The Idea of Socialism by Axel Honneth

Christensen, Martin Ejsing

Published in:
Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.54.1.06

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

The Idea of Socialism by Axel Honneth (review)

Martin Ejsing Christensen

Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy, Volume 54, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 105-109 (Review)

Published by Indiana University Press

Reviews

Axel Honneth
The Idea of Socialism
Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017. Transl. Joseph Ganahl. x+ 145 pp., incl. index.

The interaction between American pragmatism and German critical theory has a long history. While Horkheimer and Adorno, the founding fathers of critical theory, were quite critical of the native American philosophy they encountered when they fled from Nazi Germany, American pragmatism has had a considerable influence on both Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth—the two most prominent thinkers within critical theory's 2nd and 3rd generations. As is well known, however, their prime inspiration has been George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionist sociology as well as Peirce's theory of signs, while James' and Dewey's thinking has played a minor role for them. However, in Axel Honneth's most recent book, *The idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal*, this situation has changed: here, it is Dewey's thinking on politics, and especially his *The Public and its Problems*, which serves as the main inspiration.

As the title indicates, the main purpose of Honneth's short (145 pages) book is to renew the socialist idea, stressing its relevance for the contemporary world. As Honneth presents it, this project is motivated by the fact that even though we have witnessed the worst financial crisis since the 1930s and many people are outraged by the rising levels of inequality, socialist ideas seem to have lost their "utopian energy" and ability to inspire people to believe in a world beyond capitalism. The main question that Honneth wants to answer in his book is why this is so. Why have socialist ideas lost their "utopian energy" or "virulence"? And how can they be reconstructed in such a way that they, once again, will be able to make people "imagine a society beyond capitalism"?

In the book's first part, the short 'Introduction', Honneth lays the groundwork for his own analysis by reviewing and dismissing three 'popular' explanations of why the socialist idea has lost its power

TRANSACTIONS OF THE CHARLES S. PEIRCE SOCIETY
Vol. 54, No. 1 (2018) • doi: 10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.54.1.06

to inspire. According to the first explanation, the main cause is the collapse of communist regimes in 1989, which meant that that the socialist idea lost whatever support it had from actually existing alternatives to capitalism. As Honneth sees it, there are two problems with this explanation. On the one hand, most people had already stopped thinking of the communist regimes as living incarnations of socialism long before 1989. On the other hand, the lack of actually existing alternatives to capitalism did not seem to prevent the early socialist from believing fervently in the idea of socialism. This explanation, Honneth concludes, does not work.

According to the second explanation, the idea of socialism has lost its power to inspire due to "postmodernism", which has replaced the idea of historical progress with the idea of eternal recurrence so that it does not make sense to hope for a better future anymore. As Honneth points out, however, it does not seem as if the idea of "an open future of continuous progress" has been weakened when it comes to medicine or human rights, so this explanation does not seem to work either. Finally, there is the third explanation, according to which social institutions have come to be seen as merely given, reified structures impervious to change. This is the explanation that Honneth finds most appealing, even though he does not think that it will work, either. Societal relations have, as he points out, always been reified, but in former times this did not prevent socialist ideals from unmasking and destroying "the phenomenon of reification". So instead of just accepting the reification of social relations as the reason why the idea of socialism has lost its "utopian energy", the big question for Honneth becomes, rather, why socialist ideals today have lost the ability to unmask this reification.

At a general level, Honneth's attempt to answer this question has a quite simple structure. When the socialist movement was born in the wake of the French Revolution it was inspired by a core idea that is still valid today. Unfortunately, however, a number of auxiliary assumptions reflecting the contingent social conditions ("industrialism") under which socialism was born gathered around this core in such a way that they came to be identified with it. Because we now live in a post-industrialist society, these industrialist assumptions have come to seem unfounded and, as a consequence, the same goes for the idea of socialism. Hence its loss of "utopian energy".

The first part of this explanation is delivered in the first chapter "The Original Idea: The Consummation of the Revolution in Social Freedom" in which Honneth reconstructs what he takes to be the socialist movement's original, core idea, namely, social freedom. The chapter takes the reader through the early history of socialism with a special focus on the ideas of Owen, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Louis Blanc, Proudhon and Marx. As Honneth sees it, all of these early socialist luminaries thought that the French Revolution had failed to deliver

on its promise to create a society characterized by liberty, equality and fraternity. Instead of real liberty for all, post-revolutionary Europe had come to be dominated by a pernicious idea of formal, *individual* freedom favoring the moneyed classes and. In Honneth's view, it is as a reaction to the dominance of this idea that the early socialists created the idea of *social* freedom, which he takes to constitute the essence of socialism. In the book Honneth uses a number of different conceptual tools to explain what he means by social freedom, but the most accessible is probably Daniel Brudney's distinction between 'overlapping' and 'intertwined' aims. According to this distinction, two persons' aims or intentions *overlap* when it is a contingent fact that they mutually help each other to realize their respective aims, while the aims are *intertwined* when the realization of the first person's aim is a necessary part of the realization of the second person's aim and vice versa. The essence of the idea of socialism, as Honneth sees it, is thus that the only way in which real, social freedom can be achieved is if the many different aims in society do not just overlap, but are intertwined in such a way that individuals do not just care about the realization of their own, personal aims, but care also about the realization of all other persons' aims: the two sets of aims are thus so intertwined that they become virtually indistinguishable.

After having described the idea of social freedom that he takes to constitute the vital core of socialism, Honneth moves on in the second chapter, entitled "An Antiquated Intellectual Structure: The Spirit and Culture of Industrialism", to describe the three industrialist assumptions that have gathered around this core and eclipsed the idea of socialism. First there is the fact that the early socialists in their attempt to forward the realization of social freedom focused exclusively on overcoming "the capitalist market economy". According to Honneth, this exclusive focus on the economy meant that the early socialists overlooked the fact that we live in functionally differentiated societies with different social spheres (family, politics etc.) all of which being important arenas for the realization of social freedom. One of the sad consequences of this exclusive focus on the economy is, as Honneth sees it, that it made it difficult for socialists to engage with progressive feminists and republicans (whose primary concerns lay outside the economic sphere), just as the identification of the market with capitalism made it difficult for them to imagine other alternatives to capitalism than a state-controlled, planned economy. The second, industrialist assumption that Honneth takes to be responsible for the weakening of the idea of socialism is the idea that there already exists an active interest in overthrowing capitalism among a specific class—the working class. As Honneth sees it, this assumption has always lacked empirical support and is to be seen more as an expression of self-complacent wishful thinking than as a well-founded premise. Finally, there is the idea that history will

inevitably and necessarily lead to the overturning of capitalism and the full realization of the idea of social freedom, which is the third element in the antiquated industrialist intellectual structure that Honneth takes to be responsible for socialism's downfall.

But if these are the assumptions responsible for the weakening of the idea of socialism what should a renewed socialism look like then? This is the question that Honneth tackles in the final two chapters, "Paths of Renewal (1): Socialism as Historical Experimentalism" and "Paths of Renewal (2): The Idea of a Democratic Form of Life", where it becomes clear that he thinks such a renewed socialism should be a socialism with a pragmatic face. In these chapters it is thus almost exclusively Dewey's thinking about democracy that guides Honneth's attempt to renew the idea of socialism for the 21st century. In so far as Dewey never described himself as a socialist this may seem surprising, but as Honneth convincingly shows, Dewey's idea of democracy as a community-based life form is in fact identical with the idea of social freedom that Honneth takes to constitute the core of socialism. So the comparison is not that far-fetched. The most important idea that Honneth borrows from Dewey, however, is the idea of (historical) experimentalism. As he sees it, it is thus of vital importance that a renewed socialism becomes whole-heartedly experimental. Instead of thinking that history will necessarily lead to the realization of the idea of social freedom, a renewed socialism will, first of all, have to accept contingency as a brute fact and admit that socialism is a historic experiment that may not succeed. Secondly, a modern socialism will also have to replace the idea of a pre-given revolutionary subject—the working class—and instead accept the fact that every attempt to address oneself to others in the name of "social freedom" is an experiment. As Honneth sees it, a modern socialism should thus try to address itself to all the different members of the public (in Dewey's sense) who—for one reason or the other—support initiatives that seem to forward the realization of the idea of social freedom. Finally, a modern socialism should also stop arguing that the only alternative to a capitalist economy is a centrally planned one; modern socialism would instead start experimenting with different, alternative ways of regulating specific markets.

To some, Honneth's Deweyan makeover of the idea of socialism will no doubt fail to look like socialism at all. In a similar way, some will probably question the historical reconstruction that leads Honneth to posit the idea of social freedom at the core of the socialist movement. From a pragmatist perspective, however, the rapprochement between Honneth's brand of critical theory and Dewey's pragmatism seems promising. And from such a perspective, the crucial question is, of course, whether Honneth's renewed idea of socialism will *work*. Will it be able to make people "imagine a society beyond capitalism" again? The original German version of Honneth's book is from 2015.

It was written before the recent American presidential and British parliamentary elections. But perhaps the popularity of Bernie Sanders' democratic socialism in the American election campaigning and Jeremy Corbyn's stunning advances for the British Labour Party in the British election may been seen as a confirmation of the fact that the idea of socialism—renewed along the lines suggested by Honneth—still has some "utopian energy" left in it? Such a thought may of course just be wishful thinking, but at least in the case of Sanders—who for many years was mayor of Burlington, Vermont, the very city in which Dewey grew up—it may perhaps not be that far-fetched to see his relative success as a partial confirmation of the fact that a Deweyan-inspired renewal of the idea of socialism along the lines suggested by Honneth in fact may have more to say for it than some people think.

Martin Ejsing Christensen
Aalborg University
mec@learning.aau.dk

Joseph Urbas
Emerson's Metaphysics: A Song of Laws and Causes
Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016. 272 pp., includes index.

Contemporary commentators on Emerson often assume that the American essayist has been successfully rehabilitated as a philosopher. If we consider seriously his claims to philosophy from a contemporary perspective, however, we must also deal with the treatments of his philosophy critically. This is because philosophy, in itself, is a critical discipline, and every philosophical treatment of Emersonian thought deserves to be treated on the same footing with that of any other classical thinker.

Joseph Urbas's *Emerson's Metaphysics* joins David Van Leer's *Emerson's Epistemology* (1986) and Gustaf Van Gromphout's *Emerson's Ethics* (1999) as thematic, ambitiously titled attempts at providing general accounts of the different branches of Emerson's philosophy. These books are not always written by professional philosophers, although their authors (like Urbas) may be trained and learned in both. The ways of doing philosophy in these works, in any event, are often bound by contextual issues in American literature or the historical problems that the American Transcendentalists were facing rather than contemporary

TRANSACTIONS OF THE CHARLES S. PEIRCE SOCIETY
Vol. 54, No. 1 (2018) • doi: 10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.54.1.07