

The struggle for recognition: lost before it was fought

Or how the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house¹

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Abstract – This paper takes as point of departure the centrality of recognition in the contemporary political landscape. More specifically, it focuses on those struggles for recognition known as identity politics. We depart from the hypothesis that modern theories of recognition, more specifically those advanced by Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser, cannot adequately accommodate the demand for the recognition of *difference*. Our contribution with this article is to argue that, in a discussion of struggles for recognition, the distinction between *affirmative* and *transformative* strategies must be taken into account. We argue that affirmative approaches to recognition risk resulting in the negation of difference and reproducing the exclusive social order. By thinking through the implications of an affirmative approach to recognition, we aim to contribute to the understanding of failed attempts at recognition. We conclude with a tentative outline of the conditions for a transformative approach that aspires to meet the demands of actors in movements for social justice and avoid the problems of the affirmative approach.

1. Introduction

Black Lives Matter, Pride, Third Wave Feminism: all are examples of movements characterized as “identity politics.” In the past decades, there has been a significant increase of the phenomenon and it seems still to be on the rise. Increasingly, the oppressed and underprivileged are uniting in movements to raise their voices in demands for the recognition of their respective identities. Striking, however, is that these movements seem to affect no substantial difference in the existing recognition order. The possibility of identity politics to preserve and legitimize the

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1. In her groundbreaking essay *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, Audre Lorde writes: “What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable.” In our examination of contemporary struggles for recognition, we will argue that recognition thought along a logic of identification can only bring about change within these narrow perimeters.
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established recognition order is the issue we want to problematize. We will do so by examining the discussion of identity politics in contemporary theories of recognition.

For this purpose, we will examine the dialogue between Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser in *Redistribution or Recognition?* In this book, Honneth and Fraser debate the possibility of a contemporary revival of Critical Theory. The focal point of their discussion is the relation between issues of redistribution and issues of recognition. In this context, Fraser and Honneth each attempt to develop a framework that helps us understand and evaluate the proliferation of claims for recognition as advanced by identity-political movements. The first part of this paper will consist of a brief outline of these frameworks.

Following this discussion, we will argue that a contemporary take on Critical Theory needs to incorporate a critique of affirmative claims for recognition as well. By affirmative claims, we mean claims for recognition that affirm the legitimacy of the existing social order. The nature of claims for recognition, namely either *affirmative* or *transformative*, is an issue only lightly touched on by Fraser and Honneth in their attempt at the revival of Critical Theory. Our contribution here will be to shed light on the issue and its importance for a critical-theoretical evaluation of identity politics. This contribution will comprise the second part of this paper and takes the form of a critique of the affirmative strategies in the struggle for recognition, followed by an outline for an alternative approach. In an attempt to avoid the problematic implications of identity politics, this approach will be transformative in nature. The aim of our transformative approach is recognition without forced identification - *equality in difference*.

2. The Revival of Critical Theory in the Age of Identity Politics

2.1. Nancy Fraser

For Fraser, both redistribution and recognition, being spheres of justice, aim at a common goal. This goal forms the normative core of Fraser's theory, namely *participatory parity* (Fraser & Honneth 2003, p. 36) The end of equal recognition and distribution is parity of participation in social life. According to Fraser's theory, this participatory parity has two conditions, one objective and one intersubjective. The objective condition consists of a distribution of material goods and means that ensures participants' independence (ibidem) The intersubjective condition is equal recognition for all human subjects, meaning equal respect and opportunities (ibidem). Taking parity of participation as a normative core entails that Fraser must conceive of misrecognition and maldistribution as violations of justice (p. 28). Fraser conceives of misrecognition as status subordination, locating injustice in social relations, not the individual psychology of the subject (p. 29).

Following her dualist conception of justice, Fraser argues for an approach she calls perspectival dualism (p. 63). For the understanding and evaluation of claims for social justice, redistribution and recognition are to be employed as two distinct *analytical perspectives* (ibidem). These different perspectives can be employed for both issues of recognition *and* redistribution. Often, though, issues of social justice will need to be analyzed from both perspectives (pp. 65-66). For the practice of this perspectival dualism, Fraser also supplies a normative criterion for the evaluation of claims made by political movements in the name of justice. This criterion is parity of participation. Accordingly, Fraser believes that all claims for redistribution and recognition should be evaluated in terms of their advancement of participatory parity (p. 38).

2.2. Axel Honneth

Honneth traces issues of redistribution and recognition to a common origin. All social discontent and resistance, Honneth argues, is motivated from the experience of injustice (p. 130). A subject experiences injustice in feelings of disrespect and maltreatment (p. 157). Honneth takes the end of recognition to be located on an individual level: *personal identity-formation*, which can only be reached through relations of mutual recognition (p. 176). Thus, the injustice in misrecognition for Honneth lies in the disturbance of the individual's intact self-relation. This, however, does not eliminate the social dimension, since this self-relation arises from intersubjective conditions (relations of mutual recognition).

The normative source for these feelings of disrespect and maltreatment, which motivate social struggle, is located in the expectations a subject has with regard to society (p. 129). In their treatment within society, the subject expects recognition of their personal identity (p. 131). Accordingly, underlying the social experience of injustice is an experienced infringement of a well-founded claim to recognition (pp. 129, 133). In his theory of recognition, Honneth distinguishes three distinct spheres of recognition: *love*, *law* and *labor* (p. 143). The three spheres of recognition are governed by three respective principles: attentiveness to needs (love), respect for autonomy (law) and the principle of achievement (labor). Following this distinction, Honneth argues that distribution struggles should be seen as struggles for recognition (p. 137). According to him, even the experience of *material* injustice is the experience of the violation of a well-founded claim to recognition.

Following his tripartite division of the spheres of recognition, Honneth points out that claims for recognition aim at the *expansion* of the existing recognition relations in their respective spheres (p. 186). For the evaluation of these claims for the expansion of recognition relations, Honneth posits an idea of moral progress in terms of increased social integration (ibidem). Claims for recognition are thus to be evaluated according to their advancement of social integration. Social inte-

gration can be brought about in two ways: by increasing individualization or by increasing inclusion (*ibidem*). In the first case, new aspects of personal identity become the subject of mutual recognition, while in the latter case more people are included in existing recognition relations, thus broadening the scope of mutual recognition. Claims for the expansion of the existing recognition relations must be evaluated with regard to social integration: if the proposed expansion enhances social integration either through individualization or through inclusion, the claim is well-founded from Honneth's point of view (p. 187).

3. Affirmation or Transformation?

The importance of the additional distinction we wish to bring to the discussion arises from the kind of paradoxical process the struggle for recognition seems to entail. Identity-political movements unite around a certain shared identity, which they experience to be unjustly depreciated in society. Thus, the members of this depreciated group are united by their particularity, by what makes them 'different.' Though their particularity is what feeds their struggle against the existing social order, their struggle for recognition does not necessarily amount to the recognition of this particularity in itself. Depending on their strategy, identity-political movements can uphold and contribute to the existing social order and its exclusionary practices. Thus, identity-political movements are not inherently transformative.

This insight leads us to the need to distinguish between the *affirmative* and the *transformative* approach in the struggle for recognition. We will argue that these categories are not only relevant in the categorization of different social struggles but must also be included in our theoretical and normative framework for thinking about identity politics. For this purpose, we will draw on Emiliano Acosta's concept of a *logic of identification*.

In *Recognition and Dissent*, Acosta provides a thorough critique of classical theories of recognition on the grounds that they contain a logic of identification. Recognition thought along a logic of identification, Acosta argues, entails the negation of particularity. Thus, Acosta concludes that classical recognition theory does not provide the right tools for thinking the recognition of difference. Here, we will present his critique of classical recognition theories. In the following sections, we will draw on this critique to discuss identity politics as well as Honneth and Fraser.

In the tradition of recognition theory, Acosta writes, recognition is usually conceived of as the *inclusion* of subjects into an already established order (Acosta 2014, p. 4). Accordingly, demands for recognition always rest on the acceptance of this order in its legitimacy as well as the agreement on the basic principles of discussion (*ibidem*). This means that, in formulating a demand for recognition as

a demand for inclusion, the out-group affirms the current social order and the principles on which it rests as legitimate. Even if the struggle for recognition is formulated by the excluded actors themselves, the concepts they use are necessarily adopted from the discourse of the excluding group (p. 5).

Recognition thought along these lines, however, entails an *asymmetry* between the excluding group on the one hand and the excluded on the other – between those who must integrate and those who must “be integrated”. (pp. 4-5) In recognition thought of this way, it is after all the excluding group who gets to decide on the principles for “rational” discussion, select the moral values and fix the meaning of the concepts at play (p. 5). As a consequence of this unilaterality, the excluding actors enjoy a *higher position* in the discussion than the members of the excluded group trying to gain access. Even though both the out-group and the in-group can be seen as players, the in-group alone has selected the playing field as well as the rules of the game.

Demands for the recognition of excluded subjects take the form of a “radicalization” of those principles already present in the discourse of the excluding group or the oppressor (p. 7). This approach, however, rests on the presupposition that both parties share the same principles and worldview (ibidem). Yet this is only possible on the condition that one of the parties succeeds in *becoming the Other*, specifically if the excluded group successfully becomes like the excluding group and thus coalesces with its oppressor (ibidem). This process of becoming the Other is often regarded positively as a kind of “purification” of the excluded subject – as progress in terms of freedom or rationality (pp. 7-8).

However, a fundamental flaw in this radicalization approach is that it forms merely a revision of the *extension* of a concept, here “human being”, but never a criticism of this concept’s *intension* (p. 8). The *meaning* of the concept is left beyond dispute; the conflict revolves merely around the *application* of the concept. This limits what can be disputed by the excluded group to the application of the term, while the definition of the term is left beyond dispute.

Thus, a growth in the extension of a concept does not entail a change in the “meaning horizon” which justified the exclusion of the struggling subjects in the first place (p. 9). As such, although the approach of radicalizing the principles adopted from the discourse of the excluding party may enable certain excluded parties to frame their situation as unjust, it reaffirms the concept itself in its *excluding potential*. This leads Acosta to assert that emancipative discourses of this kind are potentially at once *progressive* as well as *conservative* (ibidem).

Where a process of recognition implies reciprocal influence on the subjectivities of both parties engaged, the process characterized above holds different kinds of transformation for the excluding group and the excluded group (ibidem). For the excluding – now integrating – group, the transformation holds no more than a *quantitative* change in concepts, specifically an extension of their concept of

humanity. All that changes for the formerly excluding actor is that they now think of the newly included actor as “one of us.” For the formerly excluded – now integrated – group, by contrast, the transformation is *qualitative* in nature. Inclusion into the social order requires the negation of one’s particular identity and the adoption of a new identity on terms which were established prior to one’s integration (ibidem). This imbalance in the transformation undergone leads to an asymmetrical relationship between what are now members of the same in-group.

Recognizing the Other in the sense described above means recognizing that the Other is not an Other, but yet another individual with the same predicates as all others in the in-group (of “human beings”) (ibidem). It is precisely this mechanism that Acosta calls the *logic of identification*.³ The otherness of the Other is not recognized as such, but is instead conceived of as an obstacle to recognition. Whereas this otherness was the point from which the conflict originally arose, the struggle for the recognition of this particularity remains unsolved and merely repressed (ibidem).

As such, the difference that caused the conflict is simply neglected; the real source of the problem is neither identified nor treated. This logic of identification implies that one’s distinctive otherness comes to be seen as a contaminating element, as that *from which* one must be emancipated. As a result, Acosta states, the real issue is obscured: “namely, the challenge of accepting, tolerating and valuing this singularity, this otherness, that disagrees with and questions the established social order.” (p. 10)

3.1. Identity Politics and the Affirmative Approach

In their struggle for recognition, identity-political movements often take this approach of “radicalization”, which we will call *affirmative*. In this case, identity politics run the risk of affirming the existing social order rather than challenging it, by taking its preconditions and principles to be valid. Claims for recognition in this light are claims for reinterpretation or reapplication of those principles supplied by the existing order. This means that in their struggle for recognition, identity-political movements not only affirm but also *legitimize* this existing social order. In the reproduction of this order, the formerly excluded group often itself becomes exclusive. Given that the order and its principles were supplied by a rather homogenous group and have historically proven to be fundamentally exclusive, its affirmation is likely to uphold existing exclusions and produce new ones.⁴

3. We will opt for the term “logic of identification”, to avoid confusion with regard to the plural meanings of “identity.”

4. An example that may serve to illuminate this point is the phenomenon of homonationalism, discussed at length by Jasbir Puar in her book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*.

Though the aim of identity politics is the revaluation of a depreciated particularity, those movements that take this approach articulate their aims according to a conception of recognition which entails a process of identification. This produces a recognition relation which is merely an inclusion of a formerly excluded group into an existing social order. The obtained recognition relation is still not equal, since the principles and rules of negotiation for recognition were supplied by the formerly excluding group, which gives its members a certain higher position than those of the 'newly accepted' and formerly excluded group. Also, political action along these lines entails recognition of the group not in its particularity, but in its similarity to the excluding group on behalf of shared principles and values.

The problem with this affirmative approach, namely that it does not succeed in bringing about the recognition of difference sought after by identity-political movements, leads us to recognize the importance of the distinction between the affirmative and the transformative approach to recognition. In what follows, we will apply this perspective to both Fraser and Honneth in their accounts of the struggle for recognition.

3.2. Locating the Problem in Fraser

In reading Fraser's take on Critical Theory in the age of identity politics, the issue is not so much that she does not recognize the distinction between affirmative and transformative claims for recognition. Though she does distinguish between both types of claims, the problem is that she does not incorporate this distinction in her theory. Affirmation and transformation, like redistribution and recognition, should be integrated as an *analytical perspective* from which to judge claims for recognition and formulate remedies to resolve them.

Regardless, we must recognize that Fraser mentions the distinction and touches on the issue. In her debate with Honneth, she devotes a subchapter to the issue of affirmation versus transformation. She sees the affirmative and the transformative as two different approaches to redress issues of maldistribution and misrecognition (Fraser & Honneth, p. 76). She describes the affirmative strategy as one that "aim[s] to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them." A transformative strategy, on the other hand, addresses the 'root cause' by "restructuring the underlying generative framework." (p. 74)

Weighing the relative merits of both approaches, she concludes that "transformative strategies are preferable in principle, but more difficult to effect in practice." (p. 78) Following this assessment, she develops an account of a *via media*, which incorporates the relative merits of both approaches into a strategy of "non-reformist reform," (ibidem). Her claim here is that in certain cases, status distinc-

tions can be detached from relations of subordination, and in these cases we must use the strategy of nonreformist reform. This approach consists of affirmative steps in the short term, aimed at being transformative in the long term (pp. 81-82). However, she states that “*my aim here is not to defend a specific variant, however, but to suggest the general interest of such an approach.*” (p. 82) Thus, Fraser presents different strategies for effecting social change, depending largely on the context. While she privileges the transformative approach in principle, she makes a pragmatic choice for nonreformist reform.

Fraser distinguishes affirmative and transformative approaches as different strategies, each with their relative merits. However, in her description of the affirmative approach, Fraser fails to fully consider its implications. One of the drawbacks she identifies is that affirmative strategies tend to reify collective identities. Transformative strategies, by contrast, aim at the destabilization of these status distinctions (p. 76). However, following her *via media* of an affirmative strategy aimed at long-term transformation, the reification of social identity is not the only challenge we face.

Recognizing the logic of identification as it often presents itself in the struggle for recognition should lead us to question whether the affirmative approach may be incompatible with a transformative project in the context of recognition. Once we recognize the possibility of this logic of identification in the undertaking of identity-political movements, certain problems become clear with Fraser’s account of participatory parity as it is. In the absence of a problematization of the implications of an affirmative approach to recognition, Fraser’s account of participatory parity is susceptible to two major issues.

First of all, the parity of participation aimed at by Fraser is obtained through affirmation of the existing social order and its principles. These principles were posited by the excluding group and are accepted by the excluded group in their struggle for recognition. Recognition here thus means inclusion and participation in the institutions of the existing social order. However, since the social order was set by the excluding class as sole actor, the obtained parity is merely formal: a power imbalance is maintained, which holds a certain continued subordination for the formerly excluded group. Thus, parity of participation as a requirement is not enough if the institutions to be participated in are not themselves fair. Since the institutions were installed by the excluding group and have historically proven to be exclusive, participation in them is likely not to bring the parity the oppressed are searching for in their struggle for recognition.

A second issue arises upon reflection on this logic of identification. If recognition is viewed as inclusion in the existing social order, *parity* implies *sameness*. Recognition along these lines being necessarily mediated by a process of identification, there is no room for the recognition of difference. Since movements of identity politics are united through their particularity and aim at recognition of

their shared identity, parity conceived of as sameness does not seem to be their goal. We can conclude that there is no way to the desired parity of participation through the affirmation of the existing social order. If recognition is obtained through a process of identification, power imbalances are maintained and exclusive mechanisms upheld, between the formerly excluded group and the formerly excluding actors, as well as the newly included group and other excluded groups. The presence of these mechanisms can defeat the idea of participatory parity.

3.3. Locating the Problem in Honneth

According to Honneth, all experiences of social injustice are experiences of the violation of a well-founded claim to recognition. In their treatment by society, a subject expects recognition of their personal identity. The principles governing Honneth's three spheres of recognition possess a "surplus validity" which allows for the expansion of these spheres. This possibility of expansion ensures a recognition order which is not static. Claims for social justice, according to Honneth, are claims for the expansion of the recognition relations of one of these three spheres. Claims for the expansion of the recognition order are articulated as either a reapplication or a reinterpretation of the guiding principle of the respective sphere. The aim of this expansion is the enhancement of social integration and claims for recognition need to be judged accordingly.

Honneth's contemporary take on Critical Theory is a theory of recognition thought precisely along the logic of identification we wish to problematize. Recognition is obtained through affirmation of the (exclusive) social order supplied by the excluding group. In the struggle for recognition, the principles and values supplied by the excluding group are affirmed. In claiming recognition, the excluded group argues for the reapplication or reinterpretation of these abstract principles of recognition which are thus legitimized and reproduced. Contra Fraser, Honneth does not even recognize the distinction between transformativity and affirmativity. Moreover, he seems to disregard the transformative approach as a pathway to recognition. Honneth even explicitly mentions that he takes the abstract principles of recognition to be legitimate, because of their historical process of growth and development (pp. 259-260). However, in conceiving of recognition as expansion of the existing recognition relations, Honneth's theory of recognition contains a logic of identity, opening his account up to the problematic implications we identified above.

As with Fraser, the first problem which arises in Honneth's theory is that recognition thought along this logic of sameness entails the maintenance of a relation of subordination between the formerly excluding and the formerly excluded group. Honneth posits social integration as the normative end of claims for recognition, but we must critically evaluate the frame the excluded group is being

integrated into. Though Honneth claims the legitimacy of the principles for recognition based on their historical development, they have also historically proven to be exclusive. In the affirmation of these principles, the frame is reproduced and new and old exclusions are upheld. Integration into an exclusive framework is not the aim of claims for recognition. Also, since this framework was provided by the excluding group and has historically developed under its influence, integration into this framework will not absolve the power imbalance between the formerly excluding and the formerly excluded group. Rather, a certain relation of subordination will be maintained, even after the integration of the formerly excluded group.

Second, the obtainment of recognition through a process of identification does not allow for the recognition of difference. In the struggle for recognition, Honneth argues, claims are posited as reinterpretations or reapplications of the existing three principles. Through affirmation of the principles of the excluding group, the excluded group proves their similarity with the excluding group in their valuation of the same principles: recognition implies identification. According to Honneth, what the subject expects from society is recognition of their identity. However, through this process of identification, the formerly excluded subject is not recognized in their particular identity but in their similarity to the excluding group. Thus, in becoming recognized in Honneth's account lies a necessity of *becoming the other*, even of becoming your oppressor. Accordingly, recognition thought according to a logic of identification fails to meet the expectations of the subject. Instead of being recognized in their identity, the subject is forced to alter or negate their identity in order to obtain recognition.

4. Outline for an Alternative Approach

When identity-political movements employ the affirmative strategy in their struggle for social change, their struggle for recognition can be considered lost even before it is fought. The reason for their defeat must be located in the logic of identification which is inherent to a concept of recognition thought of as inclusion in the social order. Though the members of the excluded group are united by their *particularity* - their depreciated identity - they are recognized by virtue of their *similarity* to the excluding group. If recognition of particularity was the aim, but the outcome is its negation, the struggle for recognition has thus been lost. This signifies that, in order to think the recognition of *difference*, the distinction between an affirmative and a transformative approach to recognition must be taken into account.

Here we wish to give a general outline of what such transformative approach may look like. This approach is subject to two main requirements. First of all, the approach should be one that meets the demands of actors in movements for social

justice. Secondly, since the transformative approach is articulated as an alternative to the affirmative approach, it should be able to avoid at least some of the problematic implications the affirmative approach entails.

In order to avoid these implications, the transformative strategy will need to allow for the dissolution of the power imbalance between the excluding group and the excluded group. The desired result of the struggle for recognition fought along this alternative approach is a balanced power relation between the formerly excluded and excluding. The principles guiding the social order should thus not be provided by the formerly excluding group and consequently affirmed by the excluded group but instead developed in a process in which both groups participate as actors. In addition, our approach must avoid mechanisms of identification and enable the recognition of particularity in its own right. The desired outcome is recognition of the formerly excluded group's particularity, rather than its negation.

When the recognition of particularity is the goal, Fraser rightfully points out the danger of reification of social identities. Affirmative strategies, by valorizing group identity along a single axis, "drastically simplify people's self-understandings." (p. 76) The reification of social identities is definitely a challenge identity-political movements face. The project of recognizing difference in its own right thus navigates a precarious balance between the negation of difference altogether (identification) and the objectification or simplification of these social identities (reification). An attempt to navigate this balance can be found in contemporary social movements' deployments of the theory of intersectionality.

Taking this into account, a transformative approach to recognition must challenge the existing recognition order and advocate its complete restructuring. It must aim not only at the revaluation of the depreciated identities but at *the revaluation of the social identities of all agents involved*. Accordingly, our approach is destructive as well as constructive, in the sense that it aims to deconstruct the existing hegemonic recognition order, but also to construct a new one, with formerly excluded parties now participating as actors.

After the deconstruction of this hegemony of value, however, we stand before the positive task of the construction of a new recognition order, one in which the formerly excluding and excluded group both participate. The principles of this recognition order should not reflect exclusively the values of the formerly excluding group. Instead, they will be given shape by all parties involved. The desired outcome of the alternative approach we propose is recognition of the other, not in their similarity to the self, but recognition of the other *in their otherness*. The positive, constructive aspect of our alternative approach needs to be filled in by a concept of recognition thought along a process of positing particularity and difference, rather than identification. Further research would elaborate on what such theory of recognition might look like.

5. Conclusion

Today's proliferation of identity-political movements signifies that, though denied by some, injustice is still widely experienced. Though movements of identity politics articulate certain injustices and successfully unite many actors around a shared cause, they do not succeed in remedying these injustices through political action. Though signaled, often to tiresome repetition, the injustices remain acute and continue to form a heavy burden for those who carry them daily. Understanding why identity-political movements fail to bring about the social change they aim at, we hope, may aid political actors in the future in conducting their struggle for recognition such that it results in actual social change. Since the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, we believe it is time to assemble a toolbox of our own.

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