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Comment on Hermann Kocyba. The Regime of Esteem, or Recognition as Affirmation

Abstract: This comment on Kocyba's article discusses both his economic and moral assumptions, arguing that the shift from industrial capitalism towards a 'new spirit' of more autonomous forms of work is not captured by Kocyba's comparison between producing things alone and creating services together. Consequently, the main problem is not, as Kocyba believes, the determination of an individual's share in the (intangible) product, but the competitive mindset of this new spirit, which has many undesired consequences. Concerning the 'moral presuppositions' it is argued that the questionable self-restriction to 'immanent norms' induces a strong affirmative tendency which is at odds with Kocyba's critical aspirations. The idea that critical theory can only refer to norms which are already institutionalized needs to be dropped in order to revive the critical dimension. It is argued that Kocyba is already half way there and needs to make this break more explicit.

1. Introduction

Hermann Kocyba's article on the role of recognition in contemporary capitalism touches many topics all in one go. His main interest is to re-interpret recognition in the field of work as something that is not only immanent in social practices in Axel Honneth's additive understanding (as a normative *frame*, concerned with the 'public justifiability' of a certain organization). For Kocyba, recognition is built into the very logic of the new, service-based capitalism itself—not only as a frame, but as a core ("recognition is [...] co-constitutive of economic action", he says twice). In the post-Taylorist economy and its new forms of work, recognition presumably has itself assumed economic functions, for example the determination of the economic value of products and wages. Consequently a service only has economic value if it is recognized by the customer. The only problem that remains seems to be the difficulty of determining the economic 'value' of a single contribution to such a service. This determination, Kocyba says, is not as easy as in the case of material goods production, but it is important in order to 'distribute' the right amounts of money and recognition to

every single contribution. Therefore the question ‘how can the value of service activities be made visible?’ seems to bother Kocyba the most. In the following I will react to this approach in two ways: first I will outline a general political criticism (2), and then I will suggest a theoretical alternative concerning the development of norms (3).

2. The Moral History of Work

Kocyba wants to combine empirical research and normative reasoning—a claim which I basically share.¹ However, I have some subsequent thoughts about the way it is done, and these concern the empirical as well as the normative element—and also social theory, which is sandwiched between data and norms. Let me start with the norms. For a moral philosopher it is a good starting point to assume that normative claims are the *base* (‘presupposition’) of social processes. It allows him to describe society in a normativist way and attaches a certain relevance to his theory. As a theory of society, however, this is untenable. We do not have norms first and then build our practices in their image. Practices come first (both logically and temporally), and they are and remain conflict-ridden. Norms result from these practices, trying to regulate their ‘wild’, ever-changing and often anarchic nature. This also holds for norms in the world of labor. They—say: equal respect for women—are *results* of social conflicts, rather than their ‘presupposition’. Therefore their content certainly is not a good representation of real life in society—it would be a ‘normativist fallacy’ to read a theory of society from the norms of the said society.

Moreover, for normative concerns I do not consider the term recognition very helpful, simply because it covers too much. Certainly, if you work *for* me I recognize you as my employee. Here recognition petrifies a power structure. If you work *with* me I recognize you as my co-worker. But normatively this does not mean very much. If I am a co-worker and you consider me an employee, you recognize me wrongly. So what I really want in this case is equal respect, not your recognition. We may say: ‘I want you to recognize my claim to equal respect’, but the important part, normatively speaking, is the *equal respect*, not the recognition. If I have your respect, it implies that you recognize it. It does not add anything to repeat this. The term recognition is not wrong, but—plainly speaking—redundant.² In each case I have to unfold a long story about what kind of recognition I mean, for what reasons, etc. If we have all this, we can cancel the term recognition. If we only have the term recognition, we have almost nothing.

So the interesting questions remain open once the theory of recognition ends: recognition of *what*, what *kind*, and *why*? And does it have desired or undesired

¹ This is a rather ‘trendy’ opinion today, think of David Miller or Amartya Sen; cf. Struck 2006; Sayer 2011.

² Recognition talk cuts away a good part of the normative work done by the real move. To see this, imagine someone saying: ‘I love you—and I recognize your claim that I should’. The second sentence almost annihilates the first. So why should social theory press love (etc.) in the procrustean bed of ‘recognition’ in the first place?

effects? The recognition that B transfers to A is an answer to a claim put forward by A. But which claim, on what grounds, and what for? Part of Kocyba's answer is that in the field of work, we now claim esteem based on merit, or rather: in the new, individualized spirit of capitalism we *should* claim it (rather than relying on collective rights). However, the question of what kind of recognition should be earned how in the world of labor is a tricky one. The story Kocyba tells about the shift from an older, status-based capitalism towards a newer, more individualized one implies a shift from respect for general traits (*every* worker deserves certain rights, that is: *the same* rights to participation, to a decent income etc.) towards more individualized forms of recognition (workers who achieve more deserve more, whether in cash or in 'kind'—that is: in esteem).

That, however, is a dilemma: according to François Dubet (2009) we cannot have the cake of recognition and eat it. Either we recognize general traits at the cost of individual achievements, or we recognize individual achievements at the cost of general traits. Kocyba has to make a decision: does he opt for the 'paradise lost' of the old, corporatist capitalism against the new one (as Honneth, 2011, does)? I do not think so: his objections are surprisingly humble. For example, he assumes that the new capitalism allows us to link questions of individual recognition directly to questions of income, and of income to merit in terms of economic 'value'. This is a blueprint for an individualized form of justice (*suum cuique*: to each according to his own merits). Therefore Kocyba is concerned with the question of how we can determine the 'economic value' of certain types of service labor.

Alas, he does not have an answer. Instead he links moral aspects to monetary ones. This, however, is a dangerous move: incomes have become more and more unequal in recent decades. Why should it be deserved in every case, and—more importantly—how do we know? The price for this new regime of individualized recognition is an increased inequality, both in terms of money *and* moral standing. I can hardly see why this regime should be particularly 'moral'. Narratives of merit or talent do not *explain* these inequalities, even if they try to justify (i.e. ideologize) them. A sound economic theory is required in order to make valid judgments, and I simply do not see it here.³

That brings me to the empirical side. In his description of the shift from the old to the new capitalism, Kocyba describes two kinds of work: one is an atomistic production of *things* (resembling pre-industrial craftsmanship), the other is a social activity with *immaterial* results (service). His problem is that a 'recognition' of the work done is easy in the first case and difficult in the second. These two types of work are also meant to describe a historical shift from one to the other, from manual labor in *industry* to activities of *service* (including banks etc.). I can see what he is after, but I have some doubts concerning both the conceptual and the historical point. For one, why should the production of things have a special relation to recognition? Say that while listening to a lecture, I construct a paper glider. I produce a thing by myself. Why should this earn me recognition? From whom, for what, and what kind? This is not

³ I agree with Zurn's claim (2005, cf. Henning 2012) that the theory of recognition mistakenly moralizes the economy.

self-evident. It would make sense if the claim was satisfaction: yes, a kind of work that implies instant gratification because it shows immediate results may be more satisfying. That is why people garden. But the *recognition* we associate with capitalist labor is not yet captured here; at least we need to say a lot more.

Secondly, have there not always been immaterial activities, even in the Middle Ages; and do we not still have ‘things’ produced? The two types of work Kocyba juxtaposes have no historical index. Both of them have almost always been there. The relevant historical changes become visible only if a more detailed phenomenology of types of work is applied. I will briefly indicate what I mean by this. Let us assume that producing things is the model of the independent craftsman who sells his own pottery. It is still relevant, if you think of artists, but it has not been the *dominant* mode of production for centuries now. Instead we have industrial production. Industries still produce ‘things’ today (needles, cars, iPhones, etc.), but what kinds of work are implied here?

First we have manual production labor. This, however, is not ‘producing things’. Work is fragmented on the assembly line, and it’s hard to distinguish each person’s share. The question of the impact of a particular individual on the value produced has always existed for industrial capitalism. But there was also an easy solution: a workers’ wage is not usually based on things, it does not even reflect the *value* of the products, since most of it goes into profits, not wages (the share of labor in productivity growth has declined steadily). Workers are paid for the amount of *labor time* they contribute. The hours and average wage rate for a fulltime job reflect what is ‘normal’ for a society to have in order to reproduce one’s labor power. This is the ‘moral element’ that even Karl Marx referred to. It reflects the bargaining power of different classes at a particular moment in time. Today, with declining unions and powerful stock markets, it is considered normal that even 40 hours of work do *not* earn a living—not a very ‘moral’ custom. (‘Moral presuppositions’, if they were ever present in the organization of work, seem to have gone amiss.)

Yet even within industrial production, other kinds of work are involved: repairing a machine, for instance, is not the same as producing things—it is maintenance. Neither is making plans and overseeing workers (management work), distributing products (trade and transportation work) or advertising (marketing work). These activities have been with us for centuries. Now, where does economic value enter the scene? The answer is easy: industrial production (including the banking sector) produces *commodities*, and commodities have a value. It is important to see that commodities do not have to be *things*. Anything sold on the market is a commodity: a haircut, a trip to the beach, a song, even love or financial derivatives. So instead of applying a metaphysics of things, we should start with the division of labor in the collective production of commodities. It can be anything, so it is not crucial whether we are engaged on the assembly line, in maintenance, advertising or trading on Wall Street. As long as the different types of labor deal with commodities, they share what is left of the commodities’ realized market value, in proportion to their bargaining power

and after reinvestments and profits have been deducted.⁴ None of these types of work is paid or recognized for ‘things’ produced. So the link from work to recognition leads neither through money nor through things.

In which way are these activities connected to recognition then, and what in particular *is* recognized here? I would put it the following way: in western societies, somebody who ‘goes to work’ and earns a decent living is recognized as a normal member of society. This is a good thing only insofar as it is bad *not* to have it. Not recognized, therefore, are people who do not work (e.g. the unemployed, even if involuntary) or who work *indecently* (as thieves or prostitutes).⁵ However, being recognized as normal is not very exciting, nor is it in any substantial way moral. It is not exciting because everybody is recognized—there is a fragile sense of equality here. It is not moral because the monetary link (we said we recognize somebody for his earnings) is accompanied by an *inequality* of recognition. Why should a social theory reaffirm this? If the amount of recognition a job brings reflects its alleged contribution to the value of the product, which in turn is said to be reflected in the wage, we chain a moral element to a highly contingent market outcome. That is problematic, for market outcomes are never ‘just’. A dumb actor, a stupid singer or a ruthless manager might earn a fortune, and in consequence become highly recognized members of society. A nurse or a guard, by contrast, may work very hard, but earn very little, and in consequence be recognized to a lesser degree. Why should that be considered moral? Instead of throwing morality and markets together, I think it is necessary to distinguish them. Otherwise we end up condemning people morally for their weak market position—a regrettable Victorian attitude. There is no direct link between money and morals, neither via value talk nor via recognition. Both terms are much too ambivalent.⁶

Now what about the historical shift? For this I would like to focus on yet another type of work. There are also *non-market* types of work. Typically these are social services; but the difference is not due to the type of activity, but to the social location.⁷ If the employer is public, it is non-market. So, by definition, social services do not produce commodities. As long as there is no market, anyone trying to buy these products is considered ‘corrupt’—it would pave the way for an unequal society. Once there is a market, however, you may buy and sell. Until recently schools, hospitals and even some banks were social services; hence market value was not a measure of recognition. Rather it was the other way round: the wage a school inspector, a policeman or a judge earned reflected the moral respect that society paid to these activities. Years of membership

⁴ The kind of ‘merit’ applied to profits is rarely questioned; with public guarantees, it is no longer the risk taken.

⁵ In most cases banking is still considered to be decent—one may wonder why, but that is another story.

⁶ For ‘value’ see Anderson 1993; Henning 2011, for ‘recognition’ Zurn 2005 and—again—Dubet 2009.

⁷ I define work, or labor, here as any activity undertaken for a living (for money). It is not open to a random ‘moral’ decision which activity ‘counts as’ work (this would be de-economized thinking). A society can decide to invest in other activities (childcare, recreation etc.), and I am all for this, but as long as this is not a job it is not work.

increased the wage; insurance, holidays and rights in the workplace ensured that these workers were respected members of society, regardless of higher wages in other sectors. Moreover, there were transparent salary scales, open to debate, declaring who gets what for doing what. A teacher, a nurse, a train conductor or a policeman deserved equal respect for their socially useful activities. Since it is hard to tell what is *more* useful, there was an incentive to equalize wages (not: to equal wages). For this reason wages were not so different in the end, compared to present-day wage differentials.

Here is the irony of this comparison: what Kocyba expects from today's privatized service sector was already the case in the *old* model of public services: here, recognition was indeed an economic factor. Not the only one, of course, but one among others. This moral economy worked without today's enormous social inequalities and competitive mindset. The trouble is that this is no longer the case. Where banks, hospitals, railways and even armies are privatized, these 'moral' elements in determining wages no longer exist. (Moreover, as Kocyba indicates, the usual sense of cooperation amongst co-workers is replaced by increased competition.)⁸ Rather, it is a question either of market rates (which includes brute luck) or, even worse, of access to power. The skyrocketing wages in financial industries have little to do with moral 'merit' or with adding economic 'value'; they have a lot to do with control. Banks control everybody's funds, so they have power over incredible financial resources—and serve themselves lavishly. The amounts paid in bonuses reflect a loss of moral standards, which in turn can be attributed to a loss of social control due to a massive privatization of public goods and funds. It would be impossible for members of parliament to assign themselves a million francs for hitting a random target, just because they control and invest tax money.

Something similar is true in other sectors, too: if the pay level depends on performance, but performance is hard to measure, this leads to a high level of discretion, which opens a door to 'neo-feudal' forms of personal dependency. And here the term 'individualized recognition' serves as a euphemism for the precarious strategies individuals use in order to make their work appear as important as possible to superiors. I do not agree that it is the task of critical social theory to construct new performance-based pay schemes in order to make this system more 'just' according to its own norms, as Kocyba seems to imply at times. Instead, social theory should highlight the negative effects of this new economic regime of esteem: it boosts social inequality and an anti-social sense of competition, both of which erode what little is left of the sense of cooperation and solidarity between co-workers (and co-citizens). If we want morality in the workplace, it cannot tacitly be abstracted *into* the theory of society. We need more public control—it is as simple as that. Maybe some people prefer efficiency over morals. Some do, some do not; this is a political question and not for philosophers to decide. However, philosophy should not cover up things, either. We should be careful not to make crude market dynamics look 'moral' by using an over-inclusive language of recognition, respect and esteem where we really

⁸ Following Schultheis et al. 2010 this is highly regretted by many of the workers affected.

deal with contingent market dynamics, power over resources and neo-Darwinian self-staging strategies.

3. Reviving the Critical Dimension

Up to now, my comments have been rather sketchy and political. Before I close I would like to suggest an alternative approach. For this I will return to norms. Kocyba's article has a tendency to accept the recent transformations in the organization of work, trying to find a solution to the 'remaining' minor problem of determining the exact value of every single contribution, even in the service sector. From this perspective, harm is not done *by* the new system itself, but only *within* the system—in cases where a single member does not get what he 'deserves'. So far Kocyba's theory is an example for a 'normalizing' criticism: it would criticize everything that is not yet (or not correctly) covered by the new norms of recognition. As long as Kocyba follows Honneth's self-restriction to—supposedly—'immanent norms' (norms that have been institutionalized already, if maybe not 'fully'), this is to be expected, for this model does not allow us to criticize a social system as such. Moreover, if the norms themselves erode, this theory loses its (small) critical teeth completely. However, there are some countercurrents in Kocyba's article which I would like to stress against the normative metaphysics of immanence:

For example, at times Kocyba openly criticizes Honneth's program.⁹ More important, though, are sections where Kocyba hints at problems of the new regime of esteem. It is not easy to see exactly where these problems lie for Kocyba. It is not the 'paradox of recognition' (it cannot be achieved directly, so the more that is demanded, the less is supplied), for according to Kocyba this can be resolved if we use 'indirect ways'. Neither is it the waning of the old capitalism, for it would be naive to long for this 'paradise lost' which did not seem to be one when we had it.¹⁰ Neither is it the fact that the new capitalism comes with much higher inequality and competition: Kocyba does not want to rephrase old-school criticisms of 'distribution', 'exploitation' or 'conflicts of interest'. Instead, in some sections he suggests a language of inauthenticity and suffering. This, however, needs further explanation, for it could still be read affirmatively in the following way: people should be authentic on the job; however, if they are misread by their superiors, they are forced to 'deep act' (Hochschild) roles which are not really theirs (Rastetter 2008). Viewed from within the new norms this boils down to a management problem: if we put the right people at the right place, everybody is happy. Consequently, perhaps managers should try to learn even more about every worker's personality (and

⁹ Concerning immanent norms Kocyba rightly asks: "In which sense can they be valid and invalidated at the same time?" He also questions Honneth's ideal of visibility and prefers an ideal of self-control.

¹⁰ For Lessenich 2008 theories relying on the old capitalism in order to criticize the new one are insufficient: they overlook the problems the old capitalism already had. As indicated above, I think even Kocyba relies on the old capitalism (with a large public sector) in his claim to let recognition rule the economy.

study their Facebook profiles)? There seems to be no problem with the idea of labor-related ‘authenticity’ itself. Likewise, if people ‘suffer’ because they do not earn more than their colleagues in spite of being on a good footing with the boss, this also seems to have undesired consequences. A more thorough system of Taylorized (or re-engineered) offices, more supervision and individualized forms of control seem to be the answer.

Read this way, a normative theory applying only immanent norms must remain affirmative. But what if the ‘immanent norm’ (here: everybody should be authentic on the job, and everybody should get what they deserve, independent of any scales or tariffs) is not part of the solution, but part of the problem? How do we get beyond the injustices of the current system? As I read Kocyba’s closing remarks, he does not wish to abandon the self-restriction to immanent norms. However, he broadens the horizon of immanent norms immensely—with the same effect. In the end, *every* criticism, even the seemingly ‘universal’ or the one ‘from without’, may be called immanent by what Kocyba calls ‘historical reflexivity’. Kocyba seems to have Gadamer’s universal hermeneutics in mind: everything I could possibly say will be informed by my historical situation. In effect I would not have to bother proving that the norms I apply are in some way ‘immanent’ in the society I aim to criticize. They necessarily are, whatever I say.

This is a strange way to remove the inherited self-restriction: lip service is paid to the idea of ‘immanent norms’, but its point is undermined almost completely. I would prefer to spell out clearly that the self-restriction is abandoned. What is so bad about norms that transcend the horizon of a contemporary society? Honneth’s fear, which he took from Michael Walzer and others, was that nobody would understand the critic, so he would become elitist and authoritarian (2000, 73ff.). This, however, greatly underestimates the intellectual capacities of everyday people. They usually *do* understand what justice, freedom or equality means, even in societies lacking their proper institutionalization (see Sayer 2011). Without the courage to transcend given norms, a critical theory will lend itself to affirmative normalizations of given norms. This way, the desired ‘moral progress’ (Honneth 2010, 115, 226) will never come about. Most of the ‘moral progress’ that we have witnessed in recent centuries had to rely on norms *external* to the given society.

This teaches us a different lesson about ‘historical reflexivity’: more progressive norms are not extension of old ones. Think of equal rights for women: they are not extensions of former *male* rights to domination, but instead completely changed the idea of having a right for both men and women. Likewise, civil rights are not an extension of former feudal rights; rather, these old rights *ended* with civil rights. That does not mean that new norms are taken out of the blue: there are many aspects which transcend a given society and have the potential to inform new norms.¹¹ It is only an overstretched social constructivism which

¹¹ When Marx, for example, claimed that the nucleus of the new society is already present in the old one, this did not refer to norms. Much more fundamentally, this referred to economic, technical and human possibilities that had already developed in the old society, but which were blocked by the power structures and norms of the old society.

has lost sight of them. Where everything has to be ‘intersubjective’, the normative power of nature and individuals tends to be neglected. There are, for example, certain traits of human nature which are relevant in *any* society. Kocyba mentions one of them when he replaces Honneth’s ideal of visibility (which can be put to authoritarian uses) with the ideal of *self-control*. Another one is the idea of *co-operation* invoked: following evolutionary anthropology (e.g. Tomasello 2009), it is so deeply embedded in our nature that even in societies (like ours) which undermine cooperative ways of life, people do understand what ‘working together’ could mean. I would like to encourage Kocyba to walk all the way and try to formulate new—and more progressive—norms for the new regime of esteem, based on the empirical findings he is about to gather in his projects to come.

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