\mathcal{Z}$  can perceive in the agents in  $F_X$  the qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) that constitute a recognitive capital  $R_C$  in  $F_X$ )

&

( $\mathcal{Z}$  believes that most agents in  $F_X$  express recognition when they perceive the qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) in an agent that belongs to  $F_X$ )

&

( $\mathcal{Z}$  believes that most agents in  $F_X$  believe they ought to express recognition when they perceive the qualities ( $Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n$ ) in an agent that belongs to  $F_X$ ).

---

<sup>222</sup> *Ibidem*, 42: "Social norms prescribe or proscribe behavior; they entail obligations and are supported by normative expectations. Not only do we expect others to conform to a social norm; we are also aware that we are expected to conform, and both these expectations are necessary reasons to comply with the norm".

<sup>223</sup> See Honneth, "Grounding Recognition", 516.

However, if we consider habitus as a set of cognitive disposition, then we have to give an account of recognition also as a disposition to be recognized. In such a form,  $x$ 's disposition to be recognized is actualized by enacting the cognitive dispositions of a potential recognizer: acting coherently with some social features,  $x$  drives recognizers to perceive herself according to those characteristics and to interact with her consequently. In this sense, we can say that  $x$ 's disposition to be recognized by  $y$  can be actualized because  $x$  has expectations toward  $y$ 's reaction to specific conduct. In other words, if  $x$  aims to be recognized by  $y$  as  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$ -bearer, then  $x$  should know how to act in order to enact  $y$ 's cognitive disposition.<sup>224</sup> We can establish how such a being-recognized disposition is actualized if we take into account the role-taking capacity of individuals. In this respect,  $x$ 's disposition to act as a  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$ -bearer depends on  $x$ 's capacity to recall  $y$ 's reaction to her behavior. In this respect,  $x$  as recognizee must have certain beliefs concerning the type of actions that can help her to get recognition, certain perceptive schemes that allow her to perceive who can recognize her once the behavior that can attract recognition is enacted, and certain empirical and normative expectations concerning the fact that who is perceived as a recognizer should tend to behave as such. Consequently, we could say that  $x$  has the disposition to be recognized by every agent in  $F$  if:

( $x$  can materially act in  $F_X$  as a bearer of qualities  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$  that constitute a cognitive capital  $R_C$  in  $F_X$ , attracting recognition in  $F_X$ )

&

( $x$  believes that most agents in  $F_X$  attract recognition acting as a bearer of qualities  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$  that constitute a cognitive capital  $R_C$  in  $F_X$ )

&

( $x$  believes that most agents in  $F_X$  believe others ought to attract recognition acting as a bearer of qualities  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$  that constitute a cognitive capital  $R_C$  in  $F_X$ )

---

<sup>224</sup> In light of these considerations, it could be said that a cognitive disposition consists of the capacity of being recognized/getting recognition, which differs from the passive power of attracting recognition.

&

( $\mathcal{Z}$  can perceive agents in  $F_X$  that are a bearer of qualities  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$  that constitute a recognitive capital  $R_C$  in  $F_X$  as recognizers)

&

( $\mathcal{Z}$  believes that the agents in  $F_X$  that are a bearer of qualities  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$  that constitute a recognitive capital  $R_C$  in  $F_X$  do behave and ought to behave as recognizers).

In the light of this, given  $F_X$  and  $C_X$  in which  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$  are at stake, I suggest defining  $H_R$  of an agent  $\mathcal{Z}$  in a  $F_X$  as the set of dispositions that allows  $\mathcal{Z}$  to act in order to recognize other agents in  $F_X$  as a  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$ -bearer and to be recognized by other agents in  $F_X$  as  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$ -bearer. Put briefly, we can assert that a recognitive habitus  $H_R$  is a set of practical dispositions, grounded on practical skills, perceptions, and normative and empirical expectations, which drives an agent  $\mathcal{Z}$  to act in order to behave coherently with other agents and to be treated by the latter according to some specific features  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$  that work as  $C_R$  in  $F_X$ .

Let us imagine an economic field  $F_E$  in which the set of properties at stake in order to be recognized, i.e., to be esteemed as a good worker, could be identified not only with the economic wealth of an individual. We can see as salient features the rank a worker reaches in the labor market, his professional successes, creativity and independence, the numbers of customers he serves, and the annual growth of his business, namely  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$  that are  $C_{R(E)}$ . Thus, how can we conceptualize the  $H_R$  of an agent  $\mathcal{Y}$  that acts in  $F_E$ ? As we have said before, we could define  $H_{R(E)}$  as the set of recognitive dispositions that drives an agent  $\mathcal{Z}$  to actualize conducts of action that are coherent with  $C_{R(E)}$  in  $F_E$ . In the light of this, on the one hand,  $\mathcal{Z}$ 's  $H_E$  should allow  $\mathcal{Z}$  to recognize her partners of actions  $(x, w, \dots, n)$  according to  $C_{R(E)}$  in  $F_E$ . In this case,  $H_E$  predisposes  $\mathcal{Z}$  to admire and esteem  $(x, w, \dots, n)$  in relation to the evaluation of  $C_{R(E)}$  that  $(x, w, \dots, n)$  obtain in  $F_E$ . If it happens that  $(x, w, \dots, n)$  reach  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$ ,  $\mathcal{Z}$  will testify she is recognizing  $(x, w, \dots, n)$  as  $C_{R(E)}$ -bearer acting in a coherent way with  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots, Q_n)$ . For instance, if  $\mathcal{Z}$  is an employee like  $(x, w, \dots, n)$ ,  $\mathcal{Z}$ 's attempt to improve her productivity and professional performances can be

considered a social action that testifies  $z$  is actually recognizing  $(x, w, \dots n)$  as  $C_{R(E)}$ -bearer, that is to say, as good workers. On the other hand,  $H_E$  should permit  $z$  to be recognized by  $(x, w, \dots n)$  in relation to  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$  in  $F_E$ . In this respect,  $H_E$  predisposes  $z$  to actualize conducts that are able to drive  $(x, w, \dots n)$  to provide  $z$  with social esteem and admiration. For instance, to improve productivity is conduct that consents to  $z$  to be perceived and treated coherently with  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$  in  $F_E$  by  $(x, w, \dots n)$ .  $Z$  actualizes this behavior as she expects that  $(x, w, \dots n)$  will react to such a stance in the same manner  $z$  has reacted.

Such a dynamic of recognition appears to be capable of explaining how  $H_E$  guarantees collective coordination in  $F_E$ . In fact, it can be said that the reciprocal ascription of a specific status elicits the recognizer to expect a kind of behavior from recognizee that enables the recognizer to realize her aims. Thus, taking on the appropriate roles, agents grant each other the coordination of their social conduct. Let us consider a case in which, given  $F_E$ ,  $z$  is the employer and  $(x, w, \dots n)$  are the employees. If it happens that  $(x, w, \dots n)$  reach  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$  and  $z$  perceives  $(x, w, \dots n)$  as  $C_{R(E)}$ -bearers,  $z$  recognizes effectively them if she acts properly to their status of good workers, for instance, raising  $(x, w, \dots n)$ 's wages. The growth in wage is the realization of a social action favorable to  $(x, w, \dots n)$  that the latter obtain through their recognitive predispositions, which allow them to be treated as  $C_{R(E)}$ -bearer acting coherently with  $(Q_1, Q_2, Q_3, \dots Q_n)$  in  $F_E$ . In other words,  $(x, w, \dots n)$  have improved their job performances as they expected that, perceiving them as good workers,  $z$  would have raised their wages for corroborating her recognition of  $(x, w, \dots n)$  as good workers, that is to say, as  $C_{R(E)}$ -bearers.

In sum, the realization of a particular set of social actions in a field is guaranteed by a dispositional habitus that permits agents to act for achieving and giving recognition, for being recognized and recognizing, not only for earning material advantages. Habitus' acquisition depends on a process of socialization that seems to be strictly connected to successful experiences of interpersonal recognition. These experiences tend to favor the repetitions of certain behavioral patterns until

they are interiorized in forms of dispositional properties and actualized without constant reflexive activity. In this regard, it is interesting to notice how emotions related to subjective experiences of social recognition and misrecognition are of fundamental importance for understanding not only the process of acquisition of habitus, but also its stabilization and, therefore, the reiteration of particular social conduct. For instance, to experience social esteem tends to reinforce our attitude to repeat actions that are coherent with the rules of the social context in which we are acting because to receive social esteem is the condition of possibility to experience self-esteem, that is to say, to perceive ourselves as bearers of a property (or a set of properties) that is normatively relevant in a given social context. Once we gain a positive self-perception of ourselves, we will tend to re-enact those behavioral patterns that have led us to such a condition, which means reinforcing our empirical and normative expectations, as well as the way we perceive the social world around us.

This last point might also highlight more clearly in which way habitus can guarantee the inner coordination of social groups and classes, improving Bourdieu's perspective regarding habitus' inner functioning. According to Bourdieu, the fact members of the same social group or class have the same tastes (drinking beer instead of wine, following soccer instead of cricket) or tend to vote the same party (the socialist party instead of the liberal) depends on the fact they share the same habitus. However, Bourdieu is usually charged for adopting a crypto-utilitarian approach, as he often describes operations of the habitus in terms of intuitive calculations of costs-benefits related to the adoption of a given social behavior. For instance, talking about the opportunity available in the public educative system and the general tendencies of working-class students toward them, Bourdieu states that

the negative predispositions towards the school which result in the self-elimination of most children from the most culturally unfavoured classes and sections of a class...must be understood as an anticipation, based upon the unconscious estimation of the objective probabilities of success possessed by the whole category, of the

sanctions objectively reserved by the school for those classes or sections of a class deprived of cultural capital.<sup>225</sup>

According to such analysis, the propensity of lower-class members to drop out of public educative institutions was a consequence of the class habitus they possessed, which drove them to avoid achieving a cultural aim that was hard to reach in absence of adequate cultural capital. In addition, Bourdieu seems to provide a circular explanation of the working-class members' behavior toward education. In fact, following him, dominated members of the lower classes are apt to be less cultured of members of other classes because of their working-class habitus: working-class people behave as working-class people because of their working-class habitus.<sup>226</sup>

Nevertheless, if we consider habitus as a structure that permits the actualization of successful relationships of recognition, we could overcome both these shortcomings. Against the objection of crypto utilitarianism, it could be asserted that the actualization of invariant social behavior is functional to guarantee reciprocal recognition among members of the same social environment. From this last perspective, we could say that the tendency of students that came from lower-classes to abandon higher studies relied on the fact that to pursue a higher education did not allow any significant form of social recognition among members of the working-class and, thus, any benefits in terms of emotional well-being. In the same way, we could say that it was at least improbable that, pursuing their studies, the members of the working-class would have been recognized by students from higher social classes

---

<sup>225</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction", in *Power and Ideology in Education*, eds. Jerome Karabel, A. H. Halsey (Oxford: OUP, 1977b), 495.

<sup>226</sup> Such objection has been moved, for instance, by Burawoy, "The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci", 197: "The propensity to submission is not an invariant but depends on the inculcated habitus. [...] What sort of folk sociology is this, dependent on conventional wisdom and belied by history? [...] Since we have no way of knowing 'habitus' independent of behavior, the argument is simply tautological – immigrants and women are submissive because of their habitus of submission as demonstrated by their supposed submissiveness".

as legitimate members of their social group, given the different social backgrounds and styles to interact with each other. Against the objection of circularity, it could be argued that to drink beer instead of wine during one's free time, or to vote for a specific party, can be considered as empirical marks that, if needed, can favor reciprocal recognition among social agents of the same group, thus, reinforcing social integration and group cohesion. On the contrary, to actualize social conduct that is extraneous to a specific social dimension means to put oneself in a counter-productive condition in which recognition can fail. In light of this reasoning, it could be argued that youngsters with a working-class background persisted to behave in the same manner not because their condition of social disadvantage weakened their critical skills, drove them to interiorize a sense of inferiority towards upper-class members, or nullified their capacity to realize oppositional agency. Simply, they carried on behaving so because their recognitive habitus produced actions that allowed them to testify recognition and to be recognized successfully.

In this respect, to connect recognition and habitus can also shed light on an important idea of Bourdieu, according to which a habitus, to work properly at the unconscious level, should create in human beings the *illusio* that it is worthy to compete in the social game. For Bourdieu, in fact, a field can reproduce itself only if the agents that are there believe that the competition for the accumulation of the capital at stake is worthy, and the agents' investments and efforts are justified. So, how is it possible for agents who are forced to assume a disadvantaged social position by objective social conditions (lack of material resources, poor education, weak social connection, and so on) to develop an involvement in a game that they cannot win? How is it possible that they persist following rules and norms that do not guarantee any meaningful improvement of their own social condition? Bourdieu states that an answer to these questions can be found once we consider that "necessity can only be fulfilled, most of the time, because the agents are inclined to fulfill it, because they have a taste for what they are anyway condemned to".<sup>227</sup> If we assume that the

---

<sup>227</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 176.



choices of actions that are produced by the habitus possess not only a systemic function, but also an expressivist value, then it is clear in which sense the habitus inclines agents to enact spontaneously actions and practices that can work for the reproduction, and not for the improvement, of their social condition. From this point of view, the practical preferences produced by the habitus can incline an agent to reinforce her normative and empirical expectations, reproducing a specific behavioral pattern, in so far as they make possible a successful process of recognition for the agent herself. In other words, the habitus can produce actions and practices that stabilize the social condition of an agent, guaranteeing at the same time the success of the reproduction of social order, in as much as they permit the agent herself to achieve some satisfactory form of social recognition.

## 7.4 Concluding remarks

In the previous pages, we have tried to explain how habitus can be reinterpreted in the light of Honneth's theory of recognition and to outline the main characteristics of a habitus of recognition. Briefly, we have asserted that a recognitive habitus  $H_R$  is a system of bodily abilities, perceptive schemes, and expectations that allow social agents to act in order to recognize each other coherently with norms and rules generated by a given set of objective structures. If we consider recognitive habitus  $H_R$  as a structure that consents human beings to exercise the power to be recognized, actualization of specific actions by agent  $x$  is the condition to be treated as  $C_{R(E)}$ -bearer. On the other hand, if we look at  $H_R$  as the power to recognize, the adoption of a particular behavior by  $x$  is  $x$ 's way to react properly to her partners' conduct and expectations, treating them as  $C_{R(E)}$ -bearer. Furthermore, recognitive habitus has both an individual and a collective nature. It is individual insofar as it produces social actions that are apt to satisfy the emotional needs of recognition of human beings. It is collective inasmuch as it produces forms of successful recognition among agents that belong to the same social environment that guarantees their group or class

coordination. Finally, we have stated that to take into account the role played by the emotional effects of reciprocal recognition could suggest a new approach, one more focused on social agents' subjective experiences of recognition, for reconstructing the morphology of habitus in a specific social contest.

.

## 8 A CRITICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF SOCIAL DOMINATION AND EMANCIPATION

In the previous chapters, it has been claimed that it is possible to extend Honneth's paradigm of recognition using Bourdieu's structuralist approach. Moreover, some of the previous chapters have tried to highlight two aspects: first, how both Honneth and Bourdieu consider the dynamics of recognition as a fundamental factor for explaining the actualization of social action and social reproduction, and, second, the way both thinkers evaluate social transformation as an important and invariant element of social reproduction that happens mainly through the emergence of social conflicts. Finally, it has been affirmed that both Honneth and Bourdieu endorse the idea that every social struggle can be interpreted as struggles for recognition. Having in mind all these considerations, how can we characterize *domination* and *emancipation* according to an ontology in which concrete forms of recognition are actualized and shaped by objective and subjective structures like the field, capital, and habitus? How can we clarify the critical meaning of these concepts considering social transformation and struggles for recognition as essential features of both social stabilization of social reality and its transformation?

In the first section, I describe the conception of domination developed by both authors, explaining the respective limitations. In section three, the chapter analyzes the thoughts of Honneth and Bourdieu regarding the idea of emancipation, highlighting their deficiencies as well. In the second and fourth sections of the chapter, I provide a definition of 'domination' and 'emancipation' that is consistent with the models of recognitive capital, recognitive field, and recognitive habitus that have been developed in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

## 8.1 Bourdieu and Honneth on domination and the limits of their proposals

In order to spell out my conception of domination, I start by describing Bourdieu's perspective on the topic. As has been said several times, Bourdieu considers social fields as characterized by a never-ending struggle between classes (and fractions of classes) for the monopolization of different forms of capital and, especially, for the control of symbolic capital. This last form of capital, which is common to every field, is necessary for exercising symbolic power, that is, to impose the definition of the world that is most congruent with a class' or group's particular interests. If we accept this picture, then we can advance a licit question: if the social struggle for the accumulation of different kinds of capital is endless, how is it possible for a social group or class to prevail over another one and stabilize its position of power? As we have already mentioned in chapters 2, 3 and 4, if we look more carefully at Bourdieu's structuralist account of domination, we realize that the process of recognition plays an important role in the perpetuation of domination both at a micro and macro level. At the micro-level, as it had been said, reciprocal recognition in the form of interpersonal interaction fosters the development of an individual habitus that is coherent with the structure of a field. Through recognition social agents acquire and internalize symbolic hierarchies and patterns of social actions that are dominant in a given society. If acting in a specific mode satisfies our impulse for social recognition, then human beings tend to develop habitus that is coherent with their social environment. In this respect, we could say that, at the micro-level, specific forms of successful interpersonal recognition favor social agents' acquisition of that habitus that is coherent with dominant class interests and capable of mystifying the arbitrary nature of socially prevalent relations of power.

At a macro-level, recognition is fundamental as well. The dominating class can control subjugated groups through the exercise of symbolic power; that is to say, the power to define what counts as relevant social property in a given social context. Symbolic power can be exercised by those social agents that have a certain amount

of symbolic capital; that is, recognition in terms of honor, esteem, and admiration that they receive from other agents that are in a subordinate position. In this respect, until they are involved in successful reciprocal relations of recognition with the dominated, the dominant classes can exercise their symbolic power easily. As we have illustrated previously, a social system that is essentially characterized by asymmetries of power between the dominant and the dominated can reproduce itself only if the dominated can enjoy “compensatory satisfactions and consolation prizes that tend to blur the perception and evaluation of self and others”.<sup>228</sup>

We can assert that the categories of perception, evaluation, and judgment that concur to depict a specific social order as natural, generalizing, and fostering the perspective of the ruling class, should be also capable of favoring the self-perception of dominated agents as non-dominated subjects that are working in favor of their social interests. Briefly put, we could assert that, for Bourdieu, members of dominated groups tend to endorse the symbolic framework that is coherent with the interests of the dominant class as far as the latter tends to attribute to the dominated some qualities that traditionally belong to members of the dominant class.

In Bourdieu’s account domination entails the following: first, it is a social condition in which subjugation of the dominated is unintended but spontaneous because it is inscribed in the unconscious habitus of the oppressed, which is in turn shaped according to those evaluative and perceptive patterns that belong to the dominant groups; second, social domination entails the inability of oppressed groups to enforce some collective interest because of the monopoly of symbolic capital and violence that is perpetuated by a dominant group; and third, in Bourdieu’s perspective, the justification of domination is not based on any forms of ideological legitimation or the false consciousness of the dominated. Instead, justification of the dominant order takes the shape of mystification of the objective functioning of the social order that lies in the subjective experience of the social world that social agents can have.

---

<sup>228</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 190.

However, Bourdieu's idea of domination does not deepen the objective form that relationships between dominating and dominated agents assume when symbolic capital is monopolized. If dominated agents' mystification of the social world is a consequence of the monopolization of a symbolic capital that is based on successful forms of reciprocal recognition, and if the symbolic power of the dominating class depends on the recognition that the dominating class receives from subjected agents, how can dominating agents keep stable the set of forms of recognition that advantage them? What are the structural features, at the level of field and habitus that characterize a situation in which symbolic capital is monopolized?

For his part, Honneth describes domination only in terms of ideological expectations that can govern forms of practical recognition. According to him, there are forms of recognition that seem credible, reasonable from the perspective of the subjects involved, but apt to support meaningfully the reproduction of the social system of domination:

The pride that 'Uncle Tom' feels as a reaction to the repeated praise of his submissive virtues makes him into a compliant servant in a slave-owning society. The emotional appeals to the 'good' mother and housewife made by churches, parliaments, or the mass media over the centuries caused women to remain trapped within a self-image that most effectively accommodated the gender-specific division of labor. The public esteem enjoyed by heroic soldiers continuously engendered a sufficiently large class of men who willingly went to war in pursuit of glory and adventure. As trivial as these examples may be, they do make strikingly clear that social recognition can always also operate as a conformist ideology, for the continuous repetition of identical forms of recognition can create a feeling of self-worth that provides the motivational resources for forms of voluntary subordination without employing methods of repression.<sup>229</sup>

As Honneth states, an ideological form of recognition that supports social systems based on domination, on the power of a dominant class over other dominated agents, works because it provides agents with "positive classifications whose evaluative contents are sufficiently credible for their addressees to have good reason to accept them". In doing so, ideological forms of recognition give agents the

---

<sup>229</sup> Honneth, "Recognition as Ideology", 325-326.

idea that they can get access to “credible modes of fashioning a new and affirmative self-conception”. In other words, Honneth sustains that an ideology of recognition is effective if the agents involved are driven to endorse a self-conception that pushes them to assume duties and actualize practices that are functional in reproducing an objective social order based on domination, in which the same agent still occupies a dominated social position.

Accepting such duties and practices, the agent begins to perceive herself through a different classificatory lens, as she starts considering the opportunity to fulfill new tasks and adopt new behavioral patterns as the empirical mark of the achievement of a new social status that can be considered an improvement. But in order to achieve a positive conception of the self, the agent must be involved in relationships of recognition that are successful, in so far as such relationships must allow in the agent who is influenced by ideology a positive representation of the self. This is why successful forms of recognition are not necessarily good ones or normatively justifiable. Furthermore, such ideological but positive classifications that allow dominated social agents to achieve credible forms of affirmative self-conception reflect the interests, values, and norms of dominant agents. Adopting expectations and practices that normally belong to dominant classes, dominated agents are put in the condition to perceive themselves as individuals that occupy the same social position of members of the dominant group.

However, such an account of recognition as ideology does not explain why, once the ideological character of similar patterns of recognition is discovered and oppressed agents become aware of it, it is so difficult to eradicate these oppressive forms of recognition. Honneth provides us criteria for distinguishing between ideological and good forms of recognition, but he does not explain why reaching a social awareness of the ideological nature of some recognitive patterns does not imply their abandonment and the achievement of social emancipation.

## 8.2 Domination as monopolization of the attractive power of recognition

Domination is a situation in which dominant agents can entertain successful relationships of recognition with a plurality of dominated agents and impede or weaken the actualization of successful forms of recognition among dominated subjects themselves. In so doing, the dominated agents support the position of power of a dominant class or group objectively, without being recognized properly by other groups in a position of subjugation.<sup>230</sup> According to the present account, the dominated can experience, roughly, two conditions of social subjection. In the first condition, there can be some dominated agents who objectively belong to the field in question, but who are not recognized as legitimate players by other agents in the field. In the second case, dominated agents that objectively belong to the field of concern are recognized as players by other agents but can accumulate recognitive capital and attract recognition only thanks to the recognition that comes from dominant agents. In both cases, the dominated agents cannot accumulate recognitive capital through recognition that comes from other dominated agents. Such limited accumulation of recognitive capital restricts the symbolic power of the dominated, allowing them, in the best-case scenario, to claim only for modifications of the social structure that do not weaken the privileged position of dominant agents. In such a situation the dominant agents can preserve and accumulate recognitive capital with the spontaneous contribution of a part of the set of the dominated agents. The point that is important to underline is as follows: the unequal distribution of recognitive capital, which is the expression of a condition of social domination, mainly depends on structural conditions, not on forms of personal dependency.

---

<sup>230</sup> The analysis of the idea of domination proposed here has been strongly influenced by the ideas of Emmanuel Renault, “Reconnaissance et Domination: Hegel Complété par Bourdieu (et La Boétie)”, in *Reconnaissance, Conflict, Domination* (Paris: CNRS 2007), 121-139. Also, the reading of Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic that has been provided by Tzvetan Todorov has meaningfully influenced the following: *Tzvetan Todorov, Life in Common: An Essay in General Anthropology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 22.



On the objective side, the field is organized in such a way that the fluxes of recognition favor dominant agents in the field. More specifically, in circumstances of domination, a number of the agents that are objectively involved in the practices of the field are not perceived as such from the majority of the agents in the field who recognize each other as legitimate players. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the objective morphology of the field and the extension of the field as it is perceived by the agents who belong to it *de facto*. While a number of the agents is effectively taking part in social activities and practices that are constitutive of the field, the norms and rules that govern relationships of recognition and the access to the field tend to exclude partly or completely such a fraction of oppressed groups from a qualified context of recognition. This can happen in several ways, which covers the whole spectrum of the types of misrecognition and lack of recognition that can be actualized. Dominant patterns of recognition in a field can exclude agents from tested practices of recognition on the base of their status. Furthermore, they can depreciate the social value of the set of practices in which excluded agents are involved, although they are fundamental for the existence of the field itself.

In light of this consideration, first, it might be argued that a condition of domination is characterized by a balkanization of the social space occupied by oppressed groups. That is, dominated agents who are recognized as legitimate players in the field benefit from some sort of recognition from dominant agents. They are prevented from engaging in forms of recognition with other dominated agents that occupy a lower social position in so far as dominant patterns of recognition grant them a satisfactory self-perception and self-conception. Dominated agents who are not recognized as legitimate players of the same field, but at the same time actively sustain social practices that constitute the field, tend to develop forms of intragroup recognition that retrace the dominant recognitive patterns supported by the dominant class in the field. If we accept such a definition, for instance, to deny the legitimacy of *ius soli* and, therefore, the attribution of citizenship to children of immigrants that contribute with their work to the collective

health of a country can be considered as a concrete example of domination in both senses. On the one hand, it prevents immigrants and their children from benefitting from a full form of social esteem and respect to which they are entitled as taxpayers and workers and prevents them from realizing those social preconditions that make possible the achievement of a good and satisfying individual self-relationship in Western society. On the other hand, such preclusion can weaken the contraposition between the socio-political elite of a country and the native members of the working-class, driving these distinct groups with conflicting interests to consider forms of recognition like respect and esteem as justified only among members that share citizenship.

This selective exclusion has also functional consequences. In fact, without citizenship, immigrants cannot define the share of net social wealth to which they, as a fraction of the working-class, can access legitimately. In addition, such interdiction to citizenship can create an antagonism inside the working class between native and immigrant workers, pushing both groups to wrongly perceive each other as competitors on the labor market and to avoid the realization of intergroup recognition in form of mutuality and class solidarity. Briefly put, in a situation of domination, social structures are organized in such a way that a portion of dominated agents is driven to support actively the class that monopolizes the exercise of the symbolic power. Taking part in forms of recognition that are shared by the dominant class, such partly recognized social groups increase the recognitive symbolic capital of the dominant and, therefore, their symbolic power, through which they can establish the field's criteria of access and the value and social relevance of different collective practices.

Second, it seems possible to argue that a condition of domination does not imply the disappearance or the absence of social conflict. The latter can assume the integrative nature highlighted by Bourdieu, or an individualistic and atomized nature as showed by Honneth. Considering the first case, the social promotion of norms of recognition that are inclusive toward minorities and gender claims can work, in

given circumstances, in favor of forms of competitive individualization on the labor market, hiding the process of reproduction of objective asymmetries of power between dominant and dominated classes and groups (however, it is true that the same claims can be employed to criticize individualism and economic competition as well). In the second case, the oppositional agency (in terms of power-with) can assume forms that rest below the threshold of public visibility and are far from benefitting from social coordination: small acts of sabotage in the workplace, which aim to slow down intentionally the process of production, can be considered as such.

On the subjective side of the habitus, a structural condition of domination implies a rigidification of habitus' structure, which prevents the dominated from changing their empirical and normative expectations regarding the right way to recognize and to be recognized, as well as the perceptive schemes that allow the agents to perceive others as bearers of recognitive capital. It could be argued that in such situations dominated agents who are accepted as legit members of a field are disposed to recognize and be recognized by those agents who possess the same or a bigger amount of recognitive capital, thus conforming their social actions to empirical and normative expectations that are shared by dominant agents and obtaining at least a minimal amount of social recognition (which is indeed ensured, in theory, by shared perceptive schemes, empirical expectations, and normative ones). Dominated agents who are not accepted as legit participants in the field, but nevertheless play a role there, likely will tend to develop normative and empirical expectations only toward members of their group, sustaining their needs for recognition through compensatory forms of intragroup recognition that retrace dominant recognitive patterns at work inside and between the other groups. In the end, it is possible to conclude that, in a different way, dominated groups undergo the symbolic and recognitive domination of dominant agents.

From the point of view of the habitus, moments of consciousness and unawareness regarding a possible condition of domination are intertwined. A dominated agent can grasp reflexively the social source of her oppressed condition,

that is to say, the fact that the denial of recognition she is suffering from has social origins. However, from a dispositional point of view, which is unconscious, she cannot yet recognize other agents as valuable recognizers, which actualizes, therefore, forms of recognition among the oppressed that deny or weaken recognition to who monopolizes recognitive capital. Furthermore, in a situation of domination there can be even a conflict between the normative and the empirical expectations inscribed in the habitus of a group of dominated agents. They might be inclined to conform to dominant social behavior only because they expect that everybody will act in the same way, even if they and most of the agents do not believe that it is right to act in such a way. In other words, dominated agents could be pushed to adopt a specific social conduct only because they believe that most of the people will behave in the same way, not because they think that most of the people believe that they ought to behave in such a way. They could believe that to behave in a given way is unfair and humiliating for others and themselves. However, they might still keep adopting that same behavior because they do not know if many others share the same normative beliefs and may be willing to abandon that social practice. Otherwise, they might reflexively grasp that to act only on the basis of empirical expectation means to assume a posture that works in favor of their oppression. Nevertheless, at the same time, they might behave so for strategic reasons, or for fear of suffering from social exclusion, disapproval, or condemnation. Finally, considering the subjective side of social structures, the condition of domination can be ensured also by the phenomenon that Bourdieu defines as the “hysteresis effect” of the habitus. According to Bourdieu, as social circumstances change, habitus tends to be resilient and delays adaptation to the new objective circumstances:

The situation I observed in Algeria, in which peasants endowed with a precapitalist habitus were suddenly uprooted and forcibly thrown into a capitalist cosmos [...] is one illustration. Another example is given by historical conjunctures of a revolutionary nature in which changes in objective structures are so swift that agents whose mental structures have been molded by these prior structures become obsolete and act inopportunistly (*a contretemps*) and at cross purposes; they think in a void, so

to speak, in the manner of those older people of whom we may justly say that they are 'out of sync'.<sup>231</sup>

It is reasonable to think that the hysteresis phenomenon can emerge even when the correlation between the agents' objective possibilities to increase recognitive capital and power and the expectations of the agents to be recognized collapses abruptly. In fact, such a breakdown can cause only the sudden transformation of agents' existential conditions, not of their social conditions. Agents could start to be aware of their condition of social disadvantage and of the mystifying nature of the relations of recognition in which they take part. However, despite this social awareness, they might be not equipped with, or they may not yet have developed, the recognitive dispositions that could allow them to find recognition from other agents and to follow different perceptive and normative patterns of recognition. The hysteresis of recognitive habitus, therefore, might push dominated agents to persist in the effort of pursuing a positive individual self-relationship and satisfactory experiences of recognition according to the social expectations and perceptive schemes that they share with the dominant class; even if such perceptive schemes and expectations have revealed themselves inappropriate or ineffective. At the same time, the hysteresis effect could prevent disadvantaged groups from developing new kinds of recognition among themselves.<sup>232</sup> Unprecedented and innovative relationships of recognition would put the dominated not only in the condition of denying recognition to dominant agents. They could also offer to oppressed agents the chance of devaluing the recognition that comes from an opposed dominant social group, increasing at the same time their recognitive capital and the possibility

---

<sup>231</sup> Bourdieu, Wacquant, *Réponses*, 106, Engl. transl. 130.

<sup>232</sup> It is worthy to mention that hysteresis of the habitus can also explain dominated dissent from domination in periods of social transition and transformation. For instance, see Ron Kerr, Sarah Robinson, "The Hysteresis Effect as Creative Adaptation of the Habitus: Dissent and Transition to the 'Corporate' in Post-Soviet Ukraine", *Organization* 16, no. 6 (2009): 829-853, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1350508409337581>. The article is interesting insofar as it shows how the hysteresis effect can favor the creative reproduction of social resistance in the form of habitus after a phase of social change.

to realize a satisfactory self-image and self-relationship through novel patterns of recognition.

In conclusion, the strength of a pattern of recognition that works among social agents who belong to different social groups and classes is situated even in the unconscious and spontaneous activity of the habitus, which allows the actualization of specific behavioral patterns according to the expectations we have toward our peers in interactions. Conforming to a social practice following the normative and empirical expectations we have acquired through socialization we can satisfy not only our selfish aims, or class and group interests, but also our social needs for recognition, thus allowing us to perceive ourselves as valuable individuals and to fulfill our desire for belonging. Every time such needs are satisfied, our positive experiences of recognition tend to reinforce the set of expectations that have motivated the adoption of particular behavior. To act according to social expectations means to increase the possibilities to satisfy our needs for recognition, and, therefore, to achieve some sort of affirmative self-conception. In this respect, there is no reason to exclude that some forms of recognition that mediate the interaction between the dominant and the dominated work in the same manner. They are successful until the expectations of recognition of both sides are fulfilled regularly, and, especially for the dominated, such forms of recognition provide the opportunity to achieve a satisfactory self-relationship with the agents involved.

This peculiar ontological account of social domination can help us to deepen the interpretation of Bourdieu's idea according to which the social recognition of social order, namely its collective acceptance, is based on the misrecognition of its objective nature.<sup>233</sup> To misrecognize, for Bourdieu, means that a situation of oppression, injustice, or domination of a class or group over others is not perceived as such by

---

<sup>233</sup> The following account of Bourdieu's misrecognition from the perspective of Honneth's paradigm of recognition can be considered as a development of the ideas and theoretical intuitions proposed by Terry Lovell in her comparative analysis of Honneth's, Bourdieu's, and Fraser's social theories. See Terry Lovell, "Nancy Fraser's Integrated Theory of Justice: A 'Sociologically Rich' Model for a Global Capitalist Era?", in *(Mis)recognition, Social Inequality and Social Justice. Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Terry Lovell (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2007), 66-87.

those who undergo it. Bourdieu asserts that such misrecognition produces a naturalization of the social reality in the eyes of the people who are subjected to it: asymmetries of power cannot be changed because they are a natural feature of human societies, inequalities should be accepted because this is how things work, and real life can be cruel but there is nothing wrong in that. Such naturalization is not rooted in a false consciousness of oppressed agents. Misrecognition of a given social order depends on the peculiar shape of the habitus that dominated agents have interiorized. According to Bourdieu, such a misrepresentation of the social world lies below the level of consciousness, and this is the reason why it can be barely eradicated. To define domination through the theoretical lens of the paradigm of recognition is likely a conceptual solution that might be consistent with some description of the idea of domination provided by Bourdieu:

domination succeeds in imposing itself durably only in so far as it manages to secure recognition, which is nothing other than misrecognition of the arbitrariness of its principle. In other words, it wants to be justified (and therefore recognized, respected, honored, considered), but its only chance of being so lies in declining to be exercised (every use of force with a view to obtaining its recognition can only supply a symbolically self-destructive reinforcement of its arbitrariness). It follows that powers based on (physical or economic) force can only obtain their legitimation through powers that cannot be suspected of obeying force; and that the legitimating efficacy of an act of recognition (homage, a mark of deference, a token of respect) varies with the degree of independence of the agent or institution that grants it (and also with the recognition that he or it enjoys). It is almost zero in the case of self-consecration (Napoleon seizing the crown from the hands of the Pope in order to crown himself) or self-celebration (an author supplying his own panegyric). It is weak when the acts of recognition are performed by mercenaries (a theatre *claque*, advertisers or propagandists), accomplices or even close associates, whose judgements are suspected of being imposed by a form of egoistic indulgence or emotional blindness, and when these acts enter into circuits of exchanges which are all the more transparent the more direct and short they are (the 'mutual back-scratching' of reviewers, for example). By contrast, the effect of legitimation is greatest when all real or visible relationship of material or symbolic interest between the agents or institutions concerned disappears and when the author of the act of recognition is himself recognized.<sup>234</sup>

---

<sup>234</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 104-105.

As it can be seen, in this passage even Bourdieu seems to admit that an exercise of domination that is not based on force and coercion requires the tangible presence of some sort of recognition that is testified by acts of recognition (“the legitimating efficacy of an act of recognition”) and that is reciprocal (“the effect of legitimation is greatest [...] when the author of the act of recognition is himself recognized”). According to the present reading of domination, Bourdieu’s misrecognition about the real nature of the social world is dependent not on the presence of ideological beliefs that are capable of distorting and falsifying human beings’ perspective on social reality. On the contrary, misrecognition is a function of the effectiveness of successful patterns of recognition that can create feelings of self-worth in dominated agents. Social subjects will tend to misrecognize the real nature of their social condition until they can benefit from forms of interpersonal recognition that can give them feelings of self-esteem, self-confidence, or self-respect.

The idea according to which agents tend to misrecognize the nature of the social world in as much as the pre-conditions for achieving a satisfactory individual self-relationship are guaranteed allows us to assert that there are circumstances in which dominated agents contribute to supporting and reproducing their condition of subjugation spontaneously, and without being victims of any ideological mystification. In a situation like this, dominated subjects can feel and be aware that something in their social environment is not working properly, or that their conditions could be improved, but they will tend to avoid any oppositional actions in so far as the intersubjective relationships of recognition in which they are inserted guarantee them the possibility to achieve a minimum level of respect, esteem, and love.

At the same time, such an interpretation of domination can improve some aspect of Honneth’s perspective on those forms of recognition that foster social conditions of domination. The previous definition of ‘domination’ in terms of recognition can overcome the limits of Honneth’s reading by focusing on the structural nature of dominant patterns of recognition and social domination to, thus, avoid connecting



the effectiveness of forms of recognition that favor a dominant class only due to a weakening of actors' reflexive skills. According to my interpretation, recognition can support forms of social domination not due to its ideological character, but because the expectations and the perceptive schemes of classification that rule the actualization of successful forms of recognition are embodied in the specific morphology of a field, as well as in a habitus that lies below the level of consciousness.

In other words, agents might acquire awareness regarding the fact that there is nothing natural and necessary in receiving recognition only as a good mother or housewife, or in being praised only for showing submissive behavior, without being able to abandon or criticize the recognitive patterns that cause such forms of oppressive recognition. According to the previous description of domination, in fact, it can be the case that oppressed agents cannot change dominant patterns of recognition because they are not able to increase their recognitive capital through attracting recognition from other agents who are in a condition of domination or are excluded from the transactions of recognition that prevail in the field. The rules and norms that govern the distribution of relationships of recognition are set for guaranteeing recognition only according to qualities and criteria that are defined by the dominant class. As it has been asserted in the chapter devoted to the idea of symbolic capital as recognitive capital, it is only through the accumulation of recognitive capital that the symbolic power can be exercised. If the structure of a field allows a more or less narrow set of agents to centralize the power to attract recognition and to monopolize the use of symbolic powers, then dominated agents who are aware of the limits of the dominant patterns of recognition have no means for articulating their critique and acquiring social strength (this could be labeled as a weakening of power-with of the dominated agents).

In such social circumstances, domination can be grounded also on the individual structure that has been named 'recognitive habitus'. From this point of view, in a situation of domination, individuals are able to establish reflexively a connection

between their suffering related to misrecognition, or insufficient recognition, and the objective social conditions that generate such negative experience, but they have not developed the recognitive dispositions that allow them to recognize other individuals and groups as valuable recognizers. From the perspective of the social subject, it can be said that, in a situation of domination, dominated agents can become aware of the bond between their suffering, denial of recognition, and the objective shape of the social world (i.e., their condition of oppression), but they do not yet have the recognitive dispositions for achieving a positive self-relationship through new forms of recognition that involve other oppressed or excluded social subjects.

This account has the advantage of disconnecting the idea of domination from the concept of 'ideology' and from those conceptions of social oppression that are based on the axiom that social domination goes hand in hand with the weakening of social actors' reflexive skills. A social system characterized by oppression and subjugation can subsist in the presence of successful forms of recognition, which are based on reciprocity, without the action of any ideological beliefs that are widespread among dominated social subjects. Patterns of recognition that allow the reproduction of domination can ground their force and resistance to emancipatory transformation in the objective social structures that permit their actualization, as well as in the unconscious practical dispositions of agents that are nevertheless capable of grasping reflexively the unfair, arbitrary, or discriminatory nature of a particular social environment.

A situation of domination is therefore characterized by the fact that the dominant agents can establish successful forms of mutual recognition with several parties, while the capacity of dominated agents to attract and institute fruitful relations of recognition with a vast set of potential peers is limited and weakened by objective and subjective structures. Domination implies thus that a dominant agent and a dominated agent can entertain successful forms of recognition, but also that only a dominant agent has the chance to realize successful forms of recognition with a plurality of agents at the same time.

### 8.3 Bourdieu and Honneth on emancipation and the limits of their proposals

Although he considers power and domination as coextensive, Bourdieu himself has claimed that there can be emancipation in a social world in which the social distribution of power is always realized in an arbitrary way. For Bourdieu, emancipation seems strictly connected to the idea that competitive and agonist struggles for recognition, i.e., for the acquisition of symbolic capital and recognition, must be suspended. Such a suspension for the accumulation of symbolic/recognitive capital can be obtained through the social actualization of forms of reciprocal recognition:

based on the suspension of the struggle for symbolic power that springs from the quest for recognition and the associated temptation to dominate, the mutual recognition by which each recognizes himself or herself in another whom he or she recognizes as another self and who also recognizes him or her as such, can lead, in its perfect reflexivity, beyond the alternatives of egoism and altruism.<sup>235</sup>

In the previous passage, Bourdieu asserts that the defeat of social domination corresponds to the instauration of relationships of recognition based on a perfect reflexivity, in which the persons involved have no intention of dominating the other and, on the contrary, tend to love, esteem, and respect each other without pursuing any secondary aim. The point that Bourdieu is trying to make can perhaps be better appreciated if we focus again on the idea of integrative social struggle. In chapter 3, we have seen how Bourdieu highlights the fact a dominant class or group can maintain and reproduce its domination by promoting a sort of “handicap race” in which the dominated are competing for the same kind of social aims the dominant strive for, but without the same head start. To clarify this idea, first, it is good to explain what exactly this head start is. The answer is symbolic power:

---

<sup>235</sup> Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 111.

the maintenance of order, that is, of the whole set of gaps, differences, 'differentials', ranks, precedences, priorities, exclusions, distinctions, ordinal properties, and thus of the relations of order which give a social formation its structure, is provided by an unceasing change in substantial (i.e., non-relational ) properties.<sup>236</sup>

In so far as the dominated compete in a struggle for agonistic recognition that follows the rules of the dominant class, they have little opportunity to increase their symbolic capital and power. In fact, playing such an agonistic competition, they will tend to consider other dominated agents not as possible allies against the ruling class, but as competitors in up-warding mobility. Previously, we tried to show how the exercise of symbolic power depends on how much social recognition a dominant class can attract and preserve. In this regard, it is clear that Bourdieu conceives the symbolic domination as grounded on an unequal distribution of social dignity. Social prestige and honor are forms of recognition that cannot be equally distributed because they are based on singularity and the evaluations of achievements or social features that work as markers of social difference and distinction. Through the accumulation of recognitive capital based on exclusivist forms of recognition, dominant agents can preserve their privileged position, attracting social recognition from the majority of dominated agents and impeding that the latter entertain successful forms of recognition between each other. In this picture, it is perhaps more evident why Bourdieu considers the actualization of reflexive and symmetric forms of reciprocal recognition as an antidote to the reproduction of structures of domination. To realize such modalities of recognition means to distribute equally the opportunities of recognition among social agents, allowing dominated social subjects to receive recognition also from other parties that were unable to recognize them, and to recognize them as well. However, Bourdieu does not clarify how emancipation affects objective and subjective social structures, the shape of fields, the redistribution of symbolic/recognitive capital, the structure of the habitus, and the relationship between dominant and dominated agents.

---

<sup>236</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 183, Engl. transl. 163.

For understanding Honneth's conception of social emancipation, let us recall his idea according to which a struggle for recognition aims at reconciling opposed groups through the transformation of the perceptive and evaluative patterns of an oppressing or dominant group. Honneth conceives struggle for recognition as a means for broadening the social conditions of recognition, while Bourdieu underlines the agonistic nature of the struggle for recognition, in which a group aims to increase its social prestige at the expense of other social agents. In Bourdieu's case, what is at stake is the monopoly of the recognitive capital and, therefore, symbolic power: conflicts aim at imposing the classification methods that belong to a particular group and reflect its interest. In Honneth's case, struggles for recognition consist of conflict that concerns the interpretation of a specific classification and value system that is intersubjectively recognized. In fact, such social conflicts can assume the form of struggles for individualization and struggles for social inclusion, i.e., struggles for recognition that recognize new aspects of the individual that were not recognized before (fostering the process of individualization) or that increase the number of people that are included in a specific recognition order (improving social inclusion). Together these two types of struggle lead to moral progress according to Honneth. The reconciliatory nature of this second form of struggle, therefore, gives the impression of having an intrinsically progressive nature: through the expansion of relation of recognition, society can guarantee the amelioration of collective cooperation, improving the inclusiveness of social orders of recognition, and enhancing the opportunities of self-realization for the agents who take part in the spheres of recognition.

This idea of emancipation in terms of moral progress appears coherent with the idea of social freedom that Honneth has recently developed in *Freedom's Right*: an individual  $x$  is free when  $x$  can realize her own ends in a society in which  $x$  herself and other members of the same society perceive the fulfillment of  $x$ 's ends as meaningful and necessary for the realization of the ends of all the others. If we accept Honneth's idea of emancipation in terms of moral progress, then a logic

consequence of such an account of social freedom is that the latter is guaranteed if and only if every peer of interaction has the possibility to criticize and reinterpret norms that regulate recognition and cooperation whenever the needs and interests of an agent change, or a social sphere of recognition excludes some categories of social agents. Against this account, it can be said that the extension of conditions of mutual recognition can produce not concrete forms of emancipation, but the normalization and conformity of social agents to a social system that is not based on mutuality and cooperation. This is the case of the social success of the idea of “entreployees” in network capitalism.

Nevertheless, not every form of competitive struggle for recognition, that is, for increasing recognition of a group or agent in a unilateral way, promotes the realization of exclusivist forms of recognition. An oppressed group can fight for acquiring more public visibility in the social dimension, but only for the purpose of broadening the social condition of recognition, through changing the perceptive and evaluative patterns of recognition that belong to a dominant group. It is the case of feminism, in which the struggle for increasing public visibility and credibility (recognitive capital) are often connected to the attempt to promote more inclusive and fairer forms of gender relationships in the society. Therefore, on the one hand, an ethical struggle for recognition, which aims both to improve the process of individual self-flourishing and to make the social relationship of recognition more inclusive, can produce unintended forms of systemic domination. On the other hand, we cannot exclude that the struggle for increasing instrumentally recognitive capital of a group or class could generate types of social integration and amelioration that are ethically valuable and reconciliatory. All things considered, perhaps it is also possible to develop a concept of ‘emancipation’ that is coherent with both Honneth’s and Bourdieu’s perspectives, and at the same time enhancing their conception.

## 8.4 Emancipation as structure and recognition

In light of the previous considerations, a situation of emancipation should be characterized as a circumstance in which the dominated obtain some types of material and existential amelioration through the acquisition of more recognitive capital and the modification of the dominant patterns of recognition. However, what is the nature of such an improvement of dominated conditions? First, if we consider as valid the definition of ‘social freedom’ that Honneth has provided, then it cannot be asserted that a situation of emancipation consists of social improvements that cause the worsening of the dominants’ condition. Moreover, this conception of emancipation is apparently inconsistent also with Bourdieu’s idea regarding emancipation, according to which the latter can be achieved through forms of mutual recognition that favor the interruption of any type of competitive struggle for recognition. In the light of these observations, we could suppose that a condition of emancipation is reached when the recognitive empowerment (that is, the increase of recognitive capital) of individual and collective agents is used not for imposing values and norms of recognition that favor only one group or class, but for promoting the realization of relations of recognition that allow the following:

- 1) the social inclusion of dominant and oppressed agents in the same reformed social system and in successful relationships of social recognition;
- 2) the realization of those preconditions that are fundamental for the self-realization of individuals that belong to that social system; and
- 3) the reduction of the objective, material gaps between the dominant and the dominated.<sup>237</sup>

---

<sup>237</sup> This definition of ‘*emancipation*’ reflects, in ontological terms, some of the aspects of Andrew Mason’s mitigation approach, “whereas the mitigation approach is best understood in terms of a sufficiency view which holds that justice requires us to ensure that everyone is in a position to lead a decent life, or perhaps in terms of a priority view which maintains that justice requires us to give extra weight to the interests of the worse off”, 10. See Andrew Mason, *Levelling the Playing Field: The Idea of Equal Opportunity and Its Place in Egalitarian Thought* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

The idea that a condition of emancipation is effective when an empowered social dominated group employs its recognitive capital for actualizing 1), 2), and 3) represents an attempt to integrate Honneth's and Bourdieu's perspectives concerning the bond between emancipation and social transformation. Points 1) and 2) reflect Honneth's normative conviction that an emancipatory social transformation

takes place along the two dimensions of individualization and social inclusion: either new parts of the personality are opened up to mutual recognition, so that the extent of socially confirmed individuality rises; or more persons are included into existing recognition relations, so that the circle of subjects who recognize one another grows.<sup>238</sup>

Point 3) echoes Bourdieu's observation according to which social struggles and transformation can reveal themselves being supportive of the status quo

when the whole set of gaps, differences, 'differentials', ranks, precedencies, priorities, exclusions, distinctions, ordinal properties, and thus of the relations of order which give a social formation its structure, is provided by an unceasing change in 'substantial (i.e., non-relational) properties'.<sup>239</sup>

More specifically, in order to obtain effective emancipation, the empowered dominated group must promote a renewal of the evaluative and perceptive patterns of recognition that goes beyond the purely symbolic plane, affecting also the material dimension of social life. Given such conditions, how can we describe a situation of emancipation according to the structuralist model of recognition that has been developed in the previous pages?

On the objective side, a situation of emancipation entails, first, the rupture of the monopolization of recognitive capital that subsisted in the previous condition of domination. This means to guarantee to subjugated agents the same opportunities that dominant actors have of attracting, receiving, and giving recognition. To dismantle a social structure rooted in the monopolization of the recognitive capital

---

<sup>238</sup> Fraser, Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political Philosophical Exchange*, 186.

<sup>239</sup> Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 183, Engl. transl. 163.



involves thus not only a broadening into fields that are usually ruled by a narrow set of players. It requires also a process of reassessment of all the collective practices that were misrecognized by former dominant groups but were *de facto* constitutive of a field. To emancipate women or cultural and ethnic minorities on the labor market means to disassemble those symbolic patterns that organize this economic field according to gender and racial matrixes, attributing to a given set of professional roles poor wages and low chances of benefitting from a decent level of social dignity on the basis of distinctions like male/female or autochthone/immigrants jobs. However, to redefine the set of social practices that authorize an agent to conceive himself as a legitimate player of the field in a way that increases the chances for achieving recognition for dominated agents does not imply lowering the opportunities for achieving recognition of members of the previous dominant class. On the one hand, that dominated groups should modify the structure of the field in order to obtain an inclusive structure that can augment the possibility of individual flourishing for their members. On the other hand, such a transformation of the objective structure is emancipative in so far as it does not downplay, repress, or humiliate the recognitive needs of the members of the former dominant class, leaving them the chance to use their recognitive capital for modifying potential repressive features of the reformed social structure. In this respect, we can conclude that, from an objective perspective, a condition of emancipation entails also an evaluation of the redistribution of the material resources that allows both social and individual empowerment (that is, collective recognition and individual self-flourishing as well as their power-with) of all the members of the society.

Let us consider as an example of emancipation the passage from a society based on ethnic apartheid to a society in which excluded groups have emancipated themselves. This second situation constitutes a circumstance of emancipation if, analyzing the distribution of income among the members of the previous dominant group and the members of the formerly oppressed groups, the differences of earnings among them do not reflect an ethnical stratification. In a situation of

apartheid, in fact, it is reasonable to think that the poorest segment of the population generally corresponds with the totality of the oppressed groups. On the contrary, in a situation of emancipation, it could be the case that, for instance, half of the individuals who belong to an ethnic minority might earn more than the poorest quarter of the old dominating group.

On the subjective side, a situation of emancipation is characterized by the fact that the habitus of the members of the dominant and the dominated classes and groups change in a way that testifies the successful embodiment of those perceptive and evaluative patterns of recognition that have been promoted by the dominated groups. This means that, through the development of new recognitive dispositions, members of the preceding dominant group can achieve relationships of recognition and a positive self-relationship that are not qualitatively inferior compared to the ones they could achieve in a situation of domination. At the same time, the set of perceptive schemes, as well the normative and empirical expectations of dominated agents allow them to get recognition from other agents that, in a condition of domination, were establishing successful relationships of recognition only with subjects in a dominant social position. For oppressed agents, in particular, to develop a habitus that allows them to reach good self-relationships by means of socialization with other agents with whom they did not interact in the previous condition of domination means to acquire normative and empirical expectations that were previously set aside for dominant agents only.

Developing recognitive expectations toward a variegated assortment of agents capable of providing recognition, dominated agents increase not only the chances to reach beneficial forms of self-respect, self-esteem, or self-confidence. They improve also the amount of symbolic power they possess. New forms of socialization can consent agents that were symbolically dominated to appreciate new features of their personhood or to experience new forms of recognition that can change their way of perceiving and evaluating the dominant recognitive patterns they were actualizing previously. In this way, they are put in an optimal position for evaluating the quality

and weaknesses of the dominant patterns of reciprocal recognition they were following before. Being involved in new relationships of recognition that include new peers and involve different values and patterns gives dominated agents the opportunity not only to change their dispositions but also to assume a critical posture (a strengthening of dominated agents' power-with) toward the previous dominant recognitive patterns that are rooted in new experiences of reciprocal recognition.

This last consideration allows us to deepen the issue related to the ontological status of the motivational factors that can favor the emergence of emancipatory social conflicts. As argued in chapter 3, emotional reactions to socially widespread experiences of social and political injustices do not necessarily cause oppressed agents' adoption of an oppositional agency. Experiences of misrecognition or non-recognition can induce the victims to feel shame instead of rage or resentment, discouraging them from starting a conflict for restoring a situation of justice and equality. In other cases, those who experience social and political injustices and are aware of the social roots behind recurring manifestations of humiliation or disregard they are subject to can simply develop an attitude of silent resignation and frustration that is not canalized in any form of oppositional agency. Furthermore, negative feelings caused by social and political factors can push oppressed agents to adopt self-repressive or conservative strategies in order to minimize or avoid any confrontation with the limits and oppressive features of their social world.<sup>240</sup>

In light of this, it can be asserted that negative experiences of social suffering are necessary motivational factors for enacting oppositional behavior, but alone they are not enough. Endorsing a structuralist reading of the paradigm of recognition can perhaps be helpful in highlighting further important elements. Let us focus on the idea that *habitus* is composed of perceptive schemes and a complex system of empirical and normative expectations that constitute the preconditions for the

---

<sup>240</sup> See on this topic Marco Solinas, "Rivolte Mancate: Sulle Correlazioni tra Emozioni e Spremio in Axel Honneth a Barrington Moore Jr", in *Paradigmi. Rivista di Critica Filosofica*, 2 (2017), 209-219.

actualization of social practices that express recognition. If it is so, what are the preconditions for the achievement of collective forms of oppositional agency?

First, it is reasonable to suppose that dominated agents ought to believe that most of them are inclined to abandon practices that follow dominant patterns of recognition. Briefly put, an important condition for the activation of transformative social struggles (that is to say, the implementation of an oppositional power-with) is to dispel the *illusio* among a relevant part of dominated agents. A second condition, which is strictly connected to the previous one, is that the actuation of a social behavior, or a set of actions that goes against the dominant patterns of recognition, concurs to generate in social agents a self-relationship that is more satisfying than the one the same agents could obtain actualizing behavior that conforms to the dominant patterns. In other words, in order to take part in protests, strikes, or collective practices that go against the status quo, involved agents should have developed some expectations of recognition that are connected to the evaluations of the effects that are caused by the actualization of a specific form of oppositional agency. The third requirement concerns the objective conditions that permit the development of a habitus prone to dissent and critique. The gradual modification of a habitus that reflects dominant interests and worldviews, in fact, can change only thanks to objective structures that can produce and reflect this oppositional habitus. Social movements, labor unions, underground cultures, squats, and religious communities are examples of places in which the dominated can interiorize and develop habitus and practical dispositions that allow the realization of variegated types of oppositional agency. By means of the promotion of intersubjective relationships that produce forms of cooperation, mutualism, and reciprocal supports (these are all specific forms of power-with) that are antithetical to the dominant forms of social behavior, dominated agents might undertake forms of social recognition that they could unlikely experience otherwise. In such a social environment, furthermore, the realization of practices that go against the status quo can give participants the opportunity to be appreciated and respected according to

normative values or for personal features that are underrated or explicitly banned from the dominant patterns of interaction and socialization.

# CONCLUSION

In the first part of this dissertation we have tried to reconstruct and compare Axel Honneth's and Pierre Bourdieu's critical thought along three thematic vectors: the problem of social reproduction and stabilization, the problem of social conflict and transformation, and the issue of the origin and actualization of social agency. The purpose of the first four chapters of this work was to highlight that, despite the meaningful differences, the ideas of the two authors concerning those three topics tend to converge, overlap, and complete each other.

Considering the first aspect, we have seen how both Honneth and Bourdieu, for different reasons and starting from different pictures of social reality, share the idea that the process of reproduction of society has one of its main mechanisms in the dynamic of recognition and concerns mainly the reproduction of social entities (objective social spaces, habits, customs) that stabilize interaction among individuals and collective social agents.

The necessity to unify the two points of view regarding the issue of social reproduction can be justified as follows. Honneth does not clarify the structural nature of those entities that allow the implementation of concrete relationships of social recognition. In other words, on the one hand, he does not provide a convincing perspective concerning the process of interiorization of norms and patterns of recognition in the form of customs and habits. On the other hand, even if he states that socially successful norms of recognition are embodied in institutions like the family, the market, or the democratic civil society, Honneth does not deepen the study of the morphology and basic components of these institutionalized spheres of recognition. Furthermore, Honneth does not explicitly state what kind of power

such social entities can exercise over individuals; that is to say, a power that can guarantee the reproduction of a given set of social relationships.

Instead, Bourdieu surely puts more emphasis on the structural aspects that are involved in the process of social reproduction. However, Bourdieu assumes that the concept of ‘recognition’ is a primitive one. He senses that there is some sort of tie between the recognition dynamics, the exercise of symbolic violence, and the acquisition of personal, bodily habitus. Nevertheless, he does not analyze in-depth the intersubjective process of recognition that rules the distribution of symbolic capital and the individual development of practical dispositions.

Regarding the second topic, it has been pointed out that Honneth and Bourdieu identify a strong connection between social reproduction, social struggles, and social transformation. Both authors consider social transformation as a necessary feature for the reproduction of societal life and underline the central role that social struggles have in this regard. The dissertation has sought to show how, for both thinkers, the stake in social struggles is the exercise of symbolic power and, therefore, the reinterpretation of those norms and rules that regulate social relationships in a given social space.

The advantage of bringing together their perspectives regarding this issue allows the following: 1) to sketch a more complex description of the different forms that social struggles can assume; 2) to articulate a more detailed and “colorful” notion of ‘social transformation’, highlighting not only its progressive and emancipatory nature, but also its integrative and conservative function; and 3) to build up a more accurate socio-ontological account of the preconditions that determine the emergence of social conflicts and the appearance of social transformation.

Finally, focusing on the third topic, the research has tried to explain in which way Honneth’s and Bourdieu’s theories of social action can complete and improve one another. Briefly put, their combination could give us the possibility to develop a model of social action that can depict, at the same time, the bi-dimensional nature of our social behavior. This idea implies that social practices that have a determined

social function can reproduce themselves if and only if such practices allow social agents to receive and provide some kind of reciprocal recognition.

Such a hybrid account of social actions is consistent with Honneth's theory insofar as the German thinker gives the impression of endorsing the idea that there cannot be forms of successful interpersonal recognition without the presence of specific objective (social institutions) and subjective (attitudes of recognition) conditions. In this respect, the structuralist conception developed by Bourdieu can help us to understand how concrete processes of recognition are always embedded in social structures that are not necessarily characterized by the symmetry of powers and, therefore, by forms of equal and non-hierarchical cooperation.

On the other hand, the dissertation has tried to show the important role that interpersonal recognition plays in Bourdieu's account of socialization and actualization of social behavior. In fact, Bourdieu acknowledges that the development of an embodied habitus that is consistent with the practical logic of a field is dependent on the fulfillment of the innate need for recognition of human beings. Individuals embody social structures as far as they can develop some sort of affective involvement for a given social practice, and such involvement is strictly tied to the recognition an individual receives when she starts to behave coherently with the logic of a particular social environment. The individual acquisition of unconscious social dispositions that allow the reproduction of a particular social reality is mediated by interpersonal relationships of recognition.

In light of such ideas, the thesis makes an attempt to reinterpret Bourdieusian concepts of 'symbolic capital', 'field', and 'habitus' through the lens of the paradigm of recognition developed by Honneth. Through the conceptualization of 'symbolic capital' as 'capital of recognition', the present work has tried to deepen the interesting idea, proposed by Honneth in the early phase of his philosophical enterprise, that social recognition can be the object of social redistribution and that opportunities and capacities to get recognition can be unequally distributed. At the same time, this notion of 'recognitive capital' has been employed to shed more light on the



mechanisms that allow dominating agents to increase, accumulate, and monopolize symbolic power and violence. In this way, we have sought to show how mutual forms of recognition can support class or group domination, and how, nevertheless, such forms of domination are essentially dependent on dominated contribution.

Reinterpreting the concept of the 'field' by means of the paradigm of recognition, we offered a picture of objective social spaces of interaction from which both Bourdieu and Honneth can benefit. On the one hand, for the sake of improving Bourdieu's description of the general shape of fields, it has been shown how the idea of 'field' of recognition can account for the determination of the amplitude of a field, by deepening and sharpening the description of fields' functioning. On the other hand, such a notion seems to clarify what kind of power social orders of recognition can exercise over individuals in a way that is consistent with their expressivist characterization as provided by Honneth.

Finally, characterizing the habitus in terms of dispositions of recognition, we have asserted that a recognitive habitus is a system of bodily abilities, perceptive schemes, and expectations that allow social agents to act in order to recognize each other coherently with norms and rules generated by a given set of objective structures. In a few words, recognitive habitus has been depicted as a structure through which human beings exercise the power to be recognized and the power to recognize. Furthermore, following this reading, recognitive habitus has both an individual and a collective nature. It is individual insofar as it produces social actions that are apt to satisfy the emotional needs of recognition of human beings. It is collective inasmuch as it produces forms of successful recognition among agents that belong to the same social environment that guarantees their group or class coordination. Finally, we have stated that to take into account the role of emotional effects of reciprocal recognition could suggest a new approach, more focused on social agents' subjective experiences of recognition, for reconstructing the morphology of habitus in a specific social contest.

All things considered, chapters 5, 6, and 7 can be seen as a philosophical attempt to point out that recognition is also a matter of power. As such, recognition can also be interpreted through the lens and the vocabulary of relations of power and structures of power. Similarly, it could be said that the same chapters constitute an effort to illustrate in which way human agency is mediated by structures that are constitutively susceptible to intersubjective forms of recognition and their development. The definition of ‘domination’ and ‘emancipation’ which is illustrated in the final chapter of the volume strives for embodying and expressing such an intuition, whose corollary is the following: domination cannot be considered coextensive of power and that emancipation does not entail the disappearance of relations of power among individuals or groups, or between individuals and groups.

Furthermore, the description of domination and emancipation obtained using the aforementioned hybrid concepts aspires to mirror the philosophical reflections developed in the first part of this research. In other words, the interpretation in chapter 8 aims to express the idea that both domination and emancipation meaningfully concern the shape that the processes of social reproduction and transformation can take and, further, the capacity of social agents to enact expressivist behaviors that can preserve or change a given social dimension.

If we assume that 1) social recognition can be accumulated and monopolized in the form of capital, 2) the amplitude of a field rests on those criteria that establish who is a legitimate player in a field and who is not allowed to take part in a given social game, and 3) the habitus of recognition of the agents in the field is an assortment of dispositions to recognize and to be recognized, domination could be defined as a situation in which dominant agents can entertain successful relationships of recognition with a plurality of dominated agents, accumulating capital in the form of social recognition, and impeding or weakening the actualization of successful forms of recognition among dominated subjects themselves. Such a definition of ‘domination’ focuses on the structural conditions (that is to say, the shape of a field of recognition and the configuration of agents’ habitus of recognition) that prevent

dominated social actors from accumulating recognitive capital and exercising symbolic power in an oppositional way.

On the objective side, the field is organized in such a way that the fluxes of recognition favor dominant agents in the field (the discrepancy between the objective morphology of the field and the extension of the field as it is perceived by the agents who belong to it *de facto*; competition for social climbing among dominated agents).

On the subjective side, a structural condition of domination implies a rigidification of the recognitive habitus' structure, which prevents the dominated from changing their empirical and normative expectations regarding the right way to recognize and to be recognized, as well as the perceptive schemes and beliefs concerning who is worthy of recognition and who is not. In this way, dominated groups undergo the symbolic and recognitive domination of dominant agents.

A situation of domination is therefore characterized by the fact that dominant agents can establish successful forms of mutual recognition with several parties, while the capacity of dominated agents to attract and institute fruitful relations of recognition with a vast set of potential peers is limited and weakened by objective and subjective structures. Domination implies thus that a dominant agent and a dominated agent can entertain successful forms of recognition, but also that only a dominant agent has the chance to realize successful forms of recognition with a plurality of agents at the same time.

This account has the advantage of disconnecting the idea of domination from the concept of 'ideology' and from those conceptions of social oppression that are based on the axiom that social domination goes hand in hand with the weakening of social actors' reflexive skills. A social system characterized by oppression and subjugation can subsist in the presence of successful forms of recognition, which are based on reciprocity, without the action of ideological beliefs that are widespread among dominated social subjects. Patterns of recognition that allow the reproduction of domination can ground their force and resistance to emancipatory transformation in

the objective social structures that permit their actualization, as well as in the unconscious practical dispositions of agents that are nevertheless capable of grasping reflexively the unfair, arbitrary, or discriminatory nature of a particular social environment.

Coherently with this definition of ‘domination’, the picture of emancipation we have tried to sketch entails the fact that amelioration of the social conditions of the dominated is achieved when the recognitive empowerment (that is, the capacity to increase recognitive capital) of individual and collective agents is used not for imposing values and norms of recognition that favor only one group or class. According to the present reading, emancipation is characterized by the fact the oppositional agency of oppressed groups in terms of symbolic power should allow a transformation of the social objective and subjective structures in such a way that is beneficial for both parties as part of symbolic and material respect.

On the objective side, dominated groups should modify the structure of the field in order to obtain an inclusive structure that can augment the possibility of individual flourishing for their members. Moreover, such a transformation of the objective structures is emancipative as far as it does not downplay, repress, or humiliate the recognitive needs of the members of the former dominant class, leaving them the chance to use their recognitive capital for modifying potential repressive features of the reformed social structure.

On the subjective side, a situation of emancipation is characterized by the fact that the habitus of the members of dominant and dominated classes and groups change in a way that testifies the successful embodiment of those perceptive and evaluative patterns of recognition that have been promoted by the dominated groups. This means that, through the development of new recognitive dispositions, members of the preceding dominant group can achieve relationships of recognition and a positive self-relationship that are not qualitatively inferior compared to the ones they could achieve in a situation of domination. For oppressed agents, to develop a habitus that allows them to reach good self-relationships by means of

socialization with other agents with whom they did not interact in the previous condition of domination means to acquire normative and empirical expectations that were previously set aside for dominant agents only. By developing recognitive expectations toward a variegated assortment of agents capable of providing recognition, dominated agents increase not only the chances to reach beneficial forms of self-respect, self-esteem, or self-confidence, but they also improve the amount of symbolic power they possess.

Such a definition of ‘emancipation’ implies the fact the transformation of the society in a progressive direction is not the outcome of a zero-sum game, but a process that should be beneficial for all the social agents involved, the “losers” as well. In addition, this conception of emancipation in terms of amelioration of structural social conditions does not necessarily entail the eclipse of power relations among agents of a particular social dimension. It implies only a redistribution of chances for recognition in favor of the worse off and, consequently, only a reconfiguration of power positions.

In this way, combining Bourdieu’s main operational concepts and Honneth’s paradigm of recognition, I hope to have achieved two goals. The first one is that it is possible to develop a theory of social transformation and emancipation using the main conceptual tools of Bourdieu’s critical sociology. The second aim is to have shown that Honneth’s paradigm of recognition can consider and call into question power relations of the social world, without overlooking an analysis of social reality in terms of social domination.

Finally, I wish that such theoretical and conceptual work could be useful for empirical sociological inquiries, studies in critical theory, and intersectional researches, providing new operational tools that can slightly improve our scientific knowledge of the processes of reproduction and transformation upon which human societies rest.



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adorno, Theodor W. and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. English translation by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Akram, Sadiya. "Fully Unconscious and Prone to Habit: The Characteristics of Agency in the Structure and Agency Dialectic". *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 43, no.1 (2012): 45-65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12002>.
- Allen, Amy. *The Power of Feminist Theory: Domination, Resistance, Solidarity*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1999.
- Archer, Margaret. "Can Reflexivity and Habitus Work in Tandem?", in *Conversations about Reflexivity*, edited by Margaret Archer. New York: Routledge, 2010. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026119825552>.
- Atkinson, Will. "A Sketch of 'Family' as a Field: From Realized Category to Space of Struggle". *Acta Sociologica* 57, no. 3 (2014): 223-235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699313511470>.
- Basaure, Mauro. "The Grammar of Ambivalence: On the Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu in the Critical Theory of Axel Honneth", in *The Legacy of Pierre Bourdieu: Critical Essays*, edited by Simon Susen, Bryan S. Turner. London-New York: Anthem Press, 2011.
- Bell, Duran. "Modes of Exchange: Gift and Commodity". *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 20, vol. 2 (1991): 155-167.
- Bicchieri, Cristina. *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. New York: Cambridge University Press 2006.
- Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello. *Le Nouvel Esprit du Capitalism*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999. English translation by Gregory Elliott, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London/New York: Verso, 2007.
- Bottero, Wendy. "Intersubjectivity and Bourdiesian Approaches to 'Identity'". *Cultural Sociology* 4, no. 1 (2010): 3-22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749975509356750>.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Specificity of the Scientific Field and the Social Conditions of the Progress of Reason". *Information (International Social Science Council)* 14, no. 6 (1975): 19-47.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique Précédé de Trois Études d'Ethnologie Kabyle*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 2000. English translation by Richard Nice, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977a.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction", in *Power and Ideology in Education*, edited by Jerome Karabel and A. H. Halsey. Oxford: OUP, 1977b.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *La Distinction: Critique Sociale du Jugement*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2016. English translation by Richard Nice, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Forms of Capital", in *Handbook of Theory for Sociology of Education*, edited by John G. Richardson. Westport: Greenword Press, 1986.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "What Makes a Social Class: On the Theoretical and Practical Existence of Groups". *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 32, (1987).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Homo Academicus*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1984. English translation by Peter Collier, *Homo Academicus*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Le Sens Pratique*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980. English translation by Richard Nice, *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990a.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*. English translation by Matthew Adamson. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1990b.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. English translation by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "The Peculiar History of Scientific Reason". *Sociological Forum* 6, no. 1 (1991) : 3-26.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loïc Wacquant, *Réponses. Pour une anthropologie réflexive*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992). English translation, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, (Chicago: University Chicago Press, 1992).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Sociology in Question*. London: SAGE, 1993.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Raisons Pratiques. Sur la Théorie de l'Action*. Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1994. English translation, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.



- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Pascalian Meditations*. English Translation by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000a.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Les Structures Sociales de l'Économie*. Paris: Seuil, 2000b.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Jean-Claude Passeron. *La Reproduction. Éléments pour une Théorie du Système d'Enseignement*. Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1970. English translation by Richard Nice, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage Publications, 2000c.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Masculine Domination*. English translation by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Burawoy, Michael. "The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci". *Sociology* 46, no. 2 (2012): 187-206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511422725>.
- Butler, Judith. *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France*. New York: Colombia University Press, 1999.
- Carré, Louis. "An 'Enchanted' or a 'Fragmented' Social World? Recognition and Domination in Honneth and Bourdieu". *Critical Horizons*, (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14409917.2019.1616481>.
- Celikates, Robin. *Critique as Social Practice: Critical Theory and Social Self-Understanding*. London-New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.
- Chandler, Bret. "The Subjectivity of the Habitus". *Journal of Theory of Social Behaviour* 43, no. 4 (2013): 469-491. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12025>.
- Deranty, Jean-Philippe. *Beyond Communication: A Critical Study of Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009.
- Elder-Vass, Dave. *The Causal Power of Social Structures: Emergence, Structure and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Fligstein, Neil and Doug McAdam. *A Theory of Fields*. New York: Oxford University Press 2012.
- Fraser, Nancy and Axel Honneth. *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political Philosophical Exchange*. London-New York: Verso, 2003.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992.
- Gregoratto, Federica. *Love Troubles: A Social Philosophy of Eros*. Forthcoming.

- Hirvonen, Onni. "Groups as Persons? A Suggestion for a Hegelian Turn". *Journal of Social Ontology* 3, no. 2 (2017): 143-165. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2016-0019>.
- Honneth, Axel. *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*. English translation by Kenneth Baynes. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.
- Honneth, Axel. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. English translation by Joel Anderson. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- Honneth, Axel. *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*. New York: SUNY Press, 1995.
- Honneth, Axel. "Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions". *Inquiry* 45, no.4 (2000): 499-519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/002017402320947577>.
- Honneth, Axel. "Recognition or Redistribution? Changing Perspectives on the Moral Order of Society", *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 2-3 (2001): 43-55.
- Honneth, Axel. *Reification: A Recognition-theoretical View*. Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Delivered University of California, Berkeley, March 14-16, 2005; [http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/\\_documents/a-to-z/h/Honneth\\_2006.pdf](http://tannerlectures.utah.edu/_documents/a-to-z/h/Honneth_2006.pdf).
- Honneth, Axel. "Recognition as Ideology", in *Recognition and Power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, edited by. Bert van de Brink and David Owen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007a.
- Honneth, Axel. *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007b.
- Honneth, Axel. "Rekonstruktive Gesellschaftskritik unter Genealogischen Vorbehalt. Zur Idee der «Kritik» in der Frankfurter Schule". In *Pathologien der Vernunft*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2007c.
- Honneth, Axel. *The I in We: Studies in the Theory of Recognition*. English translation by Joseph Ganahl. Cambridge: Polity Press 2012.
- Honneth, Axel. *Freedom's Right*. English translation by Joseph Ganahl. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014a.
- Honneth, Axel. "The Diseases of Society: Approaching a Nearly Impossible Concept". *Social Research*, vol. 81, no. 3 (2014b): 683-703.
- Honneth, Axel. "Is There an Emancipatory Interest? An Attempt to Answer Critical Theory's Most Fundamental Question". *European Journal of Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (2017): 908-920. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12321>.

Honneth, Axel. *Anerkennung: eine Europäische Ideengeschichte*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018.

Honneth, Axel and Joas, Hans. *Social Action and Human Nature*. English translation by Raymond Meyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Horkheimer, Max. "Traditional and Critical Theory". In *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*. English translation by Matthew J. O'Connell and Others. New York: Continuum, 2002.

Ikäheimo, Heikki. "On the Genus and Species of Recognition". *Inquiry* 45, no. 4 (2002): 447-462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/002017402320947540>.

Ikäheimo, Heikki and Arto Laitinen. "Analyzing Recognition: Identification, Acknowledgement, and Recognitive Attitudes towards Persons". In *Recognition and power: Axel Honneth and the Tradition of Critical Social Theory*, edited by Bert van de Brink and David Owen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Jaeggi, Rahel. *Alienation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Jenkins, Richard. *Pierre Bourdieu*. London/ New York: Routledge, 1992.

Kerr, Ron and Sarah Robinson. "The Hysteresis Effect as Creative Adaptation of the Habitus: Dissent and Transition to the 'Corporate' in Post-Soviet Ukraine". *Organization* 16, no. 6 (2009): 829-853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002017402320947540>.

Kojève, Alexander. *Introduction à la Lecture du Hegel*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.

Laitinen, Arto. "Interpersonal Recognition: A Response to Value or a Precondition of Personhood". *Inquiry* 45, no. 4 (2002): 463-478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/002017402320947559>.

Laitinen, Arto. "Social Pathologies, Reflexive Pathologies, and the Idea of Higher-Order Disorders". *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 25, no. 2 (2015): 44-65.

Laitinen, Arto and Arvi Särkelä, "Four Conceptions of Social Pathology". *European Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 1 (2019): 80-102. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002017402320947540>.

Lavergne, Cécile. "Violence, Identités et Reconnaissance. Penser une Philosophie Sociale de la Violence avec Pierre Bourdieu et Axel Honneth". Ph. D. Diss., Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, 2015).

Lindell, Johan. "Bringing Field Theory to Social Media, and Vice-Versa: Network-Crawling an Economy of Recognition on Facebook". *Social Media + Society*, October-December (2017): 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002017402320947540>.

- Lovell, Terry. "Nancy Fraser's Integrated Theory of Justice. A 'Sociologically Rich' Model for a Global Capitalist Era?". In *(Mis)recognition, Social Inequality and Social Justice. Nancy Fraser and Pierre Bourdieu*, edited by Terry Lovell. Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Lukes, Steven. *Power: A Radical View*. Basingstoke: Palgrave-McMillan, 2005.
- Marcoulatos, Iordanis. "John Searle and Pierre Bourdieu: Divergent Perspective on Intentionality and Social Ontology". *Human Studies* 26, no. 1 (2003): 67-96. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022579615814>.
- Mason, Andrew. *Levelling the Playing Field: The Idea of Equal Opportunity and Its Place in Egalitarian Thought*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- McNay, Lois. *Against Recognition*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008a.
- McNay, Lois. "The Trouble with Recognition: Subjectivity, Suffering and Agency". *Sociological Theory* 26, no.3 (2008b): 271-296. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2008.00329.x>.
- Petherbridge, Danielle. *The Critical Theory of Axel Honneth*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013.
- Renault, Emmanuel. "What is the Use of the Notion of Struggle of Recognition?". *Revista de Cencia Política* 27, no. 2 (2007): 195-205. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4067/S0718-090X2007000300011>.
- Renault, Emmanuel. "Critical Theory and Processual Social Ontology". *Journal of Social Ontology* 2, no. 1 (2016): 17-32. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2015-0013>.
- Renault, Emmanuel. *Reconnaissance, Conflict, Domination*. Paris: CNRS, 2017.
- Riley, Dylan. "Bourdieu's Class Theory". *Catalyst* 1, no. 2 (2017). <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol1/no2/bourdieu-class-theory-riley>.
- Saar, Martin. "Power and Critique". *Journal of Power* 3, no. 1 (2010): 7-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540291003630320>.
- Santarelli, Matteo. *La Vita Interessata*. Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019.
- Searle, John R. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Sewell, William H. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation". *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1-29.

- Silber, Ilana F. "Bourdieu's Gift to Gift Theory: An Unacknowledged Trajectory". *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 2 (2009): 173-190.
- Solinas, Marco. "Rivolte Mancate. Sulle Correlazioni tra Emozioni e Spregio in Axel Honneth a Barrington Moore Jr". *Paradigmi. Rivista di Critica Filosofica*, 2 (2017): 207-219.
- Stahl, Titus. "Institutional Power, Collective Acceptance, and Recognition". In *Recognition and Social Ontology*, edited Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011.
- Särkelä, Arvi. "Ideology as Artificial Respiration: Hegel on Stoicism, Skepticism and Unhappy Consciousness". *Studies in Social and Political Thought* 25, no. 2 (2015): 66-81.
- Särkelä, Arvi. "Degeneration of Associated Life: Dewey's Naturalism about Social Criticism". *Transaction* 53, no. 1 (2017): 107-126. doi:10.2979/tranchepeirsoc.53.1.07.
- Testa, Italo. "La Teoria Critica ha Bisogno di un'Ontologia Sociale (e Viceversa)?". *Politica & Società*, no. 1 (2016): 47-72.
- Testa, Italo. "Recognition as Passive Power: Attractors of Recognition, Biopower, and Social Power". *Constellations* 24, no. 2 (2017): 192-205. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12255>.
- Thompson, Michael J. *The Domestication of Critical Theory*. London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.
- Todorov, Tzvetan, *Life in Common: An Essay in General Anthropology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001.
- Voswinkel, Stephan. "Recognition' and 'Interest': A Multidimensional Concept in the Sociology of Work". *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Critical Theory* 13, vol.1 (2012a): 21-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2012.640594>.
- Voswinkel, Stephan. "Work, Recognition and the Changing Face of Capitalism: Admiration without Appreciation? The Paradoxes of Recognition of Doubly Subjectivised Work". In *New Philosophies of Labour. Work and the Social Bond*, edited by Nicholas Smith and Jean-Philippe Deranty. London: Brill, 2012b.
- Wacquant, Lööc "From Ruling Class to Field of Power: An Interview with Pierre Bourdieu on 'La Noblesse d'État'", *Theory, Culture and Society* 10, no. 3 (1993): 19-44. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F026327693010003002>.

Wacquant, L  ic. "Homines in Extremis: What Fighting Scholars Teach Us about Habitus".  
*Body & Society* 20, no. 2 (2014): 3-17.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1357034X13501348>.

Zurn, Christopher F. "Social Pathologies as Second-Order Disorders". In *Axel Honneth: Critical Essays. With a Reply by Axel Honneth*, edited by Danielle Petherbridge. Leiden: Brill, 2011.



