



Recognition, redistribution, and liberty[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between redistribution, recognition, and liberty. In particular, it critiques the existing approaches in the critical literature that either reduces redistribution to a simple subset of recognition, or insists that recognition is both necessary and sufficient for redistribution to occur. It argues, instead, that the introduction of the relatively weak assumption of (minimal) individual liberty is required for recognition, and that while recognition is necessary, it is insufficient for redistribution. It also considers the sustainability of voluntary redistribution in a liberal society, and voluntary recognition in an authoritarian society. Finally, the approach is applied to the problems of discrimination, genocide, and ethnic conflict.

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The socialist society would have to forbid capitalist acts between consenting adults . . . no distributional-patterned principle of justice can be continuously realized without continuous interference with people's lives.

Anarchy, State, and Utopia, p. 163 (Robert Nozick)

1. Introduction

Redistribution and recognition are two ideas that have long been a preoccupation of two very different, but deeply influential, schools of political theory and philosophy. The former—which finds expression in philosophers of social justice such as [Dworkin \(1986\)](#), [Nozick \(1974\)](#) and [Rawls \(1999\)](#)—has been a central concern of class-based politics, while the latter—which

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has been premised on Hegelian philosophy and the various derivatives of the seminar led by Kojève (1980)¹—has provided the intellectual underpinnings for understanding the politics of identity. Despite the importance of each of these fundamental ideas, however, the relationship between them has, unfortunately, remained relatively underexplored.

A clearer understanding of this relationship is of both theoretical and practical value. When treated as separate theoretical constructs, the perspectives appear to be fundamentally independent: recognition—which is the mutual acknowledgment of the existence of one group in society by another—is a microfoundational concern which, as a philosophy, presages a deeper understanding of the realized structure of observed society; it is, by design, an *ex ante* approach. In contrast, redistribution—the transfer of resources from one group to another, whether voluntary or involuntary—is a functional concept, which implicitly accepts what may be a defective system and seeks to effect corrective action based on an *ex post* philosophy of an ideal. This dichotomy, however, masks the importance of how one concept necessarily impacts the other, and how a complete theory of natural justice needs to recognize this relationship. Indeed, a small but growing literature (Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Tully, 2000; Yar, 2001; Young, 2002) argues that these two concepts are not only interrelated but also interdependent.

The issues raised by these ideas have also found currency in the practical policymaking debate. The framework of recognition-versus-redistribution has often been cast as the basis for two types of social movements: traditional, interest-based movements (McAdam, 1999; Tarrow, 1998), on one hand, and the so-called “new social movements” centered on various conceptions of culture and identity (Pichardo, 1997), on the other. Academic disputes over the linkages between class and identity politics have acquired practical relevance as a consequence of eruptions of ethnic, religious, and sectarian violence—especially among poor, disaffected, unemployed youths—in France, Rwanda, Indonesia, Darfur, and elsewhere. One is left to ponder whether such events would have occurred if policy aimed at enhancing recognition somehow addressed the dislocations felt by these protagonists, or if redistributive policy could have lessened the economic hardship faced by them.

The two major schools of thought that have emerged in the study of the linkages between redistribution and recognition are the “perspectival dualist” school associated with Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1995, 2000; Fraser and Honneth, 2003), and the “normative monism” school associated with Axel Honneth (Honneth, 1996; Fraser and Honneth, 2003). In their provocative coauthored book (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), they make distinct, but related, arguments for understanding the relationship between redistribution and recognition. The former develops a “two-dimensional conception of justice that encompasses both types of claims without reducing either type to the other,” while the latter instead proposes a form of “recognition . . . that seeks to subsume the problematic of redistribution within it.” (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 3). The common ground between these disparate approaches lies in their rejection of the “economistic view that would reduce recognition to a mere epiphenomenon of distribution” (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 2).

We dispute this claim that rational, individual decisionmaking necessarily reduces the role of recognition to a secondary outcome, with no potential impact on redistributive choices. Indeed, as will be argued, a view that embraces individual choice allows us to introduce the notion of liberalism in a very appealing way—a way that provides an alternative conceptualization of the problematic, and one that allows us to go beyond the linkages between redistribution and recognition that have been raised by the authors.²

The objective of this paper is to contribute to the understanding of the relationship between redistribution and recognition by introducing the fundamental idea of (individual) liberty (Hayek, 1978). This allows us to clarify the importance of liberty in allowing for recognition to occur in the first place, and to decouple the presumption that the politics of recognition and redistribution must imply each other. This immediately raises the question of whether redistribution is the appropriate response to recognition, *ex post*, or whether, sometimes, recognition may be enough. By not compounding the two issues, we further our understanding of, and potential for addressing, the real political-economic problems of racial and cultural integration, gender discrimination, and chronic poverty.

Our framework is founded on a condition of minimal liberalism. That is, if we wish to respect an individual's right to be decisive over just *one* pair of alternatives in any given environment, then redistribution must necessarily be treated as an independent issue from recognition. This methodologically individualist approach may, perhaps, be unappealing due to its noninterventionist prescription. Nonetheless, it lends itself to a more robust and, ultimately, sustainable approach to the problem of social inequality.

It is important at the outset to make a clear distinction between liberalism and both capitalism and democracy. The specific application of minimal liberalism that we utilize is essentially focused on the individual and his or her freedom over decisionmaking processes. It is not tied to any specific systemic features, such as capitalism (economic) or democracy

¹ Following Kant, these authors consider respect as the morally relevant kernel of recognition, from which redistribution can then follow. Another approach to the problem, therefore, would treat the distinction between the two schools as one where the focus is on *respect*, instead of recognition. Our concern here is with relationship between redistribution and recognition, which we view as a broader concept, and for which respect is a subset. As such, we lay aside this difference for the purposes of this paper. The notion of respect, however, is an integral component of our definition of liberty, as will become clear in what follows.

² It should also be noted at the outset that our approach is, in the main, positive and not normative; as such, our definitions of redistribution and recognition—and any implications from our findings—are not limited to simply those that may be *justified*, but to all possible treatments of these concepts (assuming agreement with the premises). Nonetheless, we are aware that our formalization does sacrifice some of the conceptual richness that are embodied in a more discursive approach.

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