Recognition Struggles and Social Movements

Contested Identities, Agency and Power

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At the turn of our century, social conflicts turn increasingly on questions of "recognition." Throughout the world, claims for recognition fuel campaigns for national sovereignty and subnational autonomy, not to mention "ethnic cleansing" and genocide, as well as movements that have mobilized to resist them. But such claims also occupy center stage in countries whose borders and constitutional frameworks are relatively settled. Thus, claims for the recognition of difference now figure prominently in struggles over multiculturalism within polyethnic and multi-religious states. They have also become salient in many "new social movements," such as feminism, which previously foregrounded claims for redistribution. Finally, claims for recognition are central to newly energized movements for international human rights, which seek to promote both universal respect for shared humanity and difference-regarding esteem of distinct "cultures."

To be sure, these struggles for recognition differ importantly from one another. They run the gamut from the patently emancipatory to the downright reprehensible, with most falling somewhere in between. But putting such differences to one side, temporarily, 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. Movements that not long ago boldly demanded an equitable share of resources and wealth no longer typify the spirit of the times. They have not, to be sure, wholly disappeared. But thanks to a sustained neoliberal rhetorical assault on egalitarianism, the absence of any credible model of "feasible socialism," and widespread doubts about the viability of state-Keynesian social democracy in the face of accelerated economic globalization, they have ceded pride of place to movements focused chiefly on recognition.

In general, then, we are facing a new constellation in the grammar of political claims-making. In this constellation, the center of gravity has shifted "from redistribution to recognition" (Fraser, 1995). How should one evaluate this shift?

The current situation is disturbing on two counts. First, the shift from redistribution to recognition is occurring despite (or because of) an acceleration of economic globalization. Thus, cultural conflicts have achieved paradigmatic status at precisely the moment when an aggressively expanding capitalism is exacerbating economic inequality. In this context, recognition struggles are serving less to supplement, complicate, and enrich redistribution struggles than to marginalize, eclipse, and displace them. I shall call this the *problem of displacement*.

Second, today's recognition struggles are occurring despite (or because of) increased transcultural interaction and communication. They occur, that is, just as accelerated migration and global media flows are hybridizing and pluralizing cultural forms. Yet they often take the form of a communitarianism that drastically simplifies and reifies group identities. In such forms, struggles for recognition do not promote respectful interaction across differences in increasingly multicultural contexts. They tend, rather, to encourage separatism and group enclaving, chauvinism and intolerance, patriarchalism and authoritarianism. I shall call this the *problem of reification*.

Both the displacement problem and the reification problem are extremely serious. Insofar as the politics of recognition is displacing the politics of redistribution, it risks aiding the forces that promote economic inequality. Likewise, insofar as today's politics of recognition is reifying group identities, it risks sanctioning violations of human rights and freezing the very antagonisms it purports to mediate.

Given these all-too-common tendencies, it is no wonder that many progressive observers have simply washed their hands of "identity politics." Rejecting the politics of recognition as "false consciousness," they have proposed jettisoning cultural struggles altogether. For some, this means (re)prioritizing class over gender, sexuality, and "race"/ethnicity. For others, it means resurrecting economism. For still others, it means rejecting all "minoritarian" claims out of hand and requiring assimilation to majority norms – in the name of secularism, universalism, or republicanism.

Such rejectionist approaches are understandable but deeply misguided. In fact, not all forms of recognition politics are equally likely to encourage displacement and reification. Nor are all versions morally pernicious. On the contrary, some recognition struggles 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, it is deeply imbricated with economic inequality. Thus, struggles for recognition, properly conceived, can actually aid struggles for redistribution. And far from necessarily promoting separatism, they can foster interaction across differences.

Everything depends on how recognition is approached. What is needed is an approach that can help to solve, or at least mitigate, the problems of displacement and reification. On the one hand, this means conceptualizing struggles for recognition in ways that can be integrated with struggles for redistribution, instead of in ways that displace and undermine the latter. On the other hand, it means developing an account of recognition that can accommodate the full complexity of social identities, instead of one that oversimplifies and reifies them. This would have to be an account that promotes respectful social interaction across differences, not one that encourages group enclaving and "ethnic cleansing."

Misrecognition as identity distortion?

The usual approach is to view recognition through the lens of identity. From this perspective, what requires recognition is group-specific cultural identity. Misrecognition consists in the depreciation of such identity by the dominant culture and the consequent damage to group members' sense of self. Redressing this harm requires engaging in a politics of recognition. In such a politics, group members join together to refashion their collective identity by producing a self-affirming culture of their own. Thus, on the identity model of recognition, the politics of recognition means "identity politics."

Let me elaborate. The identity model begins with 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. Thus, recognition from others is essential to the development of a sense of self. To be denied recognition is to suffer a distortion in 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 of one's society is to be misrecognized, hence to sustain damage to one's individual and

collective identity. Depreciated in the eyes of the dominant culture, the members of disesteemed groups suffer a collective distortion in their relation to self. As a result of repeated encounters with the stigmatizing gaze of a culturally dominant other, they internalize negative self-images and are prevented from developing a healthy cultural identity of their own.

On the identity model, accordingly, the politics of recognition means "identity politics." Such a politics aims to repair internal self-dislocation by contesting the dominant culture's demeaning picture of one's group. It requires that members of misrecognized groups reject such pictures in favor of new self-representations of their own making. Jettisoning internalized negative self-identities, they must join collectively to produce a self-affirming culture of their own. Having refashioned their collective identity, moreover, they must display it publicly in order to 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 concerning 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 by recognition.

Consider, first, that identity politics tends to displace struggles for redistribution. Largely silent on the subject of economic inequality, this approach treats misrecognition as a freestanding cultural harm. Many of its proponents, accordingly, 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 subcurrents are engaged in displacement.

The first subcurrent casts misrecognition as a problem of cultural depreciation. Proponents of this approach locate the roots of the injustice in demeaning representations, which they do not, however, view as socially grounded. For them, accordingly, the nub of the problem is free-floating discourses, not *institutionalized* significations and norms. Hypostatizing culture, they abstract misrecognition from its institutional matrix and obscure its entwinement with distributive injustice. They miss, for example, the links, institutionalized in labor markets, between androcentric norms that devalue activities coded as "feminine," on the one hand, and female workers' low wages, on the other. Likewise, they overlook the links, institutionalized in social-welfare systems, between heterosexist norms that delegitimate homosexuality, on the one hand, and the denial of resources and benefits to gays and lesbians, on the other. Obfuscating such

links, 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 subcurrent, in contrast, does not simply ignore maldistribution. Rather, it appreciates that cultural injustices are often linked to economic injustices. But it misunderstands the character of those 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, accordingly, 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 USA, of "classism." It follows from this view that all maldistribution can be remedied indirectly by a politics of recognition. When one undertakes to revalue unjustly devalued identities, one is simultaneously attacking the deep sources of economic inequality. Thus, 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 was vulgar economism.

Culturalism *might* make sense if one lived in a society in which there were no relatively autonomous markets. In that case, cultural value patterns would regulate 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. A politics of recognition that successfully redressed misrecognition would counter maldistribution as well.

The idea of a purely "cultural" society in which there were no economic relations once fascinated generations of anthropologists, but it is far removed from the current reality. Today, virtually nowhere in the world can one encounter such a society. Rather, marketization has pervaded all societies to some degree, everywhere decoupling, at least partially, economic mechanisms of distribution from cultural patterns of value and prestige. Partially independent of such value patterns and following a logic of their own, markets are neither wholly constrained by, nor wholly subordinate to, culture. 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.

Displacement, however, is not the only problem. In addition, the identity politics model of recognition tends to reify group identities. 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 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 of misrecognition. In reifying group identity, finally, it obscures the politics of cultural identification, the struggles *within* the group for the authority, and indeed for the power, to represent it. By shielding such struggles from view, it tends to mask the power of dominant fractions and thus to reinforce intragroup domination. Thus, the identity model lends itself all too easily to repressive forms of communitarianism, which promote 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, the model ends up valorizing monologism, supposing that misrecognized people can and should construct their identity on their own. It supposes, moreover, that a group has the right to be understood in its own terms, thus that no one is ever justified in viewing another subject from an external perspective or in dissenting from another's self-interpretation. But this runs counter to the dialogical view. It makes 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 fosters separatism and group enclaving.

In general, then, the identity model of recognition is deeply flawed. Both theoretically deficient and politically problematic, it equates the politics of recognition with identity politics. In so doing, it encourages

both the reification of group identities and the displacement of the politics of redistribution.

Misrecognition as status subordination

Consequently, I shall propose an alternative analysis of recognition. My proposal is to treat recognition as a question of *social status*. From this perspective, what requires recognition is not group-specific identity but rather the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction. Misrecognition, accordingly, does not mean the depreciation and deformation of group identity. Rather, it means social subordination in the sense of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life. To redress the injustice requires a politics of recognition, but this does not mean identity politics. On the status model, 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 other members.

Let me explain. To view recognition as a matter of status is to examine 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, institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we can speak of *misrecognition* and *status subordination*.

From this perspective, misrecognition is neither a psychical deformation nor a freestanding cultural harm. Rather, it is an institutionalized relation of *social subordination*. To be misrecognized, accordingly, is not simply to be thought ill of, looked down on, or devalued in others' attitudes, beliefs, or representations. It is rather to be denied the status of a full partner in social interaction and to be prevented from participating as a peer in social life 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, rather, through *institutionalized patterns of cultural value*. It arises, in other words, through the workings of social institutions that regulate interaction according to parity-impeding cultural norms. Examples 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 other members.

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 a plurality of 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, and professional practices. Misrecognition is also institutionalized informally – in associational patterns, long-standing customs, and sedimented social practices in civil society. But despite these 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, hence 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, 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, that is, *to deinstitutionalize patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation and to replace them with patterns that foster it*.

In short, redressing misrecognition means changing social institutions. More specifically, it means changing interaction-regulating values that impede parity of participation at all relevant institutional sites. Exactly what this means 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 down the line. Thus, 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 patterns 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 deinstitutionalizing that value pattern and replacing it with an alternative that promotes parity. This, however, can be done in more than one way. 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 way would be to deinstitutionalize 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 (other) good reasons for preferring one of these approaches to the other, in principle either 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 other cases, they may need 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 universality. 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 affirmative recognition of difference.

The crucial point, once again, is this: on the status model, the politics of recognition does not mean identity politics. Rather, it means a politics that seeks institutional remedies for institutionalized harms. Focused on culture in its socially grounded, as opposed to free-floating, forms, *this* politics of recognition seeks to overcome status subordination by changing the values that regulate interaction. Entrenching new value patterns that constitute previously subordinated persons as peers, it aims to promote parity of participation in social life.

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. Like misrecognition, therefore, maldistribution represents a form of social subordination and injustice.

Unlike the identity model, then, the status model understands social justice as encompassing two analytically distinct dimensions.[1] The recognition dimension concerns the effects of institutionalized meanings and norms on the relative standing of social actors. The distributive dimension concerns the allocation by economic systems of disposable resources to social actors. Thus, each dimension is associated with an analytically distinct dimension 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 honor, 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 labor markets, of economically defined categories of actors (classes), distinguished by their differential endowments of resources.[2] As an issue of status, therefore, recognition concerns the effects of institutionalized value patterns on different actors' capacities for social participation. As an issue of economic class, in contrast, distribution concerns the systemic effects of economic structures on the relative economic position of social actors, which also affects their capacities for participation.

Each dimension, moreover, is associated with an analytically distinct form of injustice. For the recognition dimension, as we saw, the associated injustice is *misrecognition*, in which entrenched patterns of cultural value deny some actors the necessary standing to participate fully in social life. For the distributive dimension, in contrast, the corresponding injustice is *maldistribution*, in which economic structures, such as property regimes and labor markets, deprive some actors of the necessary resources. 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 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 imbricated. 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 (Fraser, 1998; 2003). Nevertheless, distribution and recognition are not neatly separated from each other in capitalist societies. For the status model, rather, the two dimensions are imbricated and interact causally with each other. Thus, economic issues, such as income distribution, have recognition subtexts, as value patterns institutionalized in labor markets privilege activities coded as masculine and/or "white" over those coded as feminine and/or "black." Conversely, recognition issues, such as judgments of aesthetic value, have distributive subtexts, as diminished access to economic resources impedes equal participation in the making of art (Bourdieu, 1984). The result is often a vicious circle of subordination, as the status order and the economic structure interpenetrate and reinforce each other (Fraser, 1998; 2003).

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 from economic arrangements. Nor can the recognition dimension of justice be viewed in abstraction from distribution. On the contrary, only by considering both dimensions together can one determine what is impeding participatory parity in any case. And only by teasing out the complex imbrications of status with economic class can one determine how best to redress the injustice (Fraser, 1995; 2003).

In this way, the status model 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. Thus, it mitigates the problem of displacement.

In addition, the status model avoids reifying group identities. As we saw, what requires recognition on 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, it avoids the authoritarian monologism of the politics of authenticity; and it valorizes transcultural interaction, as opposed to separatism and group enclaving. Far from encouraging repressive communitarianism, then, the status model militates against it.

In general, therefore, the status model offers important advantages over the identity model. Resisting pressures to equate the politics of recognition with identity politics, it sets its sights on overcoming institutionalized subordination. As a result, it discourages both the displacement of redistribution and the reification of group identities.

Conclusion

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. Insofar as they propound "authentic" collective identities, moreover, such struggles 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 struggles for 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 provides the basis for such an alternative. Thus, I have argued that 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. Likewise, by avoiding the identity model, one can begin to diminish, if not fully dispel, the current tendency to reify collective identities.