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On Recognition – The Limits of Normativity and the Merits of Engagement

One of the basic questions of political philosophy as well as in the social sciences is the question of what keeps societies together. The answers differ widely: First of all political and social theories presuppose or diagnose different ‘types of social glue’. And secondly also the extent and intensity of social cohesion as such has been a matter of concern, especially with the diagnosis of loss or lack of social cohesion in late modern societies characterized by value pluralism, multiculturalism and global capitalism. The theory of recognition in its prominent version of Axel Honneth aims at a social and political theory that combines a justificatory dimension and a more thick phenomenological dimension of everyday life recognition and misrecognition in order so safeguard a

strong normative critical theory that allows to diagnose so-called social pathologies in modern societies. But not only poses inequality of social and other capital forms as well as social differentiation a problem for this version of recognition theory, also the question of how collective and emotional binding relations are achieved in societies with high social differentiation and increasing inequality, is questionable, as e.g. Robert Putnam has highlighted. The paper investigates into these possible collective and emotional binding relations by first taking Honneth’s phenomenology of recognition and the normative claims under scrutiny. In a second step the paper will develop a framework to conceptualize the different ‘engagements’ human beings entertain with other human beings and the environment. Within a pragmatic perspective a broader context of prac-

tical regimes and of social cohesion in
its different forms becomes visible.