

The Futility of the Recognition Paradigm

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Abstract: The recognition paradigm has emerged to understand the core of human conflicts in terms of Hegel's master-slave dialectic. However, the Hegel's dialectic has been turned into an egalitarian-antipolitical project: many writers of this paradigm have suggested that 1, mutual recognition can be achieved, 2, and it may result the end of conflicts. This paper shows that theoretically as well as empirically these are vain hopes, because recognition is a positional good. And the movements claiming recognition search for upper-hand position instead of mutuality.

Keywords: recognition, human nature, ambition, conflict, antipolitics

In political modernity several versions of egalitarianism are so dominant that it is not unreasonable to assert that in contemporary "political discourse, the claim that 'all humans are equal' is often assumed to be obviously true" (Carter 2011, p. 540). The claim itself is seen unproblematic. The 19th century was dominated by legal and political egalitarianism—although not entirely, but rather under the flag of nationalism—while the 20th century was obviously dominated mainly by the economic brand of egalitarianism—known either as socialism or welfarism. However, by the mid-1970s, long before the collapse of the state socialism in 1989-1991, it had already become apparent that socialism cannot provide either a satisfying egalitarian redistribution of material goods, nor the economic prosperity that could produce an abundance of these goods. The reaction was the rise of free-marketism, promoted by the likes of Thatcher and Reagan, which promised economic prosperity at the expense of economic equality. Egalitarians looked for a new avenue of expression, turning toward non-material goods, such as psychological well-being and moral authority, which seemed to be in inexhaustible abundance. The recognition paradigm emerged in the previous decades seems to be one version of the contemporary moral egalitarianism and antipolitics (Gray 1997, 2000, 2003).

Egalitarians have found a type of goods—respect or recognition (and the resulting psychological satisfaction and emotional well-being and self-confidence they bring)—which are seemingly in abundant supply and which are unaffected by the human conflicts arising from scarcity. This kind of egalitarianism has brought forth multiculturalism and the notion of deliberative democracy. This shift away from economic egalitarianism has fitted well with the so-called cultural turn of the Left, initiated by Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* and furthered by the Frankfurtians, which focuses on criticism of bourgeois thinking and culture instead of critiquing property relations.

Since the decline of economic egalitarianism, moral egalitarianism has dominated the contemporary landscape of academia, and its influence has spread without any serious obstacle. "Liberal modernity becomes distinctively ethical" (Anderson 2009, p. 11). Moral egalitarianism is, in logical terms, non-

egalitarian in some respects, however. It involves drawing moral distinctions and passing judgements on its opponents, labelling them racist, sexist, and the like, to morally devalue them. Moral egalitarianism cannot accept any other moral position than its own. It cannot accept or tolerate moral disagreement, and that is why many see this way of thinking as totalitarian in nature or at least oppressive. Recently, the wide scale protests against moral egalitarianism and resistance to its more extreme forms, which depreciate the morality of common people, has been labelled populism.

RECOGNITION

The latest dominant version of egalitarianism is closely connected to the notions of respect and recognition, and their horizon of meaning. One thread in modern political thinking has concerned how to eliminate politics. In the past, the positivist and Marxist versions of scientism, and later the moralised politics of Kantian liberalism were seen as an escape route from politics, but recently the dominant utopian idea has been labelled deliberative democracy and regarded as intersubjective communication. Beside the hopes to escape from politics, the literature of modern politics has focused on the construction of an ordered life of free and equal people. The first approach to addressing the problems of plurality was to set borderlines (public/private; Protestant/Catholic; etc.) to delimit fields of tolerance (Milton, Bayle, Locke, Mill). The second such strategy adopted was the short-lived idea of neutrality (John Rawls) while the most recent form is the respect/recognition paradigm connected to the ideas of multiculturalism and deliberative democracy.

Today the criticism of recognition has become a taboo, and it is taken for granted and cannot be criticized, just like equality and human rights cannot be criticized. "To be 'against recognition' seems, on the face of it, to be an unsustainable position... To be against recognition in this sense would be untenable since it would entail opposition to the crucial insights into the dialogical and non-rational nature of subjectivity that have informed many significant, frequently radical, traditions of thought. The idea of recognition has also acquired renewed significance, in the past decade or so, as a way of denoting the increasingly central role played by identity claims in social and political conflict" (McNay 2008, p. 1).

Recognition (or respect) means valuing somebody or something, regarding them as worthy and appreciating them as they are. Recognition has an evaluative sense: it carries connotations of evaluating something which is not common, but which is outstanding or extraordinary. It "differs from the others insofar as it is a comparative appraisal of a person's merits or an evaluation of her relative quality in light of some standards of excellence" (Dillon 1992, p. 111). It is important as a moral attitude referring to others, not as a recognition of facts, laws or physical environment. However, I would suppose, it is rather characteristic for this paradigm that the efforts aimed at the egalitarian reinterpretation of recognition use the terms "recognition" and "respect" interchangeably, and cannot separate them from "esteem", "honour", "prestige" and other synonyms.

Typical contemporary moral and political papers concerning recognition suppose that people demand or deserve equal respect, that is, they demand a form of recognition that "must not be due to some people more than others" (Bird 2004, p. 209). Recognition as an egalitarian normative claim refers to mutual and symmetrical interpersonal relations. In general, mutuality has become one of the key ideas of the contemporary form of egalitarianism. Mutual recognition is seen today as the only just and democratic relationship between individuals and groups, and "the value of mutual recognition... is at the core of deliberative democracy" (Gutman and Thompson 1996, p. 7).

The idea of mutual dependence, as opposed to either hierarchy and dependence or independence and autonomy is an old concept, connected to the Scottish moral thinkers' notion of *sympathy*. It became dominant mainly in the descriptive notion of the division of labour, which was devoid of any hint of criticism, as represented for children in Richard Scarry's *Busytown*. Accompanying the current dominance of free market economic rhetoric, the previous ideal of mutual interpersonal (moral) dependence has come into

fashion again, but with a strongly prescriptive tone. “Reciprocity is an explicitly moral principle” (Gutman and Thompson 1996, p. 18).

The normative force of the recognition paradigm comes from its redemptive potential residing in the ideal of mutual recognition, but this time the redemption—both from inequalities and from the concomitant discomforts and conflicts—would not only be earthly, but interpersonal and moral.

Contemporary egalitarianism is less economic in its focus, that is, it is less concerned with redistribution of wealth, but is instead preoccupied with moral and intersubjective themes. Thus, while egalitarians throughout most of the 20th Century sought to change institutions and the human mind in order to create economic equality, today their successors’ efforts are aimed at achieving intersubjective moral equality experienced in and by means of mutual recognition. The demand for recognition refers both to interpersonal relations and to relations between individuals and institutions, so contemporary egalitarians would change both. It is worth noting, however, that the recent demands for recognition are much less focused on institutions than they are on interpersonal relations.

After 1945, and particularly after the political takeover of the ‘68-ers in most institutions, it became clear that neither enlightened legislation nor the welfare state were capable of achieving the desired equal and free society. After decades of leftist governments in various countries, without clear oppressors like kings, aristocrats, etc., and where everything was controlled by the benevolent representatives of the people, a strong sense of frustration still remains. Therefore, the contemporary utopia of justice has been focused on moral epistemology and equality: how people can achieve consensus and justice, measured by their subjective psychological satisfaction. Instead of the earlier goal of legal or economic equality, today moral or intersubjective equality (recognition) is the Holy Grail sought by intellectuals and implemented by bureaucratic and legal enforcement. John Rawls clearly established that self-esteem is the most important good and it depends on the esteem of the Others’. “our self-respect normally depends upon the respect of others” (1971, p. 178). Therefore the satisfaction of one’s Ego depends on one’s social environment, as Rousseau put it critically in his *First Discourse*: Rawls hoped that self-esteem could be connected to equality, and supposed that democrats would not wish to be the masters of others in order to raise their self-esteem. A “desirable feature of a conception of justice is that it should publicly express men’s respect for one another. In this way they insure a sense of their own value” (Ibid., p.179). Democratic self-esteem and pride is somehow not equal with vanity and ambition.

This moral and political effort was closely connected to the discipline of sociology which has provided a wealth of analysis showing that in spite of legal and economic equality, a great deal of inequality persists in everyday life within intersubjective relationships. The present demands for recognition are related less to the work of institutions, than they are to intersubjective attitudes.

Face-to-face inequality, due to a lack of recognition or due to any kind of unfriendly attitudes, is evident in the communication of moral requirements, the so-called pressure for conformity expressed by the Others. These requirements are traditionally labelled as intolerant or oppressive, but in this discourse they are instead deemed to be misrecognition. They cause mental and moral suffering, a key criterion of what constitutes unjust and violent behaviour. The demand for recognition is justified basically by moral psychology, by the equal right to self-respect and a positive self-image, an unmolested mind and the concomitant psychological satisfaction. The refusal of this demand is termed misrecognition, the root of injustice and conflict in the world, and the unjust character of any human relation evidenced by the psychological well-being of specified groups of people, labelled “minorities”. Thus, justice is realized in the recognition that is claimed measured in terms of psychological well-being.

Refusing to grant the desired recognition, seen as an ‘insult’ or ‘humiliation’, is called injustice, because it damages one’s positive self-image (Honneth 1995, p. 131). This misrecognition is observable in a state of mind, as an infallible sign of unjust relations. “The conflict – coming from disapproval – is based not on a violation of an individual assertion of rights, but rather on a violation of the integrity of the person as a whole... ‘Honour’, then, is the stance I take towards myself when I identify positively with all my traits and peculiarities”. It would appear to follow that just or democratic honour or dignity is antithetical

to any normative criticism or self-criticism or self-contempt, because these would hurt the Ego's integrity. "Our ethical life rests upon a positive relation to ourselves" (Deranty and Renault 2007, p. 101). Because everyone has a right to a positive self-image that stems from recognition, and everyone has an equal right to recognition, irrespective of any merit or qualification. Hence, after the demolition of any idea of normality, there is only one politically correct, that is, egalitarian moral requirement: the refusal of any non-egalitarian requirements. Any other moral or functional requirements may cause bad feelings, psychic discomfort or critical self-reflection, and these are therefore forbidden as oppressive.

If an individual experiences an "insult", it is justified for him/her to rebel and resist. The emphasis is on such justified rebellion. Misrecognition may undermine self-righteousness and generate reflection, but a democratic self has a right to be saved from self-reflection or self-criticism. The aim is the elimination of the dialogical self—the consciousness or I/Me difference—by eliminating any disapproval as unjust (Honneth 1996, p. 83).

In the rhetoric of recognition one can see a new argument for an old utopia. The present rhetoric emphasizes psychological well-being and a sense of self-righteousness, because it has become clear that material well-being or a properly organized welfare state cannot grant the happiness wished for by many. Beside legal and economic equality, political hedonism demands intersubjective or moral equality, called mutual recognition. The problem here is that legal or economic equality and success would not satisfy ambitious people, because "in the theaters gold cannot procure a seat for the servile race beside their former masters" (Tocqueville 1994, I. p. 359). It turned out after the emancipation in the 19th century that political and legal recognition is not satisfying without social recognition, because the "judgement of others is the last judgement; and social exclusion is the concrete form of hell and damnation. It is also because man is a God unto man that man is a wolf unto man" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 196). It turned out that social misrecognition can generate the same resentment as political and legal misrecognition. After achieving mass suffrage contemporary democrats have sought equal recognition for the resentful people. The fundamental insight of the followers of the recognition paradigm is that people may be oppressed not only due to them lacking or being denied resources but also or alternatively through a denial of recognition.

COMMUNICATIVE UTOPIA, COMMUNICATION AS UTOPIA

The notion of mutual recognition is connected to the age-old hope for consensus: if only all men could see the world from every others' point of view, that is, if they are sympathetic toward one another, then mutual understanding and an inclusive political community would emerge, instead of the existing one, which is fraught with conflict between an irreconcilable plurality of views, misrecognition and frustration. The idealised dialogue of G. H. Mead is symmetrical, honest, serious, and free from violence, enforcement or any kind of asymmetry. This equal and free communicative situation involves continuous bargaining over meanings, creating wall-to-wall consensus. From this point of view any kind of inconvenience, limitation of freedom or sanction is fair only if it is based on the consent of the affected persons.

The utopia of communication—which will achieve truth and justice sooner or later—has been a constant in our culture since Milton's *Aeropagitica*, but it was given a new twist by G. H. Mead's pragmatism (Benhabib 1985). According to Mead's account, intersubjective communication is inherently symmetrical, even without power and enforcement. Recently Habermas has continued this utopia through the notion of the "ideal speech situation" and "communicative action". Mead's pragmatic theory of interpersonal communication has become important for contemporary egalitarians, because he connected the utopia of (symmetrical) communication to the formation of the self.

Recent notions of democracy include the right to a peaceful soul and an unmolested mind, undisturbed by the knowledge of failures. Mead's idealized symmetrical communication would thus eliminate the mental discomforts and self-assessment disorders which derive from misrecognition. Therefore, instead of tolerance, positive reinforcement—in the guise of recognition, respect, etc.—has emerged as the highest virtue of egalitarianism, because "the flaunting of [people's] vice in public hurts more than

the vice itself” (Montaigne 1991, p. 296). Tolerance in the past meant legal tolerance, but today it means, above all, suspending moral or even functional requirements. The recognition paradigm alludes to equal moral worth, but it opposes not only moral requirements, because it translates all kinds of lack of achievement into moral categories and turns the tensions arising from these shortages into moral questions. The theoreticians of this paradigm do not confront the question of how a society based on mutual recognition, compassion, and a moral and “cultural” interest in avoiding any misrecognition can at the same time run a contemporary complex and performance-oriented economy.

Previous notions of tolerance or neutrality presupposed that differences should not be relevant, while a paradigm which demands recognition means that particularities are important, and a decent democrat should positively support the demands for recognition of certain people. Not “colour-blindness”, but active moral support of minorities is the proper egalitarian behaviour in face-to-face relations, in this model. Hence, this mindset aims to prohibit the expression and vindication of moral requirements in interpersonal relations. This is called the enforcement of recognition. Equality may tolerate difference, but certainly not recognise merit or superiority.

The language of recognition has reinterpreted oppression or exploitation as including psychological trauma, pain, anxiety and self-assessment disorders. These negative emotions are regarded as the signs of and a convincing argument against pathological, unjust and unequal social conditions. “Psychological oppression typically results from pressures to conform to the standards and ways of life of majority cultures, who assert their values and modes of expression as the ‘norm,’ or as ‘universal,’ and correspondingly designate the values and practices of minority cultures as ‘different,’ merely particular, and inferior” (Anderson 2009, p. 33). Justice and democracy can in this way be perceived as subjective satisfaction or psychological well-being, originating from being loved (Honneth 1996, p. 135).

In the recognition paradigm, equality means everyone enjoying an equal right to an unmolested mind, which includes self-confidence and a sense of moral rightness and intersubjective reinforcement. Democracy and justice are, above all, pleasant. This pleasant state of mind is termed the integrated self, that is, one with a clear conscience, which is not burdened by external expectations or sanctions from others. The demand for recognition is a demand for the positive reinforcement of the individual’s self-confidence and positive self-image.

The argument for this claim is based on a socialized interpretation of the self. In Hegelian and Meadian thinking the self emerges through interaction and is created by the attitudes of Others, and this idea underpins the main argument for transforming interpersonal relations and enforcing recognition. In this constructivist interpretation, the self is formed in and by its interactions with others, and power and oppression exist also in these relations as misrecognition, a form of oppression involving refusing to recognize someone else’s demand. Misrecognition—meaning the refusal of recognition—is oppressive and hurts one’s dignity. As a form of symbolic violence¹ it provokes the morally legitimate and rightful retaliatory violence of the misrecognized (Honneth 1996, p. 5).

The signs of misrecognition are a troubled mind, anxiety, perplexity and self-doubt. Self-scrutiny, an ancient and Christian ideal, akin to a bad conscience, has been reinterpreted as the consequence of the unjust and unequal treatment of individuals. An integrated, harmonious self is the result of its social environment, just like a frustrated and oppressed self is. Happiness and satisfaction, and a peaceful mind can only exist if there is respectful interaction. Therefore, democracy—or as it is interpreted in this paradigm, the equal right to psychological well-being—requires the proper types of interaction, involving love, care, respect and encouragement. According to this argument, proactive democratic states should make every effort to enforce these kinds of relationships and prohibit every other kind. Social reconstruction is necessary to satisfy everyone’s need for self-respect and an unmolested mind.

In the past, the integrated self or a peaceful, undisturbed soul was seen as a result of grace, achieved by the Christians’ pilgrimage in the Valley of Sorrow. Today it is the birth right of every democrat, and only oppressive and intolerant institutions and people are the source of subjective moral calamities through their oppressive expectations and through misrecognition. Thus, equality should be created in face-to-face

relationships by securing the wished for recognition for everyone or at least for those considered underprivileged. In this psychologized politics “man has a right to live in the world he wills himself” (Henrie 1999, p. 371).

THE IMPLICIT IDEA OF THE NON-CONSTRUCTED SELF OR COVERT ESSENTIALISM?

Charles Taylor (Taylor 1994) has connected recognition to identity. In his view, misrecognition is not problematic because its means submission, but rather because it forces the Ego into a distorted version of itself.

How can this be? If the self is constructed in and by interpersonal relations, it consists of what can emerge in these circumstances. In contrast, recognition is claimed to be the actualization of authentic identity. In their argument for recognition and against misrecognition, Taylor and Honneth supposed that there is a “real self”—an “I”—that should be recognized by Others and that is not the result of intersubjective relations. It is not clear in their argument what the origin of this “real self” is, that should be recognized by others, and if this “real self” is not socially constructed, how misrecognition can distort it. Those who argue for recognition in defence of the self do not assert that the denial of recognition can hurt someone. Instead, they emphasize that it demolishes or heavily distorts the self.

If the self is constructed in and by social interactions then, theoretically, idealized mutual recognition would entail an open social process resulting in random and unanticipated selves. However, in practice the policy of recognition requires the support and reinforcement of every participant’s ready self-image and unmolested mind. What is the source of self-image or authentic identity, if it is not socially created in dialogue with others, but something that should be respected? Does the self have direct access to something that is independent from interaction and which should be recognised? The normative requirement of recognition implies that the self is not socially constructed in interaction and thus does not emerge from the reactions of others, but has instead an independent core, having dignity and the right to be respected. Without the presupposition of this “real” (or authentic) self, the normative demand for recognition and the condemnation of misrecognition would be meaningless. On the other hand, without the theory of a self which is constructed in and by social interactions, the significance of recognition could not be stressed. Without this theory of self, misrecognition would simply be unpleasant but not something deeply and fundamentally disastrous for the misrecognized individual.

AMBITION AND RECOGNITION

The vocabulary of recognition refers partly to Mead’s interpersonal communicative utopia and partly to Hegel’s recognition model of struggle and the master-slave relationship. According to Kojève, human beings would even risk their own lives “in order to be ‘recognized’ by the other, to impose itself on the other as the supreme value; accordingly, their meeting can only be a fight to the death. And it is only in and by such a fight that the human reality is begotten, formed, realized, and revealed to itself and to others. Therefore, it is realized and revealed only as ‘recognized’ reality” (Kojève 1969, pp. 7-8). The “human reality is created, is constituted only in the fight for recognition and by the risk of life that it implies” (Ibid., p. 12). The aim of the fight is not to annihilate the Other, but to enforce his recognition, because recognition is the most valued good possible, and one can only receive recognition from the subdued. The subdued has to give up his claim for recognition, but he is obliged to recognise the winner. In the Hegelian perspective the relation between two consciousness is always asymmetrical, because the claim for recognition is asymmetrical: the Ego demands that the Other recognize him. The demand for recognition is a demand for an asymmetrical relationship. The question is simply who will be subdued and who will obtain recognition from the Other. The subdued seeks to transform the world from a non-recognizing into a recognizing one in which he can be the master. Therefore, in Hegel’s account, the claim for recognition cannot be said to foster agreement or mutuality. It results in continuous fights and challenges, and obtaining recogni-

tion means that the other will be subdued and unsatisfied. The wish for recognition is a wish for a certain behaviour on the part of the Other, whose wishes are thus not satisfied.

In Hegel's description it is not difficult to recognise the old theme of ambition, running from Plato's Callicles and St. Augustine to Hobbes and Rousseau's spoiled child. According to this tradition, man seeks recognition at another's expense.

The demand for recognition was thus imbued with negative connotations in western culture in the past. It was connected to the tyrannical man, as often described by many realist political thinkers. Hobbes started from St. Augustine's sinful man and from Plato's description of Callicles, figures who can survive in a hostile world only if they take care of themselves alone, striving to be the strongest and to arrange the social world around themselves. The recognition they demand would be the continuous affirmation of the Ego's sense of strength. In many descriptions, man is tyrannical by nature. In Christian realism, as Niebuhr called it, man searches for recognition or respect from the Other, and because of the *libido domini* man seeks to keep or reverse the master-slave relationship.

To the old question of whether order can exist without hierarchy in a world of equals, Hobbes' answer is well known. As he wrote, life in the world of equals is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1965, p. 92). The equals can be kept in a state of peaceful cooperation only by force. However, *Leviathan* is not only about equality. It is also about pride and ambition, the old subject of the *vanitas* topos. *Leviathan* is the king of the children of pride (*ambitionis Elenchus*) (Job 41:34). The ambitious men want the Others' appreciation that they can only acquire from the losing competitors. Even then, only some of them can occupy a position of appreciation, so the appreciated position cannot be shared. That is why respect is a positional good, that is, status can be taken in a zero-sum game. Prestige, status and respect can be enhanced only at the expense of others.

In this regard, it is worth referring here to the founding father of the modern democratic thinking, Rousseau. In addition to the widespread interpretation of Rousseau's thought that human is good by nature and prefers justice and order, he offers another perspective on human nature in *Emil*, according to which Man aims to dominate his environment and dominate his partners by nature:

Man naturally considers all that he can get as his own. In this sense Hobbes' theory is true to a certain extent: Multiply both our wishes and the means of satisfying them, and each will be master of all. Thus, the child, who has only to ask and have, thinks himself the master of the universe; he considers all men as his slaves; and when you are at last compelled to refuse, he takes your refusal as an act of rebellion, for he thinks he has only to command. All the reasons you give him, while he is still too young to reason, are so many pretences in his eyes; they seem to him only unkindness; the sense of injustice embitters his disposition; he hates every one. Though he has never felt grateful for kindness, he resents all opposition... In vain everybody strove to please them; as their desires were stimulated by the ease with which they got their own way, they set their hearts on impossibilities, and found themselves face to face with opposition and difficulty, pain and grief. Scolding, sulking, or in a rage, they wept and cried all day. Were they really so greatly favoured? Weakness, combined with love of power, produces nothing but folly and suffering" (Rousseau 1921, p. 51).

In Rousseau's *Second Discourse* he argues that competition for prestige is not natural in origin but the result of social life, and this competition leads to slavery as a concomitant of social life.

Men no sooner began to set a value upon each other, and know what esteem was, than each laid claim to it, and it was no longer safe for any man to refuse it to another... Hence, the first duties of civility and politeness, even among savages; and hence every voluntary injury became an affront, as besides the mischief, which resulted from it as an injury, the party offended was sure to find in it a contempt for his person more intolerable than the mischief itself" (Rousseau 2002, pp. 118-9).

Social life produces vanity and ambition, as Man desires recognition and high esteem because he is a social animal. Rousseau criticized culture and society because man as a social being “lives outside himself”, he knows himself only from the Others’ judgements and opinions. (See his *First Discourse* and Moliere’s *The Misanthrope*.) It is not power, but the wish for affirmation and self-love which perverts human beings (Grant 1987).

The origin of vanity, the root of corruption of man other than private property, is man’s nature or his social life. Therefore, the solution can only be a return to the pre-social state, or the education of man—as in *Emil*—or the utopian construction of democracy—as set out in *The Social Contract*. Mead, Habermas and the radical democrats usually quote Rousseau, but they overlook his remark that democracy is for gods.

One may find a similar observation on the nature of man in connection with the world’s oldest democracy. John Adams wrote that the demand for equality is simply disobedience, as everyone hates superiority, but nobody really wishes to be equal, but instead they want to be superior. The preference for equality means the refusal of anyone being superior but not the annihilation of the ambition for superiority and esteem. Similarly, according to Tocqueville, everyone in a democracy searches for a higher position. This means that democratic people are always unsatisfied and restless. There is always competition and clashes are inevitable. He wrote: “All are constantly seeking to acquire property, power and reputation” (Tocqueville 1994, II p. 243). Nobody wants to stay in his position because there are only transitory positions among equals (Ibid., p. 244). The ostensible equality begets “restless ambition”. (Ibid., p. 39). People under a democracy are characterized by “envy, hatred, uncharitableness, pride and exaggerated self-confidence”, (Ibid., p. 7) and their lives are in a state of permanent combat. The question is not whether assigning equal value is possible or not. The real question is whether the people desire such equal valuation, whether it satisfies their wishes or not.

Even Rawls remarked bitterly:

The account of self-respect as perhaps the main primary good has stressed the great significance of how we think others value us... (N)ot everyone can have the highest status, and to improve one person’s position is to lower that of someone else. Social cooperation to increase the conditions of self-respect is impossible. The means of status, so to speak, are fixed, and each man’s gain is another’s loss. Clearly this situation is a great misfortune. Persons are set at odds with one another in the pursuit of their self-esteem (1971, pp. 544-46).

Before the emergence of the recent recognition paradigm and the related reading of Hegel by G. H. Mead, the ideal of mutual recognition resulting in peace and harmony when all demands for recognition have been reconciled was rather rare. It can be found in a rather abstract form in Kant (1991, § 24. p. 244) and Fichte (2000, p. 43), who hoped that this desire could be mutually satisfied and that this would not necessarily result in a master-slave relationship, and suggested that mutual recognition might create a new community containing symmetrical relationships.

In contemporary neo-Hegelian egalitarianism, the demand for recognition is regarded as having been the motivating force for emancipation throughout history. (Lawrenz 2007) In this egalitarian interpretation, conflict is the result of misrecognition. “The struggle is the necessary consequence of their faulty self-understanding” (Anderson 2009, p. 11). Thus, logically, mutual recognition would result in the end of conflicts and “the end of history”.

However, beside this egalitarian hope, there is still the old tradition of the moral and political refusal of ambition. The demand for recognition, the foundational notion of contemporary moral egalitarian project, had to be reinterpreted in order to separate it from the traditional meaning of ambition in the Christian tradition.

Rawls and the followers of the contemporary recognition paradigm turned the tradition upside down, defining self-respect as the highest moral and honourable good. Traditionally, the demand for recognition

results in conflict, instead of peace, because its aim is the submission of the Other, that is, the enforcement of the Other to recognize the Ego. However, this traditional interpretation of the demand for recognition and the contemporary egalitarian one are common at one point: both can see state as an established form of recognition. Because of the conflicted consequences of ambition, the Christian tradition interpreted it as sin, something that should be dominated or at least limited. But, as we can see, the recognition paradigm broke with this tradition, and instead of moderating ambition, it tends to celebrate it proudly.

In the recent discourse on recognition, mutual recognition is partly the natural character of interactions as Mead described it, and partly something that should be enforced by the democratic state. Egalitarians would use state power for satisfying demands for recognition by bureaucratically fabricating and enforcing the wished recognition of certain differences. The contemporary democratic state aims to revolutionize interpersonal relations in order to satisfy the demands for recognition of certain groups of people. The usual paradox is that the egalitarian and free relations of mutual recognition should be created by democratic state power, based on equal dignity and the representation of each person, which would then force some people to change their behaviour and even attitudes towards certain individuals. The representatives of the recognition paradigm, who are usually radicals, are rather confident of reconstructing Others' minds by means of the state. They usually do not ask whether this "moral duty could be enforceable or should be enforced" (Green 2010, p. 219).

The Hobbesian—traditional—sense of ambition, pride and honour seems to be involved in a Hegelian master-servant model (Ibid., p. 213). The question is whether people demand mutual or positional respect, and whether people are motivated by the offer of respect and satisfied by that mutual respect or not. The practice of emancipatory movements shows that rebels do not aim for mutuality at all.

INCREASING TENSIONS

In this paper I do not intend to scrutinize the presupposition of the respect paradigm. I am not interested in whether everyone aims for recognition, or even if people aim for it to an equal degree, or even if they deserve recognition equally in every situation. Neither am I interested in whether they demand equality more than recognition.

Until recently the demand for recognition—or pride, ambition, vanity, etc.—was seen as a problem because of its potential for conflict, and several institutions and social processes were maintained more or less with the purpose of taming or ameliorating this demand and reconciling frustrated people. It is a rather unusual development that some people have recently placed their political and moral hopes on a wish for recognition.

The history of democratic movements and of social life does not support the optimism of the followers of the recognition paradigm. Even leftist thinkers such as Rawls and Žižek have observed that this moral-political paradigm has not solved anything. Instead of generating peace and cooperation it has ignited conflicts, disturbing the spirit instead of pacifying it (Žižek 1999). In ancient Greek thought it was a common idea that the wish for respect and avoidance of shame had socially positive effects. It results in individuals making efforts to adapt themselves to their social requirements. In the recognition paradigm the morally justified emotional grounds for action is suffering, or bad feelings arising from disrespect. In this view, adopting Others' requirements is not a virtue of civility, but it is a form of self-deprecation, self-abasement or submission: "In the context of the emotional responses associated with shame, the experience of being disrespected can become the motivational impetus for a struggle for recognition" (Honneth 1995, p. 138). In this paradigm the dominant issue is not whether misrecognition and shame are well founded or not, but that it is unjust as such. This paradigm separates ambition and pride from its potential harmful social consequences, as it relieves shame of its supposedly positive social effects.

Why does the respect paradigm incite conflicts instead of bringing peace and cooperation?

There are several reasons for this:

1. The promise is satisfaction for all, but the psychological well-being of an ambitious man is a *positional good*, which originates from the respect of Others, therefore it cannot be distributed equally.

Recognition, in spite of the efforts of academia and benevolent moral thinkers to reinterpret our understanding of recognition and respect, is still a form of positional good, one which is connected to the agonistic human condition, to competition and scarcity. The increase in morally and politically legitimised demands for recognition thus creates more conflict instead of bringing the promised political and psychological harmony.

Rawls hoped that democracy would be the preference of equality. After the failures of the socialist utopia, many people thought that shortages or productivity difficulties occur only when there is an equality of material goods, but they supposed that when it came to moral goods—like self-esteem, an unmolested mind and the like—no such problems could exist. However, self-esteem originating from recognition seems to be a positional good, that is, it presupposes somebody occupying underdog positions. Finally, recognition turns out to be scarce, just like material goods. Scarcity seems to be a perennial feature of the human world and the “symptom of the world’s fallenness” (Kirsch 2008, p. 144).

The demand for recognition presupposes that someone else’s desire has to remain unsatisfied.

The demand for recognition—referring to the equal right to subjective satisfaction, self-respect, identity, an unmolested mind, etc., but at the same time involving an upward revaluation—requires a certain change in the behaviour of Others, and of their mode of thinking and feeling. Thus, the Others can no longer be fully autonomous beings.

On the one hand, the Ego wants to be free and to control his social environment, even to the extent of controlling the thoughts and feelings of people around him. The problem with mutual recognition is that everyone would like to be free from the expectations of Others, and from the pressure to conform deriving from their social environment. That is why the demand for recognition can be satisfied only in asymmetrical relations. It therefore results in eternal conflicts instead of a state of peaceful and harmonious cooperation. It is closely connected to the demand for transparency: many people demand the transparency of the world—institutions, other people’s minds, etc.—but all of them indignantly refuse any demand for their own transparency and insist on privacy and secrecy. The widespread wish for a more transparent world is combined with a horrified refusal of our own transparency through surveillance.

The idea of interpersonal and mutual recognition obviously contradicts the liberal ideal of autonomy and self-domination (Gray 1993, 2003, 2023), because in a situation of mutual recognition an individual should behave and even think and feel according to the requirements of his environment. The demand for recognition aims to change the Others’ thinking about the Ego. “Self-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness” (Hegel 1977, §175, p. 110). This means that the demand for recognition is for a demand to change the minds of Others, which is incompatible with the older liberal ideal of an autonomous man, which has been idealized until recently. Therefore, demands for recognition generate persistent conflicts between individuals who are taught to demand individual freedom, in the sense of autonomy—not being formed and controlled by others from without—and to be authentic—in the sense of not being conformist—as well as to demand recognition from others, i.e. to seek to control the behaviour of Others and even their attitudes and feelings (Nagel 1986). “The individual is perpetually riven by the conflict between her desire for the freely given recognition from the other, on the one side, and her longing to extort this recognition through domination, even annihilation, on the other” (McNay 2008, p. 44).

2. Social reconstruction rarely occurs without there being some losers, and thus rarely happens without some resistance. The contemporary egalitarian, therefore, would use force to transform certain institutions and interpersonal relations in order to provide recognition to some, while this would involve others losing their present recognition (called “privileges” by reconstructivist actors).

The political issue concerns whether these ambitious people, who demand recognition, can live an ordered and peaceful life without political order. Two possible solutions can be identified: one would eliminate this ambitious character of man by education or religious or ideological conversion, while the other would limit the satisfaction of their ambitions by means of enforcement or education, and offer some form of compensation. The promise of contemporary democracy is the psychological well-being and satisfaction of each individual. In practice, however, it is clear that this psychological well-being can only be enjoyed by some people. I will call this groups the privileged democrats.

3. The demand for recognition is a demand for status. Therefore, the real question is whether people demand equal respect, and whether they are satisfied by that or not. The theoreticians of the recognition paradigm use an allegedly moral argument—the notion of mutual recognition—to support the ambitions of a realist type of man, and finally these moral egalitarians find themselves in the trap of agonistic democracy. In the minds of the academic representatives of the recognition paradigm there is the notion of an idealized, mutual kind of recognition, which leads humankind towards egalitarian peace and harmony—but in the minds of their fellow activists there is a competitive form of recognition connected to occupying the position of master.

The recent fashion for egalitarian recognition is based on the re-evaluation of the notions of ambition and pride, in opposition to the Christian tradition in order to revolutionize face-to-face, intersubjective relations and to change the nature of master-slave relations. Followers of this trend would realize their goals through a radical reinterpretation of ambition and pride, the characteristic name of the annual march of the constituency of the politics of recognition. As Coin Bird wrote:

In rejecting those sorts of respect that are owed to some more than others, Kantians hope to split their concept of respect off from the hierarchical bedrock in which the language of respect has historically often found a home. Instead of construing respect in terms of a vertical sensitivity to superiority and inferiority, contemporary Kantians think of it in horizontal terms, defining an “egalitarian plateau” below which none must fall. In this way, the modern ethos of equal dignity for all can be insulated from the ancien regime discourse of honour and merit along with all of its hierarchical and inegalitarian connotations (Bird 2004, p. 209).

Even for Kant, moral respect has a hierarchical meaning, including reference to authority and submission. (Bird 2004, pp. 213–4) People outside academia, however, use recognition in a non-egalitarian sense that motivates and mobilizes them, and not in its egalitarian and mutual meaning.

The question is whether the meaning of recognition has shifted in this egalitarian direction among people in general and not only among a small leftist circle, and whether people in democracy have actually changed. That is, whether activists are publicly demanding the kind of egalitarian and universalistic recognition constructed by leftist intellectuals or whether they continue to understand recognition in its traditional sense, which entails one person prevailing over another and subduing them. Obviously, there is a difference between giving reasons for equal treatment and giving the reasons that motivate people to provide equal treatment.

4. Moral criticism of non-recognition amounts to the moral criticism of domination of one over another, or of any kind of asymmetry. Domination and servitude are translated as non-recognition by Hegel. Hence, a Hegelian may argue that achieving mutual recognition would mean the end of domination. Moral progress is usually interpreted as a way toward the end of domination, and toward antinomian freedom and equality. A society based on people mutually respecting each other would be non-coercive, but the way there may contain endless disrespect or misrecognition. It also involves enforcement, so the respect-based argument cannot be used to vindicate a respectful, morally egalitarian society. Meliorism or the perfectionism of the recognition paradigm cannot be reconciled with its own demand for recognition. Someone needs to be silenced or forced into conformity, or to be re-educated, but not recognized in order to achieve the recognition—or the emancipation—of other people.

If people are predisposed to mutual recognition and equality, why does it represent such a daunting political and moral problem, requiring huge intellectual and political efforts for it to be realised? If most of us are victims of misrecognition by some, why do some people want to oppress this egalitarian and non-violent majority? And how can the continued existence of this kind of oppressive and violent minority be explained? Perhaps only re-educated people have this kind of predisposition to mutual recognition.

Perfectionism is inherently disrespectful (Chan 2000, p. 109)—any effort to create mutually respecting people is disrespectful towards the currently existing people—like any reconstructionist efforts. Re-education requires the deconstruction of the existing culture, language, habits and institutions and of the characters of the individuals composing it. Obviously, any form of deconstruction is against recognition of the existing status quo. The activists of recognition politics thus do not accept the moral obligation when it comes to recognizing their opponents. Indeed, quite the opposite is true. They do just the opposite, they claim that their duty is to misrecognize certain groups or individuals in order to demolish them. Not only the misrecognition, but even the dehumanization of their opponents is a part of their practice. As they say, “Self-defence is no offence”.

If the interaction where the self is constructed were an open process, it could change both sides, which may result in the submission or the withdrawal of the demand for recognition on either side. However, this could never be the result in the literature on the recognition paradigm. For its followers, the only just resolution of any interaction is the recognition of certain people whose demand for recognition is valued, without considering the unpleasant changes that would need to be made to the Others’ mind.

Any kind of misrecognition, even if it is justified by emancipatory arguments, increases the conflict between people, instead of bringing us closer to mutual recognition and peaceful harmony. Thus, according to the recognition paradigm, the intensification of the demand for recognition will result in the outbreak of justified conflicts—that is, misrecognition of their opponents is justified—for the sake of emancipation, which will eventually lead to the peace of moral equality and mutual recognition. This logic of emancipation is not actually anything new. It can be found in millenarian and revolutionary texts such as Lenin’s *State and Revolution*: communism and the end of state will be achieved by a dictatorship, a state with immensely increased power. As Appiah concluded, “between the politics of recognition and the politics of compulsion, there is no bright line” (1994, p. 163).

Finally, it is apparent that not every demand for recognition is justified, that is, not everybody “merits some recognition” (Frazer and Honneth 2003, p. 38). It seems that there are just forms of misrecognition. In certain cases, as with racists, sexist and other kinds of unjust people, their psychological well-being can be overlooked due to their unjust nature, and misrecognition can be excused.

The contentious character of the demand for respect was well described by Hegel: the Ego, who demands recognition from the Other, implies the Other's submission and change. If any frustration derives from misrecognition and the misrecognized (the oppressed party) demands recognition, he can obtain the desired recognition only if the Other surrenders and abandons some elements of his own thinking, that is, the Other can recognise the Ego only if the Other is changed and discards his standards—however deeply embedded they are in his personality and identity—and accept the Ego's standards. A Catholic should reject his views on abortion, homosexuality, gay marriage, Christ, repentance, absolution, original sin, etc. if he cannot provide the recognition demanded for gays, atheists or Muslims. The notions of right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, success and failure, etc. have to be reinterpreted to be democratic and respectful. Only after changing his standards in this way can the Other provide recognition of the not less beautiful, less successful or wrong people.

This change is not only asymmetrical in nature, whereby only a change on the part of the Other may result in the desired recognition of the Ego, but it also means that the Other gives up his own original demands for recognition. That is, he yields in front of the Ego. The Other has to be submissive and give priority to the Ego's demands. If the Other has property or a well-paid job, but the Ego, referring to luck egalitarian arguments, demands recognition involving demands for a better life, the Other is morally and politically obliged—if he wants to avoid committing the crime of misrecognition and oppression—to give up his initial claim of having rights to his property or to his decently earned income. Or, if the Other initially demanded the recognition of his requirements, as being deeply embedded in his identity, he can avoid moral and political accusations, blackmailing and lynching—that is, pressure and enforcement—only if he renounces his identity and accepts that the Ego can dominate their relations and decide what are the valid standards of recognition and what is a proper identity for the Other.

People think or happily believe, if they are told, that they should receive recognition because of some achievements or characteristics that make them worthy of special attention and treatment (Dillon 1992, p. 109). It feels insulting to be treated with less respect than one *thinks is one's due* (this paraphrase is based on Wolff 1998, p. 107). The egalitarian idea of the demand for recognition in universal terms exists in moral and political philosophy but, in practice, social actors and movements demands first and foremost recognition on the basis of particular characteristics they possess (Darwall 1977).

Which kind of people win in the competition or fight for recognition may change over the course of history or as the political circumstances evolve, and the recognition paradigm is the contemporary vocabulary used in service of the will to win. Recently, what is considered to be the Other—those who should yield and whose submission will allegedly lead to a just and peaceful world—includes those who are (or perceived as) “male, cis, able-bodied, thin, white, middle to upper class or heterosexual”.

5. Being recognized is regarded as lying at the core of one's psychological well-being, so the demand for recognition is not only a demand for a just order of things, but it may also serve to mobilize its supporters. At the same time, one might wonder, how can one measure respect in order to judge mutuality—i.e. non-domination and justice—if subjective satisfaction is the ultimate measure of recognition?

Recognition is not a binary category like virginity, in the sense that it either is or is not. Instead, recognition and misrecognition are two ends of an endless continuum of attitudes. Therefore, someone can always demand or claim more respect. Especially in our current narcissistic age, there can be unlimited demands for respect in any sense, and thus there can always be a legitimate hate and resentment because of the lack of satisfying recognition offered to someone. What

is more, “people are sensitive not only to the way they are treated but also to the spirit in which that treatment is afforded” (Green 2010, p. 219).

Because of the ambiguities of language and the complex nature of moral psychology, the epistemological conflicts surrounding recognition—that is, justice in social relations—cannot be definitively decided one way or another. Language cannot be divested of ambiguity, not to mention irony and religious and artistic use of language:

To respect something is to treat it in a certain manner or to act in particular ways in connection with it... And there are many ways to respect things: by showing consideration for them or taking them into account; by keeping our distance from them and giving them room; by praising, honouring, or worshiping them; by obeying or abiding by them; by avoiding them; by protecting and being careful with them” (Dillon 1992, p. 108).

Hobbes, who based his contentious anthropology on pride, described the unavoidably ambiguous nature of recognition as originating from the problems of language and the human condition: “a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons or by reflection in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name” (1965, p. 96). Without an arbitrator, the universal demand for recognition—based on subjective and contingent, or even whimsical interpretations of individual moral psychology—results in endless resentfulness and anger.

It is clear that the scope of politics has widened into everyday intersubjective relations, and its activists have proudly rendered what were earlier private issues into public ones in order to draw them into political debates and subject them to political control. Instead of reconciliation and an unmolested mind coming from mutual recognition, the futile politics of recognition results in a more agonistic world, created in the name of justice and equality, in which there are no civilizational or moral limits for radicals who act on behalf of the emancipation of someone.

While the concept of recognition is helpful for understanding the origin of conflicts, the ideal of mutual recognition seems to be futile, causing more conflicts than it resolves. In one way or another, this paradigm falls short of producing the peaceful, harmonious and mutually satisfying human world it promises. The widespread effort to morally legitimize the demand and fight for recognition in political theory seems to lead to an increase in the number of conflicts by morally justifying them. In many cases the followers of this paradigm confess that their paradigm leads to more conflicts but believe that these will miraculously result in a just and peaceful world of mutual recognition. The warlike condition of equals competing for prestige eventually resulted in peace and hierarchy, according to Hobbes, while the recognition paradigm hopes in vain that the quarrels and fights of unequal people will somehow and someday bring equality, self-realization and peaceful harmony. Ironically, the recognition paradigm implies antipolitical hope based on the Hobbesian tragic or pessimist view of *conditio humana*.

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NOTES

- 1 "Symbolic violence is exercised only through an act of knowledge and practical recognition which takes place below the level of the consciousness and will and which gives all its manifestations—injunctions, suggestions, seduction, threats, reproaches, orders or calls to order—their "hypnotic power"" (Bourdieu quoted by McNay 2008, p. 34).