

Recognition

The idea that we are mutually dependent on the recognition of our peers is at least as old as modernity. Across Europe, this idea has been understood in different ways from the very beginning, according to each country's different cultural and political conditions. This stimulating study explores the complex history and multiple associations of the idea of "Recognition" in Britain, France and Germany. Demonstrating the role of "recognition" in the production of important political ideas, Axel Honneth explores how our dependence on the recognition of others is sometimes viewed as the source of all modern, egalitarian morality, sometimes as a means for fostering socially beneficial behavior, and sometimes as a threat to "true" individuality. By exploring this fundamental concept in our modern political and social self-understanding, Honneth thus offers an alternative view of the philosophical discourse of modernity.

AXEL HONNETH is the Jack C. Weinstein Professor of the Humanities in the Philosophy Department at Columbia University. He was previously Director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, between 2001 and 2018, founded by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno. He is the author of works in German and English, including *The Struggle for Recognition* (1994) and *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life* (2014).

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P R E F A C E

This study began with an invitation by the Cambridge Centre of Political Thought to hold the biennial John Robert Seeley Lectures at the University of Cambridge in May 2017. Admittedly I was rather intimidated by the enormous reputation of this institution as a melting pot of intellectual history, so I chose the path of caution and decided to focus on a subject that clearly belongs to the history of ideas, and yet still is a subject about which I could claim a certain measure of theoretical authority. I planned to venture into the arena of the history of political thought, while still keeping to familiar philosophical ground. Thus arose the idea for my Seeley Lectures and for this book. Just as the so-called Cambridge School and the German “history of concepts” [*Begriffsgeschichte*] have managed to reconstruct the complicated and conflict-laden history of several key concepts in our political self-understanding, thereby providing insight into the historical origin of major democratic ideas, I will use the modest tools at my disposal to do the same for another idea that has become relatively significant: recognition. In the following five chapters I will attempt to uncover the historical roots of an idea we now take for granted: the idea that relations between subjects are defined by mutual dependence on esteem or recognition.

The first difficulty posed by this task is that the idea of recognition has come to be associated with so many different

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things in different contexts. Our dependence on others' recognition is sometimes viewed as the source of all modern, egalitarian morality, sometimes as a mere social means for fostering socially beneficial behavior, and sometimes it is viewed as a threat to "true" individuality, the root of a fatal self-deception about "authentic" personality. As we will see, some of these differences are linked to semantic particularities of the concept of recognition in various linguistic cultures; for instance, unlike "reconnaissance" in French and "recognition" in English, the German term "Anerkennung" does not connote *re*-cognition in the sense of esteeming each other *again*.¹ Other differences derive from chains of association that have seeped into the local meanings of these terms over the course of their use in various specific cultures. One crucial distinction in the theoretical usage of the concept is whether recognition refers to a person's social reputation or to something more profound and independent of how that person is viewed by the public. An equally important distinction is whether recognition is considered a moral act, a manner of conveying respect or an epistemic occurrence, a result of our having recognized an independent entity. Both semantic distinctions and diverse chains of association in local cultural contexts play a crucial role when it comes to reconstructing the modern history of the idea of recognition. Before I take up this task, I would first like to express my gratitude to those whose invitation motivated me to consider undertaking such

¹ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Heikki Ikäheimo, *Anerkennung* (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2014).

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an investigation in the first place. Above all I am grateful to John Robertson, who as Director of the Cambridge Centre for Political Thought invited me to hold the Seeley Lectures in Cambridge in 2017. Not only did his generous hospitality allow me to enjoy my stay thoroughly at the university, but his insightful questions, rooted in a profound knowledge of the European Enlightenment, also contributed significantly to refining my view of the intellectual development of the idea of recognition. I also owe my gratitude to John Dunn, Christopher Meckstroth and Michael Sonenscher, whose comments and objections prevented me from drawing overly hasty and imprudent conclusions. I would also like to thank Michael Nance, who spent two semesters as a Humboldt Fellow in the Institute of Philosophy at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, for his vital impulses and remarks on the notion of recognition in German Idealism, the subject of the fourth chapter of my study. The most crucial motivation to turn my lectures into a book came from Elizabeth Friend-Smith of Cambridge University Press and Eva Gilmer of Suhrkamp Verlag; their gentle pressure and friendly reminders ensured a punctual delivery of the manuscript. I would also like to thank Eva Gilmer for reviewing my manuscript, a custom of which I have almost grown fond, with such great care and precision. Finally, I thank the translator of this edition, Joseph Ganahl, for his care and energy in providing a faithful translation of my work.

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