**Abstract** This essay analyses the interaction between Marxism and Cultural Studies in the genesis of Honneth’s theory of recognition. I reconstruct the passages through which Honneth, by drawing on the writings of some of the major cultural theorists and in reference to the works of the young Marx, develops the conceptual foundations of his paradigm (I), with special attention to the themes of social labour and the relationship between work and recognition (II). I then point out the epistemic and practical qualities of Honneth’s theory in relation to its origins in Marxism and Cultural Studies; notably its capacity of detecting even the forms of social protest which have not yet reached the threshold of public expression, and its providing an explanation for those revolts which would otherwise seem to be only led by destructive rage (III).

This essay documents the story of a successful interaction: by focusing on the early works of Axel Honneth, it retraces how Marxism and Cultural Studies concurred in the elaboration of Honneth’s theory of recognition, today widely considered among the leading paradigms in contemporary social and political philosophy.¹ Although Hegel is the main reference at the basis of Honneth’s most-read book The Struggle for Recognition (1992), it is through the interaction of Marxism and Cultural Studies that Honneth was able, in his first works – published in the early 1980 – to determine the very relevance of the principle of recognition for a critical social theory: the deepest layers of his paradigm result from the interaction between the British and American tradition of Cultural Studies (B. Moore, E. P. Thompson, R. Sennett), on the one hand, and Marxism, on the other, both conjugated with theoretical impulses deriving from the Habermasian theory of communicative action. Even though Honneth has been revising and refining his paradigm of recognition over the years, its conceptual core has remained unaltered – as can be noticed in Honneth’s latest book, Das Recht der Freiheit (2011).

The first part of this essay provides a brief reconstruction of how, moving from a critique to the neo-Kantian approaches of Apel and Habermas in his

¹ For a comprehensive, detailed and accurate study on Honneth’s theory of recognition, see Deranty 2009.
early writings, Honneth starts inquiring into the forms of the everyday practical morality of the working classes. Thanks to the works of R. Sennett, B. Moore and E. P. Thompson, he sheds light on the moral expectations, the intuitively presupposed conceptions of justice, and the normative reactions that characterise the ‘hidden morality’ of the working classes, which he, drawing on the Marxian concept of non-alienated work, traces back to the common denominator of a need for social recognition of one’s work and role in the social cooperation. In later writings (examined in Section II), Honneth uses Barrington Moore’s categories of ‘panhuman sense of injustice’ and of ‘implicit social contract’ as the theoretical links for attributing the claim for social recognition to every emancipative struggle, not only to class-based ones; in doing so, he will nonetheless preserve in his theory the Marxist idea of social dignity in the act of working, as well as the Marxian motive of history as an ongoing process of social conflicts, re-defined in terms of ‘struggles for recognition’. The last section of the essay shows how the instrument of recognition permits to detect even those potentialities for social protest which have not yet reached the threshold of articulation in the public sphere due to dynamics of social control and oppression. This ‘categorical tool’, moreover, provides a key for the explanation of revolts that would otherwise seem to be only led by destructive rage, disclosing in this way the possibility, for the subjects involved, of a clearer and strategically more effective articulation of their normative claims.

I.

The conceptual foundations of the theory of recognition are initially outlined by Honneth on the spur of some critical reservations he felt towards Jürgen Habermas’ turn to universal pragmatics, as he retrospectively writes in the Introduction to The Fragmented World of the Social (Honneth 1995b). By rationally reconstructing the rules of interaction through language, Habermas aims at establishing the general and unavoidable presuppositions of communicative action in order to justify the normative stance of his theory and to provide an ideal model of justice in the form of a symmetrical and egalitarian speech situation. The new direction that Habermas imposes to his conception in the early 1970s, according to Honneth, involves a detachment between the moral-theoretical statements formulated in the theory and the level of the moral experiences concretely lived by the subjects in their everyday life. This detachment occurs because of the neo-Kantian, quasi-trascendental device now used to philosophically justify the theory: the universal pragmatics employed by Habermas enables a grasp of the normative presuppositions of social interaction only on the basis of rationally idealised rules of speech, causing in this way ‘a growing split between the level of moral philosophy and that of everyday social experience’ (Honneth 1995b: XIV). According to Honneth, Habermas’ abstracting move is made at the expense of a proper consideration of the domain of concrete moral experiences and of the emotionally connoted, situated perspective which human subjects cannot but assume when faced by something unjust.
Honneth’s idea is that a normative theory, which does not want to rescind its bond with the pre-theoretical social reality, must be able to account for the critical and emancipatory consciousness already present in the subjects’ everyday life. For this purpose, in his early essay ‘Moral Consciousness and Class Domination’ (Honneth 1995b) he begins inquiring into the moral expectations, the intuitively presupposed conceptions of justice and the normative reactions that characterise the ‘hidden morality’ of the working classes. In this task of providing a pre-scientific anchorage to his normative considerations, his primary sources are the writings of cultural theorists in the Marxist tradition such as E. P. Thompson, Barrington Moore, Richard Sennett and Richard Hoggart. ‘The effort to understand more precisely the manner in which morality is embedded in everyday social practice directs us first to historical and sociological studies that have been concerned with the moral conduct and reflection of members of social classes which traditionally have not specialised in the articulation of moral experiences’ (Honneth 1995b: XIV). The members of the middle and upper classes, in fact, are usually educated in a cultural climate permeated by references to universalistic ideals; furthermore, they are formed, for longer periods of time, in an educational system advancing requests to ‘depersonalize one’s norms of action’ (Honneth 1995b: 210) and to produce moral reasonings in response to abstract and general problems. Honneth, thus, aims at focusing his research on social classes in which the everyday moral practices appear more clearly and un-mediately than among the hegemonic ones. If the forms of morality that characterise these latter social strata can be described as self-consistent complexes of clearly formulated norms, specialised for the intellectual solution of hypothetical moral dilemmas, the ‘hidden moral culture of the working-classes’ is composed, on the contrary, by a varied set of situationally bound normative ideas, fragmentary perspectives on life and reactive moral norms. This form of moral culture is highly situated and constituted by elements apprehended through direct experience, reelaborated in informal discussions between members of the same social class, and cemented by a traditional and orally transmitted class ethics. Here we can mention the concept of ‘class culture’ that Honneth develops, in primary reference to the writings of Richard Hoggart, in his 1979 essay ‘Zur “latenten Biographie” von Arbeiterjugendlichen’ ['On the “Latent Biography” of Working Class Youths']. Against the objectivistic interpretations of Marxism which, in an all too deterministic and automatic fashion, make the features of the class culture of these social strata and the socialisation styles of their members immediately descend from the position these classes hold with respect to the means of production, Honneth highlights the capacity of the subjects – both on the collective and on the individual level – for re-elaborating the contents which are transmitted to them by the objective division in social strata. In this way, the condition of social subordination resulting from the relations of production – from which ‘class consciousness’ originates – is positively and spontaneously enriched by the working classes to form a specific ‘class-culture’ (Honneth et al. 1979: 933). Only if we highlight this cultural aspect of working class life does it become possible to grasp the primary source of the struggles and of the
forms of opposition that the concept of class consciousness aims at motivating. Through this culture-theoretical analysis, a lively and dynamic environment can thus be uncovered, which is actively nourished and sustained by subjects who, even though subordinated in the power assets of society at large, have the opportunity of finding recognition from their peers in their own subcultural domain. Here they can pursue behavioural and expressive styles of proud ‘distinction’ from the dominant classes (Bourdieu 1984) and realise their ‘counterculture of compensatory respect’ – a concept that Honneth draws from The Hidden Injuries of Class, a volume published in 1972 by Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (Sennett and Cobb 1972: 85). In The Hidden Injuries of Class – as in the case of Richard Hoggart’s The Uses of Literacy, although for a different country and epoch – Sennett and Cobb document how most individuals of the lower strata come to develop in their living environments not only an oppositional class consciousness, but also, and primarily, a positive sense of social belonging, the awareness of being part of a neighborhood-based community of cooperation, and their own styles of expression, of behaviour and of handling of moral problems. On the basis of empirical observations, Honneth maintains in ‘Moral Consciousness and Class Domination’ that the intuitive morality of the lower social strata proves itself to be perfectly adequate to the concrete situations occurring in its context of generation. In other words, it is capable of solving the dilemmas that take place in working and everyday environments in a more convincing, complete and nuanced way than would be possible through the application, to these same situations, of abstract and universalistic moral reasonings (Honneth 1995b: 211). ‘When the social history of the working class concentrates upon normative ideals in the daily life of the industrial proletariat, it is more likely to encounter securely anchored feelings of injustice than clearly formulated, ethically grounded goals’ (209). In agreement with the concept delineated by Barrington Moore in his book Injustice (1978), Honneth calls this complex of reactive and situated normative demands ‘consciousness of injustice’ (209). The morality of the working classes, as contextually effective and lively as it may be, remains however ‘hidden’; not only to the eye of sociology, but also (and primarily) to that of the general public sphere. The normative claims at

---

2 This conception of the working-class culture seems implicitly to rest on E. P. Thompson’s definition of ‘social class’: There is today an ever-present temptation to suppose that class is a thing. This was not Marx’s meaning, in his own historical writing, yet the error vitiates much latter-day “Marxist” writing. “It”, the working class, is assumed to have a real existence, which can be defined almost mathematically – so many men who stand in a certain relation to the means of production. Once this is assumed it becomes possible to deduce the class-consciousness which “it” ought to have (but seldom does have), if “it” was properly aware of its own position and real interests . . . [I]t is easy to pass from this to some theory of substitution: the party, the sect, or theorist, who disclose class-consciousness, not as it is, but as it ought to be . . . If we remember that class is a relationship, and not a thing, we can not think in this way . . . Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is the only definition’ (1963: 10–11).
the basis of the moral reactions of the lower social strata are hindered, in their possibility of being publicly and incisively articulated, by a large number of strategies of control and manipulation carried out by the dominant classes. These strategies aim at limiting the possibility of the working class to express their normative claims in a proper and organised way and to receive attention in society: examples of these mechanisms of domination are the different weights often attributed, in informal discursive processes, to the contributions of persons in relation to the degree of schooling they show to hold, the institutional compensation for injustice in the form of material goods, or the vast complex of ‘processes of institutionalized individualization’ (214) – as the bestowing of social and political rewards for acts of individualistic risk taking, the destruction of neighborhood communities, or the establishment on the workplace of an ideology of competition and of individual efficiency. According to Honneth there can still be found, in the capitalistic societies of the 1980s, a whole domain of class-based struggles and resistance, despite the strategies of class domination carried out by the hegemonic classes to counteract the propagation of forms of emancipatory consciousness. Such a result leads the author of ‘Moral Consciousness and Class Domination’ to raise another objection to the works published by Jürgen Habermas a few years earlier (notably Habermas 1975). In these writings, Habermas states that the emancipatory potential of the lower classes has, in the end, been re-absorbed by state intervention. Accordingly, the last carrier-subject of a possible normative evolution of society through struggles and protests can only be found in the student movement and in those social groups which, in a climate of social-economical well-being, ‘learn to petition for the normative surplus of bourgeois moral universalism and to work toward a communicative ethic’ (Honneth 1995b: 206). On the basis of this – in Honneth’s view – questionable diagnosis, Habermas ends up taking as a paradigmatic model of his discourse ethics the forms of universalistic and ‘post-conventional’ morality peculiar to the dominant classes, without considering the fact that a cultural and educational monopoly is exerted, by the hegemonic classes, on these styles of moral expression. In this way, so reads Honneth’s objection, not only does Habermas get to ignore the hidden morality of the lower strata, but, moreover, unintentionally contributes to the strengthening of the strategies of domination that prevent the claims advanced by the working classes from being heard. The theme of the hidden morality of the lower classes is closely related to the concept of social recognition Honneth delineates for the first time in ‘Moral Consciousness and Class Domination’. As he tries to demonstrate with recourse to Barrington Moore’s Injustice and to Sennett and Cobb’s The Hidden Injuries of Class, social class conflicts do not only concern the unequal distribution of material goods. Consequently, they cannot be sedated by the institutions through mere economic compensations – and this explains why the compensatory strategies carried out by the capitalistic state have not defeated the hidden morality of the lower classes. Honneth maintains that the acts of struggle and resistance nourished by the ‘consciousness of injustice’ of the oppressed social strata are actually oriented, in the first instance and despite all the most common interpretations, to the achievement of ‘opportunities for cultural education, social honour, and identity-guaranteeing work’,
and against the ‘asymmetrical distribution of cultural and psychological life chances’ (Honneth 1995b: 217–18). Drawing on the situated and sub-cultural features of the hidden morality of the lower classes, Honneth describes the forms of conflict occurring in the friction areas between the classes as ‘struggles for social recognition’ through which the working subjects aim at obtaining an adequate recognition for their centerpiece role in the reproduction of society. The demand for recognition is the deepest core of the concrete justice claims through which the workers assert their right to the exercise of a properly waged, non-alienated work activity, in a context where their contribution to the social cooperation can be properly recognised; as in all those practical actions oriented towards demanding a work activity whose execution can be rationally controlled by the subject and involves the use of his knowledge and his professional skills, in which, in other words, he can avoid being reified into a component part of the machinery (Honneth 1995b: 219).

II.

The theme of social labor is at the center of the interpretation of the Marxian thought given by Honneth in his early writings, an interpretation that focuses particularly on the works of the young Marx. In close reference to the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and to the German Ideology, Honneth underlines in Social Action and Human Nature (1980) the conceptual richness of the Marxian category of social labor: human beings can not only expand their control and knowledge of the external nature through their productive activity, but, moreover, labor enables them to form and express their internal world. ‘Labor is simultaneously a factor of both production and expression’ (Honneth and Joas 1988: 21). As Marx writes in the Paris Manuscripts, ‘the object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man’s species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created’ (Marx 1988: 77). Human action assumes a social significance in labor. It configures a relation of the subject with external nature and, at the same time, with his inner nature and with the other subjects; ‘an immediate consequence’, thus, ‘of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his lifeactivity, from his species being, is the estrangement of man from man . . . What applies to a man’s relation to his work, to the product of his labor and to himself, also holds of a man’s relation to the other man, and to the other man’s labor and object of labor’ (Marx 1988: 78). This concept of work, according to Honneth, determines the categorical structure of the Marxian theory of society not only in Marx’s early writings, in which it finds its clearest formulation, but even in his more mature works, where it apparently seems to have been forgotten in favour of the model, that Honneth deems reductively mechanistic, based on the evolutionary dialectic between productive forces and relations of production (Honneth 1995b: 26). In order to be able to describe, in the most direct way possible, the instrumentalised and alienated social relationships that take place in capitalistic societies, and to reflect on the repression of human subjectivity involved by this mode of production, the mature Marx – according to Honneth –
consciously and wittingly abstracts from the expressive and recognitive elements which he considered to be anthropologically rooted in the specifically human way of relating to nature through social labor (Honneth and Joas 1988: 4). The anthropological foundation and the value explicitly given to interaction through labor are not rejected in the later works; on the contrary, Marx applies in his analysis of capital a ‘methodologically conscious reductionism’ because ‘he wishes theoretically to expound only those domains of reality which have already been subsumed by the capitalist process of valorization’ (Honneth 1994: 100). The normative category of social labor remains in the background, as a criterion against which to bring out the reality of the capitalistic social alienation. In Honneth’s opinion, it is the frequent misunderstanding of the conscious abstraction performed by Marx which has often led, in the later tradition of historical materialism, to objectivist interpretations and prosecutions of Marxian thought (Honneth 1995b: 26). Honneth’s criticisms against Habermas in his essay ‘Work and Instrumental Action’ (Honneth 1995b) go in this direction. Here, he objects to the Habermasian concept of ‘instrumental action’, which includes work, as dangerously lacking of any internal normative implication. While the sphere of communicative action can count, from the moral standpoint, on the normative idea of communication free from domination, the sphere of instrumental action, as theorised by Habermas, is devoid of any inner normative criteria: ‘Habermas eliminates from his concept of work . . . that theoretical dimension on the basis of which Marx in his early, Hegelian writings interprets the act of work as a process objectifying human capabilities. For this lost dimension of meaning [he] provides no correlate’ (Honneth 1995b: 45). As a result, in Habermas’ theory it becomes impossible to differentiate between a free, non-alienated, uncoerced act of work and an alienated work activity, ‘in which neither the accompanying controls nor the object-related structuring of the activity is left to the initiative of the working subject’ (Honneth 1995b: 46). How distant such a theory locates itself from the social struggles aimed at demanding the right to a satisfying work activity emerges through the confrontation with the empirical researches, as evidenced by Philippe Bernoux, who documents the often small scale but persistent acts of resistance that the workers perform against the Tayloristic rationalisation of the production techniques (Honneth 1995b: 47). These daily practices of opposition usually consist of continuous, insistent violations to the norms and the rules of production enforced in the workplace, and only in particular occasions take the shape of openly articulated acts of protest. In consequence, such struggles usually remain below the threshold of expression that must be crossed before they can be detected by sociology and obtain the attention of public opinion. Nonetheless, by using more refined conceptual categories than those provided by Habermas, it is still possible to gain access to a vast domain of oppositional actions directed against the capitalistic organisation of labor and aimed at recovering the social contents of personal expression and of recognition that Marx had initially connected to the act of working. As we have seen, Honneth’s first reference to the theme of the struggles for recognition concerns the unequal opportunities available to social subjects, on the collective level, for conducting a life characterised by respect and selfesteem. At the basis of this conception lies the idea that individuals nourish

various kinds of moral expectations towards society. The first of these expectations is to receive adequate recognition, that is, to be accorded proper respect for one’s contribution to the social well-being. Even the struggles for material resources constitute claims for recognition, for the trigger to the moral opposition of the lower social groups demanding a rise of their economic status is not, according to Honneth, material deprivation as such; it is instead the perception, to that associated, that one’s contribution to the reproduction of society is not adequately recognised. Throwing the bases of his theorisation of the third sphere in The Struggle for Recognition and, more broadly, of his conception of the relation between economical redistribution and recognition, Honneth establishes a strong connection between demands for material goods and the idea of social esteem (Honneth 1984; 1995a: 165–68). The mediating concept between these two elements is Barrington Moore’s idea of ‘implicit social contract’ (Moore 1978: 10–45), which is an unwritten system of informal rules that determines the conditions of reciprocal recognition in a society, functioning as a base for the tacit normative consensus among the cooperating groups within the community. Each group has an implicitly recognised social status to which a determinate dignity and social esteem are tied, a sort of ‘collective self-respect’. When the balance reached through this implicit consensus is disrupted due to the imposition, with force or fraud, of more disadvantageous conditions to the lower classes, the motivation for the practical opposition of these groups lies not only in the loss of economic status, but most of all in the lack of respect for the expectations of recognition they nourished towards society. In other words, in their awareness of not having been treated as equally legitimate members of the community which, by way of their consensus and their material contribution, they permit to reproduce.

In The Struggle for Recognition, Honneth states that Barrington Moore’s concept of implicit social contract ‘connects up with Thompson’s idea of a ‘moral economy’’ (Honneth 1995a: 167). He however maintains that the dynamics of social conflict are not understood, in E. P. Thompson’s writings, according to the model of a struggle for recognition. It is true, for Honneth, that in works like The Making of the English Working Class (1963) or ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’ (1971) Thompson was led by the idea that social conflicts can never be merely a direct expression of experiences of economic deprivation and that they originate, instead, from the frustration of moral, collective expectations regarding the way in which society should be organised (Honneth 1995a: 166). Yet, in Thompson’s writings nothing leads, according to Honneth, to the hypothesis that every violation of an implicit social consensus is perceived by the affected subjects as a deprivation of recognition and, in consequence, as an offence to their feelings of self-worth. This is the reason why the reference to E. P. Thompson appears relatively late in Honneth’s works, when the fundamental lines of the paradigm of recognition have already been defined.

Thompson, unlike the other cultural theorists Honneth refers to, is mentioned only in the 1989 essay ‘Domination and Moral Struggle’ (Honneth 1995b: 7) and in the 1992 book The Struggle for Recognition, and here merely to explain why his theoretical proposal cannot be assumed as a main reference for the paradigm of recognition.
If, on the one hand, in Barrington Moore’s works (and especially in Injustice) fundamental importance is given to the theme of individual and collective self-relation, considered in its nexus with the human need for recognition, on the other hand it can hardly be stated, following Honneth’s reading, that in E. P. Thompson these elements are lacking. The reflections concerning the destruction of pre-capitalistic communities of recognition; the idea of a violation of the personal and collective dignity the subjects could acquire in that prior, more humane and cooperative way of living; the normative considerations on the relation between the practice of a ‘moral economy’ and the feelings of self-worth and self-respect it sustained in the individuals—these are central aspects in E. P. Thompson’s writings, and on their basis it can be argued that the struggles undertaken by the workers against the capitalistic expansion, as depicted by Thompson, are indeed struggles for recognition. It is nonetheless possible, I think, to find a different reason why Honneth considered Barrington Moore a more suitable reference than E. P. Thompson for the elaboration of a theory of recognition. While E. P. Thompson’s studies are of prevalent historiographical character, Injustice, the book by Barrington Moore, which constitutes one of Honneth’s main influences, more closely follows a sociological approach. The idea of a ‘pan-human sense of injustice’, the concepts of ‘consciousness of injustice’ and of ‘implicit social contract’ elaborated by Barrington Moore, thanks to their general nature, easily seem more adequate at supporting Honneth’s foundational reflections on recognition than a historiographical kind of research like the one performed by Thompson. Barrington Moore, in Injustice, aims at deriving the category of a ‘pan-human sense of injustice’ (Moore 1978: 9) on the basis of a historical reconstruction of the social conflicts and revolutionary insurrections which took place in Germany between 1848 and 1920, considered by the author as struggles for recognition and for a ‘decent human treatment’ (1978: 216, 224, 326). Moving from a conception of human nature according to which every subject is provided not only with physical needs, but also with the constitutive psychological necessity of ‘love and respect from other human beings’ (6), Barrington Moore outlines a concept of ‘natural morality’ (7). This represents the core of the more general conception of ‘just’ and ‘unjust’ present in every human being and contributes, together with the ‘social imperatives’ deriving from the necessity of human cohabitation, to orient the historically determined norms which regulate every society. Intrinsic to the ‘consciousness of injustice’ and to the sense of ‘moral outrage’ experienced by human subjects is always the ‘innate and natural’ opposition to suffering, to the denial of recognition and to oppression – unless, of course, this instinctual force is inhibited or distorted through forms of manipulation and coercion (1978: 89–108, 458–505). The pan-human categories presented by Barrington Moore in Injustice constitute the theoretical bridge through which Honneth is able to bring out, in his writings of the mid-1980s, the universalistic character inherent in the concept of recognition (Honneth 1984); a concept of which he had only made use, until then, in his considerations on the moral culture of the industrial proletariat, without taking advantage of the potentialities it implied for the extension of his reflections beyond a specific social class. Particularly highlighted, in
Barrington Moore, is the fact that all human subjects, due to their intuitive consciousness of injustice, whose existence is a ‘pan-human or

universal characteristic’, have the possibility of detecting moral wrongs and of reacting to them. As a result of Honneth’s heightened attention for the universalistic character of the idea of recognition, the scope of his reflections on normative conflict gets considerably widened: the concept of struggle for recognition no longer concerns only the acts of resistance undertaken by the working classes in the domain of social labor, but, potentially, all normatively justified forms of struggle. As the situated, fragmentary and counter-cultural morality of the lower classes is absorbed in Honneth’s new, more abstract and universally extended approach, the more prescriptive elements of his theory, concerning the general configuration of a ‘just and good society’ based on recognition (Fraser and Honneth 2003), can finally be developed. We have come very close, in our reconstruction, to the all-encompassing systematisation of Honneth’s theoretical proposal, which takes place in The Struggle for Recognition (1992). In the years leading to this volume, however, Honneth increasingly distances himself from his previous interpretation of the Marxian thought, and moves closer to a position, in many respects, more similar to that of Habermas.

III.

A strong legacy of Honneth’s Marxist years remains nonetheless in the theory of recognition, as documented by the 1989 essay ‘Domination and Moral Struggle’. In this writing, Honneth rules out the idea that the Marxian paradigm can be renewed while keeping it faithful to the intentions and form it originally had. Some important aspects of it, however, can and should be followed through. In particular the fundamental Marxian intuition according to which, in Honneth’s words, class struggles are ‘a kind of moral conflict in which an oppressed class is fighting to achieve the social conditions for its self-respect’, is worth being relaunched within a more general paradigm of recognition (Honneth 1995b: 13). If the normative claims advanced by social groups change through history, the fact that individuals are willing to struggle in order to obtain the social presuppositions of their self-respect can be considered a historical constant, as already shown by the researches of Barrington Moore. What must be preserved of Marx’s theory is therefore the idea of history as an ongoing process of social conflicts. As Marx and Engels write in the Manifesto of the Communist Party, ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’ (Marx and Engels 1948: 9) – in Honneth’s terminology, ‘struggles for recognition’, which on the level of social-historical development constitute the motive force of the moral evolution of society (Honneth 1995b: 14; 1995a: 168–69, 175). In the years immediately prior to The Critique of Power (1985), Honneth rejects his previous interpretation of the Marxian works and, in the wake of the reading presented by Habermas in Knowledge and Human Interests, starts considering Marx’s paradigm of labor as a reductionist theoretical model. This explains the only partial acceptance, in later writings, of the impulses deriving from the Marxian tradition he had previously utilised. Marx, with Habermas and the above-mentioned critical theorists, had been among the main influences in the
genesis of the paradigm of recognition. A similar change in Honneth’s perspective implies that, in The Struggle for Recognition,

the role played by Marx in the research process leading to the establishment of the paradigm of recognition doesn’t come out in its full extent. Hegel is now the main reference in the exposition of Honneth’s theory, while Marx is criticised for having, in his early writings, ‘narrow[ed] Hegel’s model of the “struggle for recognition” in the direction of an aesthetics of production’ (Honneth 1995a: 148), and, in his more mature works, severed the tie between recognition and social labor by giving up his early and at any rate already reductionist conception. In Marx’s later works ‘individual self-realization through labor no longer automatically entails a recognizing reference to other subjects’ (149), and, since the theme of recognition has now been left aside, ‘in his analysis of capitalism he lets the laws of motion of the conflict be fixed – in accordance with his new set of basic concepts – by the antagonism of economic interests’ (149). In this way, class struggles are no longer conceived according to the moral model of conflicts for recognition, but merely as ‘a struggle for (economic) self-assertion’ (149). This shift of Honneth’s perspective towards Hegel provides him with the philosophical backing to elaborate a still monistic (as was Marx’s paradigm of labor), but internally differentiated theoretical model. Paralleling the structure of Hegel’s System of Ethical Life, Honneth retraces in contemporary societies the three historically-determined spheres of recognition, respectively related to affective relationships, to the system of modern law, and to social cooperation, that constitute the core of his paradigm (Honneth 1995a). One relevant drawback of this – fruitful, under other respects – change of textual references is that the Marxian themes concerning the material execution of working activities, which constitute one of the main focuses of Honneth’s early writings, significantly disappear from view (Smith 2009). Honneth’s attention is, in this phase, mainly devoted to ensuring the internal articulateness of his paradigm of recognition – a finality that brings him closer to the Hegelian model – while, at the same time, preserving the amount of formality requested by our post-traditional, internally-differentiated societies – a task for which he finds one of his primary references in the Habermasian theory. In his latest book Das Recht der Freiheit, published in Germany in 2011, Honneth seems however to have at least partially reconsidered his views on the economist reductionism he previously saw at work in Marx’s theory, as he describes the Marxian normative idea of society in terms of a model of ‘social freedom’. Honneth now understands the Marxian normative theory as a paradigm of social cooperation characterised by reciprocal relationships of recognition, in which every individual has the opportunity of pursuing his self-realisation while collaborating to the reproduction of the universal, according to the Marxian idea that ‘the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all’ (Marx and Engels 1948: 31). Not only does Honneth propose the Marxian normative paradigm of social labor as an example of a conception based on social freedom, but, in discussing the cognitive sphere of work, he also returns to a typically Marxian theme which, although accorded great importance in his first writings, had subsequently receded into
the background behind the issue of recognition for individual achievement: the right of every subject to a satisfying, properly human and non-alienated execution of his work activity (Honneth 2011: 438–39).

Since his early writings, as we have seen, Honneth pursues the search for a theoretical instrumentarium enabling the uncovering of the forms of injustice and social suffering not yet explicitly articulated in normative terms by the affected subjects, or the acts of resistance which have not yet crossed the threshold of publicly recognised emancipatory struggles. The ‘categorial tool’ (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 113) of recognition does not only offer a general and empirically demonstrated explanation for the phenomena of social protest of the past and present time but, moreover, it permits the detection of even those forms of discontent whose expression is, in various ways, hindered by structures of oppression. In this way, it can avoid the ‘unintended complicity with political domination’ (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 125) to which succumb all those theories that identify the whole spectrum of the current normative issues with the claims explicitly advanced in the public sphere by the most visible social movements, according to the moral languages conventionally accepted. The victims of the grossest injustices are frequently the same individuals who are less provided with the means and possibilities, in terms of material resources, cultural education and positive self-relation, to incisively denounce their situation. In consequence, for a critical social theory it becomes necessary to be equipped with conceptual instruments capable of discerning also the voices of the people who, otherwise, wouldn’t have a voice, in order to give to these subjects the opportunity of bringing their immediate ‘consciousness of injustice’ to the level of justice claims susceptible to obtain visibility in the public sphere (Deranty 2004). Not every struggle can be, of course, deemed as normative: social conflicts are to be determined as ‘normative struggles’, in Honneth’s theory, only when their motives and ends can be assessed as being morally justified in conformity with the universalistic principle of mutual recognition and its social articulations in the three spheres (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 144–45). If, on the one hand, not every struggle is based on normative principles, on the other hand the need for recognition constitutes the deepest core of every normative struggle. Even behind the seemingly most utilitarian demands for justice and the most strategically aware forms of normative conflict there is, on the part of the conflicting subjects, a need for recognition – at least implicitly. The subjects or the groups struggling against each other correspond, in Honneth’s view, to the ‘estranged parties’ which Habermas evokes in the Marxian interpretation he gives, in Knowledge and Human Interests, of the ‘dialectic of the moral life’ originally expounded by Hegel in The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate (Honneth 1991: 269–77; Habermas 1971: 56–60; Hegel 1961: 224–53). The estrangement between the subjects can be overcome, and both the conflicting parties can live a proper human life – that is, relating to the world in an unruptured and non-antagonistic way – only when the outcome of their struggle is not merely the gain of practical advantages, but real, mutual recognition with the other. Mutual recognition cannot, of course, be obtained only through a change in the relations of power; it requires the awareness, by the two parties, that hindering the other subject’s possibility of enjoying equal opportunities
for self-realisation means injuring one’s own self, and that well-being founded on another’s deprivation, or on more or less overt antagonisms, is essentially imperfect and illusory. To reach this point, however, antagonistic struggle is often as necessary as discursive processes: the re-establishment through conflict of more balanced strength relations between the groups makes it impossible, to the formerly privileged group, to ignore the others’ argumentations by resting on consolidated positions of power. In the words of a classic study of social conflicts, ‘once the respective power of the contenders has been ascertained in and through conflict, a new equilibrium can be established and the relationship can proceed on this new basis’ (Coser 1964: 137). On these renewed foundations of more symmetrical power it becomes possible, in a longer or shorter period of time, to undertake the dialogical processes of reconciliation that can lead to a social cooperation sustained by everyone’s agreement, and, in this way, to come to an effective, mutual recognition (Presbey 2003). Honneth’s theory can offer a valuable contribution, both on the epistemic and the practical side, also in the eventuality of justified struggles whose normative character remains hidden behind collective acts of destructive rage, apparently devoid of moral contents and of a specific target. Honneth mentions, as an example of this, the riots carried out by the youths – mostly of immigrant descent – residing in the French banlieues. He interprets these revolts, conducted by marginalised and often unemployed people, as manifestations of resentment towards a society in which they feel hopeless and powerless:

Even if these persons are legally recognized members of the society, they constantly live the experience of being invisible or superfluous. They are only regarded as groups statistically constituting a permanent menace for society or as a source of troubles. Their feeling of being considered by the other members of society as lacking any positive worth is, in my opinion, one of the main reasons for these revolts . . . Especially their normative expectations on the third principle, the one related to work, have been frustrated. (Honneth 2006: 39)

In the epistemic domain of Honneth’s theory, it becomes possible to look beyond the pointless destructivity, which apparently characterises these forms of conflict, without a priori discrediting them as mere expressions of aggressiveness, incompatible with the features of a democratic society. Only in this way can a route be opened to allow that, in the future, the social unrest at first expressed through these manifestations of rage can be elaborated and articulated in explicit demands of justice by the subjects involved, and denounced by means of strategically more effective forms of struggle. Honneth, moving from the theme of moral intuitions he references via Barrington Moore, thus gains access to a vast domain of normative claims, situations of social suffering and experiences of injustice which usually remain concealed from the eyes of the public opinion. His theory, thanks to the categorical instrument of recognition, avoids the risk of abstracting from the less

reassuring aspects of political reality, like domination and conflict, and of taking refuge in a domain of ideal principles disconnected from factuality.

Normative social struggles are a possible indicator of situations of oppression and a concrete factor of emancipatory opposition against the forms of domination present in society; for this reason a theoretical paradigm wanting to preserve its critical strength ought to inquire into their generative dynamics and ways of articulation. This consideration for the chaotic, vital and ever-changing reality of the societies we live in constitutes one of the strong points of the paradigm of recognition; and represents one of the aspects in which the fruitful encounter of Marxism and Cultural Studies, so valuable for the very elaboration of the conceptual core of Honneth’s theory, appears at its best.

References


Eleonora Piromalli holds a degree and a PhD in political philosophy from the Department of Philosophy of the University of Rome ‘Sapienza’. Her dissertation, discussed in the summer of 2012, consisted of a critical analysis of the philosophical work of Axel Honneth, from his first writings to his latest book, Das Recht der Freiheit. She has edited, translated into Italian and introduced a collection of Honneth’s early essays (Riconoscimento e conflitto di classe, Mimesis, 2011) as well as editing the Italian edition of Jacques Bidet’s Explication et reconstruction du Capital (Il Capitale – Spiegazione e ricostruzione, Manifestolibri, 2010). She has published articles on the Frankfurt School in ‘La Cultura’ and in other Italian journals of political philosophy. Her research interests include critical theory and the Frankfurt School, Marxism, Hegel and Hegelianism, theories of democracy, cultural studies and social history.