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Methodological Remarks on the History of Ideas vs. the History of Concepts

As I mentioned in the preface, it is important for our democratic culture that we recall the historical origins and developments of the ideas and concepts that continue to define our political and cultural life today. Only on the basis of such historical reflection can we recognize how we have become who we are and which normative claims are entailed by our shared self-understanding. The concept of "recognition" merits such historical reflection as well; after all, over the last few decades, it has become a crucial element of our political and cultural self-understanding, as is illustrated by demands that we respect each other as equally entitled members of a cooperative community,[1] that we unconditionally recognize the particularity of others[2] or respect cultural minorities in the context of a "politics of recognition".[3] By reconstructing the modern history of the idea of recognition, I hope to sort out the many various meanings of recognition and thus contribute to clarifying our current political and cultural

[1] John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 2.
[2] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
[3] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

self-understanding. Before I can directly turn to this task, however, I need to say a few words about both my approach and my aims, for the attempt to uncover the origins of our current understanding of recognition is faced with demands and expectations of varying complexity and sophistication.

For various reasons, there are two narrow limits on my historical approach to the concept of recognition: first, it would be highly misleading to suggest that my attempt to uncover the historical origins of recognition is only concerned with this single term. Unlike other concepts of similar importance, i.e. the "state", "freedom" or "sovereignty", there has not always been a single, identical term to denote what we mean by "recognition". On the contrary, a great number of terms have been employed in modernity to express the fact that we are related to each other by means of various forms of recognition: Rousseau drew on the work of the French moralists in using the term "amour propre", Adam Smith spoke of an internal "external observer", and it was not until Fichte and Hegel came along that the now familiar term "recognition" came into use. The origin and development of the contemporary idea of recognition thus cannot be revealed merely by examining the historical use of just this one term. We would thereby lose sight of too many relevant currents, too many significant sources and ideas. Therefore, I will not undertake a history of the concept in this narrow sense; rather I will trace the development of a constitutive thought by studying the various meanings that have become attached to it by virtue of having either corrected it or added to it. This means I will have to begin with the difficult question of whether we can find something like a "big bang" for the concept of recognition.

Of course, there are many ways to undertake a "conceptual history" of "recognition". Thinkers such as Robin G. Collingwood, Quentin Skinner, Michel Foucault and Reinhart Koselleck, to name just a few, have developed very different conceptions of what it would mean to reconstruct the origins and history of specific ideas. However, my investigation into the genesis of our current idea of "recognition" does not attempt to live up to the demands of the history of ideas as a scientific discipline. Nor will I make an effort to untangle the complicated historical relationship of causality among different versions of one and the same vague idea. To undertake such a historical study in the true sense of the term would require, paraphrasing Dummett, providing evidence that certain thinkers were in fact influenced by certain other thinkers. In order to do so, "dates of publication must be scrutinised, diaries and personal correspondence studied, even library catalogues examined to discover what specific individuals read or might have read."[4] I feel incapable of undertaking such a task given the means that my own academic education has put at my disposal. I have never learned how to undertake bibliographical research, nor am I accustomed to tracing intellectual influences back to their historical source. Therefore, we will have to content ourselves with a "conceptual history" whose standards are far lower than those set by the discipline which normally goes by this name. The following study will instead focus on how a certain thought, i.e. recognition, followed different developmental paths, taking on ever new and revealing meanings by virtue of the fact that this

[4] Michael Dummett, *Origins of Analytical Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 2.

idea was "in the air", so to say. Whether the various descendants of this single idea will ultimately coincide and furnish us with a unified concept or instead remain mere fragments is a question I will deal with at the end of my historical reconstruction. At any rate I intend to provide a history of the argumentative development of an idea, not to present the causal sequence of how one author influenced the next. Do not expect any new discoveries of intellectual constellations or influences; at most you will receive a different perspective on already familiar material.

There is one point, however, at which I hope to manage to go beyond the already familiar results of the history of modern ideas: I will place special emphasis on the question of whether the particular sociocultural conditions in a given country have lent a specific coloring to the idea of recognition. Because the notion that we are always already involved in relations of recognition has taken on such a variety of meanings in modern thought, I will operate on the hypothesis that these differences are linked to the national particularities of the cultures in which the term is employed. By making such an admittedly risky presupposition, obviously I am forced to adopt a particular approach: I will not deal with individual authors in a way that focuses on the individuality of their respective works; rather I must treat several authors of the same nationality as typical representatives of a larger group sharing certain theoretical beliefs and ethical valuations. I will thus have to treat individual works as instances of a common culture, so it should be no surprise that in the following chapters I will focus on the national particularities of the usage of the term "recognition".

Of course, I am aware that I thereby run the risk of following a tradition that speaks, intentionally or

unintentionally, of the "spirit" or "soul" of a nation. We should be wary – especially those of us from Germany – of naively reviving notions of "national" dispositions that can be ascribed to an entire people. Therefore, I will in no way refer to collective "attitudes", national mentalities and the like; by speaking of national particularities concerning the idea of recognition, I mean to say that the sociocultural conditions of a certain country may have influenced a number of thinkers within that country to make similar associations with the idea of recognition. What I have in mind is essentially that which justifies our asking whether certain motives, themes or styles of thought prevailing in the philosophical tradition of a given country derive from the latter's distinct institutional or social conditions.[5] I will operate on the assumption that the national particularities emerging in the course of a nation's historical development are what cause the idea of recognition to take on a specific tone or coloring depending on the country under discussion.

I am certainly not the first to have noticed that the idea that we are mutually dependent on others' recognition has a negative connotation in French thought. Beginning with Rousseau at the latest and extending into the work of Sartre or Lacan, our dependence on the social esteem or affirmation of others represents the danger of losing ourselves in our own, entirely unique individuality. Regardless of how this thought is further elucidated and justified in detail, its continual reappearance in the works of a number of French authors allows us to presume that this negative connotation is not a coincidence, but

[5] See my essay "Zwischen den Generationen", *Merkur*, no. 610 (2000), pp. 147–52.

that certain national particularities must have played a certain role in the matter. This in turn raises the question of which particularities in the social and cultural history of France might have caused the idea of recognition to take on such a negative connotation. And once we have chosen to go down this path, it will make sense to search in other countries for similar links between the sociocultural conditions in a given country and the prevailing understanding of recognition. From here it is but a small step to the hypothesis that differences in the experiential horizons of various philosophical cultures contribute to the fact that a single idea has come to have such disparate meanings over the course of the last three centuries.

Yet, this still does not explain why I have chosen to focus on France, Great Britain and Germany. This is due, first of all, to pragmatic reasons, as the shifts in political thought in these countries over the course of modernity are particularly well-researched. The changes in the political and cultural self-understanding of these countries over the last three or four centuries are much more familiar to us than the contemporary and equally relevant shifts in other countries on the European continent. Perhaps the fact that these three countries occupy such a central position in the history of ideas is also due to the fact that these nations' authors are regarded almost exclusively as having produced the "classics" of political thought. With very few exceptions, e.g. Baruch de Spinoza and perhaps Francisco Suárez, the political thinkers whose works fill our textbooks today originate from the French-, English- or German-speaking parts of Europe. It is all but inevitable that we ask whether this obvious dominance merely reflects the theoretical imperialism of three powerful

nations or whether it is due instead to the substance of their work.

Merely by raising this question, it becomes obvious that pragmatic reasons cannot suffice to justify my focusing on these three particular countries. If I left it at that, I would inevitably be suspected of merely regurgitating the philosophical perspective of the dominant European powers. In order to dispel such concerns, I cannot merely refer to the state of current research or the customs of the discipline. Perhaps it will help to cite a consideration I first encountered in an essay by Reinhart Koselleck and have encountered in a number of other studies. Koselleck believes that the historical developments in modern France, Great Britain and Germany since the seventeenth century reflect three developmental patterns in civil or bourgeois society over the course of modernity. Not only do the bourgeoisies in these three countries differ in terms of how they understand their role and historical position, a fact revealed by the different meanings of "citoyen", "Bürger" and the "middle classes", but these semantic differences also indicate the fundamental alternatives with respect to how the new social order could develop.[6] A similar argument is made by Jerrold Seigel in his comprehensive study *Modernity and Bourgeois Life*, in which he addresses the differences in the self-understanding of the bourgeoisie and investigates the paths of modernization taken by France, Great Britain and Germany.

[6] Reinhart Koselleck, "Drei bürgerliche Welten? Zur vergleichenden Semantik der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft in Deutschland, England und Frankreich", in *Begriffsgeschichten: Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006).

Like Koselleck, he operates on the premise that these do not merely represent three random examples, but rather the paradigmatic patterns of development of bourgeois society in modern Europe.[7] If we pursue this basic line of thought further, we will come upon an argument that might allow me to justify limiting my project to the history of ideas in a mere three countries. If it is true, as Koselleck and Seigel seem to suggest, that the intellectual and societal changes in France, Great Britain and Germany over the course of the last three centuries provide the structure and the model for developments in the rest of Europe as well, then my focus on these three countries would be based on more than merely random or pragmatic considerations. Instead, the semantic coloring and accents that the idea of "recognition" has taken on in these three countries would reflect the only variations of which the European horizon of consciousness has proven capable. Because this might sound a bit presumptuous, I would like to formulate the matter a bit more cautiously. If it is true that the three types of development undergone by bourgeois society and paradigmatic for all of Europe can be found in the self-understanding of the bourgeoisies in France, Great Britain and Germany, then a historical analysis of the changes and colorings of the idea of recognition in these countries would largely exhaust the meanings this term can have.

This idea is the basis for my hope that the following inquiry into the origins and developments of the idea of

[7] Jerrold Seigel, *Modernity and Bourgeois Life: Society, Politics, and Culture in England, France, and Germany since 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

recognition in modern Europe will not merely reflect one particular point of view. Although interesting and illuminating meanings of the idea of recognition might also be found in other linguistic regions of Europe, they have not managed to establish themselves as enduring connotations of the term. For reasons that will soon become clear, I will begin my analysis in the francophone realm. It is here that the notion that we always already relate to each other by means of mutual recognition first took root, leading to a very specific, nationally colored conception of intersubjectivity.