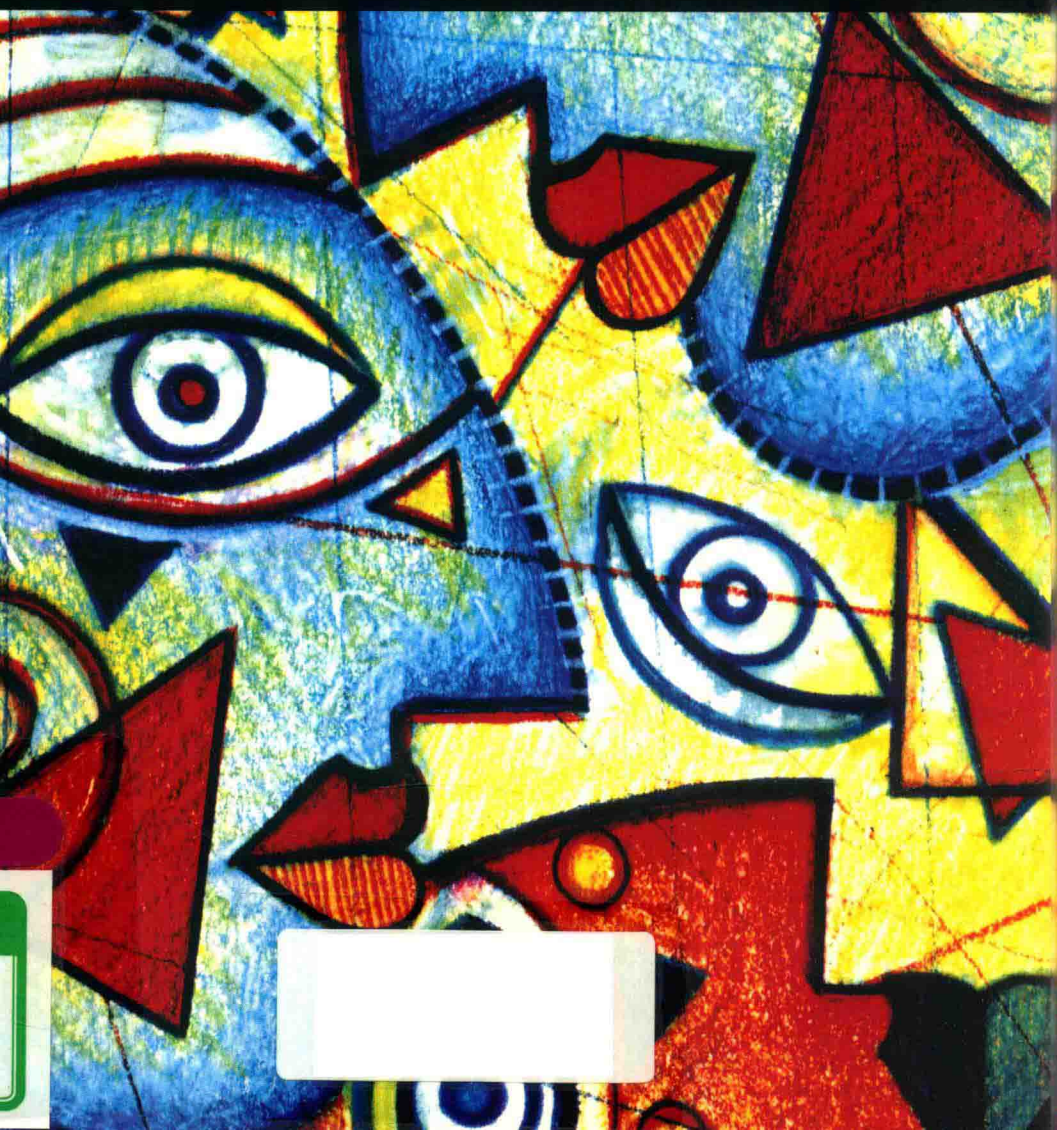


LOIS MCNAY

AGAINST
RECOGNITION



AGAINST RECOGNITION

Lois McNay

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For Murray

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Introduction: Against Recognition

To be 'against recognition' seems, on the face of it, to be an unsustainable position. The Hegelian idea of the struggle for recognition has provided the foundation for numerous important formulations of an alternative conception of subjectivity to the monological and disembodied accounts that prevail in conventional thought. 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. It would be difficult to be against recognition in this sense, too, as it would be tantamount to disregarding widespread social transformations that have undeniably had catalysing effects on political movements. It would be unreasonable to be against recognition in a final sense, namely, that to be emphatically for or against something is, in so many respects, non-conducive to intellectual debate. It leads all too easily, as Michel Foucault has observed, to the adoption of polemical attitudes that foreclose the exploration of subtleties and interconnections between differing positions.

This book is not 'against recognition', therefore, in any of the general senses outlined above. It is against recognition, however, in the more specific sense that it is critical of a cluster of loosely related formulations of the idea which have become predominant in the past ten or so years and which are associated, by and large, with what can be called communitarian and communicative traditions of

thought. The catalyst for this resurgence of interest in recognition is the essay by Charles Taylor (1994a) on the politics of recognition, although the idea has been present, with varying degrees of prominence, in the work of many of the thinkers considered here for much longer. Nonetheless, it is Taylor's signal essay that has given the idea of the struggle for recognition renewed currency as an interpretative trope for explaining the centrality of identity claims to so many significant social and political struggles. The idea has been developed mainly within the terrain of normative political thought and the adjacent domains of cultural and social theory, but it has also been fruitfully developed in the more distant domain of psychoanalysis. Indeed, as the idea has become increasingly prevalent there have been many fruitful engagements between thinkers across these disciplinary fields. Despite its prominence in debate and the important insights it has generated, I argue that the way in which the idea of recognition has been elaborated by a cluster of thinkers is flawed. My basic argument is as follows. Although the idea of recognition highlights the multifarious ways in which identity claims lie close to the heart of many contemporary social and political movements, it frames these issues in a reductive understanding of power. I focus, in particular, on the ways in which the idea of recognition rests on a simplified understanding of subject formation, identity and agency in the context of social hierarchies, in particular, gender. In the final analysis, many of these difficulties stem from the dual significance that the idea of recognition is accorded as both a descriptive tool and a regulative ideal. The exigencies of sustaining the idea of recognition as a viable normative ideal result in a delimitation of its analytical purchase by disconnecting certain aspects of subject formation from an analysis of power. This disconnection is partly concealed by an ontology of recognition that each thinker sets up and that allows them to naturalize and universalize their particular account of subjectivity and agency. The ultimate irony of these naturalizing and universalizing tendencies is that they undermine the initial impulse that led these thinkers to use the idea of recognition in the first place. Far from resulting in a more embodied, dialogical account of subjectivity, most of the thinkers considered here end up invoking relatively abstract and disembodied conceptions that are closer than they might care to acknowledge to the monological concepts they oppose.

In sum, I am not against recognition in that I do not disagree with the basic claims made about the dialogical nature of subjectivity, identity and agency by thinkers of recognition. I am against recognition, however, in so far as these insights are not sufficiently embedded in a

sociological understanding of power relations. The consequent ways in which the idea of recognition is naturalized and universalized fore-close anything but the most limited understanding of identity and agency in the context of the reproduction of inequalities of gender.

THE SUBJECT OF RECOGNITION

The force of the idea of recognition derives from its original Hegelian formulation where selfhood is formed not through a solipsistic process of rational contemplation but through an intense and unending conflict with an 'other'. From Hegel's basic depiction of the struggle for recognition have flowed a multiplicity of theories about the precise nature that this agonistic process of subject formation assumes. In general, recent work on recognition has conceptualized this dialectical subjectivity in ways that are quite distinct from earlier phases of interest in the idea, most notably, the theories of the post-war existential phenomenologists such as Kojève, Merleau Ponty, Sartre, De Beauvoir and Fanon. In many respects, the work of the latter has a more nuanced understanding of the entrenched nature of power relations and, as a consequence, a more pessimistic political outlook than the former. The recent resurgence of interest in the idea of recognition has been fuelled partly by opposition to the conception of the subject that underpins the tradition of liberal thought, on the one hand, and poststructuralism, on the other. The theoretical difficulties with these respective conceptions of the subject have been widely debated and they only briefly need stating. The concept of the subject held to underpin much liberal thought, especially recent Anglo-American philosophy, is essentially the antecedently individuated entity whose rational and autonomous characteristics are, arguably, overstated. In contrast, the subject of poststructural thought is, on the whole, negatively conceived as a relatively passive and fragmented entity in so far as it is understood as an effect of discourse. One of the central difficulties of these divergent concepts of subjectivity, which has been exhaustively documented by feminist thinkers, is that they are analytically limited in terms of understanding aspects of gender identity and inequality. It is this concern to integrate a fuller account of gender and other social differences into a concept of subjectivity that has partly led many thinkers to develop the dialogical idea of recognition. Without wanting to over-schematize, the three features that constitute the basic lineaments of the subject in what could be termed the 'new'

recognition paradigm are that it is dialogical, situated and generated through practice.

The fundamental insight that subjectivity is dialogical in nature, that it is created only through interaction with an Other, allows social and political theory to be recast around the insight of the central importance of intersubjective relations, rather than instrumental or strategic ones, to social life. Clearly many liberal thinkers acknowledge the dialogical aspects to subjectivity and social life; it is only extreme forms of liberal thought that posit the subject as an autarkic being. On the whole, however, the relation between self and other is attenuated by the ontological primacy liberalism accords to the rational or prudentially self-interested individual evident, for example, in Rawls's original position. In this respect, the subject of poststructuralist thought has a greater affinity with the subject of recognition in that it is conceived as a fundamentally relational rather than monological entity. Poststructuralism formulates this relational dynamic, however, largely in terms of a general model of the linguistic construction of desire where language is conceived as an impersonal system of signification. On this view, the other is the Symbolic Other, that is to say the objectified other who is the effect of the subject's projections and fantasies. In contrast, thinkers using the idea of recognition tend to conceive of this relational dynamic in terms of a social dialogue with concrete others, independent individuals who exist externally to the subject's projections. On this view, language is conceived not as an abstract system of signification but as a type of practical action that aims at self-expression, communication or mutual understanding. Dialogue is, therefore, oriented towards the realization of some kind of pragmatic, intersubjectively shared goal. This difference between the relational subject of poststructuralism and the dialogic subject of recognition can be restated as the difference between an exclusionary and inclusionary view of the interaction between self and other. Poststructuralism views subject formation as taking place through the exclusionary dynamic of the constitutive other. The 'illusion' of stable subjectivity is maintained only through a derogation or denial of the potentially troubling alterity of the other. Theories of recognition tend to stress conversely the inclusive features of subject formation, that is, stable subjectivity is based on the ability to tolerate and embrace the other's difference. A significant implication of the inclusionary recasting of dialogical subjectivity is that it seemingly institutes an inalienable ethical bond to the other at the heart of normative thought.

The proposition that subjectivity is dialogical in nature is closely related to a second characteristic of the subject of recognition, namely,

that it is ineluctably situated. The situated nature of subjectivity can be taken to mean many things but, in general, it denotes the way in which our sense of self, our understanding of what is good and what is just, are not trans-historical, universal phenomena but are inseparable from specific cultural and social contexts. This view of the situated nature of subjectivity is generally compatible with types of constructivism where identities are understood as performatively constructed, to varying degrees, rather than as having an essential core. This leads to the further claim that the constructive elements of thought on recognition are embedded in and derived from actual social practices. In other words, an explicit connection is posited in theories of recognition between political prescription and social theory both in terms of its normative consequences and also in terms of its tacit pre-understandings. In this regard, thinkers of recognition clearly position themselves in opposition to many Anglo-American political philosophers who assert that ideal thought must necessarily be free-standing. There is a further sense in which subjectivity can be understood as situated that is more closely connected to the idea of the situation, which is central to the work of phenomenologists such as Merleau Ponty, Sartre and Beauvoir (Kruks 2001). On this view, subjectivity is situated in that it cannot be fully understood from the abstract perspective of determining structures, but must also be grasped from the perspective of the lived reality of embodied social relations. Such an interpretative perspective is often formulated in terms of the idea of 'experience', which is widely held to be problematic because it seems to refer to some kind of self-evident and authentic realm. If, however, this perspective is detached from the recovery of an essential experience and used more as a heuristic tool, it delivers crucial insights into aspects of embodied subjectivity and agency. It is not possible, for example, to fully explain the dialectic of freedom and constraint that is generative of agency without adopting some kind of phenomenal perspective on the intentionality of embodied existence. Action cannot be grasped only from an abstract account of structural contradiction or linguistic indeterminacy but must also be understood through ideas of intention, aim and commitment 'that can also be refused' (Kruks 2001: 12). It is this inseparability of self from situation and the consequent necessity of adopting some kind of interpretative or phenomenal perspective that informs, for instance, the emphasis placed by recognition thinkers on language as a form of pragmatic interaction rather than as pure signification.

A third characteristic of the subject of recognition is that it is generated through embodied practice. Subjectivity is not a punctuated phenomenon but the outcome of an ongoing process of engagement

with the world. This idea is closely related to the idea of the situation and likewise, it can be traced back to an influential formulation of existential phenomenology, most famously expressed in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born but becomes woman. The idea that subjectivity is produced through practice is, of course, not limited to phenomenology; it has been interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, many of which emphasize the embodied, pre-reflexive and shared dimensions of this generative process. Practices are understood as 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding' (Schatzki 2001: 2). On this view, subjectivity is neither fully willed nor fully determined. It is neither the outcome of a conscious project of self-fashioning nor is it the effect of the iterative operations of discourse upon the body. It is rather the pre-reflexive realization of embodied dispositions which themselves are the result of the incorporation of the latent tendencies of the world into the body. This emphasis on the embodied and pre-rational dimensions of practice is taken in different directions by thinkers of recognition. Charles Taylor, for example, argues that our deepest moral and ethical judgements are not rational or cognitive but are 'inarticulate' in that they are based in emotional and intuitive responses to the world. Along with thinkers like Axel Honneth, Taylor also argues that many of our actions are motivated not by rational interest but by the often pre-rational but elemental 'moral suffering' that occurs from social misrecognition. Likewise, Jurgen Habermas uses the idea of universal pragmatics to show how daily interaction is practically oriented towards reaching understanding rather than being driven by strategic or instrumental concerns. Like the idea of the situated nature of subjectivity, the emphasis on practice returns recognition thinkers again to some kind of phenomenal perspective which attempts to analyse social existence in terms of latent or explicit self-understanding, intention and aim.

Although the subject of recognition is elaborated according to discernible, shared themes, it is important not to overstate these commonalities. Each thinker develops them in distinct ways, in relation to differing problematics, and in order to reach divergent political conclusions. There is one overarching feature, however, that unites these various configurations of the subject, which is that almost all the thinkers considered here invest the idea of recognition with a strong normative significance. The idea of recognition is regarded not just as a useful analytical tool for unravelling processes of subject formation but is also seen as a potent way of expressing a normative ideal of egalitarian self-realization. The attribution of such a normative force

to the idea of recognition is motivated, to some degree, by a concern to overcome the issue of difference which, although enormously important in contemporary thought, has become something of a theoretical impasse. Again, the liberal and poststructural treatment of the idea of difference establishes the parameters of the problem that thinkers of recognition seek to overcome. In liberal theory, cultural, social and ethical differences are treated as the more or less unalterable given of value pluralism. Individuals are understood to have fairly fixed, pre-given beliefs and are regarded, therefore, as relatively impervious to democratic deliberation. On the whole, any response to collective social and normative problems must be based on an appeal to their rational self-interest, rather than to any altruistic capacities, or on an appeal to the intrinsic importance of certain normative ideals. This leads to an emphasis on normatively thin procedural solutions that leave the seemingly irreconcilable differences of value pluralism intact (see Habermas 1998b). In poststructuralism, difference is not so much an unalterable empirical given as it is an insurmountable ontological premise of existence. On this view, any attempt to set up definitive social or political arrangements runs the risk of excluding and oppressing individuals in unforeseen ways. Like liberalism, this leads poststructural thinkers to posit normatively thin political solutions, although they are formulated not so often as procedural frameworks but more as transient political alliances galvanized around contingent universal aims (e.g. Butler, Laclau and Žižek 2000). Against these two streams of thought, thinkers of recognition argue that if subjects are understood in a different way then difference is no longer reified as an ineliminable obstacle to social and political arrangements based on normatively thick ideas of shared understanding, empathy and agreement. The inclusive inflexion that thinkers of recognition give to the dialogical constitution of the subject means that individuals have the capacity, indeed in some cases are predisposed, to empathize with the other rather than being locked in an antagonistic relation with them. The inclusive proclivities of the subject are reinforced through the ideas of its situated and practice-oriented nature which emphasize the underlying shared regularities, assumptions and norms that structure embodied social existence. By highlighting the commonalities of existence in this way, even if they are latent, recognition thinkers seek to sketch out potential grounds for shared understanding and action. On this view, difference is not denied but neither is it hypertrophied. As Kruks puts it: 'the commonalities of embodiment point beyond the solipsistic tendencies of . . . subjects each of whom objectifies the other' (Kruks 2001: 33). It is in this respect that recognition has an explicitly dual significance; it is both an analytical

tool and a political ideal. The normative solution to the problem of difference proposed by thinkers of recognition is inextricably related to their ontology of the subject.

THE ONTOLOGY OF RECOGNITION

On the face of it, the normative force of the idea of recognition is attractive. It resonates, in particular, with feminist attempts to conceptualize subjectivity and agency beyond the well-known analytical and normative limitations of poststructural and liberal thought. The influential work of Seyla Benhabib and Jessica Benjamin, for example, has drawn out the potential implications of the idea of recognition for an understanding of the gendered aspects of embodied existence. The value of the idea of recognition is not limited to feminist thought; it has also provided a fruitful basis for theories of political engagement that seek to transcend the idea of difference; for example, theories of deliberative democracy. Whilst not wanting to discount the valuable insights of this work, it is the central claim of this book that the normative potency invested in the idea of recognition is also the source of a central weakness. There is too often an unexamined conflation of the normative and analytical functions of the idea of recognition with the effect that the former limits the critical purchase of the latter. The normative 'redemptive' force that resides in the ideal of mutual recognition constrains the way it is used as an analytical tool to explain how power creates unequal identities. In order to render recognition plausible as an ideal of self-realization and equality, sociological barriers to its possible implementation must necessarily be diminished or construed as contingent, secondary effects of power. Thus problematic aspects to the reproduction of subjectivity that pertain to the pervasive and insidious nature of social domination are underplayed. This is achieved through the disconnection of an understanding of subject formation from an analysis of power relations, with the consequence that the idea of recognition fails to grasp some important dimensions to the reproduction of social inequalities.

This problematic conflation of the normative sense of the idea of recognition with its analytical scope is not an incidental effect of the way it is conceptualized but rather a constitutive feature. It stems from the way in which almost all of the thinkers considered here legitimate the idea of recognition through ontological claims. The idea of the struggle for recognition permits each thinker to set up a

primal dyad as the origin of social relations and to attribute to this dyad a fundamental function, whether it be communication, self-expression or a constitutive need for acknowledgement. Social relations are then assessed according to the extent to which they realize or distort this primal function. On this view, social relations of power are always a *post hoc* effect, distorting or otherwise, of some antecedent and primordial interpersonal dynamic. Thus, for Habermas, social relations are regarded as imperfect realizations of an orientation to understanding that, in his view, constitutes the telos of linguistically mediated recognition, indeed, of language in general. On Taylor's expressivist version of recognition, social relations are assessed in terms of the extent to which they permit the actualization of authentic ethical identities. The problem with such views is that the extrapolation of the essence of sociality from a primal recognition dynamic results in a simplified understanding of power and its operations with regard to the formation of subjectivity and the construction of oppression. These simplifications manifest themselves in various ways. One major difficulty is that the face-to-face dynamic that is intrinsic to the idea of recognition disconnects inequalities from a socio-structural account of power. Gender oppression, for example, is misunderstood by being construed as, in its essence, a form of interpersonally engendered misrecognition rather than also as systemically generated oppression. This is not to deny that inequalities are created through personal interaction, but, by focusing principally on this mode, the idea of recognition obscures the extent to which identity and subjectivity are penetrated by structural dynamics of power which often operate at one remove from the immediate relations of everyday life.

This disconnection of the phenomenal realm of interaction from the underlying nexus of power relations is compounded by the tendency of many of the thinkers considered here to allocate recognition struggles to a distinct realm – the lifeworld or culture – thereby disconnecting it from what is variously configured as the arena of redistribution, the economy or systems. This book follows a multiplicity of thinkers in arguing that it is important to grasp the increasingly complex ways in which identity and subject formation are interconnected to latent structural dynamics (Fraser 2003; Hennessey 2000; Ray and Sayer 1999; Young 2000). The connection between embodied social reality and social structures is not an extrinsic one, expressed in theories of determination, but is an intrinsic one where impersonal forces shape, in a subtle and often indirect fashion, the felt necessities of daily life. Arguably, this interpenetration of the phenomenal and the structural is an intensifying feature of globalized capital where