

## RECOGNITION AND POVERTY

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing popularity of Axel Honneth's recognition theory across philosophy and the social sciences, there is almost no philosophical literature on the relation between recognition and poverty from this perspective. In this paper, I am concerned with three questions related to such a reflection. Firstly, I will examine whether and how the recognition approach can contribute to the understanding of poverty. This involves both conceptual and empirical questions and targets the ability of the recognition approach to propose a valid theory of the social world. Secondly, I am interested in figuring out whether and how the recognition approach can help to understand what is wrong about poverty. This means asking about the normative or ethical competence of the recognition approach in regard to poverty. Thirdly, the recognition approach claims to transcend theory and research, but also affect the social and political practice. Then the question arises as to whether and how it can help to design or implement poverty reduction or poverty alleviation practices and policies. In discussing these three matters, I aim to show that the recognition approach can in fact be a valuable and important contribution to poverty research and poverty politics.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

*recognition; poverty; misrecognition; moral harm; Axel Honneth.*

### RESUMEN

A pesar de la creciente popularidad de la teoría de reconocimiento de Axel Honneth tanto en filosofía como en las ciencias sociales, casi no hay literatura filosófica sobre la relación entre reconocimiento y pobreza desde esta perspectiva. En este artículo abordo tres cuestiones relacionadas con esta reflexión. Primero, examinaré si la teoría del reconocimiento puede contribuir a entender la pobreza y cómo puede hacerlo. En segundo lugar, me interesa establecer si la teoría del reconocimiento puede ayudar a entender qué está mal en relación con la pobreza y cómo puede hacerlo. En tercer lugar, la teoría del reconocimiento pretende trascender el ámbito teórico e investigativo y también incidir en las prácticas sociales y políticas. Entonces surge la pregunta sobre si es posible que ella contribuya a diseñar o implementar prácticas y políticas para la reducción de la pobreza y sobre cómo puede hacerlo. Al discutir estos tres asuntos trataré de mostrar que la teoría del reconocimiento puede efectivamente ser una valiosa e importante contribución a la investigación y a las políticas sobre la pobreza.

### KEYWORDS

*reconocimiento, pobreza, falta de reconocimiento, daño moral, Axel Honneth.*

## RECOGNITION AND POVERTY

The recognition theory by Axel Honneth has increasingly gained attention and discussion across philosophy and the social sciences (Petherbridge, 2011; van den Brink & Owen, 2007). This has led research into different issues such as work, democracy, global politics and social justice. It is thus surprising that the literature on recognition and poverty or recognition-based research into poverty is rather thin (Schweiger, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Also, the newly published volume “Recognition theory as social research”, which explores a variety of social issues such as marriage, crime and immigration, and intends to outline a recognition-theoretical research programme for the social sciences, does not explore it (O’Neill & Smith, 2012). The same is true for social exclusion, which is nowadays often used as a broader concept of poverty. Also, Honneth himself has not engaged in any serious discussion about poverty. It is neither an explicit topic in his debate with Nancy Fraser (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), nor in his seminal publication *The Struggle for Recognition* (Honneth, 1996), nor in his newest book, *Das Recht der Freiheit* (“The Right to Freedom”) (Honneth, 2011). The most notable exception to this rule is maybe my article on relative poverty and social esteem –published in German– which limits its discussion to a specific political concept of poverty: as used within the European Union (Schweiger, 2012a). Another one is Volker Heins’ effort to broaden the recognition approach and so he discusses it in the light of global justice –which is obviously concerned with poverty– but does not reflect on poverty in detail either (Heins, 2008).

As the recognition approach is a broad philosophical theory and a critical social theory, which expands into other disciplines as well as the empirical research, with the aim of contributing to the understanding and the critique to today’s social order, it seems obvious that poverty should not be left outside the picture but rather given an important place inside. There is no need to cite the well-

known numbers of how many people are living in severe poverty, suffering hunger and having no access to sanitation or adequate education so as to understand that poverty is, without any doubt, one of today's most pressing problems (Mack, Schramm, Klasen, & Pogge, 2009). It is also reflected by the increasing philosophical work on these topics, of which maybe the two most prominent recent contributions are from Thomas Pogge and Peter Singer (Pogge, 2008; Singer, 2010). There is no comparable literature on poverty from the perspective of recognition theory.

Therefore, in this paper I want to open the debate on the relation between poverty and recognition and discuss it in the light of some recent developments in the wake of the EU economic crisis. My focus lies on poverty in the Western world, but I will also engage in some questions that are relevant to all forms of poverty on a global scale. My interest points out to three questions. First, whether and how the recognition approach is able contribute to the understanding of poverty. This involves both conceptual and empirical questions and targets the ability of the recognition approach to propose a valid theory of the social world. Second, I am interested in figuring out whether and how the recognition approach can help to understand what is wrong about poverty. This means asking about the normative or ethical competence of the recognition approach in regard to poverty. Third, the recognition approach claims to transcend theory and research but also affect social and political practice. So the question arises as to whether and how it can help to design or implement poverty reduction or poverty alleviation practices and policies.

To some extent, these three questions mirror the four tasks that Christopher Zurn (2011) has distinguished for the successful diagnosis of a social pathology. The first task is a symptomatology, which describes the main symptoms of the social pathology, shows that they are experienced as harmful and in which ways. It has to flesh out the specifics of this particular pathology against the standard of normality. The second task of an epidemiology is then concerned with showing that these symptoms are, in fact,

widespread within the society and that they last for a longer period of time. The third task is that of aetiology, which means that some convincing explanations for the social pathology have to be given. The fourth and final task is a therapeutic one. It is not enough to just describe and explain a social pathology, but rather potential measures should be developed to 'heal' the society. My distinction between social-theoretical, normative and practical-political questions highlights other perspectives but nonetheless incorporates these four tasks. Any recognition-based understanding of poverty will have to show its merits regarding the understanding of its symptoms, consequences and causes.

### **RECOGNITION, MISRECOGNITION AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE**

As the case for every broader philosophical approach or social theory, it is difficult to summarize the basic tenets of the recognition approach without facing shortcomings, and so Honneth himself has changed or, at least, modified his theory over the years. Some will highlight its anthropological dimensions, others its version of a theory of justice or reconstruct the recognition approach as a version of a critical theory that emerges from and is situated within today's social struggles. In my opinion, one of the most accurate descriptions is that by Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch, who distinguished between a social-theoretical, a moral-philosophical, a sociopolitical and a methodological perspectives to describe the recognition approach (Schmidt am Busch, 2010). The social-theoretical perspective states that modern societies can be understood as the institutionalization of three basic forms of recognition: love, rights and social esteem. While love refers to the need to be recognized as a vulnerable individual, rights refer to the universal respect humans owe to each other because they are equal moral agents, and social esteem is the recognition-theoretical version of the principle of desert, the idea that everyone deserves to be recognized for his/her contributions to a shared goal. Modern societies institutionalize these three forms rather

differently, even though there are also some similarities. Marriage, family and personal relationships are the most common institutions of love, rights are secured by a legal system and the state, and social esteem lies behind the meritocratic promise of modern markets. Then, from a moral-philosophical perspective, these three forms of recognition are not mere social or sociological facts but of moral value, because they provide a framework for social justice. To recognize each other in these three dimensions of love, rights and social esteem is the morally right thing to do, because they are valuable in themselves and because they are the intersubjective conditions of undistorted self-realization. The sociopolitical dimension of the recognition approach lies especially in its critique to the modern, so-called 'neoliberal' capitalism and an advocacy for social, political and economic change to overcome it. Neoliberalism undermines the adequate and successful experience of recognition; rather it distorts all these three basic forms. This critique is also based on a certain methodology, which is favoured by the recognition approach and can be understood as 'internal' or 'immanent' critique. This means that Honneth and his followers do not want to employ a God's eye view on the social problem but rather locate the recognition approach itself within the social relations they criticize and shows that the measures to criticize Neoliberalism lay within neoliberal societies themselves. This 'immanent' point of view is also important for the social-theoretical and moral-philosophical dimensions of the recognition approach. What counts as a successful institutionalization of recognition and the content of morality cannot be derived from any abstract principles, but rather unfold through historical and social changes driven by the struggles for recognition. Legitimate social struggles can then claim for an adequate or expanded realization of such social relations in which the experience of love, rights and social esteem is possible and secured. Honneth writes about this 'immanent' critique:

I always introduce the conflicts and struggles of capitalist social formations with reference to those principles of mutual recognition that are considered legitimate by the members of society themselves. What motivates individuals or social groups to call the prevailing social order into question and to engage in practical resistance is the moral conviction that, with respect to their own situations or particularities, the recognition principles considered legitimate are incorrectly or inadequately applied. (Honneth, 2003, p. 157)

The reconstruction of the recognition approach core elements by Nicholas Smith also incorporates these four perspectives but condenses them into three points (Smith, 2012). First, the recognition approach claims that social struggles are motivated by experiences of disrespect or misrecognition, which are the negative counterparts of the three forms of recognition – love, rights and social esteem. Struggles for social change – whatever concrete form they take or whomsoever they come from – can be understood as such struggles for proper recognition. Second, people or social groups struggle for recognition because it entails such importance for their lives and because the experiences of misrecognition are harmful and create suffering. Every human depends on the proper recognition of others as an individual (love), as a moral agent (rights) and as a valuable and contributing member in certain social contexts (social esteem). Third, the recognition approach not only provides a social-theoretical explanation but also a moral-philosophical evaluation. It is not enough to explain that social struggles are driven by claims for recognition, neither is it enough to explain that recognition is important for individuals and that misrecognition is harmful. There is also a need to show that misrecognition is morally wrong and what is wrong about it. This moral-philosophical theory transcends social-theoretical explanation and opens the possibility, or even creates the need, to think about the proper social order or how a society should look like to secure the undistorted experience of recognition and to protect its members from the illegitimate experience of misrecognition.

Based on Smith's three points and the four perspectives by Schmidt am Busch, now I will reflect on the relation between poverty and recognition. The three questions I want to answer – whether the recognition approach can help to understand poverty, whether it can help to understand its moral weight, and whether it can help to design poverty politics – can now be placed within this framework of the recognition approach. The key task is then to show that the recognition approach aims, as a social-theoretical, moral-philosophical, sociopolitical and methodological theory, do provide insights into poverty or at least help to understand it properly. Poverty has also, then, to be embedded within the current social struggles – whether or not from the poor themselves – and research has to be conducted on whether poverty is accompanied by such experiences of misrecognition and whether it is therefore morally wrong.

#### **POVERTY AND RECOGNITION DEPRIVATION**

There is no a single uncontested concept or notion of poverty, whether inside or outside the poverty research field, in the everyday world of politics. In fact, it is the other way around, and disputes about the right understanding of poverty, its contents, scope and causes are widespread (Ruggeri Laderchi, Saith, & Stewart, 2006). So, if one asks about the possible contribution of the recognition approach to this understanding, it is highly unclear what this could mean. Does it mean contributing to a deeper or more accurate understanding of one specific approach to poverty such as relative monetary poverty in the Western world? Or does it mean contributing to the development of a whole new approach to poverty? Or does it mean contributing to distinguish different concepts of poverty and to evaluate their merits and shortcomings? Or does it mean showing that the recognition approach helps to embed one or some approaches to poverty into a broader theory? All these questions and tasks are of value but they lead to quite different results and depend on quite different methodologies. If

the recognition approach wants to contribute to new knowledge about poverty, it may require either engaging in a social theory or in empirical research, and whilst both should be combined they are quite different, and it is also obvious that there are certain limitations to what different disciplines can and should do. As my contribution targets a philosophical and conceptual level, I cannot engage in detail with questions concerned with measuring poverty, using different methods of empirical research or how the gathered data are to be analysed. I rather want to focus on two different directions. The first one reflects on a certain concept or approach to poverty or on certain knowledge about poverty and the poor produced using it. The second one aims to develop a so-called recognition-based concept of poverty, which incorporates some aspects of other concepts but nonetheless stands alone.

I will use the example of the relative poverty as measured by having less than 60 per cent of the equivalent median income. This poverty measurement is quite common and standard in the European Union and its Member States (Nolan & Whelan, 2011). Obviously the 60 per cent line is arbitrary and it could equally be 50 per cent or 65 per cent. The basic idea behind this and similar approaches is to understand poverty as having less than what is the average or 'normal' standard throughout the population, and that this having less income is what constitutes poverty or at least an essential feature of it. As the poverty measure is relative to the income level in the target society, it may vary. Having a monthly income of 900 euro can mean being counted as poor in one country – for example, in Germany or Austria – while having the same amount does not constitute poverty in Bulgaria or Romania. This difference between relative and absolute measures is quite important. The absolute measure of \$ 1.25 a day, which is used by the World Bank, counts poverty regardless of the social circumstances or the median income in the target society (World Bank, 2011). Based on the relative concept there are roughly 80 million people suffering from income poverty in the European Union, which is about 16.4 per cent of its population. Further in-



teresting knowledge about this form of poverty is its connection to other socio-economic variables such as unemployment, education, gender, migration background or disability, its dynamic in recent years, or the influence of the welfare state provisions. But what is the relation between this measure of poverty or this specific form of poverty and recognition nowadays? What can or should the recognition approach do with it, contribute to it or criticize of it?

I think three points should be made. First, the recognition approach can and should try to integrate this as well as other scientific concepts of poverty into its framework. This means showing that measuring poverty relative to the median income is of value for the recognition approach, that it can use this knowledge for its own aims of social critique and that this is compatible with its main assumptions. I see no actual problems in this regard and I have shown it too. I conclude that relative poverty measured as income poverty can be conceptualized as a form of denigration, which means that the contributions of these poor are not adequately socially esteemed (Schweiger, 2013). Income poverty is embedded into modern capitalistic societies in many ways as it is connected to its formation of labour (income poverty has a lot to do with unemployment or poorly paid labour), its social system (the poor can make legal and non-legal claims towards it) and the structural misrecognition of certain parts of the population such as migrants, women and people with special needs. The approach to measure poverty with income is in line with the recognition approach's focus on social esteem in the form of paid work and the inclusion through it (Schmidt am Busch, 2010). Furthermore, it is obvious that any critique to Neoliberalism and its harmful developments, such as the dismantling of the welfare state or the distortion of the 'achievement principle', has to take seriously income poverty as one aspect of precarization (Deranty, 2008). This integrative work is not enough, though; in fact, it only adds something to the recognition approach and not to the understanding of poverty. Second, the recognition approach can engage critically with this specific concept and reflect on its – maybe hidden – implicit and

explicit assumptions, its core meaning and its relation to other social conditions and practices. In my view, the most important contribution in this regard is to show that relative income poverty is of such importance precisely because it is connected to recognition and especially to social esteem. The core of all relative poverty measures is to conceptualize it against a standard of 'normality' that everyone within a society should reach and under which basic social activities are no longer possible or at least limited (Townsend, 1979). But what is this core of a good life that is endangered by poverty? Absolute measures of poverty often refer to anthropological 'facts', which seem indisputable, but for relative measures this question is trickier. Is inequality per se an adequate measure or does it need to be connected to other certain forms of hardship to count as poverty? And why does inequality in income matter that much? Such questions can only be answered if it is shown that income is of such a high value – which it is because it enables people to do something, to have something and to be someone – and that social equality of income is an important value for such societies. In terms of the recognition approach, this means addressing the issue that relative income poverty is connected to experiences of misrecognition such as being excluded, the lack of social esteem or the inability to establish lasting personal relations. In this understanding, relative income poverty is a first-order disorder in modern capitalism, but one which is rooted in specific second-order disorders such as the commodification of ever more spheres of life, the individualization of risk, the precarization of work, the denigration of achievements and contributions, or the invisibilization of social groups (Zurn, 2011). But this also transcends income poverty and its relative measures and shows that poverty can only be understood if its different dimensions are taken into account (Kakwani & Silber, 2008). A single measure such as having less than X – whether it is a fixed sum or a sum relative to the median income of the population – is always only one indicator of poverty that has to be accompanied by others that explore the social conditions of those affected in more detail. Such

single measures of poverty have always been embedded within a broader picture of capitalistic development and formation, in which poverty is produced and in which poverty is attributed in certain ways. It is not only about economics but also about politics and the critique of certain politics that induce poverty and worsen the living conditions of the poor (Harriss, 2009). The third point I would like to make is that such concepts of poverty have a lot to do with the aim of the recognition approach to take side with progressive social practices and also give them a voice within its theoretical framework. It is obvious that the poor have no say in their counting as poor if they are measured by relative income poverty. It is a fact that if someone has less than others, this is an external attribution which the poor cannot control in any way. If the recognition approach is to take its own promise of being connected to those suffering under capitalism seriously, it needs to take the poor as subjects of poverty and poverty research seriously. Are the poor the mere objects of this poverty research or are they given a place and voice within the conceptualization of poverty itself? Income poverty is an 'objective' indicator that lets the subjects behind it – who only count above or beyond the poverty line which marks and labels them – disappear. Taking side with the poor, who are in no way a homogenous group, would also mean thinking of new ways to recognize them in the scientific discourse about poverty and its domination by economic factors, such as relative income (Chambers, 2007).

The second possible recognition-based approach to poverty could be to develop a whole new concept or further develop existing concepts of poverty, which then could also be operationalized for social research. One role model for such an enterprise could be the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen, which is also a broad philosophical theory and serves as the background to many different social scientific studies (Alkire, 2002; Robeyns, 2005). For Sen and others, the core of poverty is the deprivation of basic capabilities, such as being able to feed oneself, being able to read and write, being able to have access to health care and

being able to shelter oneself. For the recognition approach, this core would be to be successfully or adequately recognized. It is possible to understand poverty, then, as a social condition in which the experience of recognition – love, rights, social esteem – is not possible or distorted; poverty as a form of recognition deprivation. This would not replace other measures of poverty, it would rather be necessary to include some of them, but this could open new research areas and produce new knowledge about poverty, about what it means to be poor, and about the social formation of modern capitalism in general. The notion of poverty as recognition deprivation could then be operationalized or further substantiated by distinguishing important experiences of recognition that form an absolute core of poverty. These could be, for example, having social contacts (a measure of social inclusion and the experience of love), having a job with decent pay (a measure of social esteem) and having equal rights or access to social security (a measure of legal respect). If a person is deprived in one or all of these aspects, meaning that he or she does not have lasting social contacts, does not have a job with decent pay or does not have access to welfare provision, then he or she is living in poverty or suffering from recognition deprivation. There are serious objections against such a use of the concept of poverty. Exclusion could be argued not to be poverty, that being unemployed is not poverty, that having fewer or no rights at all is not poverty. Such arguments want to reserve poverty for material hardship or even only for a lack of money. But what forms of hardship should then count as poverty? Only food, shelter, and clothes? Then practically no one is poor in modern welfare states (Fahey, 2010). If one agrees that the core of relative poverty is having less than others, the question is less of what. And having less of certain social, symbolic or material forms of recognition can constitute poverty. It would be wrong to argue that the mere experience of denigration or of not being loved or appreciated – all of which are important experiences of misrecognition that can have devastating effects on one's life – constitutes poverty, but it is undeniable that the experience of

those forms of misrecognition that violate the core conditions of being included into society and that enable people to walk as equals among their peers have something to do with poverty. If the recognition approach has something to say about how modern societies function, then it has something to say about one of its main dysfunctions: poverty.

### **THE MORAL HARM OF BEING POOR**

Poverty is almost never used as a neutral description but mostly as a moral verdict. It is a common understanding that being poor is somehow bad and morally wrong. In this sense, poverty is a thick concept which combines descriptive and prescriptive elements (Williams 1985). What this exactly means is highly disputed and unclear. There are basically two approaches for any normative or moral evaluation of poverty. One can start by taking poverty as something bad or wrong. Then the wrongness is part of the whole definition of poverty. Amartya Sen (1983) has called this the “absolute core” of poverty that can and should not be dismissed by mere inequality. Or one can start the other way and take poverty as a neutral condition which can be morally wrong but which does not have to be. Most theories within philosophy go down the first route and assume that poverty is wrong simply because it is poverty, that poverty the way they use it cannot be good or neutral. As Honneth or others within the recognition approach use the notion of poverty, it seems as if they understand it this way. Honneth refers, for example, to the expansion of the welfare state as moral progress because it decreased the possibility of poverty.

For there can be no question that it was in the interest of the classes constantly threatened by poverty to decouple part of social status from the achievement principle and instead make it an imperative of legal recognition. We can thus speak of moral progress in such cases of boundary-shifting when a partial shift to a new principle lastingly improves the social conditions of personal identity-formation for members of particular groups or classes (Honneth, 2003, p. 188).

Such an assumption, as well as all other approaches to a moral evaluation of poverty, depend on what one understands as poverty. If poverty is defined as not being able to feed oneself, it appears clear that such a condition is wrong. If one defines poverty as having less than others, one can argue that this might be justified and not wrong in at least some cases. Think of the example of relative poverty as living off less than the 60 per cent median income. This is the condition of many people that are unemployed because they have to take care of their young children. Then it could be the right conclusion to say that this kind of poverty is morally wrong. Or, to use the terminology of recognition, that this condition of poverty is a harmful experience of misrecognition. But also, all people in prisons are relatively poor in the sense of having less than 60 per cent of the median income. Is their condition morally wrong, and if it is not, what is the categorical difference between those prison inmates and single mothers? Poverty always depends on circumstances and this is not just true for relative poverty. Are those who are shipwrecked on a desert island without food and shelter poor? I do not think so. It is clear that the normative evaluation of poverty always depends on how one conceptualizes poverty and under what circumstances this social condition arises. One and the same definition of poverty can provide plenty of insights into one social formation, while the same concept can be rather useless in another one. So, if I want to show herein that the recognition approach can in fact explain what is wrong about poverty, this will be different –and may not be true– for all different kinds of poverty and under all possible and realized circumstances. Social critique in this sense is not a universal science, but rather context-sensitive.

I want to stick with the distinction between absolute and relative poverty as two ideas of conceptualizing poverty by either putting it in relation to the actual living standard in the target society or by using absolute thresholds of which no one, and under no circumstances, should fall short. I think there are three general aspects which constitute the moral harm of being poor, which

are shared by relative and absolute forms of poverty but each in a different manner. First, poverty is morally harmful and wrong if, and insofar as, it is the result of processes of misrecognition. Second, poverty is morally harmful and wrong if, and insofar as, it is experienced or connected with such experiences of misrecognition that may ultimately make it impossible to live a good life in the sense of realizing oneself. Third, poverty is morally harmful and wrong if, and insofar as, it violates embedded normative claims that are immanent within these societies or that have been legitimately requested from them.

The first point refers to the cause of poverty and understands it as the result of social processes rather than personal failure. Individuals do influence their social condition but there is overwhelming evidence that people are born poor and only seldom become poor because of their own decisions. Poverty is transmitted and influenced by the place of birth, the family and social background, the education system and the job market, all of which are not under the control of the individual (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Jenkins & Siedler, 2007). These causes of poverty – and also social exclusion – can be reconstructed as processes of misrecognition, such as the absence of personal relations and care, the absence of actual inclusion into the main social spheres of education, citizenship, culture or the labour market, and the absence of social esteem. Poverty is the result of capitalism and serves diverse functions for it (Gans, 1972). This is true both for relative and absolute poverty. While relative poverty is the result of social pathologies within capitalistic societies, the result of inequalities in education, social capital and earnings, absolute poverty is the result of differences within and mostly between countries and the exploitation of those poorer countries and their weak position within global capitalism. If recognition can be reconstructed on the global level, then it can take the form that the divide between rich and poor countries is the result of processes and politics of misrecognition that are forced upon the latter. This does not mean that there are no internal deficiencies in those poor countries but



that they should be understood as the result rather than the cause of underdevelopment.

The second point concerns some of the most pressing effects and consequences of poverty under which those people suffer. The core of any good life is the experience of undistorted recognition and the opportunity to realize oneself by choosing to live the kind of life one has good reasons to value. Personal freedom is based on social conditions that the individual can only partly control, and poverty is a limitation of this personal freedom on many levels. Poverty limits life chances because people who are poor do have far fewer resources, because they can participate in far fewer social contexts and practices, because they are trapped in their situation, they have fewer opportunities to choose from and because they are more vulnerable to changes. Poverty means that those who are poor are limited in their ability to care for themselves and for those whom they want to take care of, such as family, children, partners and friends. Some of these limitations are experienced as misrecognition by the poor and some are accompanied by such experiences. Many of the poor are ashamed of themselves, they are afraid of the others' reactions, they are hurt by what they read and hear from others in the media, from their children's teachers, from their own family members, from their friends and from the strangers they have to go to ask for help and provision. Avishai Margalit (1996) has written impressively about the decent society whose institutions do not humiliate, and probably no other sphere is as full of experiences of humiliation as is poverty. But these symbolic and psychological forms of harm that are inflicted on poor people come together with the material hardship of poverty, which heavily affects the social life of the poor. These are all different areas in which misrecognition takes place, not static but as processes that become increasingly more manifest over time until they ultimately break those people. It is not a personal weakness of those people that break under poverty, that drop out, that resign and more or less give up any hope and quit. They are no longer able to struggle, to struggle for a better



life, to struggle for recognition, to struggle against the social, economic and political institutions that have put them in their position. This is true for poverty in relative and in absolute terms, but the absolute poor outside the Western world are in a much weaker position, because their poverty is often life-threatening, the social protection is much weaker, often even the basic social institutions are missing and people are confronted with war and forced to migrate. Under such circumstances, recognition in all its forms of personal relations, legal respect and social esteem becomes precarious and often even impossible.

The recognition approach wants to use a methodology of immanent critique and poverty should also be criticized in this way. On the one hand, this can be an effective and fruitful strategy. Immanent critique is especially powerful in societies that are already highly developed and understand themselves as welfare states. The idea that at least a basic social security is needed for civil rights and duties to be assumed can be mobilized for a critique of poverty in such liberal and democratic societies. The widely shared understanding of social equality, the idea of equality of opportunity and solidarity with the vulnerable, the sick and the poor, does in fact form the background to much of the anti-poverty politics and social policy in general in such welfare states. There are obvious differences in the shaping and institutionalization of the welfare state and this idea has come under pressure in recent years, but the aim to help those in need is still widely supported by the public and incorporated in many ways in the legal system. On the other hand, things are quite different if one looks at the global picture. On the global scale, immanent critique is obviously limited because there are no shared standards or otherwise institutionalized normative claims. As Heins (2008) argued, there are many societies which are far from being 'modern', democratic or welfare societies and they do not have any adequate internal and immanent standards which could be used to criticize. There is no easy and simple solution to this problem of globalizing the recognition approach that does not either give up the whole idea of immanent critique

or lose nearly all of its bite if it tries to cover the global scale and reduces itself to a very small set of globally accepted treaties. The most but not fully convincing solution I can think of it is to show that poverty does violate such claims that arise from the core of recognition itself, that the experience of recognition forms the social conditions of any good life (Schweiger, 2012b). No matter what the internal standards within a society might be, absolute poverty limits the opportunities for self-realization so that they are negligibly small. In contrast, claims of recognition can refer to this absolute core in every society and under all circumstances – in a refugee camp in Africa, in custody pending deportation in Austria or in an automobile plant in the USA – and can demand that the intersubjective conditions and social relations should change in order to make undistorted self-realization possible. The anthropological and universal roots of the recognition transcend the borders of any given society.

#### **A RECOGNITION-BASED APPROACH TO POVERTY ALLEVIATION**

In the previous sections I have tried to show that the recognition approach can contribute to the understanding of poverty and that it can especially contribute to understanding why poverty is morally wrong. But it is not enough to produce knowledge about poverty, social critique wants to contribute to its end, or at least to such social and political practices that alleviate poverty, help the poor and give them space and a voice. A recognition-based approach to poverty also has to engage with therapeutic measures for the social pathology of poverty and what the social institutions, relations and practices should look like to bring forward the idea of an inclusive and socially just society, in which the experience of undistorted recognition is possible. Honneth often refers to the social democratic welfare state in which everyone has access to welfare provision and as much personal freedom as possible, and these two build the basis for a flourishing society, in which everyone finds his or her place. This ideal points back

to the better times of welfare capitalism after the Second World War, in which the unemployment rates were low, workers' rights were protected and the wealth distributed more justly. In many respects, this line of argument to defend what has been achieved is also applicable to a critique of poverty politics. The dismantling of the welfare state, the shift to workfare, the deregulation and commodification of work, the privatization of social services, the austerity measures and the cuts in welfare provisions all hit the poor, those who are vulnerable and those who do not have any lobby behind them, not even a toothless union (Crotty, 2012; Lødemel & Trickey, 2000). And it is also true that poverty, in the welfare states but also globally, is caused by Neoliberalism in the sense that it – or the politics in its wake – produces unemployment, badly paid and insecure jobs, and cuts off many from adequate education or health care. The ongoing crisis has further stipulated and intensified these developments. Unemployment is on the rise; people, especially the youth, are pushed into poverty and trapped in low-wage jobs. The approach to establish such institutions that secure basic provision for all and a functioning legal system, which provide the conditions in which personal relations, love, caring, friendships, the proper execution of rights and duties, political participation, access to the labour market or equality of opportunity are possible, is not wrong at all. And it also follows the line of its immanent critique of poverty, which I have outlined before, that a meritocratic society, which values the 'achievement principle', does – at least implicitly – demand a strong understanding of social equality and the realization of real social inclusion of all its members. Without it there is no equality of opportunity, which is necessary to value achievements and to deserve something for it as social esteem.

This critique is not in any way specific to the recognition approach, although its tripartite understanding of social justice aims to include more dimensions and reflect the conditions of justice more fully than other approaches. But the real *differentia specifica* between the recognition approach and the social justice and po-

verty alleviation is what Honneth calls the “surplus of validity” that is inherent in all forms, relations, practices or institutions of recognition. Honneth writes in his response to Nancy Fraser about this:

For each of the three recognition spheres is distinguished by normative principles which provide their own internal standards of what counts as ‘just’ or ‘unjust’. In my view, the only way forward here is the idea, outlined above, that each principle of recognition has a specific surplus of validity whose normative significance is expressed by the constant struggle over its appropriate application and interpretation. Within each sphere, it is always possible to set a moral dialectic of the general and the particular in motion: claims are made for a particular perspective (need, life-situation, contribution) that has not yet found appropriate consideration by appeal to a general recognition principle (love, law, achievement). In order to be up to the task of critique, the theory of justice outlined here can wield the recognition principles’ surplus validity against the facticity of their social interpretation. (Honneth, 2003, p. 183)

This means that in an important sense the recognition approach is never finished because the processes of recognition, its immanent dialectic, never come to an end. This is not to be understood as fatalistic but rather that social justice for the recognition approach is always more like a regulative idea than something that can be achieved once and for all. Neither does it mean that no real progress can be made and that it would be useless to struggle for justice; the contrary is true. The recognition approach views social progress as actually happening, not linear, and there are also setbacks and misdevelopments, but in general the recognition theory itself – but not alone – can contribute to social progress. This is also important for poverty politics, poverty reduction and alleviation policies in at least two ways.

First, the poor themselves have to be included, they have to be empowered, their struggles have to be taken seriously and they have to be recognized on a much broader spectrum (Lister,

2004). They are not to be treated as failures that need to be fixed, nor as charity cases that only cost money and resources, nor as worthless members because they cannot work or do not find an adequate job. As I pointed out, not being able to care for oneself and one's family is one of the most pressing harms that are connected to poverty, and this view of poverty as a personal failure is also sustained by the way poverty politics functions and works.

The second aspect I want to stress is that the core of recognition is to be valued in many different ways for being a person, for one's talents and efforts, and for one's uniqueness, and that this affects how poverty reduction and alleviation measures should be designed. Poverty politics or any public institution cannot provide all that is needed for recognition and this should not be tried if it can be avoided. The recognition approach does not opt for a superstate monster that assigns everyone the right dose of recognition at the right time. But neither does it mean that poverty politics is only about money or the provision of food and shelter and a TV for the free time of unemployment. Poverty politics based on the recognition approach cannot stop and be satisfied with providing welfare to the poor. It is rather needed to give the poor access to all different contexts of recognition, so that they are recognized by those who are dealing with them in the various welfare institutions.

Third, the recognition approach cannot be satisfied with separating poverty and poverty politics from the society in which they are embedded. Poverty is always a systemic failure and sustainable changes for the better of the poor always affect the whole society. The biggest issue in this sense, besides the distribution of resources, is the one-sided interpretation of the 'achievement principle' that has become hegemonial. If the 'achievement principle' has a moral core and can be mobilized for claims of justice, then it cannot, in the same breath, be used to stigmatize the poor, the unemployed, the so-called 'underachiever'. Poverty politics, on a national and a global scale, needs a different understanding of achievement, one that is not limited to capitalistic market success,

but one that takes many more dimensions into account, such as social value and individual capabilities. The work of people with special needs, of people with psychiatric disorders, of people who will never be able to get and succeed in any of the 'real' jobs, cannot be dismissed as merely useless by giving them some money or free access to health care and culture. These are important things to do but the shame of denigration remains. Such a new understanding of the 'achievement principle' also implies new forms of social esteem and desert. This transcends the defensive struggle for good old welfare capitalism. Based on the background of global poverty and injustice, such a move to more radical changes is necessary and might even imply a more radical understanding of recognition itself.

## CONCLUSIONS

Many questions concerning the relation between poverty and recognition remain unsolved and need further reasoning. And the recognition approach or recognition-theoretical research will probably not be the single best answer to all questions surrounding poverty. But I have tried to show that the recognition theory can contribute to the understanding of poverty and enrich poverty research by embedding it into the bigger picture of social (mis) developments in recent capitalism, and that it would be better to critically engage with existing concepts of poverty and to expand into new discourses about how to conceptualize poverty. Any normative or moral evaluation of poverty is closely tied to such conceptual questions. Without knowing what poverty is, what it does to the poor, its causes and also its multidimensionality, it is not possible to come to grips with all the important issues of global and local justice that surround poverty, whether it be in modern welfare states or in rural development countries. Poverty is, then, a social condition that is connected to various forms of misrecognition, which have deep, long-lasting and often lifelong consequences. This knowledge also translates into a broad approach to poverty politics, which aims to

provide all people with the social conditions to experience recognition and to live the good life they want to realize. It cannot be enough to analyse and criticize poverty; it has to end.

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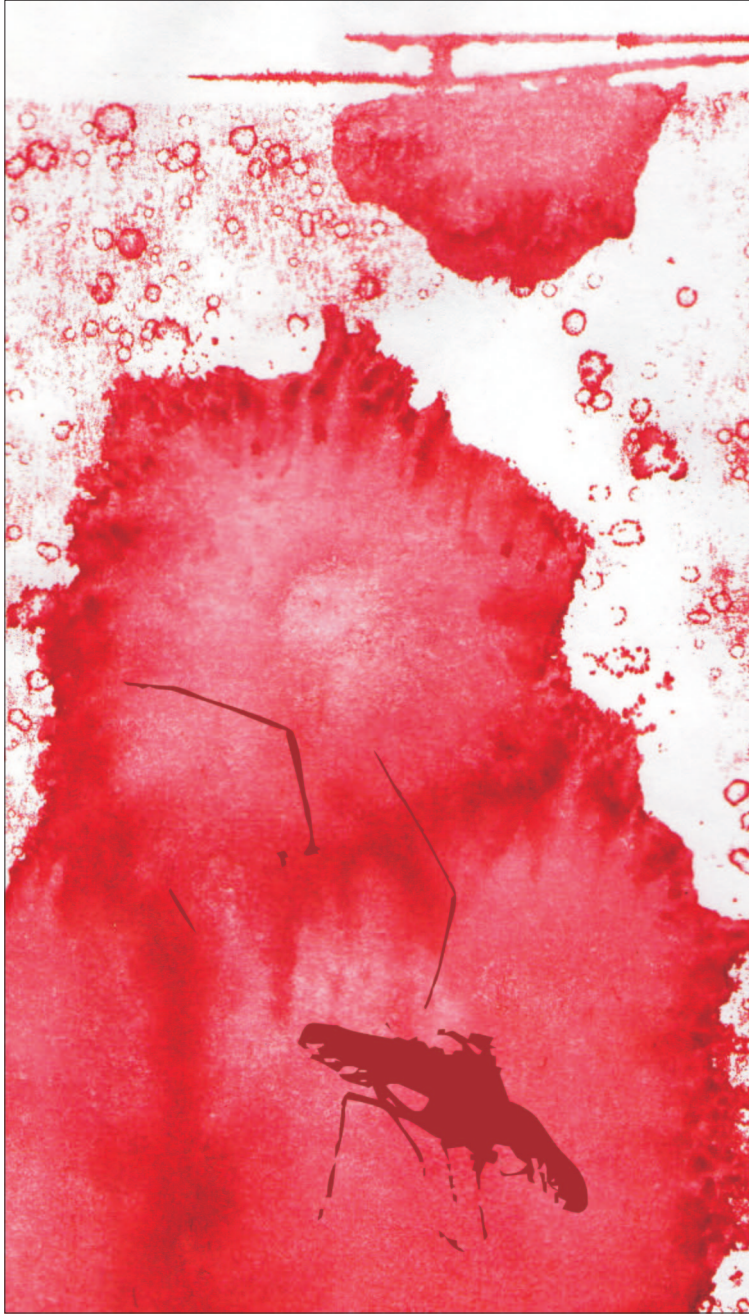
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