Anthropologies of Social Life and The Critique of Relations of Inferiority

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ABSTRACT In this paper I will argue that Niko Kolodny, in *The Pecking Order: Social Hierarchy as a Philosophical Problem*, provides necessary but not sufficient theoretical tools to distinguish between legitimate and objectionable relationships of hierarchy, due to the tacit individualistic anthropological assumptions underlying his approach. I will therefore highlight the unilaterality of an individualistic anthropological paradigm and emphasize the need for a relational account of human subjectivity in order to further problematize the nature and the persistence of oppressive relationships of social hierarchy.
KEYWORDS Kolodny, Social Hierarchy, Anthropology, Relational subjectivity, Critical theory

RESUMO Neste artigo, argumentarei que Niko Kolodny, em The Pecking Order: Social Hierarchy as a Philosophical Problem, fornece ferramentas teóricas necessárias, mas não suficientes, para distinguir entre relações de hierarquia legítimas e censuráveis, devido aos pressupostos antropológicos individualistas tácitos que sustentam a sua abordagem. Sublinharei, por isso, a unilateralidade de um paradigma antropológico individualista e enfatizarei a necessidade de uma concepção relacional da subjectividade humana, a fim de aprofundar a problematização da natureza e da persistência de relações opressivas de hierarquia social.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE Kolodny, Hierarquia Social, Antropologia, Subjectividade relacional, Teoria Crítica

Introduction

The Pecking Order. Social Hierarchy as a Philosophical Problem by Niko Kolodny is an extremely compelling and complex book, whose scope is multifaceted and pursued through engagement with the main traditions of political philosophy. Its primary aim is to argue that the normativity of subjects in social relationships — namely, the moral grammar underlying their claims against other subjects and the state

— can ultimately be traced back to a general claim against social hierarchies and in favor of social equality. Its second aim is to clarify when these claims are legitimate or objectionable.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book is its pluralist approach. From a methodological standpoint, Kolodny's interpretation of social members' claims against other subjects and the state does not exclude other normative claims identified in political philosophy, such as claims for rights against invasion and interests in improvement. Rather, his argument is that these normative categories intersect and combine. If the normative category of "rights against invasion," in its more or less extreme versions, captures the rejection by subjects of the social world's intrusion into their bodily, mental, and personal space, the normative category of "interests in improvement" grasps subjects' requests to live a fulfilling life within associated life. Nonetheless, Kolodny points out that there are claims against the social world that are neither reducible to claims against invasion nor to claims for improvement. When individuals' personal space and their requests for fulfillment are respected, but there are claims against unequal positions in the social space or against the asymmetrical influence of social institutions, what is the normativity at issue? For Kolodny, the issue at stake is claims against inferiority, either in horizontal relationships with other subjects and/or in vertical relationships with social institutions, especially the state. Specifically, it concerns the refusal of social hierarchies, according to which some social subjects have more power, authority, and regard than others — endowments that allow them to make decisions, command orders, and receive attentions that affect and determine one's own or others' decisions, social environment, and self-perception.

From a theoretical standpoint, Kolodny's argument is pluralist because it highlights how different interpretations of subjects' normativity lead to the development of different accounts of human freedom, having thus diversified anthropological implications. For instance, supporters of a theory of social claims as rights against invasion assume a "negative" account of human freedom, as the freedom from others' intrusion. Supporters of a theory of social claims as interests in fulfillment assume a positive account of freedom, as the capacity of subjects to pursue their self-realization in the social context. Finally, supporters of a theory of social claims as a refusal of social hierarchies interpret freedom as social equality.

In my comment, I will argue that Kolodny's strategy to approach the issue of social hierarchy, clarify the distinctive elements of non-objectionable and objectionable hierarchies, and define social equality has some blind spots, which arise from the tacit individualistic anthropological paradigm underlying the book. Interpreting subjects' claims is not, in fact, only an "anthropological gesture", leading to a conception of human freedom. It is also the result of prior and tacit anthropological assumptions, which are never neutral: they reflect the historical, social, and economic structures of the world in which we live and influence the very way in which we pose and develop philosophical issues such as the question of hierarchy. I will therefore contend that Kolodny's interpretation of social hierarchies relies on an individualistic conception of human subjects as singular individuals, which does not account for the constitutive relationality of human development and self-realization and weakens his descriptive and normative analysis of social hierarchies. Secondly, I will argue for the relevance of a relational account of human subjectivity to descriptively and critically approach social hierarchies. In doing so, I will reverse the relationship between political philosophy and anthropology underlying the book, starting from anthropology and moving toward political philosophy and the problem of hierarchies. Unveiling the tacit anthropology of Kolodny's theoretical strategy has both a descriptive and critical aim: what are the anthropological assumptions of Kolodny's conception of hierarchies? Are they legitimate and sufficient? Are there alternative aspects of human and social life that must be considered in order to further understand relationships of hierarchy from both a descriptive and normative standpoint?

1 The tacit anthropological assumptions of Kolodny's approach to social hierarchy

Let's begin with the first point, namely, problematizing the anthropological assumptions that underlie the book. What I want to argue is that the way in which the author frames the issue of social hierarchy maintains, and shares with the two approaches of "rights against invasion" and "interests in improvement", the individualistic anthropological paradigm of Western societies. I will then contend that, because of such

an underlying anthropological approach, Kolodny's criteria for judging a hierarchy as legitimate or objectionable are necessary but not sufficient.

The identification and critique of the individualistic anthropological paradigm is a key outcome of critical theory and social philosophy. Critical philosophers, from Dewey (1984), Adorno and Horkheimer (2002), to Honneth (1995) and Fraser (2003), just to name a few, have reconstructed how, since the advent of the modern era and capitalism, the symbolic and material framework of Western societies has revolved around the primacy of individuality, mostly understood in individualistic and competitive terms. By analyzing the founding texts of Western political philosophy and modern human societies (such as the doctrine of natural law and Hobbes' and Locke's theories of the social world), they identified four foundational elements of such an anthropological paradigm. These are: (i) human beings are individuals, unique and singular subjectivities, who express and realize their individuality through actions; (ii) individuals are naturally endowed with a personal identity (interests, needs, capacities), along with natural rights and the freedom of self-expression and self-realization; (iii) other individuals, having the same natural rights, are potential dangers and competitors to the personal well-being and freedom of the individual; (iv) social institutions should ensure the realization of all individuals by limiting their absolute freedom.

Such a conception of human subjectivity was essential to the emancipatory transformation of Western societies and continues to be central in acknowledging and preserving individual rights, such as the freedom of thought, expression, and religious and political beliefs. However, critical theorists have pointed out the ultimate one-sidedness of this anthropological paradigm: it obscures the relational dimension of subjectivity. Specifically, it fails to provide theoretical frameworks for understanding how other subjects and the social world are also constitutive elements of human subjectivity, with both descriptive and normative consequences (Dewey, 1983; Honneth, 1995; Butler, 1997; Ikäheimo, Leopold & Stahl, 2021; Petherbridge, 2013). On the one hand, it clings to the myth of subjective identity as something given, naturally endowed, and to be protected from external influences. In doing so, it overlooks how individuals necessarily develop within a social context that is structured by supra-subjective and pre-existing languages, customs, and values, which constitutively influence their identity. Thus, individual identity is always "constituted" by the social world. On the other hand, it does not consider how individual freedom and self-realization are possible *thanks to* and

through other subjects, who recognize and actively participate in the social realization of the individual's identity contents.

In the three interpretations of subjects' moral claims presented in the book, the modern anthropological paradigm of human individuality as the primary element — to which social relationships come after — is floating around, both theoretically and methodologically. In the case of "rights against invasion", which interprets subjects' claims as claims against others' intrusion, other subjects are theoretically conceived only as potential dangers to the individual, for human freedom is understood to lie in the personal space from which others are excluded. In the case of "interests in fulfillment", which interprets subjects' claims as interests in having a fulfilling life, the maintenance of such a conception of subjectivity instead emerges methodologically, namely, in the problematic cases where the interests in fulfillment of two subjects clash with one another and in the strategies used to solve these problems. The strategies rest solely on rationalistic principles of justification, such as the calculation of consequences and the priority of one fulfillment over another, excluding from the outset the possibility that other subjects' fulfillment can sometimes be conceived as one's own fulfillment, thus unintentionally maintaining the assumption that subjects' interests are always competitive.

As for claims against social hierarchies and Kolodny's strategy, the maintenance of this individualistic anthropological paradigm is first evident from the way he approaches the issue of hierarchies at the outset: subjects refuse relationships of asymmetry, and thus it is necessary to understand when asymmetries are legitimate or objectionable. In this methodological approach, an individualistic conception of human subjectivity is implicitly assumed. That is, a conception of subjectivity that does not first consider relationality and asymmetry *as constitutive elements* of human development and self-realization, and only later asks, "when do asymmetries turn into problems for subjects? When do asymmetries become objectionable?" What I want to argue in the next section is that, due to the lack of consideration for the relational nature of human subjectivities, the elements that Kolodny points out to define a hierarchy as legitimate or objectionable, as non-dominant and oppressive, are necessary but not sufficient. To do so, I will primarily refer to the way he analyzes relations of inferiority among social members in Part II, T*he Positive Conjecture: Claims Against Inferiority*.

2 The Need for a Relational Account of Human Subjectivity in the Critique of Hierarchies

In Kolodny's theory, a relationship of asymmetry between social members — such as the asymmetrical relationship between teacher and students, or flight attendants and passengers — is not considered objectionable if it satisfies the following main conditions. Firstly, it is limited to a specific context (the classroom, the flight). Secondly, it is limited in content, meaning that the greater power of the first subject does not command the second subject to pursue certain ends but only provides the means to pursue their own ends. For example, a flight attendant cannot force passengers to fly or set their destinations but can only provide them with the means to pursue their own trips. Similarly, a teacher cannot force students to pursue a particular career but can only provide them with the educational means to reach their own career objectives. Thirdly, social members with higher power, authority, and regard are themselves regulated by higher-order decisions (e.g., the laws of the state or the school director). Finally, people in an asymmetrical relationship can be equals in other recognized relationships (e.g., political rights, civil rights).

What I want to argue is that these "tempering factors", while necessary, are not sufficient for an asymmetrical relationship to avoid being oppressive. This is because they abstract from the supra-subjective material and symbolic frameworks in which relationships among subjects occur. Even if teachers or flight attendants cannot force us to pursue certain career objectives or travel to certain destinations, the set of means they provide for us to pursue our own ends are not neutral. They embody a material and symbolic framework that ultimately influences the ends we autonomously pursue. For instance, the priority boarding pass or the premium options through which flight companies and flight attendants regulate access to the plane reflect a capitalist social value, where those who earn more and are thus able to spend more have priority over others and access to better services. This influences my own and deliberate access to the plane and the way I experience flying. Similarly, teaching methods, the selected readings, and the way debates are organized in a class do not command students to pursue certain career objectives but can strongly influence them. For example, in a philosophy class where

the teacher presents only white male philosophers, where debates are organized according to competitive or Western academic criteria, and where only certain scientific languages and practices are considered valuable, women and non-Western students will be influenced in their career choices and/or the way they will approach their careers.

The same issue arises in Kolodny's analysis of racism and sexism, which he considers forms of disparity of regard. Disparities of regard are natural elements of social relationships, since, according to independent values (such as my love for music), I can regard a person with a strong sense of musicality more than another who either lacks it or has it to a lesser extent. The objectionable element of racism and sexism, according to Kolodny, lies in the fact that they do not rest on independent values but are influenced by the presence of basing traits, i.e., gender and race. Thus, when taking two people with the same sense and talent for music, I may regard the white and male person as having a stronger sense of musicality. In a non-racist and non-sexist context, however, I would regard both persons equally, recognizing them both as having a great sense of musicality. Despite the usefulness of Kolodny's distinction, racism and sexism are not only about the different ways in which subjects are regarded according to a certain value or capacity. They also concern the values, accomplishments, and capacities through which I evaluate people. For example, as a manager, I might evaluate workers based on values like competitiveness, absolute presence at work, and conformity to the firm's cultural values — all of which reflect the symbolic and material framework of Western societies. In this case, I would regard two equally competent workers differently: I would regard a man more favourably than a woman with a family or than a non-Western person. If, however, the woman abandons her family or the non-Western person adopts Western working standards, I might regard them equally or even more favourably than other male, white workers. But the social equality they gain would be merely a conformation to the symbolic and material framework I set.

Kolodny's "tempering factors", while necessary, seem insufficient to fully distinguish between justifiable and oppressive relationships of hierarchy. The reason for this blind spot lies in the uncritical anthropological paradigm of individuality underlying the book and the lack of a relational account of human subjectivity in the background. By contrast, what I contend is that an inquiry into the relational preconditions of human subjectivity could not only lead to a rearticulation of the issue

of social hierarchies but also help identify the structural elements that make a hierarchical relationship objectionable or justifiable, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the oppressive nature of domination. Let us, therefore, consider the anthropological underpinnings of a relational account of human subjectivity.

Philosophical theories of human subjectivity that offer alternatives to modern individualism — from recognition theory (Hegel, 1969; Honneth, 1995; Dewey, 2015) to post-structuralism (Foucault, 1982; Butler, 1997) and feminist theory of vulnerability (Mackenzie, Rogers & Odd, 2014; Pulcini, 2001) — begin their anthropological considerations by descriptively acknowledging that human subjects are not prior to the social world. Despite their differing approaches, these theories highlight, first, how subjects are embedded, from birth, in pre-existing social contexts that progressively become more complex and extended. These contexts, with their supra-subjective material and symbolic frameworks (ranging from language to social practices, values, economic structures, and cultural norms), shape emotional, cognitive, and practical capacities and influence the formation of identity contents (interests, needs, values, and capacities). Second, they emphasize that the fulfillment and realization of subjects' identity contents depend on the recognition and active participation of other social subjects and social institutions.

In these theories, human existence is recognized and problematized in its intrinsically relational nature, and consequently, in its constitutive asymmetries of power. Both in horizontal and vertical relationships, we are "vulnerable", "dependent", "affected", and "produced" by our social environments, which are "fabrics of individuality" (Dewey, 1982, p. 191). Even if in different degrees, social institutions, social practices, and other subjects, according to their characteristics, social roles, and positions in the social environment, have power over us and influence us. However, from a theoretical point of view, the relationality of human subjectivity does not only entail being influenced by and dependent on the power of others. It also involves the capability of human subjectivity itself to react to and influence other subjects and the social environment.

Therefore, considering, from a theoretical point of view, the relationality of human beings discloses an ambivalent or relational conception of power (Follett, 1986; Butler, 1997; Petherbridge, 2013). Accordingly, being exposed to the power of others also entails being enabled and empowered to influence others, transforming the material and symbolic framework in which we are embedded in the different social dimensions

in which we act. Therefore, having power means being enabled by others to influence them and being influenced in return, in an endless circuit. The structure of relationality, as such, involves co-determination, co-empowerment, and co-dependence. From a theoretical standpoint, asymmetry, vulnerability, and influence are structural and circular elements of relational life and, thus, of social life.

What normative implications can these descriptive anthropological considerations have with regard to objectionable asymmetries or hierarchies of power and social equality?

1. Asymmetries turn into relationships of domination, therefore objectionable, when the circulation of power between subjects — either in horizontal or vertical relationships — is blocked, and power is unilaterally exercised (Saar, 2010; 2019). Namely, there is only one subject capable of influencing, determining, and relying on the other and modifying the shared symbolic and material framework in which the relationship occurs. In this pathological relationship, the other subject's ability to influence, determine, and rely on the other is either null or rigidly channeled into the emotional, cognitive, and practical possibilities set by the more powerful subject, without the chance to actively modify the symbolic and material framework in which both are embedded. A relational account of subjectivity, therefore, reveals that relationships are always embedded in and embody a certain symbolic and material framework. Even if limited to a specific context and content, asymmetrical relationships always influence how we pursue our deliberate ends. It shows that a relationship of asymmetry, even if tempered by higher-order decisions and relationships of equality in other contexts, can still be oppressive and objectionable as long as it limits or nullifies the subject's potentialities for action to influence back the symbolic and material framework that regulates the relationship. To not be objectionable, therefore, asymmetrical relationships should also be circular — they should allow the subject with less power, authority, and regard to be enabled to transform the symbolic and material framework that governs the relationship. Being equal in a different dimension (e.g., as equal citizens) or having higher-order decisions regulating the relationship would not be enough. The issue at stake is the chance to directly and actively determine, co-create, and enrich the values, norms, and practices that regulate relationships of asymmetry, both horizontal and vertical.

2. A relational account of human subjectivity can also problematize the pervasive nature of objectionable asymmetries of power, such

as racism and sexism, understood as regard. Even when a non-Western individual or a woman is regarded as much as another in a workplace, the objectionable nature of the asymmetry persists when they conform to the material and symbolic framework that regulates Western and male-dominated work contexts, without having the possibility to redefine it.

3. A relational account of human subjectivity can, finally, further clarify the normative category of social equality. Social equality could be defined not only as the absence of untempered hierarchies — as the possibility for subjects to be equal to others within a given material and symbolic framework, to deliberately set their own ends, and to not be regarded as lesser than others in light of basing traits such as gender or race — but also as the possibility for co-determination, co-influence, and co-empowerment in the ongoing redefinition of the symbolic and material framework that regulates their relationships. Social equality, therefore, would be the equal possibility to participate in the transformation of the social world.

Conclusions

Niko Kolodny's book offers a fundamental perspective on the issue of social hierarchy. On one hand, it identifies a key category of social claims that cannot be reduced to either "claims against invasion" or "interests in improvement". On the other hand, it provides a list of "tempering factors" necessary to distinguish between legitimate claims against social hierarchies as oppressive, and those hierarchies that do not constitute domination. Nonetheless, what I contended is that Kolodny's approach to the issue of social hierarchy and his list of tempering factors rest on tacit individualistic anthropological assumptions that stand in the way of a deeper problematization of the nature and persistence of oppressive hierarchies. I therefore argued that a relational account of human subjectivity, which points out the constitutive relationship between subjects and the social world, is necessary for a critique of oppressive relationships of hierarchy and the outlining of a concept of social equality.

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