The Struggle for Recognition
The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts
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Disrespect and Resistance: The Moral Logic of Social Conflicts

At a pretheoretical level, Marx, Sorel, and Sartre – the three representatives of the tradition brought to light above – could always count on the fact that the self-understanding of the social movements of their day was shot through with the semantic potential of a vocabulary of recognition. For Marx, who followed the working class’s attempts at organizing from the closest distance, it was beyond doubt that the overarching aspirations of the emerging movement could be brought together under the concept of ‘dignity’. Sorel, a theoretical forerunner of French syndicalism, employed the conservative-sounding category of ‘honour’ to express the moral content of the political demands of the workers’ movement. And the Sartre of the fifties encountered in Frantz Fanon’s famous book an anti-colonialist manifesto that attempted to explicate the experience of oppressed Black Africa by drawing directly on Hegel’s doctrine of recognition. However much the idea of tracing social conflicts to the violation of implicit rules of mutual recognition may have been an essential element of the everyday political observations of these three theorists, this experience was hardly reflected in the conceptual framework of the emerging social sciences: in the contexts in which the category of social struggle plays any constitutive role at all in revealing social reality, it quickly came to be defined, under the influence of Darwinian or utilitarian models, in terms of competition over material opportunities.

Although Emile Durkheim and Ferdinand Tönnies both approached the development of empirical sociology with the intention of critically diagnosing the moral crises of modern societies, neither of them give the phenomenon of social confrontation a systematic role in their basic concepts. However many insights they may have had into the moral preconditions for social integration, they drew few theoretical conclusions from this for the category of social conflict. Max Weber, on the other hand, who sees the process of socialization as virtually geared towards a conflict of social groups, excludes every aspect of moral motivation from his conceptual definition of ‘struggle’. According to the famous formulations of his ‘Basic Sociological Concepts’, an action context involves a social relationship of struggle ‘insofar as the action is oriented intentionally to carrying out the actor’s own will against the resistance of the other party or parties’ in order to increase the actor’s power or chance of survival. And Georg Simmel, finally, who devotes a famous chapter of his Sociology to the socializing function of conflict, systematically considers a form of social ‘sensitivity to difference’ (along with ‘hostility’) as a source of conflict, but he does so little to trace this dimension of personal or collective identity back to intersubjective preconditions associated with recognition that it is impossible for moral experiences of disrespect to come into view as the occasions for social conflicts. Once again, as in so many respects, the sociological work of the pragmatist ‘Chicago School’ constitutes a notable exception. In the textbook edited by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess under the title Introduction to the Science of Sociology, the discussion of ‘conflict’ refers to a ‘struggle for recognition’ with regard to the particular case of confrontations between nationalities or ethnic groups. Nevertheless, aside from the mere mention of ‘honor, glory, and prestige’, this discussion also does not have much to say about how the moral logic of social struggles is to be appropriately defined.

Thus, within academic sociology, the internal connection that often holds between the emergence of social movements and the moral experience of disrespect has, to a large extent, been theoretically severed at the start. The motives for rebellion, protest, and resistance have generally been transformed into categories of ‘interest’, and these interests are supposed to emerge from the objective inequalities in the distribution of material opportunities without ever being linked, in any way, to the everyday web of moral feelings. Relative to the predominance that the Hobbesian conceptual model acquired within modern social theory, the incomplete, even misguided, proposals of Marx, Sorel, and Sartre have remained mere fragments of an invisible, undeveloped theoretical tradition. Today, anyone who tries to reconnect with this disrupted effective history of Hegel’s counter-model, in order to acquire the foundations for a normatively substantive social theory, will have to rely primarily on a concept of social struggle that takes as its starting-point moral feelings of indignation, rather than pre-given interests. In what follows, I want to reconstruct the essential
features of an alternative – Hegelian and Meadian – paradigm of this sort, up to the point at which it begins to become apparent that recent trends within historiography can support the asserted connection between moral disrespect and social struggle.

Even just our effort to develop an empirically grounded phenomenology of forms of recognition made clear that none of the three fields of experience can be adequately described without reference to an inherent conflict: the experience of a particular form of recognition was shown to be bound up with the disclosing of new possibilities with regard to identity, which necessarily result in a struggle for the social recognition of those new forms of identity. Of course, the three spheres of recognition do not all contain the type of moral tension that can set social conflicts in motion, for a struggle can only be characterized as ‘social’ to the extent that its goals can be generalized beyond the horizon of individuals’ intentions, to the point where they can become the basis for a collective movement. With regard to the distinctions made above, the initial implication of this is that love, as the most basic form of recognition, does not entail moral experiences that could lead, of their own accord, to the formation of social conflicts. Every love relationship does, to be sure, involve an existential dimension of struggle, insofar as the intersubjective balance between fusion and ego-demarcation can only be maintained through the overcoming of resistance on both sides. But the goals and desires connected with this cannot be generalized beyond the circle of primary relationships, at least not in a way that would make them matters of public concern. The forms of recognition associated with rights and social esteem, by contrast, do represent a moral context for societal conflict, if only because they rely on socially generalized criteria in order to function. In light of norms of the sort constituted by the principle of moral responsibility or the values of society, personal experiences of disrespect can be interpreted and represented as something that can potentially affect other subjects. Whereas here, in the case of legal relations and communities of value, individual goals are, in principle, open to social universalization, in love relationships they are necessarily enclosed within the narrow boundaries of a primary relationship. This categorial restriction already gives us an initial, rough idea of how a social struggle must be understood within the context of our discussion. We are dealing here with a practical process in which individual experiences of disrespect are read as typical for an entire group, and in such a way that they can motivate collective demands for expanded relations of recognition.

What is striking about this provisional definition, to begin with, is the purely negative fact that it is neutral with regard to the usual distinctions within the sociology of conflict. If one interprets social struggle from the perspective of moral experiences in the manner mentioned, there is no theoretical pre-commitment in favour of either non-violent or violent resistance. Instead, at the level of description, it is left entirely open whether social groups employ material, symbolic, or passive force to publicly articulate and demand restitution for the disrespect and violation that they experience as being typical. The suggested conception is also neutral with respect to the traditional distinction between intentional and unintentional forms of social conflict, since it asserts nothing about the degree to which actors have to be aware of the driving moral motivation of their action. Here, one can easily imagine cases in which social movements intersubjectively misidentify, as it were, the moral core of their resistance by explicating it in the inappropriate terms of mere interest-categories. Finally, the idea that personal and impersonal goals represent exclusive alternatives does not entirely apply to a struggle understood in this way, since the struggle can, in principle, only be determined by those universal ideas and appeals in which individual actors see their particular experiences of disrespect eliminated in a positive manner. There must be a semantic bridge between the impersonal aspirations of a social movement and their participants’ private experiences of injury, a bridge that is sturdy enough to enable the development of collective identity.

The descriptive openness that thus characterizes the suggested concept of social struggle stands in contrast to the fixed core of its explanatory content. Unlike all utilitarian models of explanation, it suggests the view that motives for social resistance and rebellion are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition. These expectations are internally linked to conditions for the formation of personal identity in that they indicate the social patterns of recognition that allow subjects to know themselves to be both autonomous and individuated beings within their socio-cultural environment. If these normative expectations are disappointed by society, this generates precisely the type of moral experience expressed in cases where subjects feel disrespected. Hurt feelings of this sort can, however, become the motivational basis for collective resistance only if subjects are able to articulate them within an intersubjective framework of interpretation that they can show to be typical for an entire group. In this sense, the emergence of social movements hinges on the existence of a shared semantics that enables personal experiences of disappointment to be
interpreted as something affecting not just the individual himself or herself but also a circle of many other subjects. As Mead saw, the need for such semantics is met by the moral doctrines or ideas that are able normatively to enrich our notions of social community. Along with the prospect of broadened recognition relations, these languages open up an interpretive perspective for identifying the social causes of individual injuries. Thus, as soon as ideas of this sort have gained influence within a society, they generate a subcultural horizon of interpretation within which experiences of disrespect that, previously, had been fragmented and had been coped with privately can then become the moral motives for a collective ‘struggle for recognition’.

When we try to grasp, in this way, the process by which social struggles emerge, they turn out to involve the experience of recognition in more than just the regard mentioned. The collective resistance stemming from the socially critical interpretation of commonly shared feelings of being disrespected is not solely a practical instrument with which to assert a claim to the future expansion of patterns of recognition. For the victims of disrespect – as has been shown in philosophical discussions, in literature, and in social history – engaging in political action also has the direct function of tearing them out of the crippling situation of passively endured humiliation and helping them, in turn, on their way to a new, positive relation-to-self. The basis for this secondary motivation for struggle is connected to the structure of the experience of disrespect itself. As we have seen, social shame is a moral emotion that expresses the diminished self-respect typically accompanying the passive endurance of humiliation and degradation. If such inhibitions on action are overcome through involvement in collective resistance, individuals uncover a form of expression with which they can indirectly convince themselves of their moral or social worth. For, given the anticipation that a future communication community will recognize them for their present abilities, they find themselves socially respected as the persons that they cannot, under present circumstances, be recognized for being. In this sense, because engaging in political struggle publicly demonstrates the ability that was hurtfully disrespected, this participation restores a bit of the individual's lost self-respect. This may, of course, be further strengthened by the recognition that the solidarity within the political groups offers by enabling participants to esteem each other.

The foregoing may seem to suggest that all social confrontations and forms of conflict follow the same pattern of a struggle for recognition. On this view, the emergence of every collective act of resistance and rebellion would be traceable to an invariant framework of moral experiences, within which social reality would be interpreted in terms of a historically changing grammar of recognition and disrespect. A thesis of this sort would lead, however, to the fatal consequence of requiring one to dispute, from the outset, the possibility of social struggles that obey a logic of the more-or-less conscious pursuit of collective interests. That this is not the case – that is, that not all forms of resistance have their roots in injury to moral claims – is clearly shown by the many historical cases in which it was purely the securing of economic survival that motivated massive protest and revolt.

Interests are basic goal-directed orientations that accompany the economic and social circumstances of individuals, if only because individuals must try to obtain the conditions for their own reproduction. Such interests become collective attitudes to the extent to which various subjects become aware of the commonality of their social situation and, because of this, come to see themselves as confronting similar tasks of reproduction. Feelings of having been disrespected, on the other hand, form the core of moral experiences that are part of the structure of social interaction because human subjects encounter one another with expectations for recognition, expectations on which their psychological integrity turns. Feelings of having been unjustly treated can lead to collective actions to the extent to which they come to be experienced by an entire circle of subjects as typical for their social situation. The models of conflict that start from collective interests are those that trace the development and course of social struggles back to attempts on the part of social groups to obtain or enlarge control over certain opportunities for their reproduction. This same line is also taken by all those approaches that want to broaden the spectrum of these interest-guided struggles by including cultural and symbolic goods within the definition of group-specific opportunities for reproduction. By contrast, the models of conflict that start from collective feelings of having been unjustly treated are those that trace the emergence and the course of social struggles back to moral experiences of social groups who face having legal or social recognition withheld from them. In the first case, we are dealing with the analysis of competition for scarce goods, whereas in the second case, we are dealing with the analysis of a struggle over the intersubjective conditions for personal integrity.

It is important to stress, however, that this second model of conflict, based on a theory of recognition, should not try to replace the first, utilitarian model but only extend it. It will always be an empirical question as to the extent to which a social conflict follows the logic of the pursuit of interests or the logic of the formation of moral reactions.
That notwithstanding, social theory's fixation on the dimension of interests has so thoroughly obscured our view of the societal significance of moral feelings that today recognition-theoretic models of conflict have the duty not only to extend but possibly to correct. The collective interest behind a conflict does not have to be seen as something ultimate or original but may rather have been constituted within a horizon of moral experience that admits of normative claims to recognition and respect. This is the case, for example, wherever the social esteem for a person or group is so obviously correlated to the level of control over certain goods that only the acquisition of those goods can lead to the corresponding recognition. A number of historical studies point in the direction of just such a corrective interpretation of social conflicts by focusing on the everyday moral culture of the lower social classes. The results of these studies can help to lend empirical support to the model of conflict developed here and to defend it against obvious criticisms.

Not least under the influence of utilitarian currents of thought, historical research on political movements was, for a long time, so wedded to the standard model of the collective pursuit of interests that the moral grammar of social struggles had to remain hidden from it. This only changed in a lasting fashion after the methodological intersection of social anthropology and cultural sociology gave rise, two decades ago, to a form of historiography that was able to perceive more broadly and more accurately the normative presuppositions of the way lower social classes engaged in conflict. The advantage of this approach over conventional historiography lies in its heightened attention to the horizon of moral norms of action that are subtly involved in everyday life. Aided by the tools of anthropological field research, it became possible for historical studies to reveal the implicit rules of the normative consensus on which the political reactions of various subcultures depend. The impetus for this sort of reorientation, by which the utilitarian presuppositions of the earlier tradition could be replaced by normative premises, undoubtedly came from the English historian E. P. Thompson. His investigations of the everyday moral conceptions that motivated the English lower classes to resist the introduction of capitalist industrialization prepared the way for an entire line of research. Thompson took his lead from the idea that social rebellion can never be merely a direct expression of experiences of economic hardship and deprivation. Rather, what counts as an unbearable level of economic provision is to be measured in terms of the moral expectations that people consensually bring to the organization of the community. Hence, practical protest and resistance typically arise when a change in the economic situation is experienced as a violation of this tacit but effective consensus. In this sense, the investigation of social struggles presupposes an analysis of the moral consensus that unofficially governs, within a context of social cooperation, the distribution of rights and responsibilities between the dominators and the dominated.

To be sure, this shift of perspective was not yet enough to generate the results that, at a historical level, would support the thesis that social confrontations can in principle be understood in terms of the moral pattern of a struggle for recognition. For that, the further point needed to be demonstrated that every violation of an implicit consensus among those affected is experienced as something that denies them social recognition and, as a result, injures their feelings of self-worth. The first approach to explicating a motivational nexus of this sort has been developed in historical studies that have taken Thompson's approach and extended it along the dimension of individual or collective identity. Once the component of subjects' practical relation-to-self was taken into account, it quickly became apparent that, for participants, the existing consensus in each historical case amounts to a normative order that organizes relationships of mutual recognition. In this field, pioneering work has been done by Barrington Moore, and it is no coincidence that his concept of an 'implicit social contract' connects up with Thompson's idea of a 'moral economy'. His comparative studies of revolutionary uprisings in Germany between 1848 and 1920 concluded that the active and militant subgroups within the working class were primarily those that felt their previously recognized self-understanding to be massively threatened by socio-political changes. Moore treats the implicit social contract – that is, the normative consensus among the cooperating groups within a community – as a loosely organized system of rules that determine the conditions for mutual recognition. Hence, as soon as an implicit consensus of this sort is disrupted by politically imposed innovations, this leads almost inevitably to social disrespect for the inherited identity of individual subgroups. And, in Moore's view, it is only this jeopardizing of the possibility for collective self-respect that generates broad-based political resistance and social revolts.

Today, Moore's position is strengthened by historical studies that locate the motivational impetus for political uprisings in the injury inflicted upon group-specific notions of honour. This research – well exemplified by Andreas Griessinger's study of eighteenth-century journeyman artisans – adds the further component of identity to Thompson's approach by systematically connecting the political
disappointment of moral expectations with the overthrow of traditionally conceived relations of recognition.

Studies of this sort provide sufficient experiential detail to serve as initial empirical support for the thesis that social confrontations follow the pattern of a struggle for recognition. A serious disadvantage arises, however, from the fact that the role these works ascribe to the internal logic of recognition relations is too limited to admit of anything but a historical account of particular lifeworlds. Whether they are spontaneous revolts, organized strikes, or passive forms of resistance, the events depicted always retain something of the character of mere episodes, because their position within the moral development of society does not, as such, become clear. But this gap between individual processes and an overarching developmental process can only be bridged once the logic according to which recognition relationships are expanded itself becomes the referential system for historical accounts.

Posing the task in this way makes it necessary to conceive of the model of conflict discussed so far no longer solely as an explanatory framework for the emergence of social struggles, but also as an interpretive framework for a process of moral formation. Even just the reference back to the logic of the expansion of recognition relationships allows for the systematic classification of what would otherwise remain an uncomprehended occurrence. Every unique, historical struggle or conflict only reveals its position within the development of society once its role in the establishment of moral progress, in terms of recognition, has been grasped. In addition, of course, the radical broadening of the perspective from which historical processes are to be observed demands a change in our view of the primary research material. The feeling of being unjustly treated and the experience of being disrespected, both of which are relevant for the explanation of social struggles, no longer appear only as motives for action but also come to be examined with regard to the moral role that must be attributed to each of them in the development [Entfaltung] of relations of recognition. As a consequence, moral feelings – until now, the emotional raw materials of social conflicts – lose their apparent innocence and turn out to be retarding or accelerating moments within an overarching developmental process. Of course, this last formulation also makes unmistakably clear the challenges facing a theoretical approach that is supposed to be able to model the struggle for recognition as a historical process of moral progress: in order to be able to distinguish between the progressive and the reactionary, there has to be a normative standard that, in light of a hypothetical anticipation of an approximate end-state, would make it possible to mark out a developmental direction.

Hence, the general framework of interpretation on which we must rely describes the process of moral development through which, in the course of an idealized sequence of struggles, the normative potential of mutual recognition has unfolded. A model of this sort finds its point of departure in the theoretical distinctions learned from Hegel and Mead. Taken together, the three forms of recognition – love, rights, and esteem – constitute the social conditions under which human subjects can develop a positive attitude towards themselves. For it is only due to the cumulative acquisition of basic self-confidence, of self-respect, and of self-esteem – provided, one after another, by the experience of those three forms of recognition – that a person can come to see himself or herself, unconditionally, as both an autonomous and an individuated being and to identify with his or her goals and desires. But even this tripartite division owes its existence to a theoretical projection of differentiations that are found only in modern societies back into a hypothetically supposed original situation. For, as we have seen in our analysis, legal relations are unable to dislodge themselves from a customarily ethical framework of social esteem until they have been subjected to the claims of post-conventional morality. Insofar as this is the case, it is natural to assume, as the original situation of the formative process to be described, a form of social interaction in which these three patterns of recognition are still intertwined in an undifferentiated manner. One thing that may speak in favour of this is the existence of an archaic group morality, in which aspects of care are not fully separated from either the rights of tribal members or their social esteem. Thus, the moral learning process that the envisioned interpretive framework is supposed to model has to accomplish two completely different tasks: it must both differentiate the various patterns of recognition and then, within the spheres of interaction thus established, unleash the inherent potential of each. If we distinguish, in this sense, between the establishment of new levels of recognition and the development of their own internal structures, then it is not difficult to see that only the second process directly provides the occasion for social struggles.

Although the differentiation of patterns of recognition stems from social struggles that involve demands for recognition only in the very broad sense of releasing potentials for subjectivity, the result of this process marks the attainment of a socio-cultural level at which each of these structures, with its own internal logic, can become effective. Once love for persons is separated, at least in principle, from legal
recognition and social esteem, three forms of mutual recognition have emerged that are geared towards specific developmental potentials as well as distinct types of struggle. At this point, for the first time, we find normative structures built into legal relations (with the possibilities for universalization and de-formalization [Materialisierung]) and into communities of value (with the possibilities for individualization and equalization) — normative structures that can become accessible via emotionally laden experiences of disrespect and that can be appealed to in the struggles resulting from these experiences. The breeding-ground for these collective forms of resistance is prepared by sub-cultural semantics in which a shared language is found for feelings of having been unjustly treated, a language that points – however indirectly – to possibilities for expanding relationships of recognition. It is the task of the envisioned interpretive framework to describe the idealized path along which these struggles have been able to unleash the normative potential of modern law and of esteem. This framework lets an objective-intentional context emerge, in which historical processes no longer appear as mere events but rather as stages in a conflictual process of formation, leading to a gradual expansion of relationships of recognition. Accordingly, the significance of each particular struggle is measured in terms of the positive or negative contribution that each has been able to make to the realization of undistorted forms of recognition. To be sure, such a standard cannot be obtained independently of a hypothetical anticipation of a communicative situation in which the intersubjective conditions for personal integrity appear to be fulfilled. Thus, ultimately, Hegel’s account of a struggle for recognition can only be brought up to date again (albeit with less ambitious claims) if his conception of ethical life can also — in a modified, desubstantialized form — regain its plausibility.

9

Intersubjective Conditions for Personal Integrity:
A Formal Conception of Ethical Life

If the idea of a ‘struggle for recognition’ is to be viewed as a critical framework for interpreting the processes by which societies develop, there needs to be, by way of completing the model, a theoretical justification for the normative point of view from which these processes can be guided. In order to describe the history of social struggles as moving in a certain direction, one must appeal hypothetically to a provisional end-state, from the perspective of which it would be possible to classify and evaluate particular events. In the case of Hegel as well as of Mead, we found at this point the proposed model of a post-traditional relationship of recognition, a relationship that integrates legal and ethical (if not familial) patterns of mutual recognition into a single framework. For, as it turns out, both thinkers shared the conviction that it is in modern society that subjects are to be recognized as both autonomous and individualized beings. Even just this brief reminder of the earlier discussion is enough to suggest that the end-state to be sketched is not to be grasped in terms of concepts drawn from a narrow understanding of morality. In general, ‘morality’ is conceived today, within the Kantian tradition, as the point of view that allows all subjects to be accorded the same respect or to have their interests taken into consideration in the same, fair way. But a formulation of this sort is too narrow to include all the aspects that constitute the goal of undistorted and unrestricted recognition. Prior to any substantive explication, therefore, one must first clarify the methodological status of a normative theory that is capable of depicting the hypothetical end-point of an expansion of relations of recognition. One can, it seems to me, speak here of a formal concept of the good life or, indeed, of ethical life [Sittlichkeit]. Only once this methodological justification has