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Recognition and the constitution of social order

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The concept of recognition has recently garnered much attention in international relations (IR) theorizing (see e.g. Ringmar and Lindemann 2011). Much of this attention derives from its revival in political and social theory, closely associated with Axel Honneth's rearticulation of a Hegelian strand of critical theory (Honneth 1996), and hence the overall prominence of Honneth's social philosophy in this forum is not surprising. Although we share the doubts of both the contributors and Honneth himself as to the 'applicability' of his work to IR, references of this kind do make clear that to engage concepts and problems of recognition, manifold and dispersed as they may be, is to tackle core theoretical problems regarding the constitution of self, subjectivity, and social order.

Jens Bartelson aptly highlights the enigmatic quality of the concept of recognition: it promises to solve an impressively broad array of problems, and we are inclined to find such promises plausible even before a systematic effort at conceptual clarification has kicked in. Hence, the primary question to pose at this stage is why we are interested in recognition in the first place. The challenge of theorizing recognition in IR is then, as both contributions highlight, not an exercise in how to best ‘engraft’ a concept of social and political theory into IR: but rather one of reconstructing the underlying dissatisfaction with an established vocabulary against which the concept of recognition appears to us as tempting.

Why then is it that increasingly IR theorists turn to this concept? We suggest that it is due to the increasingly widespread impression that the practice of simply presupposing states as ready-made and given actors has become deeply problematic. At least since the agency-structure debate, questions of identity formation, representation, and othering all point to how ‘actors’ or persons are ‘made’, and it should not come as a surprise that the literature on recognition addresses precisely this set of questions (see Bartelson 2013, 15).

However, within the confines of these remarks, we are neither interested in reviewing the literature nor pinpointing critical aspects in the individual contributions. The arguments presented are far too rich, too nuanced, and too different in their substantive outlook for such an endeavor to succeed. Rather, we are interested in demonstrating how both contributions, despite their differences, point toward a link between the politics of recognition and the constitution and disruption of social order at a global scale. Hence, we conclude with a few tentative pointers as to how this link may be further theorized.

Bartelson and Erman on recognition

Bartelson situates recognition in the context of the formation, transformation and transcendence of the state system. Theories of recognition are sometimes taken to provide an avenue for a more peaceful world, a claim the author is highly skeptical about. Bartelson takes recourse to Ricoeur in order to identify three faces of recognition: epistemic recognition, that is, the recognition of something as something, self-recognition and mutual recognition. These three faces recur in IR theorizing. Recognition is used to inquire into processes of identity formation (political recognition); to question the legal status as ‘members’ of the community (legal recognition) and explore the mutual recognition as moral agents (moral recognition). Each of these dimensions is rendered subject to critical scrutiny. Political recognition is conceptually flawed: ‘While the mechanism of recognition

explains how a given actor acquires some of these characteristics, which in turn help explain how and why it acts in certain ways but not in others, the actor in question must nevertheless be assumed to possess some basic capacities to act that make it possible to enter into interaction with others in the first place' (Bartelson 2013, 20). Legal recognition with its distinction of a declaratory and a constitutive theory of recognition falls back and forth between epistemic and moral recognition. Consequently, legal recognition falls prey to political considerations and instrumentalization (Bartelson 2013, 22). Moral recognition 'presupposes that equal worth constitutes the basis from which a shared moral framework can develop as a consequence of mutual recognition among actors' (Bartelson 2013, 25), but cautions us that any other universalistic vocabulary can be captured by particular interests and that these high hopes might be unjustified. Even more, to associate equality with practices of recognition is to lose sight of their exclusionary implications (Bartelson, 2013, 21). Cutting across these problematic usages, however, lies an even more fundamental problem. To frame politics in terms of recognition is to presuppose a world *a priori* divided into a multiplicity of distinct and separated collectivities. No matter whether recognition is held to produce cooperation or conflict among these entities, the very move of presupposing them indicates that the concept of recognition may merely reproduce the problem it was heralded to solve. Reversing the theoretical terms of trade, this may indeed point to a substantive oversight in much of the literature on recognition in social and political theory, which characteristically brackets the concept of the international (see also Walker 1993).

Erman takes on recognition from a different angle. The author starts from the classic divide between the declaratory and constitutive theory and associates them with current camps of IR theorizing. The declaratory theory is assumed to foster a positivist approach as there are clear, empirically testable, criteria that define the state. In contrast, the constitutive theory is said to be supported by constructivist theorizing. Erman identifies here a clear separation of 'facts' and 'norms' at play that is rejected as untenable. Bringing in Robert Brandom's normative pragmatics, which seeks to reconstruct the inherent normativity at play in questions of theoretical philosophy is thus a conclusive follow-up. Erman, too, comes to the conclusion that: 'the emphasis on questions about the ontological status of facts in theorizing the recognition of statehood has led it to an impasse in the sense that theorists have tended to focus on the wrong kind of questions' (Erman 2013, 48) and thus ultimately, Erman joins Bartelson in the judgment that the transfer of 'conceptual tools from the recognition literature in social and political theory' (Erman, 52) is problematic to solve our problems, especially as we deal not with individual identity formation, but with political entities in their quest for self-determination.

Erman goes on to highlight the autonomy of a legal-political dimension of recognition linked to self-determination, and warns against the danger of culturalizing away the genuinely legal and genuinely political dynamics. The criticism is well taken, and we concur that a unilateral extension of social-psychological modes of explanation would be problematic, and practices of self-determination deserve to be studied in their own right. However, it remains unclear to what extent constructivist accounts under scrutiny actually share the author's substantive focus. Rather than stipulating that 'the notion of recognition of primary importance for theorizing statehood is not of a social-psychological kind focusing on identity and subjectivity, but rather of a legal-political kind focusing on collective self-determination as an exercise of autonomous agency' (Erman 2013, 54), one might then have to focus on just how these two dimensions hang together. For how is it that collectivities making claims to exercise autonomous agency are constituted in the first place, and what is the scope of agency?

What is more important in the present context, however, is the positive side. Both authors conceive of recognition as a speech act. Intuitively plausible as this may seem, speech acts come with a number of substantive theoretical problems: the problem of intentionality vs. conventions; sincerity as one of the main conditions, the exclusion of performative dimensions, etc. Most importantly in the present context, speech acts require a 'context',¹⁶ a community within which they can be meaningfully uttered. The social context, which renders possible particular utterances, particular forms of recognition, while excluding others, is only mentioned *ex negativo* when Bartelson points to the danger of reifying existing forms of particularism, and the need for a historical reconstruction of the practices of recognition to lay bare their exclusionary power. Making explicit the underlying concepts of communication and society, which provide for the felicity conditions of speech acts of recognition, may thus be the major theoretical challenge coming out of this forum.

Order and the problem of contingency

The contributions to the forum highlight the extent to which recognition is a concept of social and political theory. It originated only in the 17th century and had in Kant's notion of *Achtung* a very important predecessor, before Fichte and Hegel transformed it to their liking. Instead of asking what

¹⁶ Interestingly enough, the question of context has in recent discussions on securitization turned into the question of the audience that determines whether a securitization moves is successful or misfires. It would be interesting to pursue this question of the audience in relation to social order in more detail. Due to space constraints, we cannot do this at this point.

recognition 'is', we suggest to first ask the simple question: how is social order possible? Along the lines suggested by the contributors, we can pursue this question by highlighting single, double, and triple contingency (Strydom 1999). Single contingency refers to the recognition of a fact, something is recognized as something, which can be registered and acknowledged in further communication. This might encompass the reference to actors that are treated as simple 'objects': such and such state is not accepted to exist. Now the crucial point here might be that empirical facts are not simply given, but there is a *struggle* to establish facticity. This is not a problem of cognition as behaviorists would have it, but a process of signification: already on this level, communications (or speech acts for that matter) are constitutive. This 'struggle' for facticity has been mentioned and explored by both authors. Also, they pointed to a relational use of recognition linked to the creation of subjectivity. Recognition is an intersubjective concept that shows how the *struggle for subjectivity* cannot be understood by looking at one subject alone: who we are depends on others. Of course, the question to what extent the self presupposes the other finds different answers in different social theories. Questions of identity formation and subjectivity thus require a concept of double contingency where ego and alter as two 'black boxes' meet and create 'white'. Most sociologists refer to the mutual taking into consideration as the basis of sociality.

However, Bartelson, in particular, points to an additional dimension: recognition is not only a relational concept, but requires a third, a triadic relation in order to account for both agency and change and their contingent delimitations. For recognition to work in any social order, there must be 'three' discursive positions, not only two. In any case, recognition is not only granted, demanded, withheld, and received at a dyadic level. All of these dynamics take place under the implicit auspices of a third observer, be it the public sphere(s), anarchy, or democracy.

To highlight the role of the impersonal 'third' then opens up two further avenues: first, a historical reconstruction of how practices of recognition are related to the third position of the implied observer, through which conditions of felicity are established and transformed: anarchy is increasingly replaced by democracy as a self-evident rationale under the auspices of which recognition can be granted; questions of status, identity, and othering are concurrently transformed. Second, as the third is linked to questions of authority, it is possible to conceive recognition in a wider context of social order that is broader than just politics: given that we experience the worst economic crisis of the last 80 years, it seems unnecessarily limited to focus on just states: we could ask how economic actors are recognized by others, and how the epistemic authority of economic knowledge has become so widely acknowledged. Similarly, dynamics of recognition occur in religion,

sports and many other social spheres? Under conditions of a world society, which is not imagined *a priori* as hierarchical, multiple ‘thirds’ co-exist, each constituting distinct, yet global orders of recognition. Focusing on such differentiated practices of recognition might help us to unearth these different functionalist logics without reifying them.

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‘Recognition’: some analytical remarks

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In institutional contexts, the term ‘recognition’ is commonly used as a technical term. It either ascribes a certain status to an entity, or expresses acknowledgement that an entity has a certain status. Any further description of the status, of course, depends on the relevant entity and the context. In international relations, the relevant status is most frequently recognition of ‘states’ as legal subjects of international law. But sometimes what is at stake is recognition of ‘a people’, or rather recognition of the ‘political autonomy’ of a people, whereby ‘people’, here, is roughly equivalent with ‘sovereign political association’. In addition, recognition sometimes concerns the recognition of a body of government as representative of a state in international law. In the first two cases, recognition confers a certain legal status on an institution, in the third case on persons in their role as representatives of an institution. All cases will be called ‘legal recognition’, despite the fact that acts of recognition are political acts, because they concern a legal status.