

INTRODUCTION

The Problem of Recognition

WALKING ALONG A CROWDED AVENUE, you see a friend and call out her name: suddenly, a pocket of intimacy forms in an otherwise anonymous public space. Standing in a long line at the immigration office, you find yourself grateful for your Canadian passport, which you know will make it easier for you to extend your employment in the United States. You roll back the metal gates in front of your shop window, which now displays (next to the list of South Asian languages spoken inside) a new assortment of items prominently bearing the American flag. Sitting down with a calculator, you and your partner wonder whether it will be possible to get a home loan together at a decent rate without being married. A young man watches as you slowly board the bus, and then offers you his seat. Driving down a street in a predominantly white neighborhood, you are pulled over again by the police, suspended in mistrust while the officer runs your identification and plates. You recall how several of your male co-workers unexpectedly declared that they think *you'll* be the next woman in the office to have a baby. You wait for the volunteer to find your name on the voting rolls. You add a new accomplishment to your curriculum vitae. You hold a stranger's gaze for a second too long, checking for and inviting desire.

Life is given texture by countless acts of recognition. From everyday interactions to the far-reaching deliberations of legislatures and courts, people are constantly asking the interconnected questions: Who are you? Who am I? Who are we? In answering these questions, we locate ourselves and others in social space, simultaneously taking notice of and reproducing relations of identity and difference. And in this way, we orient ourselves practically: we regularly decide what to do, and how to treat others, at least partly on the basis of who we take ourselves, and them, to be. For better or for worse, the distribution of affection, loyalty, esteem, consideration, rights and obligations, and many other social goods is closely tied to our assessments of identity, both personal and collective. At one level, there is no reason to regret this fact, and in any case probably no way to escape it, for recognition helps give our lives depth and continuity, and a world completely lacking the signposts of identity would be unnavigable. At the same time, many of the relationships established and maintained through recognition are unjust, often severely so. If recognition makes the social world intelligible, it

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often does so by stratifying it, subordinating some people and elevating others to positions of privilege or dominance. This book is about the social and political dynamics of recognition, about how recognition becomes a medium of injustice, and about what it would mean for relations of identity and difference to be structured more justly.

Although these are perennial issues, the theme of recognition has become particularly prominent in social and political theory over the last decade and a half, due largely to three intersecting developments. First, during this period, mainstream political theory began to take notice of the distinctive demands for justice raised by political movements organized around ethnicity, race, language, culture, gender, and sexuality. Second, the events of 1989 seemed to place problems of identity and difference—ethnic conflict, religious fundamentalism, regional secession movements, immigration and citizenship, and nationalism—at the center of global politics. And, third, many theorists began to approach these issues through the concept of recognition, drawing more or less directly on the philosophy of Hegel, who coined the phrase “the struggle for recognition” (*Kampf um Anerkennung*) and gave the concept its most influential philosophical treatment. By the end of the last decade, scholars had even begun to talk of a general shift away from a “politics of redistribution,” focused on the satisfaction of interests and the distribution of material goods, and toward a “politics of recognition,” focused on securing equal respect and esteem for the diverse identities borne by members of pluralistic societies.¹

Out of this intersection of contemporary politics with Hegelian philosophy came a distinctive theoretical approach to problems of injustice on the terrain of identity and difference, which received one of its most famous statements in Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor’s catalytic essay “The Politics of Recognition,” which was first published in 1992. There, Taylor drew on Hegel, among many others, to work out an account of the larger meaning and conceptual underpinnings of the demands for recognition made by members of oppressed and marginalized social groups. The first step in this reconstruction was to bring recognition into view as a distinctive but neglected human good. Since we are socially situated creatures, Taylor argued, we are profoundly vulnerable to the ways in which we are perceived and characterized by others. “The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others,” he wrote; “and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.” Correspondingly, receiving recognition of one’s identity from others is a “vital human need,”

a precondition of effective agency.² The second step was to establish a norm of equality governing the distribution of recognition, and here Taylor turned explicitly to Hegel's incisive analysis, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, of the self-defeating tendency of asymmetrical structures of recognition such as the master-slave relationship. For Hegel, as Taylor said, "the struggle for recognition can find only one satisfactory solution, and that is a regime of *reciprocal* recognition among *equals*."³ On this basis, Taylor argued that modern politics must extend public recognition to all their citizens, both as human beings in general and also as the bearers of particular social identities.⁴

It is easy to understand why this general approach to recognition has become influential. It expresses an attractive ideal, envisioning a world in which people could all find their own identities accurately and respectfully reflected in the mirror of their shared social and political life—a world in which, as Rousseau put it, "each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united."⁵ At the same time, it offers a concise interpretation of a ubiquitous and deep-seated form of injustice, called "misrecognition," which consists in the failure, whether out of malice or out of ignorance, to extend people the respect or esteem that is due to them in virtue of who they are. Taken together, these two components of the standard approach to recognition constitute a powerful and appealing elaboration of the idea of democracy as self-determination or self-rule.⁶ Democracy, on such a view, is always a matter of recognition: citizens must be able to understand the rules and decisions to which they are subject as in some sense expressions of their own wills. And the idea of democracy thus understood is also betrayed by persistent forms of identity-based inequality, which make it more difficult for members of subordinated groups even to understand themselves as full members of the supposedly sovereign "people," much less to experience political decisions as in any substantial way their own doing.

But is this the best way to flesh out the idea of democracy? Must a world of greater justice and equality also be a world of mutual transparency, a world without alienation, a world in which we can be confident of our invulnerability to all powers that we do not ourselves control? There are at least two important and interrelated grounds for concern about this vision. The first picks up on an important strand of political thought—stretching from the exemplary tales of the ancient Greek tragedians, to Tocqueville's eloquent account of the intertwining of promise and danger in democracy, to Arendt's meditations on the unpredictability of human interaction—which has steadfastly warned against overambitious efforts to rescue social and political life from its own fragility. For these authors, such efforts go wrong at the level of what we

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might call social and political “ontology”: they rest on distorted pictures of basic features of the human world, mistaking the irreducible conditions of social and political life for pathologies that might someday be overcome.⁷ Correspondingly, from this perspective, the crucial questions to be asked about the politics of recognition are ontological. What would the world have to be like for its vision of successful mutual recognition to be possible, or even intelligible? Does the ideal of recognition rest on a coherent and persuasive picture of, for example, the relationship between identity and human agency? Or does the pursuit of recognition, for all its democratic good intentions, actually blind us to certain ineliminable, and perhaps also valuable, aspects of our own situation?

The second ground for concern about the standard approach to recognition follows the lead of a different but equally important line of political thought. At least since Marx’s attack upon the false universality of eighteenth-century declarations of individual rights, radical social critics have often argued that mainstream responses to injustice are superficial: at best, they simply misunderstand deep-seated structures of inequality and relations of power; at worst, they actually help to create or reinforce them. Of course, Marx’s critique was directed at notions of rights that purported to be what we would now call “difference-blind,” but there is good reason to raise the same concerns in relation to certain kinds of difference-conscious politics, too.⁸ From this perspective, the crucial questions to be asked about the politics of recognition concern its pre-suppositions about the nature and sources of injustice in relations of identity and difference. Is “misrecognition” best understood as the failure to see and/or respect the identity of the other? Or does that characterization of the problem mislead us about the structure of this sort of injustice, and, consequently, about what it would mean to overcome it?

These two concerns may seem to point in very different directions, for if the first strand of thought cautions against excessive theoretical and political ambition, the second insists, ambitiously, that prevailing understandings of injustice are insufficiently deep or demanding. (Indeed, Marx and Marxism are often thought to exemplify just the sort of utopian arrogance—or “metaphysical optimism,” as Isaiah Berlin put it—against which the tragedians and their descendants warn.⁹) As unlikely as such an undertaking might seem, however, this book pursues both sets of questions simultaneously, for at least in the context of recognition, their answers are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing.¹⁰ On the one hand, I shall argue that the ideal of mutual recognition, while appealing, is also impossible, even incoherent; and that in pursuing it we misunderstand certain crucial conditions of social and political life. Foremost among these conditions is the fact of human finitude, which I interpret not in terms of mortality, but rather in terms of the practical limits

imposed upon us by the openness and unpredictability of the future—what Hannah Arendt called the “non-sovereign” character of human action.¹¹ In this sense, the pursuit of recognition involves a “misrecognition” of a different and deeper kind: not the misrecognition of an identity, either one’s own or someone else’s, but the misrecognition of one’s own fundamental situation or circumstances.

On the other hand, I shall also argue that injustice in relations of identity and difference is not simply a matter of improper recognition in the conventional sense—that is, of the proliferation of false or demeaning images of various people and groups. To be sure, this is one important and widespread symptom of injustice, although it is not a necessary one. But this diagnosis does not grasp the problem at its root. It gives short shrift to the underlying forms of desire and motivation that sustain and are sustained by unjust social arrangements, thereby ignoring both the possibility that demeaning images of others are epiphenomenal—that they are supported by structures of desire that are not in the first instance *about* others—and, more troublingly, the possibility that even affirmative images of others could be consistent with, or serve as vehicles of, injustice. In what follows, I offer an alternative diagnosis of relations of social and political subordination, which sees them not as systematic failures by some people to recognize others’ identities, but as ways of patterning and arranging the world that allow some people and groups to enjoy a semblance of sovereign agency at others’ expense. And here, the concern about excessive ambition converges in a surprising way with the concern about our grasp of injustice, for on this account, injustice in relations of identity and difference is itself a matter of misrecognition in the deeper sense I have just described.

Taken together, these two arguments suggest that there is a profound irony involved in the ideal of recognition: the very desire that makes that ideal so compelling—the desire for sovereign agency, for an antidote to the riskiness and intermittent opacity of social life—may itself help to sustain some of the forms of injustice that many proponents of recognition rightly aim to overcome. This irony makes the pursuit of recognition at best an equivocal instrument of emancipation, replete with double binds. Movements organized around demands for recognition may indeed produce concrete gains for members of subordinated groups. Yet in characterizing injustice as the misrecognition of identity, and in embracing equal recognition as an ideal, they may simultaneously make it more difficult to comprehend and confront unjust social and political relations at their root. In some cases, even apparently successful exchanges of recognition may reinforce existing injustices, or help to create new ones.

Having said that, it is important to emphasize that this book is not a

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polemic against social and political movements organized to fight injustice in relations of identity and difference. It is not a call for people to abandon particularism in favor of universalism—or vice versa. And it is not driven by a concern about what Arthur Schlesinger called the multicultural “disuniting of America.”¹² Two points need to be made here. First, when I discuss the “politics of recognition,” I mean to refer to a specific way of making and justifying political and theoretical claims, which can be more or less conceptually explicit, and more or less self-conscious, but which is hardly the only discourse through which left social and political movements have tried to respond to injustice in relations of identity and difference.¹³ Indeed, it is important to remember that the “politics of recognition” is not simply a framework through which some activists and scholars articulate demands for justice, but also a discourse through which some other academics and political actors have chosen to understand these demands, sometimes with suspicion and sometimes with sympathy.

And this leads directly to the second point. It has become commonplace in mainstream political theory to speak as though the politics of recognition were practiced exclusively by those people and groups who are already socially marked as “particular.” On this view, the politics of recognition is a matter of how much or what kind of recognition *we*—speaking, in the voice of universality, for the “larger society”—ought to extend to *them*. But this way of talking obscures the fact that the politics of recognition is not the exclusive province of any group or movement or political sector. As Hegel knew, it takes at least two to struggle; and those who criticize identity politics and multiculturalism in the name of the unity of the “larger society” are also practicing a politics of recognition, which is marked by the same conceptual and political problems I have just described. There is at least one difference, though: people who are able to identify relatively unproblematically with the “larger society” and its institutions are also typically better able to set the terms under which any exchange of recognition with less powerful and more vulnerable others will occur, making their own desires and needs into nonnegotiable items. So while I do raise concerns about one way in which some on the left analyze and respond to injustice, I also direct this critique at actors who are not ordinarily represented as being engaged in the politics of recognition—including especially the state and those who speak on its behalf, both formally and informally—precisely because these are often the actors who make politics into a matter of recognition in the first place, and whose own demands for recognition, tacit and explicit, create powerful incentives for others to frame claims about democracy, justice, inequality, and subordination *as* recognition claims.

It is also important to stress that to criticize the ideal of recognition in this way is not to call for the abandonment of democratic and egalitarian aspirations. To the contrary, it is to recast those aspirations in a way that does not confuse justice in relations of identity and difference with mutual transparency, or with security from risk, or with the overcoming of all experiences of alienation or even hostility in our relations with others. Following up on the thought that the source of relations of subordination lies not in the failure to recognize the identity of the other, but in the failure to acknowledge one's own basic situation and circumstances, I call this alternative a politics of *acknowledgment* rather than a politics of recognition. In this picture, democratic justice does not require that all people be known and respected as who they really are. It requires, instead, that no one be reduced to any characterization of his or her identity for the sake of someone else's achievement of a sense of sovereignty or invulnerability, regardless of whether that characterization is negative or positive, hateful or friendly (for, as we shall see, positive images can be instruments of subordination, too). It demands that each of us bear our share of the burden and risk involved in the uncertain, open-ended, sometimes maddeningly and sometimes joyously surprising activity of living and interacting with other people.

In the following chapters, I develop these arguments through a series of critical engagements with an eclectic group of social and political thinkers, interspersed with extended case studies of struggles for recognition drawn from literature, history, and contemporary politics. At the center of the book, however, is an unorthodox interpretation and reappropriation of Hegel. As I have indicated, Hegel is usually read as the philosophical godfather of the standard approach to recognition, both by proponents of that approach and by some of its most sophisticated and thoughtful critics. There is a great deal to this reading, but it is also an oversimplification, and part of the agenda of this book is to change the way we understand the relationship between Hegel's philosophy and the politics of recognition. Although one strand of Hegel's thought, and ultimately the dominant one, does align him with the ideal of recognition, another strand actually illuminates the limits of that ideal and suggests an alternative understanding of justice, rooted not in recognition but in acknowledgment. This neglected dimension of Hegel's philosophy ties him, however partially, to an important countertradition of thought about recognition that stretches from Sophocles and Aristotle to Hannah Arendt and beyond. By reading Hegel in the company of these other thinkers, I aim to transform our understanding of the ethical and political implications of his account of recognition, especially in the famous sections of the *Phenomenology* devoted to the struggle for

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recognition and the master-slave relation. Bringing this dimension of Hegel's thought into the foreground will also let us see where he turns against his own best insights, embracing exceedingly ambitious visions of human reconciliation through mutual recognition, and endorsing unjust social relations in his pursuit of those quixotic goals.

The close attention to Hegel and others notwithstanding, this book is not a contribution to the history of political thought in any straightforward sense. That is not to say it is ahistorical: I proceed mainly through detailed engagements with particular authors and cases, and I have tried to say something interesting and new, however modest, about each of these subjects on its own terms, and with reference to at least some of the specialized literature into whose territory I venture. Still, this is not a history of the concept of recognition, nor is it a thorough investigation of the significance of that concept in the complete works of any single thinker—not even Hegel's, the powerful gravitational pull of his corpus notwithstanding. It is, at best, an episodic history, whose shape has been guided as much by my own thematic preoccupations as by anything else.

It is also important to specify the sense in which this is a work of normative theory. The purpose of this book is not to defend my own set of all-things-considered judgments about well-known policy controversies involving issues of identity and difference—should the provincial government of Québec be allowed to regulate the use of English on signs? Should Britain fund Muslim schools? Should the law recognize same-sex marriages? This is not because I think such political judgments are unimportant, nor because I think political theorists—or anyone else—can't or shouldn't make them. Yet such judgments depend on, among other things, the lucidity of the background vocabulary in which we represent, to ourselves and to each other, the nature of the political problems we face, the stakes of the decisions we confront, and the range of possibilities we possess.¹⁴ And when an often-used vocabulary of this sort obscures as much as it clarifies, political theorists are faced with another set of tasks, at once diagnostic and reconstructive: to bring the obstruction into view; to demonstrate its implications; to understand its sources (for these things are rarely accidents or mere matters of careless thinking); and, in the course of all that, to work toward an alternative and more perspicuous language. It is this sort of background conceptual work—not yet prescriptive, but certainly normative—that I undertake in the following chapters with respect to the idea of recognition.