

Normativity as Autopoiesis

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Abstract: This project intends to provide a systems theory approach to extracting a sociological theory from Honneth's recognition theory as a movement further away from a linear reading of the latter. The main convergence of this paper is to argue that normativity is autopoietic in the sense that it is a self-reproducing product of interaction between the systems of personal relations, market economy, and democracy. I argue in this project that the language of critical theory from Honneth's work will benefit from a Luhmannian rethinking of concepts, which will expand the nuances of Honneth's moral vocabulary and address the concerns of his critics. This paper aims to articulate a "sociology of recognition" which looks at social pathologies from the perspective of entropy, negentropy, functional differentiation, and perturbation of other systems.

Keywords: Luhmann, Honneth, systems theory, recognition theory

Communications have recently been a problem attributed to the exponential growth in connectivity in our contemporary times. Issues of misinformation occur in communications, such as fake news, generative AI content, and information campaigns. The understanding of communication serves as a remedy to the current proclivity of society to rely on assumed conventions of meaning. Luhmann's communication theory provides a sound epistemological counterpoint to these issues by setting expectations of the variability of outcomes since it assumes functional distinction of systems. This systems theory-based perspective provides a nuanced understanding of Honneth's recognition theory. A consolidated theory derived from Honneth's oeuvre shows that Honneth identifies three systems differentiated by their functions. For Honneth, society functions through three spheres: personal relations, market economy, and democracy. Society maintains its functionality by relying on the normative resources provided by these spheres. I propose to establish an observational construct to depict these spheres as systems that communicate their needs to other systems.

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Using Luhmann's vocabulary avoids the communicative issues that Honneth faces with his concepts of normativity, disrespect, and social pathology. My take on this matter is to modify the language using Luhmann's morally agnostic concepts. This eliminates the sense of moral judgment when Honneth uses the concept of normativity to denote cooperation and mutual recognition in society. With Luhmann, it is possible to articulate the system's functionality via its need to avoid entropy or to maintain its continuity. I see this compatibility when Honneth mentions in *Freedom's Right* that the market economy is amoral, which translates well when viewed from Luhmann's idea of functional differentiation and negentropy.

This paper provides a systems theory approach to extracting a sociological theory from Honneth's recognition theory. The main contention of this paper is to argue that normativity is autopoietic, in the sense that it is a self-reproducing product of interaction between the systems of personal relations, market economy, and democracy. The final proposal of this paper is to articulate a "sociology of recognition" which looks at social pathologies from the perspective of entropy, negentropy, functional differentiation, and perturbation of other systems. This will be done in three parts. The first part will discuss and rehearse Honneth's recognition theory from the perspective of a system. A detailed discussion of this is also covered in my previous work, *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition*.¹ The second part of this paper will cover some of Luhmann's concepts on systems theory, communications, and entropy. The final part of this paper will explore the possibility of a sociology of recognition.

The System of Recognition

Axel Honneth's recognition theory is based on the basic assumption that human societies are motivated by love, rights, and esteem. The core concepts of his theory can be found in *The Struggle for Recognition*.² As elaborated in this work, the developmental process of mutual recognition, including its pathological tendencies, begins with love, which will evolve into rights, and is expressed further in the form of esteem. *The Struggle for Recognition* follows up on Hegel's observations on crime and how it seamlessly involves the recognition of both a violation of law and, perhaps, the possibility that the subjectivity of the criminal is a misrecognized subject.³ Honneth, in this work, further adopts George Herbert Mead's sociology, specifically the relationship between the concept of the "I" and "Me," where

¹ See Roland Theuas Pada, *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

² See Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

³ See *Ibid.*, 12.

the “I” realizes that in its dialectical relationship with a generalized other, it begins to understand that the “Me” is an ongoing transformative process. This becomes Honneth’s basis for the spheres of recognition. From a developmental perspective, love is the initial dialectical encounter where the subject experiences care and concern unreciprocated by the subject to the other. An example of this case is when a mother or a caregiver provides for the infant’s needs without demanding anything from the infant. This becomes the starting point for recognition. The infant begins to recognize that, insofar as it is treated as a subject deserving of love, the caregiver is also worthy of love.⁴ On the other hand, rights are realized when the subject’s social environment becomes more complex.⁵ The realization that subjects are expected to be recipients of love (or at least care or concern) means that the general public fundamentally possesses the same expectation, leading to an understanding of the importance of norms and laws. As the highest developmental phase, esteem occurs with the realization that individual contributions to society are valued and encouraged through exchange values and reciprocity.⁶ These spheres of recognition signify an “operating” system where the preservation of normative expectations and practices is circulated to society. However, recognition theory acknowledges that the possibility of misrecognition is a constant in these spheres or phases. For example, the abuse of a child could generate pathologies of social relations since racial discrimination and economic exploitation of laborers are also pathological.

Honneth’s motive for the development of this theory dates back to an early paper he wrote entitled “Atomism and Ethical Life: On Hegel’s Critique of the French Revolution.”⁷ His first major work, *The Critique of Power*, establishes his differentiation from the Frankfurt School and continues Habermas’ critical theory.⁸ Scholars often prefer Honneth’s earlier works since they contain core principles of Honneth’s brand of critical theory that provide a sociological and moral vocabulary to understand and provide critical avenues for social issues. The local scholarship on Honneth usually prefers this route. Pilapil, for example, find Honneth’s theoretical perspective useful in the Moro struggles in Muslim Mindanao.⁹ Bolaños, on the theoretical side, explores the theoretical prospects of Honneth’s critical theory in his essay, “The ethics of recognition and the normativity of social

⁴ See *Ibid.*, 103–104.

⁵ See *Ibid.*, 109.

⁶ See *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷ Axel Honneth, “Atomism and Ethical Life: On Hegel’s Critique of the French Revolution,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 14:3-4 (1988), 359–368.

⁸ See Axel Honneth, *The Critique of Power*, trans. by K. Baynes (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991).

⁹ See Renante Pilapil, *Recognition: Examining Identity Struggles* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015).

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relations”¹⁰ while also addressing Ricoeur’s premature criticisms of recognition theory in “Between Struggle and Peaceful Dialogue: An Overture to Honneth and Ricoeur on Recognition.”¹¹ Loquias, a recent Honneth scholar in the Philippines, uses Honneth’s critical theory to unpack social issues, such as the relationship between pedagogy and globalization¹² and environmental ethics.¹³

Later developments in Honneth’s theory address some of his critics’ concerns. His refinement of recognition theory could be seen in works such as *Reification*, which hints at his theory’s non-linear or cyclical articulation.¹⁴ Honneth’s full implementation of recognition theory’s critical potential would later be found in *Freedom’s Right*, where he attempted a systematic rendition of Hegel’s concept of the *Sittlichkeit* in the context of modern democratic societies.¹⁵ Criticisms such as Deranty’s observation of recognition theory’s apolitical nature,¹⁶ Fraser’s critique of esteem,¹⁷ and Kompridis’ commentary on the ambiguity of recognition¹⁸ were addressed in *Freedom’s Right*, albeit, indirectly. For example, the apolitical nature of Honneth’s recognition theory could be understood in *Freedom’s Right* as a necessity for developing political discourse and political culture. Likewise, the division of labor, in the case of Fraser, could be remedied by the recognition of subjects that deserve esteem. In the case of Kompridis, the ambiguity of recognition lies in its sphere or function in a specific system. Love involves personal relations, rights refer to the development and cultivation of a political culture in democracies, and esteem is dependent on the participation of individuals in the market economy as laborers, consumers, and investors (capitalists). Few attempts were made to establish Honneth’s continuity of theory in his oeuvre. Zurn’s *Axel Honneth*, for

¹⁰ See Paolo Bolaños, “The Ethics of Recognition and the Normativity of Social Relations,” in *Suri*, 1:1 (2012), 15–24.

¹¹ See Paolo Bolaños, “Between Struggle and Peaceful Dialogue: An Overture to Honneth and Ricoeur on Recognition” in *Budhi*, 20:2 (2016).

¹² See Victor Loquias, “Axel Honneth’s Critical Pedagogy for a Renewed Socialist-Global Society,” in *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 5:1 (2019), 99–140.

¹³ See Victor Loquias, “Axel Honneth on Social Justice and the Environment as a Moral-Practical Concern” in *Eubios: Journal of Asian International Bioethics*, 30:5 (2020), 264–272.

¹⁴ See Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ See Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, trans. by J. Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 2–4 and 7–8.

¹⁶ See Jean-Philippe Derranty, “Politicizing Honneth’s Ethics of Recognition,” in *Thesis Eleven*, 88:1 (2007), 92–111.

¹⁷ See Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition* (New York: Verso, 2003).

¹⁸ See Nikolas Kompridis, “From Reason to Self-Realisation,” in *Critical Horizons*, 5:1 (2000), 23–47 and Nikolas Kompridis, “Struggling over the meaning of recognition: A matter of identity, justice, or freedom?,” in *European Journal of Political Theory*, 6:3 (2007), 277–289.

example, traces the development of Honneth's theory from *The Critique of Power to Freedom's Right*.¹⁹ Another example is my attempt in *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition* to articulate the relationship between the spheres of social interaction in the context of the three forms of recognition and the place of antecedent recognition to provide feedback loops for the systems to adjust their norms.²⁰ In this current manuscript, I add to this by attempting to discuss recognition theory as a system, bringing Luhmann into the discussion.

Modelling a system out of Honneth's recognition theory requires readers to view recognition areas as interconnected systems with inherent dependencies that can create stable or pathological conditions. An apt analogy is to recall the interdependence of Plato's ideal republic through its myth of metals in which bronze, silver, and gold each have their own contribution to the state.²¹ The myth of metal eschews social mobility because the metals are refined to perform only a specific purpose. Likewise, in the case of Honneth's recognition theory, the spheres of recognition provide specific normative resources to maintain the homeostasis of a modern democratic society. The "metals" in recognition theory are love, right, and esteem.

Love is the primary motive for function in societies. They do not only provide the initial training for socialisation, but they also open new avenues and possibilities for existing individuals. Families provide socialisation training, friendships provide variations on how individuals can self-actualise, and intimate relations provide purpose for subjects. Love requires regulation by semi-permanent rules and, at the same time, the material resources to sustain relationships. Since love could be exploited, it depends on the regulative function of rights. Esteem, on the other hand, provides the material resources to sustain relationships. Love, in the context of modern democratic societies, also contributes to the reproduction of subjects.

Rights serve as a regulative mechanism for love and esteem. Rights are derived from the consistency of productive social relations. While rights are semi-permanent, they are subject to procedural augmentation and modification. We see the immediate importance of rights in the legal system, and laws are passed, modified, and repealed. Likewise, the legal system usually consists of representatives of other members of society mediating the creation, modification, and removal of laws. This regulative system is maintained by discourse among citizens and subjects of society, thus aligning

¹⁹ See Christopher Zurn, *Axel Honneth* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

²⁰ See Pada, *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition*.

²¹ See Plato, *The Republic*, in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vols. 5 and 6, trans. by Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1969), Book III 413ff., <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg030.perseus-eng1>>.

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the goals of laws generated by the sphere of rights with the goals of society, or at least its majority. Rights require resources and, most importantly, people with varying motives and interests in society that contribute to its functions.

Esteem is the source of material resources in society. Esteem is rewarded for contributing to societal needs, specifically, economic remuneration. Monetary resources can be expended, traded, and invested as a form of remuneration. People participate in this economy of trading, generating, and investing resources in the sphere of esteem. Since the market economy is self-interested, its characteristics are amoral and require law regulation. Moreover, people participate in the interactions of the market economy because it is essential for the continuity of personal relations (love) and democratic deliberations (rights). The force of the market economy, however, is significant enough to influence the sphere of love and rights so much to the point that it takes a consolidated effort from both to regulate the market economy's own goals.

The intention of depicting these spheres of recognition as interdependent units, much like Plato's myth of metals, is to demonstrate that normativity for these three spheres is self-adjusting and self-regulating. In an earlier paper, I have noted the limitations of reading Honneth's recognition theory solely on a linear progression based on the development of norms from love, rights, to esteem.²² A linear reading of the progression from love, rights, and esteem will give the impression that the normative products of recognition are a rigid normative outcome that determines and prescribes future social interactions. My assertion, at least in my reading of Honneth, is that the linear reading presented in *The Struggle for Recognition* was from a developmental perspective akin to similar theories from Freud, Piaget, and Erikson. The developmental perspective from Honneth's recognition theory, however, does not necessarily mean that recognition is linear, progressive, and fixed. On the contrary, both of the earlier and later works of Honneth emphasize that the intention of recognition theory is not linear but systemic. The earlier references to the reconstruction of Hegel's project of the system of ethical life or the *Sittlichkeit* inform us that Honneth's recognition theory is more concerned about the process than the outcome. The bud is also given more emphasis over the rose in Honneth's *Reification: A New Look at An Old Idea*, particularly the inclusion of antecedent recognition, i.e., Marcelo's interview essay,²³ and the publication of *Freedom's Right*. These materials point out that Honneth's project was not merely a call for a revolutionary movement towards recognition, rather, it was a systematic project that depicted the progress and setbacks of modern democratic societies.

²² See Pada, *Axel Honneth's Social Philosophy of Recognition*, 84.

²³ See Goncalo Marcelo, "Recognition and Critical Theory Today: An Interview with Axel Honneth," in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 39:2 (2013), 209–221.

Honneth's depiction of modern democratic societies, however, was a productive one despite the modest goal of description as opposed to a more flamboyant and sponsor grabbing promise of transforming society.

Honneth's critical theory is a peculiar one, and at this juncture, it is in the approach that observation and description create a form of critique that is epistemically grounded in the limitations of observation. This limitation implies that it is more grounded in the possibility of an erroneous observation that means that the theory can adapt, make new observations, and try alternate possibilities for instigating internal forms of emancipation. I find this preferable over transcendental and universal truths that cannot bend themselves over for imperfections in reality because they think that their theory is bulletproof. Honneth's recognition theory recognizes complexity. This is evident in the alternatives that he depicts from normativity and social pathologies. Moreover, the recognition of complexity as an additional layer of nuance to Honneth's theory makes his pronouncement of finding societal learning instances out of social pathologies even more compelling than a traditional revolutionary movement. I see this affinity towards a complex and dynamic social theory as an important dynamic that is missed by Honneth's critics. The fixation on Honneth's progressive depiction of society's transformative norms does not make Honneth "Pollyanish" or overly optimistic about society's ability to self-regulate and self-correct. Rather, the point of highlighting progress is to underscore the fact that such progress is only made possible through a complex dialectical engagement of various systems working in concert (or, in most cases, a lack of concert) to produce the effect of what we observe as "democracy."

Luhmann's System Theory

Niklas Luhmann was a German sociologist renowned for adapting systems theory into social theory. Luhmann's works were distinct in that his engagement with philosophy was exceptional. Like Jürgen Habermas, Luhmann was also a recipient of the Hegel Prize in 1988. One of Luhmann's interests was developing a "Theory of Society" where sociology is refined to understand the nuances and complexities of the idea of society. His critique of sociology aims to reach this objective:

Sociology must understand its relationship with society as one of learning, not instruction. It must analyze the problems it discovers, possibly postpone tackling them, and possibly declare them insoluble, albeit without knowing how to proffer "scientifically proven

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solutions.” All this requires a theoretically grounded description of modern society.²⁴

Luhmann’s intention for refining the theory of society lies in how and what we observe, which comprises our understanding of society. For Luhmann, the paradox of social observations is rooted in communications. Communication is the only observable phenomenon generated by society, and, for him, the only way to observe society is through communication. Thus, the paradox is that while we can observe society through its communications, our observations are likewise muddled by the processes involved in communicating our observations. Moreover, claiming certainty over the communication of observation is bound to reproduce communicative problems in claims that insist on consistent or functional outcomes in immanent instances and are dependent on complex factors not covered by a limited observation. A common recurrence of this phenomenon is the assumption of cultural biases that we have with certain cultures. Assuming, for example, that all African Americans love fried chicken or gold jewelry is as erroneous as claiming that all Filipinos love eating rice, adobo, and Jollibee’s *Chickenjoy*, and also believe in *utang na loob* [debt of gratitude]. We do not know every African American and their preference for food or ornaments, neither could we possibly know each Filipino’s preference towards adobo, *Chickenjoy*, and the practice of *utang na loob*. Correcting for these possibilities offers a nuanced perspective to an often functive reduction of concepts also referred to as stereotypes.

Luhmann offers complexity as opposed to suspicion. Equally, this presents a path of critique seen in critical theory without the moralistic condemnation of domination and the promise of emancipation. Complexity offers an insight into causal possibilities without resorting to functions since systems theory demands a refined method of observation; society as a system must be dissected through its internal systems and interactions with other systems. The systems within society generate varying observable effects which Luhmann refers to as communications. These systems are self-enclosed to maintain its distinct homeostasis. Communications offer the possibility of relaying the intentions of a system to another system, but because of their enclosed nature, the responses that they generate are emergent. The system of a country’s economics can merely irritate the systems of private relations to either spend or save their money, economics cannot dictate the spending behavior of the systems of private relations but can irritate them to a degree that it will elicit a response from the system of private relations. Systems

²⁴ Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society*, Vol. 1, trans. by R. Barrett (California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 5.

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generate communication in as much as currency communicates a value that makes us understand that 100 USD is more valuable than 100 PhP. While we know the value, we do not exactly know its value until we see a report on current exchange rates. In the same manner, we might have an idea of what is beautiful in a pageant, but it is not necessarily a correct prediction of the outcome.

Moreover, while communication remains the only observable product of systems within systems and society as a system of its own, our observations, too, are likewise communication and are subject to communicative expectations in as much as we expect that a fluctuation of the USD will affect the overall value of PHP or that the winner of a beauty pageant will be beautiful. This generates somewhat relatively stable but also emergent outcomes. Stable and emergent effects are observed partly because systems are operationally closed from each other and can only affect other systems externally in irritation. That is why the economy, as a system, will strive to function despite legal impediments but will nonetheless be affected by regulations such as taxes and tariffs. Luhmann further adds:

As far as this is possible in the system itself, it guarantees the autopoiesis of societal communication by transforming it into the freedom to say yes or no with far-reaching consequences to everything that has been determined. In complex societies, what therefore evolves are not obligations for consensus but symbolically generalized communication media.²⁵

This insight explains, continuing with a different example, why a box of ammunition from Federal costs more than that of Armscor's in the Philippines, and that while the price is higher, this product is still sold in the Philippine market. Consumer interest, in this example, is not necessarily dictated by price. Still, rather than an operationally closed system, it is irritated by external factors and thus tries to adapt by observing how observations are made. One can imagine plausible outcomes of the preference for Federal brand ammunition as perhaps being more friendly to the environment since the EPA in the USA is more stringent than the Philippine's DENR (which, for the sake of assumption, is an observation of an observation of its own).²⁶ This is what Luhmann remarks as a "self-conditioning" of the

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁶ DENR (Department of Environment and Natural Resources) has regulations for governing the use of lead in paints, fuel additives, water pipes, toys, cosmetics, school supplies, and food packaging through its *Administrative Order No. 2013-24*. The EPA (Environmental Protection Agency), in its CFR (Code of Federal Regulations) No. 302.6, specifies the

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system that allows them to take account of the possibility of success and failure as a reaction to the environment.²⁷

Irritation is the preferred descriptor here since it neither affects the system directly nor creates a point of stimuli to warrant the possibility of a reaction. Reaction is contingent on various other stimuli that affect the system; hence, if all other stimuli are not known or not observed properly, the outcome is emergent. This is why, despite the protests for the cessation of the use of petroleum-based products, its appeal for its negative effects on humans, and even the absurd lengths to which the “Just Stop Oil” tries to communicate its message, oil continues to flow. We are reminded of an analogous concept from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, that the attempt to deter crime through public punishment and executions is not necessarily a direct communication to society to stop committing crime.²⁸ The irritation is merely a stimulus for society to react, not necessarily from the intended outcome by governments and institutions. What Foucault observes is that the irritation led to a reaction contingent on the emergent behavior of the populace. They communicated a spectacle instead of complying with the state’s intended communication.

The best way to explain complexity in Luhmann’s system theory is to look at biological organisms as an analogy for society. Much like how we could remember Ryle’s explanation of a “mind,” we ought to look at society as an emergent effect of various systems, irritating each other in a concerted and unconcerted effort to generate the observable effect of a communicating “mind.” Systems as “organisms” operate for the fulfilment of their function and the maintenance of their homeostasis. The sphere of economics, for example, has to fulfil the need to maintain profitability and the necessary resources to continue its operation. In other words, systems avoid entropy and seek *negentropy*.

As a distinct system, an organism seeks to maintain its existence and function despite external irritations from other systems. As a functionally distinct organism, other systems cannot directly control or compel a system to function outside its homeostatic parameters. Luhmann notes that the threat of entropy creates conditions on how systems can attain negentropy.²⁹ However, despite the lack of direct control over another system, a system can irritate another system and have effects contingent on its need for

requirements for handling, disposing of, and recycling spent lead from expended ammunition. The Philippines’ DENR does not have any provision for regulating lead use, recycling, and handling; hence, there is no regulatory pressure on ammunition manufacturers in the Philippines to reduce lead use and dispersal.

²⁷ Luhmann, *Theory of Society* Vol. 1, 138.

²⁸ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 7.

²⁹ See Luhmann, *Theory of Society* Vol. 1, 252.

negentropy. For example, a ban on advanced semiconductors in China can lead to the PRC manufacturing its semiconductors, or a ban on gambling in China could trigger other systems to conduct gambling operations outside of the PRC as an online activity. Contingency here means that there would be a response to the irritation if it warrants a reaction. However, the kind of reaction elicited by these irritations depends on various circumstances and even the intensity of the irritation. Moeller notes that the concept of contingency in Luhmann is dependent on occurring events, but it also depicts non-necessity and probability.³⁰ Contingency refers to the uncertainty of outcomes that, despite an agent's intentionality (or lack thereof) in a system, the effects of the outcome are not necessarily guaranteed. Contingency refers to a system's attempt to create an effect to either stimulate or irritate a system. If I called Taiwan the real China, the irritation to the PRC would be negligible and insignificant. However, a different degree of irritation is expected if the United Nations begins referring to Taiwan as legitimate China and PRC as fascist China. Irritation, negentropy, and functional differentiation affect the system's response to another system. The system generates its response out of its own accord, or as Luhmann puts it, an autopoiesis:

Autopoietic systems are systems that themselves produce not only their structures but also the elements of which they consist in the network of these same elements. The elements consist in the network of these same elements. The elements (which from a temporal point of view are operations) that constitute autopoietic systems have no independent existence. They do not simply come together. They are not simply connected. It is only in the system that they are produced. They are produced (on whatever energy and material basis) by being made use of as distinctions.³¹

Autopoiesis is the response generated by a system to various irritations, its need for homeostasis or negentropy, and its maintenance of its functional differentiation. This does not necessarily mean that change is impossible; however, effective communication or targeted irritation can elicit other systems to generate their autopoietic responses. An urban environment with a poor public transportation system will either increase the number of private vehicles or alternative commercial forms of transportation. In some cases, migration would be an option to make up for the contingencies of a

³⁰ See Hans-Georg Moeller, *The Radical Luhmann* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 56–57.

³¹ Luhmann, *Theory of Society* Vol. 1, 32.

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commute. The response of subjects reacting to a system will vary. The beauty of system theory is that its norms are autopoietic; they are generated as a response to the different forms of irritations, along with the need for different systems' requirements for negentropy. The outcomes, however, are also autopoietic too. They are not guaranteed, nor are they going to create predictable outcomes. Despite this, understanding autopoietic responses does not necessarily preclude random outcomes, instead, the opposite is true that the outcomes are relatively stable despite the uncertainty.

My point is that autopoiesis provides a guiding principle for normativity despite its claim for uncertainty. While reactions from irritations from different systems might be deemed emergent, the reaction has always been coming from informed prognostications. Despite this safety blanket (or lack thereof) of relatively stable outcomes, the Luhmannian take on system theory takes the route of modesty instead of absolute certainty.³² That is why, as Moeller observes, Luhmann does not make moral prescriptions that are rooted in privileged and unequivocal conclusions rooted in observations.³³ Luhmann's systems theory does not account for absolute certainty of outcomes, nor does he make the same moral judgment. I argue a similar tendency in Honneth's recognition theory, that in the attempt to depict the tendency of normativity, Honneth's recognition theory must appeal to emergent outcomes on the position of emergence, rather than absolute certainty.

Recognition and Systems Theory

Normativity is an autopoietic communication that intends to inform sustainability in a system and between systems. It does not follow the aesthetic criteria of good or evil, rather, it follows the principles of entropy and negentropy. In a system, normativity maintains homeostasis and seeks negentropy. As a *system of systems*, social systems are constantly seeking collective, collaborative, and autopoietic norms to maintain homeostasis. In the case of recognition theory, there is an individualistic effort from personal relations, market economy, and democracy to generate the effect of maintaining homeostasis as a subject that operates within these systems. As a system, society is contingent on the effects of various participation of individuals in different systems. There is a constellation of contingencies that occur within a society's sub-systems, and Honneth's recognition theory offers a conceptual framework for understanding functionally differentiated systems pursuing negentropy. What I find fascinating in this perspective is

³² Moeller, *The Radical Luhmann*, 120.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

that these functionally differentiated systems are also co-dependent on the persistence of the other system's negentropy. This co-dependent tendency is further seen in instances where the entropy of one system leads to the generation of another system to replace the entropic system. For example, Argentina's economy and its low valuation of pesos led to the country's adoption of the USD as a substitute for economic transactions,³⁴ replacing an entropic economic system with a system that can maintain negentropy. The process of substitution is autopoietic. People who have realized the turbulent and fluctuating value of the Argentine Peso opted to resort to a stable economic system to avoid entropy.

One could say that this avoidance of entropy leads to contingent systemic changes, shifts from fossil fuel to green and sustainable energy has been influenced by these constellations of contingent forces and systems in as much as there is a shift from supporting Jews as victims of genocide to the perpetrators of genocide.³⁵ However, this observation's purpose is not to place value judgment or express support or condemnation for these observations. Instead, these examples demonstrate that normativity is as fungible as viral trends in TikTok, *memes*, or web series such as *Skibidi Toilet*.³⁶ If anything, these examples demonstrate that there should be no long-term indignation towards using words such as norms or normativity since they are temporary despite their relative stability. Systems are contingent on the fickle irritations that elicit their unique and emergent autopoietic responses. In the recent 2024 United States election, the consistently liberal-leaning media outlet *The Washington Post* decided to abjure from its usual practice of endorsing a political candidate.³⁷ The normative expectation that they would endorse a democrat instead of a republican candidate is an autopoietic decision that is contingent on its own constellation of systems, notwithstanding the fact that it is merely one of the irritations that stimulates a contingent reaction from the American voters. In other words, normativity is not permanent, oppressive, or, as some would say, progressive. It is amoral since it merely wants to preserve the system's homeostasis. That is to say that a capitalist system is subject to its distinct functional operation since a traffic rule-violating jeepney is motivated to keep on violating traffic safety rules to

³⁴ See Robert Plummer, "How Argentina learned to love the US dollar," in *BBC* (10 April 2024), <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-66507826>>.

³⁵ See Matt Egan and Donald Judd, "Harvard, Penn and MIT presidents under fire over 'despicable' testimony on antisemitism and genocide," in *CNN* (6 December 2023), <<https://edition.cnn.com/2023/12/06/investing/bill-ackman-harvard-penn-antisemitism>>.

³⁶ See Lisa Respers, "Skibidi Toilet: If you don't know what it is, you will," in *CNN* (25 July 2024), <<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/25/entertainment/skibidi-toilet-explainer>>.

³⁷ See Manuel Roig-Franzia, and Laura Wagner, "The Washington Post will not endorse a candidate for president," in *Washington Post* (25 October 2024), <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2024/10/25/washington-post-endorsement-president/>>.

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survive and feed its family. The difference is merely aesthetic. We pity the jeepney driver more than the capitalist corporation that employs over a thousand employees with their own respective families and responsibilities for avoiding entropy.

While this might draw ire and condemnation from popular and dominating intellectual circles, my contention is that systems are amoral. The contingency of moral judgment from the public is a matter of aesthetics; it is a contest and competition between those who look more pathetic than the other party. That, too, is subject to the contingencies of second-order observations and prevailing communicative trends. Any expectation of change is contingent on the prevailing trends and irritation of trends derived from second-order observations. For example, there would be more backlash for me if I accidentally ran over a window washer-beggar along Lacson Ave. than the backlash that a jeepney driver would have if they had driven over my entire family. This public expectation is normative; however, it is not permanent. It is contingent on the constellation of systems' irritation, the communication they produce, and the second-order observations they create as an effect of autopoiesis.

While I hope that I do not run over a window-washer-beggar along Lacson Ave. in as much as I do not wish that a tired 18-hour shift jeepney driver to maul my entire family, the moral decisions and condemnation from these actions are as fungible as the trends of fashion or the value of cryptocurrency against contemporary money laundering laws. Moving forward, the insight that we should pick from this point is that normativity is neither a negative nor a positive concept. Normativity is autopoietic, generated by forces that influence a constellation of irritation of systems pursuing their respective functional differentiation and negentropy. In the same manner, Honneth's characterization of the areas of recognition, namely, personal relations, market economy, and democracy, ought to be perceived in an amoral negentropic pursuit of maintaining societal homeostasis.

If Kompridis was complaining about the ambiguity of recognition, the complaint was apt in the sense that there is never truly a fixed and overarching category or concept for recognition, other than the fact that it is guided by the autopoietic necessity of democratic systems to pursue negentropy. A shift from the language of moral judgment augments the language of recognition to take into account the autopoietic nature of systems responsible for society's homeostasis. I think this was the original intention of Honneth's appropriation of Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*, wherein the perspective of progress is only attained through the dialectical relations elicited by various systems pursuing their respective homeostasis.

In this regard, a brief excursus would articulate the codependent nature of personal relations, market economy, and democracy. To begin with,

personal relations are the fundamental motive force for individuals to participate in all of the other spheres of recognition. Market economy provides material resources, and the sphere of democracy provides the regulative element to limit the amoral tendencies of personal relations and market economy. These three spheres of recognition irritate each other, creating contingent effects that we could observe as a society. The consonance, or for the most part, the dissonance of these three spheres is autopoietic. That is why Filipinos working in foreign countries is a good example of a norm that comes out of Philippine society's autopoietic dissonance (or consonance, if you benefit from the influx of foreign currency). Filipinos who do not have the benefit of generational wealth are compelled to work for foreign currency because the market economy in the Philippines does not support the possibility of sustainable and progressive economic growth. The family of the exported laborer is held hostage. At the same time, the government takes credit for the economic growth brought by the greater spending power of the OFW's family. In this example, our point of critique does not have to revolve around the moral condemnation of any of the spheres in their pursuit of negentropy. The foreign worker works and inevitably sacrifices his or her relationship with their family to maintain the homeostasis of their personal relations. The market economy in the Philippines, likewise, must maintain its own need for homeostasis by maintaining profitability at the cost of the participants of its system. In the case of democracy's system, political continuity must be maintained, be it for the sake of the politician or the country.

The emergent effect generated by these systems brings us to the sober realization that these systems aim to attain homeostasis and negentropy. While it seems easy to condemn the use of fossil fuel as a further exacerbation of climate change, it also presents some challenges to the condemnation of a developing country that has yet to achieve the economic capital to afford environmentally conscientious solutions to climate change. We do not expect that most Filipinos could shift to electric or hybrid vehicles when they could barely afford to keep their finances afloat or have enough resources to own their own land and have a roof over their heads in the same manner that we are unable to be morally indignant with the influx of illegal immigration from various countries to more developed countries because of their home countries' oppressive and unsustainable governance. Systems are motivated by the need to avoid entropy; moral indignation does not help and only assists one's improvement of second-order observations from other systems. This is also a preferred outcome for any system pursuing negentropy. Hence, moral indignation is merely lip-service for one's curation of profile, knowing the functional motive of a system provides a more nuanced critique:

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Functional differentiation has affected the concept of world even independently of this development. Modern society regulates its own extent, the modern world as well. Modern society can only change itself and is therefore prone to constant self-critique. It is a self-substitute order; the modern world, likewise. It, too, can change only in the world.³⁸

Functional differentiation, therefore, provides a nuanced understanding of a system's emergent responses to communication, or, for the most part, irritations from other systems. Knowing that a system's main proclivity is to pursue its function, maintain its existence, and avoid entropy. This perspective synchronizes well with Honneth's recognition theory since the spheres of recognition are functionally differentiated systems. However, despite their functional differences, the systems within society (namely personal relations, market economy, and democracy) are also required to maintain the homeostasis of a *society*. This leads to emergent solutions, and often, a self-correcting and self-aligning outcome maintains homeostasis. This is what we ought to understand as *normativity* elicited from the autopoietic convergence of various systems that are functionally differentiated.

So, how does this autopoietic reaction mesh with the idea of social pathologies? Social pathologies are likewise emergent reactions to the irritation from various systems. The difference, however, is that social pathologies lead to the system's impeding entropy. For example, poverty is functionally an impediment to the self-actualization of individuals and their respective personal relations. Poverty itself is not a crime nor an evil that should be eradicated. However, we must recognize that it can have entropic effects on different systems. Crime, too, is a social pathology because it threatens the homeostasis of other systems. California's Penal Code §459.5 is an interesting example of how social pathologies could lead to entropy. The law states that shoplifting is treated as a misdemeanor if the value of the stolen goods or merchandise is below 1000 USD.³⁹ This creates an environment of entropy for businesses; if operating within California is no longer profitable, stores and other business establishments may relocate to safer and more profitable areas. Social pathologies indicate that the functional differentiation of the system and its homeostasis are no longer viable. This is the reason why the sales of mechanical typewriters are no longer as prevalent today as they were during the 20th century, or a video rental store where the latest titles could be viewed in the glorious resolution offered by the VHS

³⁸ Luhmann, *Theory of Society* Vol.1, 91.

³⁹ See State of California, Penal Code §459.5, <https://california.public.law/codes/penal_code_section_459.5>.

format. These industries, as systems, have already heard their death knells when personal computers became ubiquitous and when DVD (which also had its death knell) replaced the media consumption format.

In recognition theory, social pathologies are often considered learning instances for systems to tweak their responses. This does not guarantee an optimal response, nor does it mean that there is an “optimal” response. What matters is that the response maintains homeostasis and avoids entropy. Like DVDs, Blu-Rays, and video streaming services, the systems under media consumption are subject to entropy if a much more efficient and effective solution is available to the greater system. That is why illegal immigration seems to appear as the right solution if the condition of the system can support the demand of immigration. But suppose country A is the wealthiest in the world, and 80% of the world population decides to migrate there through legal or illegal means, the solution no longer becomes viable and could, in turn, cause entropy in a few systems. This is a point that I have raised in my earlier work on normativity as a resource that is shared, generated, and distributed in society,⁴⁰ a deficit in the expected resource from a sphere of recognition can cause pathologies, in extreme circumstances, even the replacement of a system could happen. If there is any concern towards Honneth’s optimism, my contention is that perhaps he understands that societal systems are motivated to pursue their function and avoid entropy. This means that the survival and maintenance of the function of the system prevail despite the possibility of entropy. To a certain degree, we can expect that negentropy prevails, and we merely have to communicate this possibility of entropy in the most efficient way possible. Only then could we at least attempt to safeguard the salvation of the system from its entropy.

Conclusion

Normativity is autopoietic. It is an emergent product of multiple systems working to irritate and elicit various responses required by different systems. What ties these systems together is their common desire to maintain functional differentiation and negentropy. Normativity, in as much as I dislike this observation, is subject to trends and momentary epistemic convictions. The only way to validate this conviction is to see its actual effect upon its implementation. While this is ideal, the resources required to implement and validate the solutions to social pathologies are a risk that ought to be weighed carefully. Solutions today are created with the most expedient and swift communications possible. Some systems have also been created to hasten communications. Technology has enabled contemporary

⁴⁰ See Pada, *Axel Honneth’s Social Philosophy of Recognition*, 162–163.

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society to witness rapid changes without the foresight of the possibility of failure. Disruption has been the trophy of innovation, and what makes this horrific is that we are willing to take the risk of entropy for the sake of radical change and the titular obsession with disruptions. We do this at the risk of unforeseen catastrophes. This is the kind of stuff that stock market crashes are made of and is the situation where we are willing to burn physical resources for an imaginary resource (cryptocurrency) for the sake of radicality or at least the appearance of one. My Luhmannian reading of Honneth's recognition theory offers us the caution that we are all intertwined in multiple systems, some of which we do not even know we are a part of, which elicits the need for prudence. The call for radical change is as urgent as the demand Schwab's call for an on-demand economy. Neither is tested for long-term effects, nor are they proven to provide sustainable and progressive societal change. All our responses are autopoietic. However, autopoietic responses can be normative, and while systems desire to avoid negentropy, the response might actually lead to entropy.

When exaggerated to the level of a dystopian future, the haste for communication can lead systems to a state where they are between entropy and negentropy. A good example of this state is the so-called "dead internet" theory.⁴¹ Dead Internet theory refers to the phenomenon where content creation in various media and social media platforms is generated by large language model systems (LLMs) or the ubiquitous "AI." Part of this system relies on views and feedback from audiences and media consumers, which ironically, could also be performed by bots using LLMs, thereby validating the function and negentropy of the system. When stretched to a certain point in our imagination, we could foresee an internet where no one creates content, save for bots and AI, where no one consumes this content either, save for bots and AI. A much closer dystopian example from my concoction is the "dead university theory." With the proliferation of university rankings, lobbied by technology companies who insist on including artificial intelligence products, universities are compelled to conform to the requirements of university ranking companies. Teachers are required to use AI-generated content for teaching or scholarship, while students must also use AI-generated content for their assessment tasks. The teachers also use AI to check the assessment tasks. The teachers can spend their entire time playing basketball and

⁴¹ See Kaitlyn Tiffany, "Maybe You Missed It, but the Internet 'Died' Five Years Ago," in *The Atlantic* (31 August 2021), <<https://web.archive.org/web/20230306110843/https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2021/08/dead-internet-theory-wrong-but-feels-true/619937/>>.

watching K-drama, while the students could play Valorant until they earn their degrees.⁴²

On the brighter side of possibilities, systems theory allows critical and recognition theories to be specific and more targeted and persuasive with their critique. Arguing for the contingent effects on various systems interacting together can offer a compelling path to critique if the parties involved are aware of their role and its consequences for their homeostasis. If a medium-sized cookery, for example, keeps dumping oil in the sewer system of a residential area, it would be more persuasive to inform them that various parasites and vermin will contaminate their food, attracted to the oils they generate. As opposed to vehemently condemning them on social media platforms or confronting them with threats, system theory will create a much more conducive dialectical engagement for all parties involved.

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⁴² Admittedly, this is my variation of Slavoj Zizek's "Synthetic Sex and Being Yourself," in *Big Think* (8 June 2015), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xYO-VMZUGo>>.

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