# Social Domain and Politics in Contemporary Critical Thinking: Honneth, Rancière, and their Relation to E.P. Thompson

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## Abstract

The article examines the concept of emancipation provided by contemporary critical thinking. To this end, it starts by analyzing the recently published book on a "critical encounter" between Axel Honneth and Jacques Rancière that took place in 2009. In reference to politico-philosophical debates of the 1990s, it points out that they have a common starting point in negative and emancipatory experiences. Nonetheless, one gives priority to the domain of the social and the other to political expression. By analyzing the relation of each author to E.P. Thompson, the article stresses that contemporary critical theory needs to overcome such one-sided perspectives.

**Keywords**: Axel Honneth, Jacques Rancière, Edward P. Thompson, Recognition, Critical Theory, Emancipation

Contemporary critical thinking sometimes tries to develop a concept of emancipation focusing, in a one-sided way, on social domain or on politics. A good example is provided by an encounter which took place, on June 2009, in the historical building of *Institut für Sozialforschung* in Frankfurt am Main. It was an encounter between two of the most important thinkers of our time, the German philosopher Axel Honneth and the French thinker Jacques Rancière. A book, recently edited and published by Jean-Philippe Deranty and Katia Genel, reproduces the event, adding one text from each author to clarify their respective theoretical trajectories, and to explain their methods of critical thinking. The book also includes two

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editors' introductions which locate the contrast between Honneth and Rancière in the context of contemporary critical theory. (Honneth and Rancière 2016). This encounter should not be dismissed in contemporary politico-philosophical discourse. This is because it shows strong one-sidedness, but, at the same time, it invites looking for ways of overcoming this.

To this end, in what follows, I will first contextualise Honneth's and Rancière's theoretical approaches. I will show that their famous works of the 1990s stem from negative experiences of injustice or the wrong, rather than from stable definitions of criteria of justice or democracy. In reference to this shared point of departure, which was developed, however, in different ways, I will first analyse Rancière's critique of Honneth, as well as the way the French thinker points towards an idea of recognition in his own thought. I will then discuss Honneth's critical answer to Rancière in light of his most recent work. This will allow us to stress the critical point of the encounter, which will lead to a consideration of two main differences between them: that of the topic of norms and, especially, that of the priority given to social domain or to political expression.

At this stage, I will endeavour to understand if it is possible to intersect Honneth and Rancière. In order to do this, I will look at how both thinkers refer, in their own ways, to the British historian Edward Palmer Thompson. This argument will conduct to state as the Honneth/Rancière encounter claims to take into account the negative and emancipatory experiences of the subject in a non-essentialist manner. Such a claim has been set up by critical theory throughout the second half of the 20th century and it has found a meaningful synthesis in Thompson's oeuvre.

This common reference will further show the differences between Honneth and Rancière. In their relation to Thompson, the former gives priority to the social domain, and the latter to politics. Thus, the analysis of their relationship with the author of *The Making of the English Working Class* will have a strategic role. It will attempt map out a path by which critical thinking can overcome the one-sidedness characteristic of the two thinkers. This will take Honneth and Rancière's

perspective – namely, negative and emancipatory experiences – as a starting point for a critical theory. However, we will endeavour to articulate social experience with political expression.

The position of the present article is that this articulation is indispensable for critical thinking. Critical theory cannot overshadow the problem of political expression, which aims to question social belongings by seeking to 'verify' equality. At the same time, it cannot move its focus entirely to the political side of agency. The social sphere does not consist only of designating subjects to a space in which they are not allowed to name themselves; it is the place in which subjects respond to injustices or to the wrong, and in which they reconfigure a 'police order' of recognition. Critical theory, definitively, should take into account these two sides, which are both present in Thompson, but one-sided in Honneth and Rancière.

## 1. Two critical theories of the 1990s

During the second half of 20th century, politico-philosophical panorama, particularly in the English-speaking world, was staging a divide. On one side were utilitarian views, which justified politico-public actions through the criterion of maximisation of individuals' prosperity. On the other side were theories of justice, which conceived such actions by looking for a criterion of 'just' and 'good' with which substantiate them. In the second half of the century, the latter position took centre stage, and began to dominate the discussion also in continental Europe, especially through John Rawls's influential book *A Theory of Justice*. Renewing interest in philosophical meditation on politics, these theories of justice established an original link between liberal and socialist traditions, and led several thinkers to adopt the view that the convenience of actions should be evaluated in accordance with the 'agreement' among subjects on the followed principles.

Honneth and Rancière's main works should be seen in this context. It is clear that both Honneth's 1992 *The Struggle for Recognition*, as well as Rancière's 1995 *La Mésentente*,[1] set out with a critical approach to this debate. They criticise the

idea that critical thinking should be confined to measuring the distance between agreed norms of justice and an unjust social reality. Both suggest an epistemological shift in this debate. The two authors do not start from a definition of the 'criteria' of justice or democracy, but from the 'experiences' of those subjected to injustice or the wrong and who try to emancipate themselves.[2]

However, Honneth and Rancière's theoretical interventions develop in different ways. While Honneth proposes a 'formal ethic' informed by social experiences, Rancière criticises the concept of 'political philosophy' which, according to him, has constituted ever (since Plato) an epistemological practice aimed to set aside political experiences of what he calls 'dissensus'.

Further, their divergence can be already found in the different scholarly traditions to which each of them belong. For Honneth, this is the Frankfurt School. For Rancière, this is French critical thinking of the second half of 20th century. Nevertheless, it should be added that neither Honneth nor Rancière embrace fully these traditions. Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition* critically approached the 'communicative' way of his master Jürgen Habermas by looking to single out its pre-discursive aspect – namely, negative experiences. In doing so, he connected to Theodor W. Adorno's "negativism". But, at the same time, he followed Habermas in opposing the functionalism of the first generation of the Frankfurt Critical Theory.[3] Yet, whereas Honneth explicitly inscribes himself to this tradition, with Rancière things are more complicated. Rancière's oeuvre is rather unclassifiable. His thought aims to challenge the structuralist idea, which claims that subjects are merely the 'supports' of a structure, and therefore more or less ignorant. Opposing this idea, he highlights, particularly in his studies undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s on French worker emancipation in historical segment 1830-1851, the intelligence of those whom he calls 'the part that has no part'. This particular route is not without proximity to post-structuralism, although his relationship with thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean-

François Lyotard, remains ambiguous. It would be more appropriate to describe him as post-Althusserian. For, even if he strongly detaches himself from his one-time master (Rancière 2011a), he shares an approach similar to some of Louis Althusser's disciples such as Alain Badiou and Étienne Balibar (Hewlett 2007).

Positions elaborated by Honneth and Rancière in the 1990s have since evolved. Without abandoning the analysis of social pathologies of injustice, Honneth has subordinated it to an examination on the modern concept of freedom as a normative axis on which to build a more just society (Honneth 2014). As for Rancière, with his studies of aesthetics which deepened during the period following the publication of *La Mésentente*,[4] he has made room for a certain materialism of a creative act – that is, the conditions of sensible experience – which the 1995 work seemed to neglect in favour of a discursive concept of emancipation.

The 'critical encounter', then, is out of the time in which it would have to be happened. This is likely why the book's title, *Recognition or Disagreement*, takes the English translation of the already cited Honneth and Rancière's principal works of the 1990s. However, this delay is not out of contemporary preoccupations of politico-philosophical reflection. Rather, as Genel and Deranty's introductions suggest, it is by starting from the singular trajectories of Honneth and Rancière that it is possible to deal with concepts such as identity, subject, freedom, and equality, which, while constituting the object of the encounter, serve as a catalyst for a reframing of critical thinking.

## 2. The Honneth/Rancière critical encounter

The Honneth/Rancière encounter began with both authors presenting criticisms of each other's work. It continued with a debate in which both of them tried to respond to the critique they had received. Let us briefly examine these exchanges, notably those pertaining to the idea of recognition, and endeavour to arrive at the main critical point of the encounter. This will allow us to consider two important differences between them.

### *2.1. On recognition: Rancière on Honneth, and Honneth's answer*

Rancière's criticism of Honneth is mostly targeted towards *The Struggle for Recognition*. First, the French thinker makes a distinction between Honneth's concept of recognition contrasting with what is usually understood by this concept. For Rancière, the conventional meaning of recognition designates 1) a perception of something already familiar, and 2) a moral act treating individuals the way they should be treated. In contrast, Rancière claims that Honneth has a 'polemical idea of recognition', which, 'focuses on the conditions behind such a confirmation' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 85). Consequently, Rancière admits Honneth endorses a dynamic conception of identity. Honneth does not think that identity, in multiculturalist manner, is the confirmation of something which is already in place. Instead, identity is something that increases the capabilities of the struggle, and struggles for the recognition of these capabilities.

However, in Rancière's opinion, Honneth's inter-subjective relationships give too much weight to identity. This emphasis on identity leads to a self-relationship of the individual which sees 'the activity of a subject mainly as an affirmation of self-identity' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 86), although with other similar subjects in the spheres of love, rights, and solidarity. For Rancière, this anthropological construction presupposes 'a general theory of the subject' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 87) and of its integrity. Thus, Honneth risks[5] being associated with those who conceive of politics through an elaboration of positive normative presuppositions. For my argument, this means that Honneth risks losing sight the point of view of the experience of injustice or the wrong; precisely the point of view which Honneth's thinking stresses in the context of political philosophy of the 1990s.

Rancière demonstrates the existence of this risk by analysing the first sphere of recognition: the affective relation of the baby to the mother. According to Rancière, Honneth (who takes Donald H. Winnicott's work as a reference point)

conceives it as a simple relationship, a "me-you" relationship. Instead of this model, Rancière proposes a counter-model already present in Honneth's, as well as in Winnicott's, analysis: the 'transitional object'. That is, a space both real and fictional in the baby-mother relationship. Rancière exemplifies the nature of the 'transitional object' by referring to Marcel Proust's character of Albertine. In the narrator's relationship with Albertine, love is 'the *construction* of this other' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 88): the construction of the object of love. This type of relationship is not a simple one – not the relation of a single person to another – but a relationship between multiplicities: 'The fact is that Albertine, the object of love, is a multiplicity of people, set up in a multiplicity of relationships and located in a multiplicity of places' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 88). In this sense, love – and Rancière believes it pertains to the sphere of rights, and the sphere of solidarity as well – does not consist of a pre-configured, dual relationship. Here, Rancière is most likely following Althusser's interpretation of Mao's 'On Contradiction' (Althusser 1969), contrasting the 'simple contradiction' with a multidimensional contradiction. But, unlike Althusser, Rancière takes the object of love as something that *suspends* the existing 'sensible order', due to its fictitious/real nature. For Rancière, the operative space constituted by love – the 'as if' – is a relationship which reconfigures the subject's possible and multiple relationships.

For the 'critical encounter' between Rancière and Honneth, the importance of Rancière's conception of love is as follows. We should not think of recognition as a relationship which confirms the identities of two already constituted persons. Otherwise, we would be forced to presuppose the integrity that the subjects strive to attain. Recognition should be understood, instead, as the transformative factor in the relationship between people, the factor that creates a relationship which did not exist before. In this sense – Rancière admits – it is possible to speak about a '"Rancièrian" conception of the theory of recognition' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 95). This conception of recognition that could be defined as 'suspensive' (Campailla 2016).

As a result, recognition is a shared language between Honneth and Rancière, though it manifests in different ways. Furthermore, the encounter highlights an overlap between them. Honneth answers to Rancière's critique by admitting that in his earlier work 'there was a certain tendency […] to describe the struggle for recognition in terms that assumed the positive affirmation of a certain identity – an already given identity.' Hence, he continues, 'I think this is not a completely correct description of what is going on in such a process' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 108). In order to avoid presupposing a given identity, he now feels that struggling for recognition equates to fighting to 'reformulate the existing principles of recognition', as well as the identifications which they frame and fix. Thus, he agrees with Rancière on the fact overcoming injustices entails 'a process of dis-identification' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 109). In sum, it seems that both agree on the assessment that the theory of recognition risks focusing exclusively on the social specificity of subjects, and excludes their political agency.

Nevertheless, this overlap is precarious. In fact, Honneth does not give up the idea of the normative content of social struggles. He contends that the 'moral grammar of social struggles' – that is, an interpretation of conflicts in moral terms, and not simply in terms of interests – leads to the remark that emancipation is an 'undistorted self-relationship' of the subject. Therefore, instead of finding a common ground, there is still a strong disagreement between them. Here, more than in *The Struggle for Recognition*, this 'self-relationship', even if it still born of the social experience of the subject, is conceived as a 'telos' to be attained. Namely, it is conceived as the ideal of 'undistorted' and 'complete' self-realization that, although it is not possible to describe fully, cannot but be presupposed (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 109-110). This idea of 'telos' is at odds with Rancière, because it presupposes the integrity of the *social* subject.

### 2.2. The critical point

It is probably in light of this idea of 'telos' (of recognition) that Honneth considers the Rancièrian 'equality of

anyone with anyone else' – on which, according to Rancière, any act of emancipation is based – a 'motivational force' of political enactment and, more precisely, 'a deep-rooted desire for *egalitarianism*' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 99). From Rancière's perspective, this account is not completely correct. As Rancière states in the debate, his concept of equality should not be understood in these terms (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 111). This is one of the most interesting points of the encounter, its 'critical point'. This is because it makes the differences between the two authors clear.

Actually, for Rancière, equality is not a 'motivational force'. If there is a 'motivational force' to be found in Rancière's oeuvre, it would simply be the will to emancipate oneself from a lived injustice. Talking about a 'desire for *egalitarianism*' for Rancière would be to claim the very opposite of what he has always contended. It would be akin to arguing that equality is an objective to be attained. But for Rancière equality does not have such a teleological dimension; it is instead understood as a formal presupposition. Rancièrian members of 'the part that has no part' do not 'desire' to be equals, but they *demonstrate* equality. They *demonstrate* both that the order which recognises them as unequal is contingent, and that they want to be recognised differently.

However, we should not take Rancière's own view for granted, according to which Honneth's interpretation is misguided. Instead, one must ask why Honneth reads Rancière's notion of equality in this way. There are at least two possible answers to this question.

The first possibility is that Honneth's interpretation is, in a sense, an attempt 'to appropriate' Rancière's thought and show its limits. I use the verb 'to appropriate' because Honneth evidently absorbs Rancièrian ideas in his own views (views which have been formed in recent years). This allows Honneth to perform two operations simultaneously. Firstly, it allows him to overshadow what he is actually putting aside (and which was very important during the period of *The Struggle for Recognition*). That is to say, the primacy of social experience as a pre-theoretical and pre-discursive element upon which theory and discourse are grounded, in favour of the normative values

already in place in modern institutions. In fact, by reducing the Rancièrian presupposition of equality to an anthropological desire, he does not read it as a formal statement enacted by subjects in their social and political experiences of emancipation (as does Rancière), but rather as a socio-political and anthropological value that subjects desire to realize. Consequently, the second operation highlights that modern egalitarian desire is limited in normative terms. For that reason, it would be more useful to give priority to the normativity derived in modern freedom; what he calls 'social freedom' (Honneth 2014, Part III). In this first hypothetical answer, Honneth's account of Rancière is integrated within his own recent theoretical project, in whose 'normative reconstruction' the Rancièrian equality is put aside in favour of the notion of freedom put forward by Honneth. This remark demonstrates that what Honneth is arguing in this 'critical encounter' differs from the thesis that Rancière is criticising. There is no room to develop what several interpreters have already observed, namely, that Honneth's most recent theoretical views present a shift from his earlier position. It has been argued that his current interest in the normative principles immanent to modernity, rather than in analyses of negative social experiences, shows that he is now more closely aligned with his master Habermas.[6]

The second possible answer can be found in the details of Rancière's thought. Honneth's criticism, in fact, allows us to see what is missing from the concept of equality proposed by the French thinker. More precisely, this is something that is both appearing and disappearing in Rancière's view: a reference to suffering. It is possible that Honneth finds a 'desire for *egalitarianism*' to be a 'motivational force' in Rancière, because this would explain the origin of the emancipatory act. As I have stated above, even if such a 'motivational force' cannot entail, in Rancière, nothing but the will to emancipate oneself from a negative experience, this experience is not enacted by subjects who demonstrate equality. For instance, if we take one of the most important examples used by Rancière, that of Louis-Gabriel Gauny (the 'plebeian philosopher' of 19th century [Gauny 1983]), it can be said that Gauny suffers in his own

workplace. However, when he transforms his working situation through emancipating himself, he does not aim to be recognised as a suffering worker. In this vein, Honneth claims that Rancière should define a notion of suffering in order to explain this kind of 'subjectivization'. But Rancière looks explicitly to avoid such a notion: 'Taking injustice as a starting point is not the same as starting from suffering' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 126). Thus, though Honneth agrees that political action cannot be reduced to a 'reference to suffering' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 128), Rancière's thinking seems to him insufficient in that it is missing a key 'explanatory element' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 123). For my argument, this entails that Rancière is missing the specificity of the social experience.

## 2.3. Two main differences

This critical point of the encounter stresses two main differences between Honneth and Rancière.

The first difference relates to the topic of norms. For Honneth, particularly in his most recent views introduced with *Freedom's Right* (2011), struggles aim to re-appropriate the already institutionalized normative principles in order to fulfil a modernity conceived, in line with Habermas, as an 'incomplete project' (Habermas 1981). But in *The Struggle for Recognition* (1992) – the work to which Rancière critically refers in the context of the encounter – these norms emerge, unlike for Habermas, from the struggles themselves. Despite the difference between the two works, Honneth has always had a positive relationship with the topic of norms. By contrast, Rancière has always seen norms as a vehicle for domination, where he follows the critical stance towards normativity prevalent in French thought in the second half of the 20th century. The risk that Rancière sees in norms is the same he sees in Honneth's conception of love. That is, as stated above, to confirm the social identities of two already constituted persons. This is the reason why Rancière takes Gauny as one of his principle examples: Gauny does not claim to be recognised as a suffering worker.

This allows one to see a second, and more fundamental, difference. If we examine their work carried out during the 1990s, the primacy given to the social domain by Honneth is mirrored by that given to politics by Rancière. Their encounter appears as respective one-sidedness. In Honneth's case, the social order of recognition risks overshadowing the problem of political expression, which is evidently marked by social belongings. Because of these social belongings, there are subjects who can make their voice heard in politics, and subjects who cannot – some will be politically understood while others will not. Thus, political expression looks to question these belongings by seeking to 'verify' equality. This proposition is at the core of Rancière's views, but is misguided in another respect. When Rancière conceives the social domain only as an order of recognition which does not count some subjects (a 'police order') he moves his focus entirely to the political side of agency. That is, he does not grasp the fact that the social sphere consists of more than simply designating subjects to a space which does not allow them to name themselves. It is, at the same time, the place in which this police order of recognition is refused and reconfigured.

## 3.  A common reference: E. P. Thompson

From this point of view, it would seem difficult to bridge the two stances. I would nevertheless suggest that there exists a parallel between the two positions. In fact, as Deranty remarks, both thinkers inadvertently shared similarities in early writings.

[Rancière's] texts from the mid-1970s present arguments that seem fairly close to one of Honneth's earliest texts, 'Domination and Moral Struggle', published at about the same time, in which Honneth sought to reinterpret Marx's theory of emancipation as pointing to demands for the recognition of proletarian 'dignity' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 38).[7]

Subsequently, Rancière's writings in the 1980s and 1990s looked to show that emancipation operates 'in-between' the social and political spheres (particularly, in polemics with Hannah Arendt). This means that Rancière is at odds with an essentialist idea of politics. At the same time, these writings are

characteristically one-sided, basing emancipation on political expression and reducing the social domain to 'police' (Rancière 1995). Hence, Rancière fails to connect the two spheres. However, the 'critical encounter' made it possible to try to bridge the views of the two thinkers. This is because the shared language of recognition shows that both Honneth and Rancière start with negative and emancipatory experiences, and that both endeavour to see the critical theory in light of these experiences.

In my opinion, the one-sidedness of Honneth and Rancière's positions should not force us to make a choice between one or the other, but rather bring to the forefront the continuum between the social sphere and politics. The question is: would it be possible to find an intersection of the two lines of thought within such a continuum? One viable solution could be to examine an author to whom both thinkers have referred to, in different phases of their theoretical development. Namely, the British historian E.P. Thompson.

### 3.1. Honneth's relation to E.P. Thompson

In *The Struggle for Recognition*, and also in earlier writing (Honneth 1995), Honneth explicitly referred to Thompson. In a significant chapter of this book, entitled 'Disrespect and Resistance: The Moral Logic of Social Conflicts,' Honneth focuses directly on the British historian. Here, Honneth states that the role of the theory of recognition should be to make the normative moral perspective present in social conflicts explicit. As the German philosopher writes, Thompson's social historical studies have questioned 'social theory's fixation on the dimension of interest,' which 'has so thoroughly obscured our view of the societal significance of moral feelings' (Honneth 1994, 166). Through this focus on the 'societal significance of moral feelings' by Thompson, it has become possible to gain knowledge of the already mentioned 'moral grammar of social conflicts'.

By studying the late 18th century 'English crowd', Thompson showed that struggles were not only about immediate interests (like satisfaction of hunger), but included a 'moral economy'. This was defined as the various opinions of

how society should be organized from the workers' own practical perspectives (Thompson 1971). For Thompson, the social identity connected to work – and all the values and knowledge included therein – is what allowed the workers, during the period of early industrial development, to *produce* a different socialization: that is, to create social norms that were in contrast to the ones imposed by the rising capitalist techniques of production. This is what Thompson argued in his famous article of 1971 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century'. But even before this article, Thompson had sketched a similar statement. The first part of his most important work, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), in fact deals with the cultural background of different artisans of the 18th century. This background reappears as a weapon of resistance in the second part of the book, against the rising capitalist exploitation in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Thompson 1966). Honneth directly referred to Thompson's argument in the elaboration of his theory of recognition, which allowed him to grasp the moral and normative content of the social experiences of injustice.

In the same chapter of *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth refers to another historian, namely Barrington Moore, the author of *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt*, published in 1978. In this book Moore analyses revolutionary uprisings in Germany between 1848 and 1920, and comes to the conclusion that such uprisings were determined by an 'implicit social contract', a system of norms shared among the groups involved in the struggle (Moore 1978). Interestingly, Honneth seems to prefer Moore over Thompson. He maintains that Thompson has simply given 'the impetus for this sort of reorientation,' (Honneth 1994, 166) and that is Moore who 'extended it [Thompson's approach] along the dimension of individual or collective identity' (Honneth 1994, 167). The reason why Honneth gives more importance to Moore than to Thompson could be that the latter's work is more strict in its historical character. Instead, Moore's work draws up 'a more general conception of "just" and "unjust" present in each human being,' as an Italian scholar rightly observed (Piromalli 2012, 43-44). The universalistic conception of moral feeling of

injustice analysed by Moore allows Honneth to ground his own theory of recognition on the anthropological base of self-realization; which, as I remarked earlier, constitutes one of the most relevant objects of controversy in the 'critical encounter' with Rancière.

For the German philosopher, Thompson provides the opening for a non-essentialist method of social inquiry. However, because Honneth transposes this inquiry to a theoretical plane, Thompson's writings are surpassed. This is because his strict reference to historical experience is not sufficient for the construction of a complete theoretical system. Due to the interconnected nature of psycho-anthropological, sociological and philosophical dimensions in the three spheres of recognition, Honneth's critical theory is informed by experience, but it does not directly address said experience. His relation to Thompson demonstrates that Honneth's idea of recognition is strictly a *social* theoretisation.

### 3.2. Rancière's relation to E.P. Thompson

Rancière's relation to Thompson is different and, in a sense, more complicated. Rancière explicitly referred to Thompson in commenting on the workers' articles in *La Parole ouvrière* (1976), written and edited alongside Alain Faure.[8] Adding to this explicit reference, Thompson's idea that workers have a capacity to proactively oppose their exploiters can be said to highlight a link to 'early Rancière'. In a decisive phase of his theoretical development, the influence of Maoism leads Rancière to attempt to demonstrate that the exploited subjects are capable of responding to injustices. This capacity of response is a political speech/voice (*parole*) that emerges directly from the social experiences of the workers. It will constitute the main point of reflection of Rancièrian thought, manifested in the idea of the intelligence of the oppressed.

One should be reminded that 'The formation of working-class thought in France' was the original title of *Proletarian Nights* (1981)[9] – a title manifestly inspired by Thompson's work from 1963. However, this latter book approaches the problem in a different way than the former. The condemnation of the social domain can be read as a critique of Thompson's emphasis on

social identity of the workers. *Proletarian Nights* does not deal, as did *La Parole ouvrière*, with 'workers' who want to be recognised as such in order to negate the social contempt to which they are subjected – 'workers' who, from the social domain, would like to nominate themselves as political subjects. Instead, it deals with 'proletarians' who have the same feelings and anxieties as bourgeois writers – 'proletarians' who also write about these feelings and anxieties. That is, 'proletarians' who do not fit into a fixed social category.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that 'the mature Rancière' – from *Proletarian Nights* onwards, and reaching its peak in *La Mésentente* – stands completely at odds with Thompson. Debates after the publication of *Proletarian Nights* provoked Rancière to strongly criticise the tradition of Social History. Rancière stresses that worker militancy in France during the period spanning 1830-1848 is not directly connected to worker skill. He is not at all negating that this connection could exist at some level, but it would not be sufficiently strong to create a 'worker culture', as Social History claims. According to Rancière, this is because militant ideas serve to mediate between worker life and intellectual life. Unsurprisingly there was much response by social historians.[10] For the sake of my argument, it is interesting to remark that Thompson was never Rancière's target of criticism,[11] even if the British historian pioneered studies of the so-called *new social history*. This is probably a merit of Rancière, because Thompson – in spite of widespread interpretation – does not deal with worker culture as a unity. However, as I stated earlier, it is undeniable that for Thompson the social identity of workers plays an important role in the political enactment.

Furthermore, Rancière gives a positive account of Thompson in *The Names of History* (1992). In this work, the French thinker appears to find his idea of 'hazardous subjectification' mirrored in the 'inaugural scene' chosen by Thompson to illustrate the making of the English working class. In it, Thompson describes:

the January 1792 meeting, in a London tavern, of nine honest and industrious workers seized with the singular conviction that every adult person in possession of reason had,

as much as anyone else, the capacity to elect the members of Parliament (Rancière 1994, 92).

Thompson argues, in the preface of *The Making of the English Working Class*, that class cannot be grasped through scientific means: class is not a mathematically derived sum of interests. Class is felt and articulated through common experiences which 'happen' to heterogeneous subjects who are confronted at a specific historical moment with some form of exploitation (Thompson 1966). For Thompson, to take the title of one of his most important articles, published in 1978 (Thompson 1978), it is possible to have 'class struggle without class'. This means that the political behaviour of a class subjectivity can exist independent of the conceptualization of the class as such. In fact, the 'making' in the title of the book suggests a process: the constitution of class cannot be formalized, because class is its experience of itself. Rancière referred to this argument in order to directly address the experiences of the French workers in the 1830s and 1840s.

The aspect of Thompson's oeuvre that does not play a role in Rancière's mature perspective is, instead, the emphasis on the social identity of the workers – as proved by Rancière's previously mentioned critique of Social History. This is precisely the aspect that Honneth sides with. It can be seen that Rancière, like Honneth, surpassed Thompson, but for opposite reasons. Honneth's aim was to conceptualize Thompson's argument about the historical experience of the workers. Rancière's rationale was found in the archives of worker emancipation. Namely, that the workers refused to take up the assigned identity of 'worker'. Through his relation to Thompson, it becomes evident that Rancière's concept of recognition is an explanatory framework aimed at a new configuration of *political* visibility/audibility in struggles. Thus, Rancière's definition of recognition does not formalize said struggles within a theoretical paradigm, as is the case with Honneth. At the same time, however, he omits the social suffering experienced by 'the part that has no part' – an omission that, as mentioned earlier, Honneth criticises during the 'critical encounter'.

### 3.3. A common point

Regarding the relationship between Rancière and Thompson, something more remains to be said. This is because it allows to intersect Honneth and Rancière through an already mentioned common point.

In 1978, Thompson wrote a polemical attack on Althusser, and more generally on determinist and functionalist approaches, entitled *The Poverty of Theory*. The book bears a certain similarity to the critical intervention brought about by Rancière in 1974 with his *Althusser's Lesson*. We know that Thompson read Rancière's text, but this is limited to a footnote (Thompson 1995, 272, footnote 134). Furthermore, the validity of Thompson's polemic – itself strongly criticised (Johnson 1978, Anderson 1980, Hall 1981; see also Thompson's reply, 1981) and defended (Wood 1982) – cannot be discussed here. It must be stated that, for my argument, an interesting remark made in *The Poverty of Theory* states theory should be informed by experiences. In line with Thompson's historical work discussed above, these experiences should include both those of injustice, as well as those reacting to this injustice (in view of a new configuration of the context in which the experiences themselves take place).

This remark points to what is common in the frameworks that both Honneth and Rancière developed in the 1990s. It is a form of critical thinking which does not aim to offer the criteria with which one can define justice or democracy, but draws instead either on negative experiences or sees democracy as nothing but a name for emancipation experiences. Honneth and Rancière's respective uses of Thompson strengthen the common point between them, for it was in reference to Thompson that both of them intervened in the politico-philosophical context of the second half of the 20th century with a non-essentialist understanding of subjective experience.

Thus, the 2009 'critical encounter' arrives admittedly late, for it is mostly a debate of the 1990s. Nevertheless, it can still prove useful to explore a form of critical thinking which develops a middle ground between that of Honneth and Rancière. This is because said middle ground could articulate a

given social experience with its political expression. This halfway position can be achieved through Honneth and Rancière's reference to Thompson, who allows us to truly grasp the possibilities and limits of their theoretical viewpoints.

### 4. Critical thinking between Honneth and Rancière through E. P. Thompson

Let us now try to develop a concluding assessment of the primary argument presented here.

The 'critical encounter' clears a path towards a form of critical thinking between Honneth and Rancière. In doing so, it is useful to reflect upon the context in which their 1990s works formed. In these works, they attack the idea that a critical theory should be confined to measuring the distance between agreed norms of justice and an unjust social reality. Both suggest an epistemological shift is required to resolve this debate. Thus, their starting point is not a definition of the 'criteria' of justice or democracy, but rather the 'experiences' of those trying to emancipate themselves after having experienced injustice or wrong. However, Honneth and Rancière's theoretical considerations develop in different ways. Namely, in the specific style in which both critically relate to the respective traditions which shaped their thoughts. This difference is evident in the 'critical encounter'. In it, even though the language of recognition is shared, it is still possible to see two main divergences: that of the topic of norms, as well as the priority given to either social domain or politics. From this point of view, then, it would be difficult to bridge them.

Nevertheless, in their itineraries they inadvertently encountered. The figure of this virtual encounter is E.P. Thompson. For both, Thompson provided the opening for a non-essentialist method of taking into account negative and emancipatory experiences. Yet, they addressed him differently. Honneth mobilised Thompson's writings within a *social* theoretisation. Rancière was inspired by Thompson at different phases in his career. The first phase was that in which an early, virtual, encounter with Honneth can be seen. However, in his 'mature period' he referred to Thompson in order to grasp a 'hazardous subjectification', namely, a new configuration of

*political* visibility/audibility of wronged subjects. Thus, Honneth and Rancière's relation to Thompson points out the one-sidedness evident in the 'critical encounter'.

Nonetheless, this shared relationship to Thompson could prove a viable way through which to bridge the divide. With respect to the British historian's oeuvre, Honneth and Rancière can be seen to intersect in at least once their respective 1990s reflections. Namely, and already alluded to, how to avoid criterion for defining justice or democracy, yet still deal with negative and emancipatory experiences. This topic builds up a form of critical theory based on a remark made by Thompson in *The Poverty of Theory*: the notion that theory should be informed by experiences.

Let us propose, then, in a *constructive* way, a concluding remark of this intersection between Honneth and Rancière as mediated by Thompson. In order for the social subject to be *suspensively* recognised on the political stage, she/he should be referred to by the social domain, in her/his very political enunciation. To reconfigure the police order of recognition which negated as a political subject, her/his political enunciation has to be articulated in the social sphere in which she/he collects experience both of the injustice and wrong, as well as of the very will to emancipate. Critical theory should take into account the continuum between these two sides. These are both present in Thompson's oeuvre, but one-sided in Honneth and Rancière.

This continuum between the social and political spheres can espouse a comparative study between Honneth and Rancière. And for this study, the 2009 "critical encounter" clears the way. Yet, it must be recalled that this approach has been attempted in 2003 by some journal articles written by one of the two editors of published version of the encounter (Deranty 2003a, 2003b, 2003c). Yet, among Honneth scholars, this encounter has rarely been taken into account with the exception of attempts to radicalise his work (Deranty and Renault 2009). As for Rancière, among his readers, it has received ambivalent remarks. On the more critical side, these include those of Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, as well as works by Samuel A. Chambers.[12] Also notable is Oliver Davis,

who has been more sympathetic.[13] Over the course of the discussion with Honneth, Rancière admits to having his own idea of recognition, which is evidently different from that proposed by Honneth in 1992. This imposes the task of presenting an immanent critique of both thinkers. That is, to cast such an idea of recognition into the context of relaunching the 'critical attitude' of thinking, to be accomplished through articulating the socio-experiential dimension, with its associated antagonistic political enunciation.

## NOTES

[1] I use the French title because the English one, *Disagreement*, does not make sense of the true Rancièrian idea. As Rancière claims in the 'critical encounter' with Honneth, *mésentente* is an 'untranslatable term [because it] plays on the relation between *entendre*, to "hear", and *entendre*, to "understand"' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 83).

[2] See Renault 2019. Renault formulated criticism of the theories of justice by means of the notion of "experience of injustice".

[3] On Honneth's itinerary see Deranty 2009.

[4] From Rancière 2011b to Rancière 2013.

[5] More precisely, Rancière writes: 'It is not a question about the details of Axel Honneth's theory. It's a more general concern about the very idea of a general theory of subject: for instance, the idea that if you want to develop a good model of politics, grounded in good normative presuppositions, you have to construct a general theory of the subject. I think there is a cost to pay for it, which is sometimes too expansive' (Honneth and Rancière 2016, 87).

[6] Although in different ways, this shift has been noted by several interpreters of Honneth. See Piromalli 2012, particularly 261-290, Hunyadi 2014; *Critical Horizons* 2015; Deranty 2016, and the introduction to Renault 2017.

[7] See Faure, Rancière 2007, and Honneth 1995.

[8] Faure, Rancière 2007. See notably the afterword by Rancière from 2007.

[9] See Rancière 2011c, 21; and Rancière 2007.

[10] See Rancière 1983. In the same issue of the journal there are criticisms by William H. Sewell and Christopher H. Johnson, and in the following one criticisms by Edgar L. Newman and Nicolas Papayanis as well as the reply by Rancière.

[11] In an interview with François Ewald, Rancière argues: '[…] the notion of class has never been other than the result of a bundle of identifications. Thompson has shown that the "making of the working class" in England was the result of a series of efforts, recognitions, speeches' [my trans.] See Rancière, 1981.

[12] See Bingham, Biesta 2010, notably the chapter 'Recognition's Pedagogy', 86-109; Chambers 2013. Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta partially agree

with Deranty's idea that in Rancière's thinking as well as in theory of recognition, politics is born out of struggle and disagreement. But they argue that looking for a logic of recognition in Rancière means 'to police' his thought. Namely, it means supposing Rancière actually 'explains' what recognition is (notably, 106-109). Samuel Chambers claims that Deranty, for his 'own desire to link Rancière to the tradition of politics of recognition' (50), would propose a dialectical interpretation of the French thinker, according to which 'the political' is the terrain of encounter – 'a third term' – between 'politics' and 'police'. At the same time, Chambers uses the concept of 'ontological torsion' which Deranty himself identifies in Rancière to demonstrate that 'politics' is a logic wronging the 'wrong'.

[13] See Davis 2010. Davis, notably in the footnote 70 of his book, remarks: 'While in a sense Deranty is right to say that Rancière's is a politics of recognition, in that Rancière is concerned with the miscount and the wrong, one major difference is that Honneth is far more interested in the affective dimension to (non-)recognition than the socio-structural. This is why I suggest that, rather than their being merely similar, as Deranty does, Honneth's account can usefully supplement Rancière's in the affective sphere' (181).

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