



REVOLUTIONARY RECOGNITION

RICHARD GUNN AND ADRIAN WILDING

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**REVOLUTIONARY
RECOGNITION**

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FOREWORD BY JOHN HOLLOWAY

Super! Exciting! I've just finished reading the book and I'm delighted. I knew I would like it – I've known Richard and Adrian for many years – but I didn't know I would find it so exciting.

What is so exciting about it? For me two things: the very notion of mutual recognition and then the way they follow the concept from Hegel to Marx to Occupy to commons to climate change, pausing on the way to criticize the liberal reformism of Taylor and Honneth.

Mutual recognition moves from being the key category in a learned but unorthodox reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to being a key component in the rethinking of anti-capitalist revolution. For Hegel mutual recognition finds expression in the 'I that is We and We that is I' (1977: 110) that he saw in the revolutionary crowd at the height of the French Revolution. Marx and Engels expressed the same idea in the closing sentence of *Communist Manifesto* Part II, when they spoke of communism as 'an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx and Engels 1976b: 506).

For Hegel, history is a movement through various forms of false or contradicted recognition to reach a true mutual recognition. The master-slave dialectic sets the scene: neither slave nor master is recognized as a person. Each is 'recognized' through the role they occupy in the relation, or perhaps misrecognized or malrecognized, since their personhood is reduced to that role. This false or contradicted or malrecognition is not an error of perception, since recognition is constitutive: we are constituted by the recognition of others. The slave is reduced to being a

slave through the master's (and his own) recognition of himself as such; the master too is reduced to being a master through the slave's (and his own) recognition of himself as such. Mutual recognition (and therefore our own fullness as people) can be realized only through the abolition of the master-slave relation, that is, of all relations of domination.

Much the same argument can be made in relation to Marx. In *Capital* he emphasizes on repeated occasions that the existence of the commodity reduces people to 'personifications' or 'character masks' as buyers or sellers. When the commodity is the labour power of the workers, here too the seller (the worker) and the buyer (the capitalist) are reduced to personifications of their location in the relation. They are pushed into roles as buyer or seller, worker or capitalist. Mutual recognition of people as people, with all the things they have in common and all their particularities, could come only with the overcoming of relations of domination and the formation of a society based on 'an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'.

This is a vastly oversimplified presentation of the notion of mutual recognition. What I really want to ask is how does this take us forward in our understanding of revolution, of the possibilities of radical social change? Richard and Adrian's book is enormously, excitingly ambitious. They want to bring the long-neglected Left-Hegelian tradition into the centre of current radical anti-capitalist movements like Occupy, the commons movement and the movement for climate justice. I think they are absolutely right to do so, but just how does the notion of mutual recognition help us?

For me the notion of mutual recognition adds a new dimension, or perhaps a new cutting-edge to Marx's concept of fetishism, which is at the centre of his critique of capitalism in *Capital*. The existence of our products as commodities leads to a fetishization or reification (Lukács) of social relations. I buy a car: this appears to be simply a relation

between my money and the thing bought. Behind this, however, is a social relation, a relation between active subjects: a relation between my activity as a professor, for which I have been paid with money, and the work of the workers in who knows where, Japan, Korea, Mexico, who have made the car. The relation between me and the car workers is a social relation which exists in the form of a relation between things, in other words, a fetishized or reified relation.

How does it help us if we now add a reflection on recognition to this? My payment of money is a perverted act of recognition: I recognize the work that the workers have done so that I can drive around in safety and comfort. Behind the monetary transaction there is a subjacent *we-ness*. There is a coming together of their activity as car workers with my activity as a professor that enriches the world in some way. If we think of the relationship in terms of recognition, then a warmth comes into it. I want to shake their hands, thank them for the skill and care they applied in making the car so comfortable and safe. They, no doubt, would want to say to me, 'I found your foreword to the Gunn and Wilding book really motivating, I must tell my children about it this evening.' But of course, our mutual recognition does not happen in that way. I pay my money to the car dealer, or rather to the credit company; the workers receive their wage and have no interest in my existence, and that is that. There is a dreadful and violent malrecognition here that contradicts the potential richness and warmth of the subjacent *we-ness*. The contradiction is a strong one, between the world of mutual recognition that could be and the dead-killing thing-ness of the contradicted recognition in which we live.

Recognition is a flow. There is nothing fixed about the 'I that is We and We that is I': it is in constant movement as the 'I's change, as the 'We's change, as their relationship changes. For Hegel, it is the excitement of the revolutionary crowd. It is ephemeral, evanescent perhaps, it makes

no claim on the future, pre-defines nothing. It is what Bloch, following Boethius and inspired by Goethe's *Faust*, calls the *nunc stans*, the perfect moment that reaches for eternity. It is Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*, now-time, a moment of unbearable intensity. The moment of mutual recognition is not necessarily short-lived; it is rather the breaking of any notion of duration, the rupture of the homogeneity of time. Richard Gunn once wrote, in a review of Bloch's *Principle of Hope*, that no one placed the stakes so high in their understanding of communism. But that is just what he and Adrian are doing in their insistence that communism is mutual recognition. That is what makes the book beautiful. Their mutual recognition is just as wildly ambitious as Bloch's *nunc stans* or Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*.

Wildly ambitious certainly, perhaps also wildly unrealistic for those of us whose senses have been dulled by the society in which we live. But perhaps that is not the point. For just as Benjamin's *Jetztzeit* is a scream against the deadening homogeneity of time that condemns us to tomorrow being a continuation of today and just as Bloch's *nunc stans* is the most intense expression of hope against the tick-tock of oppression, so mutual recognition is not just the expression of a possible communizing future but also and above all a movement-against its own contradicted existence. Or better, a movement-against its own contradicted existence. Hyphenated because the movement of mutual recognition can only be a negative movement, a movement-against, in a society that contradicts it. Even if we think of mutual recognition as having been realized, as apparently Hegel did in his own time, an immense silliness that has done much to undermine the dangerousness of his ideas, even then, it would have to be understood negatively as a constant movement-against the encroachment of its own institutionalization. Certainly in the present capitalist society, mutual recognition exists, to use Richard's classic and much-quoted

phrase, 'in the mode of being denied', and therefore as struggle against its own denial.

Mutual recognition, then, is a flow that exists in the mode of being contradicted. What contradicts it is anything that blocks the flow. Any freezing that turns the water into ice, any coagulation or clotting that impedes the flow of blood. Richard and Adrian speak of role definitions as 'reified ice floes that are carried on recognition's tide' (p. 52). Hegel speaks of *geistige Massen*, spiritual masses, which I understand to mean massifications or coagulations in the flow of the spirit. To say that mutual recognition exists as contradicted means that it exists as coagulated, clotted, in spiritual masses. It exists as roles, as institutions, as definitions, as limits, as perimeters, as sects, as parties, as anything that converts the flow of becoming into the stasis of being. The 'I that is We and We that is I' never *is*: it flows. For the same reason, 'communism' is a nonsensical term: it makes sense only as a communizing.

Mutual recognition, as movement-against, is anti-identitarian. This is crucially important when we relate the concept to current struggles. Richard and Adrian say that 'political philosophy has never been closer to political reality' (p. 4). That is key to the powerful link between the earlier and the later chapters of the book. The earlier chapters focus on the concept of mutual recognition and the importance of the Left-Hegelian tradition, including Marx in that tradition, while the later chapters centre on the significance of that tradition for the practice of current struggles. The bridge is the critique of the abandonment of the Left-Hegelian-Frankfurt-School tradition by the later generation of the Frankfurt School, Honneth in particular. The argument flows beautifully and is very convincing. Mutual recognition, the abolition of hierarchies, the pursuit of horizontality and the attempt to listen to all voices in a movement, is indeed a central feature of radical struggles over the last twenty years or so, perhaps ever since the Zapatista uprising

with its emphasis on ‘dignity’ as the central principle of organization and struggle. The idea of prefiguration is a reaching towards a mutually recognitive society through the creation of similarly recognitive organizing here and now. In that sense, Richard and Adrian are right to say that the Left-Hegelian tradition is at the centre of current struggles. Yet even here it is important to emphasize the negativity of the tradition, the fact that the movement of mutual recognition is a movement-against. Against the commodity form and the clotting that is inherent in that form. Against the dangers of encroaching identities, perimeters (sometimes tied to the notion of community), definitions, roles, never far from even the most exciting movements.¹ That is precisely why the notion of mutual recognition is so important to political practice, as restless, unceasing critique, as constant push against the obstacles that impede its flow.

To recover the force of ‘mutual or revolutionary recognition’ and with it Hegel’s *Phenomenology* and the Left-Hegelian tradition and to place them in the centre of the current longings for a different world, where they are already – what a fabulously important project!

Read on. Or if you’ve skipped over this foreword, don’t worry. The exciting part starts in the pages that follow.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has its origins in 1989, a year of revolutions, when Adrian enrolled in a course offered by Richard at Edinburgh University's Department of Politics on 'Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Political Theory'. Since that time, and never merely in the roles of teacher and student, the two have collaborated as equals and friends. Both Adrian and Richard happily acknowledge their great intellectual debt to each other. *Revolutionary Recognition* distils three decades of their collaboration. For their support during the writing of the book Adrian would also like to thank Ina and James. Richard thanks Michele for everything.

Introduction

Our book champions the notion of ‘recognition [*Anerkennung*]’. In understanding a politics of emancipation, ‘recognition’ – so we urge – is the key. Mutual recognition (a term which we explain in due course) is the goal and rationale of revolution. Recognition is the theme which underlies critical theory and holds the route to revolution clear. In present-day society, individuals confront a world that has ‘the character of being something external’ – to quote Hegel (1977: 294) – and alienation is the result. Neoliberal thinking stifles political initiatives which bring the notion of a ‘we’ of individuals into play. A politics of recognition, or of mutual recognition more specifically, is a politics ‘in, against and beyond capitalism’, to borrow John Holloway’s pregnant phrase (Holloway 2016).

In speaking of revolutionary recognition, our aim is to clear a space in which revolution’s hope for an ‘association’ where ‘the free development of each is the free development of all’ – or, in Hegel’s expression, an ‘I that is We and We that is I’ (1977: 110) – can be renewed.

Developments in capitalism are not, we think, the only reason why an emphasis on recognition is timely. Changes in the Left also foreground cognitive themes. During the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, the Left hoped and dreamed and acted in broadly social democratic ways. Lenin’s desideratum of an avant-garde party of professional revolutionaries increased the tempo of revolutionary struggles but left their statist and social democratic framework intact. Now, everything has changed. Since, roughly, 2011, revolutionary

struggles have dispensed with social democracy and an exclusive focus on seizing parliamentary power. They have turned to a direct and much more fluid form of interaction. In doing so, they take up – sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly – the notion of mutual recognition we set out in this book. Present-day revolutionary theory for its part broadens the terms of debate. In the exchange between Lenin and Luxemburg in the early part of the twentieth century (the exchange which came to be known as the ‘problem of organization’¹), neither side acknowledged that organization may or must have a prefigurative dimension.² Later in the twentieth century, in the feminist movement especially, prefigurative thought and action became widespread – as did ‘prefiguration’ as a term.³ In the more recent ‘Occupy’ movement of 2011–13, prefiguration became a central and explicit theme.⁴ Today, the terms at issue in orthodox Marxism’s ‘problem of organization’ have altered. In the movements that have flourished since 2011 not merely an emphasis on participatory democracy but themes of prefiguration and ‘horizontal’ democracy⁵ go without saying. Gunn and Wilding’s *Revolutionary Recognition* speaks for and attempts to strengthen this Marxist and, at the same time, anarchist trend.⁶

The argument in this book is both theoretical and practical. It begins in a theoretical vein, by considering the origins of the term ‘recognition’ in the philosophy of Hegel. Our reading of Hegel breaks new ground in emphasizing the radical, indeed revolutionary, implications of his understanding of this idea. From Hegel we turn to Marx who, we argue, took up Hegel’s understanding of recognition, using it as a key weapon in his critique of capitalism. That Marx, like Hegel, was a thinker of recognition has received little attention in Marxist theorizing, an omission our book aims to redress. Our discussion then turns to present-day academic treatments of recognition. We argue that recent academic theory has, by and large, forgotten the term’s original revolutionary

meaning. Academic theory has drawn the concept's revolutionary sting. Here we underline something that a reader of our book must heed if they are to understand our argument. The recognition that Gunn and Wilding champion *is not* the largely reformist notion discussed today by Charles Taylor and Axel Honneth and academics who follow in their wake, but rather *recognition in its original revolutionary sense*. Our chapters on Hegel and Marx attempt to breathe fresh life into lines of argument which Honneth and present-day academia (discussed in Chapter 3) have diluted, downplayed or even opposed. Our book is, to this extent, an 'anti-Honneth' (to invoke the title though not the substance of a well-known Engelsian polemic).

In the second half of the book we turn from 'theory' to 'practice' and more directly political questions. Chapters 4 and 5 of our book explore what a practice of mutual (i.e. revolutionary) recognition may look like and discuss some of the political issues recognition raises. Recognition, we argue in Chapter 4, is the thread that connects the seemingly diverse ideas and ideals that guide revolutionary struggles today. It is a concept which makes sense of the global Left's rejection of social democratic politics and its turn to a politics of prefiguration. It is a term which allows the 'problem of organization' to be thought anew. In Chapter 4, we also consider various challenges to our idea that mutual recognition should be the rallying cry for the Left; in particular, the idea that no revolutionary movement can do without hierarchy, and that mutual recognition cannot work on a large scale.

The struggles of recent years have cast into relief fresh possibilities and scarcely imagined themes.⁷ For the first time, radical social movements have made mutual recognition a direct and explicit aim. Can these movements, and their mutually recognitive heritage, be sustained and developed and extended? We believe that they can, and that the dominance of social democracy in radical thought is a thing

of the past. 'Recognition', as an expression and a concept, is the term of the day.

In Chapter 5 we address one further key criticism that can be levelled at a notion of recognition – that it has little to say about how humans should treat the natural world. If mutual recognition occurs between humans, then what rationale does it give for protecting other species, ecosystems, the planet as such? We show ways in which this difficulty can be overcome and 'red' and 'green' struggles against capitalism can be united.

Though the final chapters of the book deal with more practical issues, ours is nevertheless a work that constantly looks to radical ideas from the history of political thought and demonstrates their topicality. One way of expressing our book's aim is to say, we attempt to renew the tradition of 'Left' (or 'radical' or 'Young') Hegelianism which Hegel's notion of recognition inaugurates and to which Marx belongs. We attempt to breathe fresh life into a position which, in the neoliberal period, has been neglected and hollowed out. Yet besides attempting to renew a school of thought, however vital, we see our discussion in political terms. The Left-Hegelian line of thought which we attempt to renew here is, we believe, vital to struggle today. Political philosophy has never been closer to political reality. As a result, if the book is found convincing, Left Hegelianism will be renascent and terms from Hegel's *Phenomenology* will be on political activists' lips. The social world will turn on its axis. All this is for the future: for now, it is enough to introduce a reader to a line of thought that has, in neoliberal times, been marginalized but which has revolutionary strength.