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RETHINKING RECOGNITION

IN THE SEVENTIES AND EIGHTIES, struggles for the 'recognition of difference' seemed charged with emancipatory promise. Many who rallied to the banners of sexuality, gender, ethnicity and 'race' aspired not only to assert hitherto denied identities but to bring a richer, lateral dimension to battles over the redistribution of wealth and power as well. With the turn of the century, issues of recognition and identity have become even more central, yet many now bear a different charge: from Rwanda to the Balkans, questions of 'identity' have fuelled campaigns for ethnic cleansing and even genocide—as well as movements that have mobilized to resist them.

It is not just the character but the scale of these struggles that has changed. Claims for the recognition of difference now drive many of the world's social conflicts, from campaigns for national sovereignty and subnational autonomy, to battles around multiculturalism, to the newly energized movements for international human rights, which seek to promote both universal respect for shared humanity and esteem for cultural distinctiveness. They have also become predominant within social movements such as feminism, which had previously foregrounded the redistribution of resources. To be sure, such struggles cover a wide range of aspirations, from the patently emancipatory to the downright reprehensible (with most probably falling somewhere in between). Nevertheless, the recourse to a common grammar is worth considering. Why today, after the demise of Soviet-style communism and the acceleration of globalization, do so many conflicts take this form? Why do so many movements couch their claims in the idiom of recognition?

To pose this question is also to note the relative decline in claims for egalitarian redistribution. Once the hegemonic grammar of political contestation, the language of distribution is less salient today. The move-

ments that not long ago boldly demanded an equitable share of resources and wealth have not, to be sure, wholly disappeared. But thanks to the sustained neoliberal rhetorical assault on egalitarianism, to the absence of any credible model of 'feasible socialism' and to widespread doubts about the viability of state-Keynesian social democracy in the face of globalization, their role has been greatly reduced.

We are facing, then, a new constellation in the grammar of political claims-making—and one that is disturbing on two counts. First, this move from redistribution to recognition is occurring despite—or because of—an acceleration of economic globalization, at a time when an aggressively expanding capitalism is radically exacerbating economic inequality. In this context, questions of recognition are serving less to supplement, complicate and enrich redistributive struggles than to marginalize, eclipse and displace them. I shall call this *the problem of displacement.* Second, today's recognition struggles are occurring at a moment of hugely increasing transcultural interaction and communication, when accelerated migration and global media flows are hybridizing and pluralizing cultural forms. Yet the routes such struggles take often serve not to promote respectful interaction within increasingly multicultural contexts, but to drastically simplify and reify group identities. They tend, rather, to encourage separatism, intolerance and chauvinism, patriarchalism and authoritarianism. I shall call this *the problem of reification.*

Both problems—displacement and reification—are extremely serious: insofar as the politics of recognition displaces the politics of redistribution, it may actually promote economic inequality; insofar as it reifies group identities, it risks sanctioning violations of human rights and freezing the very antagonisms it purports to mediate. No wonder, then, that many have simply washed their hands of 'identity politics'—or proposed jettisoning cultural struggles altogether. For some, this may mean reprioritizing class over gender, sexuality, 'race' and ethnicity. For others, it means resurrecting economism. For others still, it may mean rejecting all 'minoritarian' claims out of hand and insisting upon assimilation to majority norms—in the name of secularism, universalism or republicanism.

Such reactions are understandable: they are also deeply misguided. Not all forms of recognition politics are equally pernicious: some represent

genuinely emancipatory responses to serious injustices that cannot be remedied by redistribution alone. Culture, moreover, is a legitimate, even necessary, terrain of struggle, a site of injustice in its own right and deeply imbricated with economic inequality. Properly conceived, struggles for recognition can aid the redistribution of power and wealth and can promote interaction and cooperation across gulfs of difference.

Everything depends on how recognition is approached. I want to argue here that we need a way of rethinking the politics of recognition in a way that can help to solve, or at least mitigate, the problems of displacement and reification. This means conceptualizing struggles for recognition so that they can be integrated with struggles for redistribution, rather than displacing and undermining them. It also means developing an account of recognition that can accommodate the full complexity of social identities, instead of one that promotes reification and separatism. Here, I propose such a rethinking of recognition.

The identity model

The usual approach to the politics of recognition—what I shall call the 'identity model'—starts from the Hegelian idea that identity is constructed dialogically, through a process of mutual recognition. According to Hegel, recognition designates an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects, in which each sees the other both as its equal and also as separate from it. This relation is constitutive for subjectivity: one becomes an individual subject only by virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject. Recognition from others is thus essential to the development of a sense of self. To be denied recognition—or to be 'misrecognized'—is to suffer both a distortion of one's relation to one's self and an injury to one's identity.

Proponents of the identity model transpose the Hegelian recognition schema onto the cultural and political terrain. They contend that to belong to a group that is devalued by the dominant culture is to be misrecognized, to suffer a distortion in one's relation to one's self. As a result of repeated encounters with the stigmatizing gaze of a culturally dominant other, the members of disesteemed groups internalize negative self-images and are prevented from developing a healthy cultural identity of their own. In this perspective, the politics of recognition aims to repair internal self-dislocation by contesting the dominant culture's

demeaning picture of the group. It proposes that members of misrecognized groups reject such images in favour of new self-representations of their own making, jettisoning internalized, negative identities and joining collectively to produce a self-affirming culture of their own—which, publicly asserted, will gain the respect and esteem of society at large. The result, when successful, is 'recognition': an undistorted relation to oneself.

Without doubt, this identity model contains some genuine insights into the psychological effects of racism, sexism, colonization and cultural imperialism. Yet it is theoretically and politically problematic. By equating the politics of recognition with identity politics, it encourages both the reification of group identities and the displacement of redistribution.

Displacing redistribution

Let us consider first the ways in which identity politics tend to displace struggles for redistribution. Largely silent on the subject of economic inequality, the identity model treats misrecognition as a free-standing cultural harm: many of its proponents simply ignore distributive injustice altogether and focus exclusively on efforts to change culture; others, in contrast, appreciate the seriousness of maldistribution and genuinely wish to redress it. Yet both currents end by displacing redistributive claims.

The first current casts misrecognition as a problem of cultural depreciation. The roots of injustice are located in demeaning representations, but these are not seen as socially grounded. For this current, the nub of the problem is free-floating discourses, not *institutionalized* significations and norms. Hypostatizing culture, they both abstract misrecognition from its institutional matrix and obscure its entwinement with distributive injustice. They may miss, for example, the links (institutionalized in labour markets) between androcentric norms that devalue activities coded as 'feminine', on the one hand, and the low wages of female workers on the other. Likewise, they overlook the links institutionalized within social-welfare systems between heterosexist norms which delegitimate homosexuality, on the one hand, and the denial of resources and benefits to gays and lesbians on the other. Obfuscating such connexions, they strip misrecognition of its social-structural underpinnings

and equate it with distorted identity. With the politics of recognition thus reduced to identity politics, the politics of redistribution is displaced.

A second current of identity politics does not simply ignore maldistribution in this way. It appreciates that cultural injustices are often linked to economic ones, but misunderstands the character of the links. Subscribing effectively to a 'culturalist' theory of contemporary society, proponents of this perspective suppose that maldistribution is merely a secondary effect of misrecognition. For them, economic inequalities are simple expressions of cultural hierarchies—thus, class oppression is a superstructural effect of the cultural devaluation of proletarian identity (or, as one says in the United States, of 'classism'). It follows from this view that all maldistribution can be remedied indirectly, by a politics of recognition: to revalue unjustly devalued identities is simultaneously to attack the deep sources of economic inequality; no explicit politics of redistribution is needed.

In this way, culturalist proponents of identity politics simply reverse the claims of an earlier form of vulgar Marxist economism: they allow the politics of recognition to displace the politics of redistribution, just as vulgar Marxism once allowed the politics of redistribution to displace the politics of recognition. In fact, vulgar culturalism is no more adequate for understanding contemporary society than vulgar economism was.

Granted, culturalism might make sense if one lived in a society in which there were no relatively autonomous markets, one in which cultural value patterns regulated not only the relations of recognition but those of distribution as well. In such a society, economic inequality and cultural hierarchy would be seamlessly fused; identity depreciation would translate perfectly and immediately into economic injustice, and misrecognition would directly entail maldistribution. Consequently, both forms of injustice could be remedied at a single stroke, and a politics of recognition that successfully redressed misrecognition would counter maldistribution as well. But the idea of a purely 'cultural' society with no economic relations—fascinating to generations of anthropologists—is far removed from the current reality, in which marketization has pervaded all societies to some degree, at least partially decoupling economic mechanisms of distribution from cultural patterns of value and prestige. Partially independent of such patterns, markets follow a logic of their own, neither wholly constrained by culture nor subordinated to it; as a

result they generate economic inequalities that are not mere expressions of identity hierarchies. Under these conditions, the idea that one could remedy all maldistribution by means of a politics of recognition is deeply deluded: its net result can only be to displace struggles for economic justice.

Reification of identity

Displacement, however, is not the only problem: the identity politics model of recognition tends also to reify identity. Stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, it puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture. Cultural dissidence and experimentation are accordingly discouraged, when they are not simply equated with disloyalty. So, too, is cultural criticism, including efforts to explore intragroup divisions, such as those of gender, sexuality and class. Thus, far from welcoming scrutiny of, for example, the patriarchal strands within a subordinated culture, the tendency of the identity model is to brand such critique as 'inauthentic'. The overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations. Ironically, then, the identity model serves as a vehicle for misrecognition: in reifying group identity, it ends by obscuring the politics of cultural identification, the struggles *within* the group for the authority—and the power—to represent it. By shielding such struggles from view, this approach masks the power of dominant fractions and reinforces intragroup domination. The identity model thus lends itself all too easily to repressive forms of communitarianism, promoting conformism, intolerance and patriarchalism.

Paradoxically, moreover, the identity model tends to deny its own Hegelian premises. Having begun by assuming that identity is dialogical, constructed via interaction with another subject, it ends by valorizing monologism—supposing that misrecognized people can and should construct their identity on their own. It supposes, further, that a group has the right to be understood solely in its own terms—that no one is ever justified in viewing another subject from an external perspective or in dissenting from another's self-interpretation. But again, this runs counter to the dialogical view, making cultural identity an auto-generated auto-description, which one presents to others as an obiter

dictum. Seeking to exempt 'authentic' collective self-representations from all possible challenges in the public sphere, this sort of identity politics scarcely fosters social interaction across differences: on the contrary, it encourages separatism and group enclaves.

The identity model of recognition, then, is deeply flawed. Both theoretically deficient and politically problematic, it equates the politics of recognition with identity politics and, in doing so, encourages both the reification of group identities and the displacement of the politics of redistribution.

Misrecognition as status subordination

I shall consequently propose an alternative approach: that of treating recognition as a question of social status. From this perspective, what requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction. Misrecognition, accordingly, does not mean the depreciation and deformation of group identity, but social subordination—in the sense of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life. To redress this injustice still requires a politics of recognition, but in the 'status model' this is no longer reduced to a question of identity: rather, it means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society, capable of participating on a par with the rest.

Let me explain. To view recognition as a matter of status means examining institutionalized patterns of cultural value for their effects on the relative standing of social actors. If and when such patterns constitute actors as peers, capable of participating on a par with one another in social life, then we can speak of reciprocal recognition and status equality. When, in contrast, they constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible—in other words, as less than full partners in social interaction—then we can speak of misrecognition and status subordination. From this perspective, misrecognition is neither a psychic deformation nor a free-standing cultural harm but an institutionalized relation of social subordination. To be misrecognized, accordingly, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down upon or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction, as a consequence

of institutionalized patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem.

On the status model, moreover, misrecognition is not relayed through free-floating cultural representations or discourses. It is perpetrated, as we have seen, through institutionalized patterns—in other words, through the workings of social institutions that regulate interaction according to parity-impeding cultural norms. Examples might include marriage laws that exclude same-sex partnerships as illegitimate and perverse; social-welfare policies that stigmatize single mothers as sexually irresponsible scroungers; and policing practices, such as 'racial profiling', that associate racialized persons with criminality. In each of these cases, interaction is regulated by an institutionalized pattern of cultural value that constitutes some categories of social actors as normative and others as deficient or inferior: 'straight' is normal, 'gay' is perverse; 'male-headed households' are proper, 'female-headed households' are not; 'whites' are law-abiding, 'blacks' are dangerous. In each case, the result is to deny some members of society the status of full partners in interaction, capable of participating on a par with the rest.

As these examples suggest, misrecognition can assume a variety of forms. In today's complex, differentiated societies, parity-impeding values are institutionalized at a plurality of institutional sites, and in qualitatively different modes. In some cases, misrecognition is juridified, expressly codified in formal law; in other cases, it is institutionalized via government policies, administrative codes or professional practice. It can also be institutionalized informally—in associational patterns, long-standing customs or sedimented social practices of civil society. But whatever the differences in form, the core of the injustice remains the same: in each case, an institutionalized pattern of cultural value constitutes some social actors as less than full members of society and prevents them from participating as peers.

On the status model, then, misrecognition constitutes a form of institutionalized subordination, and thus a serious violation of justice. Wherever and however it occurs, a claim for recognition is in order. But note precisely what this means: aimed not at valorizing group identity but rather at overcoming subordination, in this approach claims for recognition seek to establish the subordinated party as a full partner in social life, able to interact with others as a peer. They

aim, in other words, to de-institutionalize patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster it. Redressing misrecognition now means changing social institutions—or, more specifically, changing the interaction-regulating values that impede parity of participation at all relevant institutional sites. Exactly how this should be done depends in each case on the mode in which misrecognition is institutionalized. Juridified forms require legal change, policy-entrenched forms require policy change, associational forms require associational change, and so on: the mode and agency of redress vary, as does the institutional site. But in every case, the goal is the same: redressing misrecognition means replacing institutionalized value patterns that impede parity of participation with ones that enable or foster it.

Consider again the case of marriage laws that deny participatory parity to gays and lesbians. As we saw, the root of the injustice is the institutionalization in law of a heterosexist pattern of cultural value that constitutes heterosexuals as normal and homosexuals as perverse. Redressing the injustice requires de-institutionalizing that value pattern and replacing it with an alternative that promotes parity. This, however, might be done in various ways: one way would be to grant the same recognition to gay and lesbian unions as heterosexual unions currently enjoy, by legalizing same-sex marriage; another would be to de-institutionalize heterosexual marriage, decoupling entitlements such as health insurance from marital status and assigning them on some other basis, such as citizenship. Although there may be good reasons for preferring one of these approaches to the other, in principle both of them would promote sexual parity and redress this instance of misrecognition.

In general, then, the status model is not committed *a priori* to any one type of remedy for misrecognition; rather, it allows for a range of possibilities, depending on what precisely the subordinated parties need in order to be able to participate as peers in social life. In some cases, they may need to be unburdened of excessive ascribed or constructed distinctiveness; in others, to have hitherto underacknowledged distinctiveness taken into account. In still other cases, they may need to shift the focus onto dominant or advantaged groups, outing the latter's distinctiveness, which has been falsely parading as universal; alternatively, they may need to deconstruct the very terms in which attributed differences are currently elaborated. In every case, the status model tailors the

remedy to the concrete arrangements that impede parity. Thus, unlike the identity model, it does not accord an *a priori* privilege to approaches that valorize group specificity. Rather, it allows in principle for what we might call universalist recognition, and deconstructive recognition, as well as for the affirmative recognition of difference. The crucial point, once again, is that on the status model the politics of recognition does not stop at identity but seeks institutional remedies for institutionalized harms. Focused on culture in its socially grounded (as opposed to free-floating) forms, *this* politics seeks to overcome status subordination by changing the values that regulate interaction, entrenching new value patterns that will promote parity of participation in social life.

Addressing maldistribution

There is a further important difference between the status and identity models. For the status model, institutionalized patterns of cultural value are not the only obstacles to participatory parity. On the contrary, equal participation is also impeded when some actors lack the necessary resources to interact with others as peers. In such cases, maldistribution constitutes an impediment to parity of participation in social life, and thus a form of social subordination and injustice. Unlike the identity model, then, the status model understands social justice as encompassing two analytically distinct dimensions: a dimension of recognition, which concerns the effects of institutionalized meanings and norms on the relative standing of social actors; and a dimension of distribution, which involves the allocation of disposable resources to social actors.[1]

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[1] Actually, I should say '*at least* two analytically distinct dimensions' in order to allow for the possibility of more. I have in mind specifically a possible third class of obstacles to participatory parity that could be called *political*, as opposed to economic or cultural. Such obstacles would include decision-making procedures that systematically marginalize some people even in the absence of maldistribution and misrecognition, for example, single-district winner-take-all electoral rules that deny voice to quasi-permanent minorities. (For an insightful account of this example, see Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Majority*, New York 1994). The possibility of a third class of political obstacles to participatory parity brings out the extent of my debt to Max Weber, especially to his 'Class, Status, Party', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds, Oxford 1958. In the present essay, I align a version of Weber's distinction between class and status with the distinction between distribution and recognition. Yet Weber's own distinction was tripartite not bipartite: 'class, status, and party'. Thus, he effectively prepared a

Thus, each dimension is associated with an analytically distinct aspect of social order. The recognition dimension corresponds to the status order of society, hence to the constitution, by socially entrenched patterns of cultural value, of culturally defined categories of social actors—status groups—each distinguished by the relative honour, prestige and esteem it enjoys vis-à-vis the others. The distributive dimension, in contrast, corresponds to the economic structure of society, hence to the constitution, by property regimes and labour markets, of economically defined categories of actors, or classes, distinguished by their differential endowments of resources.[2]

Each dimension, moreover, is associated with an analytically distinct form of injustice. For the recognition dimension, as we saw, the associated injustice is misrecognition. For the distributive dimension, in contrast, the corresponding injustice is maldistribution, in which economic structures, property regimes or labour markets deprive actors of the resources needed for full participation. Each dimension, finally, corresponds to an analytically distinct form of subordination: the recognition dimension corresponds, as we saw, to status subordination, rooted in institutionalized patterns of cultural value; the distributive dimension, in contrast, corresponds to economic subordination, rooted in structural features of the economic system.

In general, then, the status model situates the problem of recognition within a larger social frame. From this perspective, societies appear as

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place for theorizing a third, political kind of obstacle to participatory parity, which might be called *political marginalization or exclusion*. I do not develop this possibility here, however, but confine myself to maldistribution and misrecognition, while leaving the analysis of political obstacles to participatory parity for another occasion.

[2] In this essay, I deliberately use a Weberian conception of class, not a Marxian one. Thus, I understand an actor's class position in terms of her or his relation to the market, not in terms of her or his relation to the means of production. This Weberian conception of class as an *economic* category suits my interest in distribution as a normative dimension of justice better than the Marxian conception of class as a *social* category. Nevertheless, I do not mean to reject the Marxian idea of the 'capitalist mode of production' as a social totality. On the contrary, I find that idea useful as an overarching frame within which one can situate Weberian understandings of both status and class. Thus, I reject the standard view of Marx and Weber as antithetical and irreconcilable thinkers. For the Weberian definition of class, see Max Weber, 'Class, Status, Party'.

complex fields that encompass not only cultural forms of social ordering but economic forms of ordering as well. In all societies, these two forms of ordering are interimbricated. Under capitalist conditions, however, neither is wholly reducible to the other. On the contrary, the economic dimension becomes relatively decoupled from the cultural dimension, as marketized arenas, in which strategic action predominates, are differentiated from non-marketized arenas, in which value-regulated interaction predominates. The result is a partial uncoupling of economic distribution from structures of prestige. In capitalist societies, therefore, cultural value patterns do not strictly dictate economic allocations (*contra* the culturalist theory of society), nor do economic class inequalities simply reflect status hierarchies; rather, maldistribution becomes partially uncoupled from misrecognition. For the status model, therefore, not all distributive injustice can be overcome by recognition alone. A politics of redistribution is also necessary.[3]

Nevertheless, distribution and recognition are not neatly separated from each other in capitalist societies. For the status model, the two dimensions are interimbricated and interact causally with each other. Economic issues such as income distribution have recognition subtexts: value patterns institutionalized in labour markets may privilege activities coded 'masculine', 'white' and so on over those coded 'feminine' and 'black'. Conversely, recognition issues—judgements of aesthetic value, for instance—have distributive subtexts: diminished access to economic resources may impede equal participation in the making of art.[4] The result can be a vicious circle of subordination, as the status order and the economic structure interpenetrate and reinforce each other.

Unlike the identity model, then, the status model views misrecognition in the context of a broader understanding of contemporary society. From this perspective, status subordination cannot be understood in isolation

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[3] For fuller discussions of the mutual irreducibility of maldistribution and misrecognition, class and status in contemporary capitalist societies, see Nancy Fraser, 'Heterosexism, Misrecognition, and Capitalism: A Response to Judith Butler', NLR 1/228, March–April 1998, pp. 140–9; and 'Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition and Participation', in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, volume 19, ed. Grethe B. Peterson, Salt Lake City 1998, pp. 1–67.
[4] For a comprehensive, if somewhat reductive, account of this issue, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Critique of Pure Taste*, tr. Richard Nice, Cambridge, MA 1984.

from economic arrangements, nor recognition abstracted from distribution. On the contrary, only by considering both dimensions together can one determine what is impeding participatory parity in any particular instance; only by teasing out the complex imbrications of status with economic class can one determine how best to redress the injustice. The status model thus works against tendencies to displace struggles for redistribution. Rejecting the view that misrecognition is a free-standing cultural harm, it understands that status subordination is often linked to distributive injustice. Unlike the culturalist theory of society, however, it avoids short-circuiting the complexity of these links: appreciating that not all economic injustice can be overcome by recognition alone, it advocates an approach that expressly integrates claims for recognition with claims for redistribution, and thus mitigates the problem of displacement.

The status model also avoids reifying group identities: as we saw, what requires recognition in this account is not group-specific identity but the status of individuals as full partners in social interaction. This orientation offers several advantages. By focusing on the effects of institutionalized norms on capacities for interaction, the model avoids hypostatizing culture and substituting identity-engineering for social change. Likewise, by refusing to privilege remedies for misrecognition that valorize existing group identities, it avoids essentializing current configurations and foreclosing historical change. Finally, by establishing participatory parity as a normative standard, the status model submits claims for recognition to democratic processes of public justification, thus avoiding the authoritarian monologism of the politics of authenticity and valorizing transcultural interaction, as opposed to separatism and group enclaves. Far from encouraging repressive communitarianism, then, the status model militates against it.

To sum up: today's struggles for recognition often assume the guise of identity politics. Aimed at countering demeaning cultural representations of subordinated groups, they abstract misrecognition from its institutional matrix and sever its links with political economy and, insofar as they propound 'authentic' collective identities, serve less to foster interaction across differences than to enforce separatism, conformism and intolerance. The results tend to be doubly unfortunate: in many cases, struggles for recognition simultaneously displace struggles for economic justice and promote repressive forms of communitarianism.

The solution, however, is not to reject the politics of recognition *tout court*. That would be to condemn millions of people to suffer grave injustices that can only be redressed through recognition of some kind. What is needed, rather, is an alternative politics of recognition, a *non-identitarian* politics that can remedy misrecognition without encouraging displacement and reification. The status model, I have argued, provides the basis for this. By understanding recognition as a question of status, and by examining its relation to economic class, one can take steps to mitigate, if not fully solve, the displacement of struggles for redistribution; and by avoiding the identity model, one can begin to diminish, if not fully dispel, the dangerous tendency to reify collective identities.