Recognition, Responsiveness and Misrecognition

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Introduction

Jacob Schiff and Claudia Leeb address in their contributions the significant, and still inadequately thought, issue of the inclusive and exclusive character of recognition. Whereas Schiff extends our thinking about recognition through literature and the possibility of increasing responsiveness to others through narrative, Leeb analyzes the control of and violence toward the other enacted and exercised in recognition. In both essays we see how the discourse of recognition, whether recognition is conceptualized as the agonistic struggle for being acknowledged by the other or dialogical mutual understanding, is haunted by the seemingly intractable facticity and deeply rooted systemic character of misrecognition. The self that is to recognize the other might well be constitutively or systemically implicated in power, defined by self-interest, or conditioned by finitude, such that dialectical reversals of power and dialogical communication do not conclude with free and uncoerced reconciliation for each and all but with another constellation of inclusion and exclusion.

There is a justifiable fear that the universal, even when it is framed in terms of justice and equality, fails to reach and appreciate the singular life of others in their concrete and contingent specificities or uniqueness. Insofar as the other is not merely one more particular subsumable under a universal category, even that of consensus or inclusion, recognition appears inadequate to radical alterity or what is not only relatively but excessively other. The other who is not recognized as another myself can be a danger or disturbance, or perceived as such, to the self’s understanding and enactment of the relation between self and other. The very occurrence of recognition and understanding are informed by the differences and asymmetries of those involved regardless of their good or ill intentions. Recognition threatens violence to or power over the subaltern and marginal, the dominated and exploited, not only by exclusion but by inclusion; for instance, by representing and assuming their voices for them and yet—through their actual social-political location and their perceived silence—against them. The ethics of universal benevolence, cosmopolitanism, and humanism need to be confronted with existing social structures of power if they are not to naively reproduce and excuse them.

Responsiveness

Jacob Schiff considers issues of inclusion and exclusion in the current global context in relation to the philosophical question of what greater inclusion signifies. Beyond the incessantly repeated banal formula of promoting greater inclusion, he asks: what is the basis for the inclusion that is presupposed by contemporary discussions of cosmopolitanism and deliberative and participatory democracy? For Schiff, such questions do not only concern theory done from an impersonal third-person perspective but the issue of interpersonal experience and the potential cultivation of a disposition or attitude that he calls “responsiveness,” a concept that has remained an underappreciated presupposition of democratic theory. His adaptation of this phenomenological concept, which challenges the duality and reification of activity and passivity, is appropriate given the practical and experiential aims of his strategy.

In this paper, we are presented with two models of responsiveness, which we might associate with the names of Nietzsche and Levinas. Whereas William Connolly suggests that responsiveness is an alternative to responsibility that would loosen its structural hostility toward the other, thinkers such as Kwame Anthony Appiah contend that responsiveness is not so much an irresponsible interruption of coercive responsibility, or a free play of transgressions, but is itself crucial to responsibility articulated as answerability to even distant and unfamiliar others. This raises important questions, only partially addressed in this paper, concerning the relationship between responsiveness and responsibility: Are they necessarily incompatible, as a kind of natural spontaneity in contrast with a restrictive disciplinary order, or does responsibility need to be rethought through responsiveness? Does ethical recognition exclude the other through its presupposition of what and who should count as ethical, as Connolly appears to suggest following Nietzsche and Foucault’s critique of the disciplinary character of responsibility, or is recognition only possible through the ethical relation with the other? That is, through an encounter that occurs prior to any recognition—or understanding—and through alterity rather than identity or any act of identification?

How we respond to these questions will shape our assessment of Connolly’s claim that responsiveness is to finitude, whereas Patchen Markell and the Schiff propose that it is not so much a
response to finitude as it is the acknowledgement of “the diverse ways in which we are or might be connected to others.”¹ Schiff articulates such responsiveness as “the acknowledgment of connections between our everyday experiences and the often-distant experiences of others.”² One might wonder whether it is a question of responding to connections, which potentially reintroduces the idea that recognition involves a kind of cognitive knowledge that can be disrupted by skepticism, or whether it is the event of encountering the other, in the other’s very altverity, which is the central question of responsiveness; i.e., of how one responds and does not respond to the other. In the latter case, responsiveness is not a relation to connections but to the other's particular materiality, existence, and embodiment; and responsibility is not so much something added on after the fact, but is the very encounter with and response to the other.

These issues concerning what is encountered allow further questions to be posed about Schiff’s argument for the importance of narrative and mimesis in cultivating responsiveness. He shows how narrative through its mimetic character, which promotes identification, and various literary devices, which change the reader’s point of view, can help overcome distance. Literature in particular and narrative in general can thus help promote being more open toward others and such openness can itself be further developed and cultivated. I am not so much concerned here with whether addressing responsiveness through literature and cultivation is elitist or overly restrictive, as both can be understood more extensively in relation to everyday narratives and practices of the self.

Although I agree that narrative can have these critical and more responsive tendencies, and despite acknowledging the dangers of narrative for others who find no place in them or are demonized in them, I find that Schiff’s analysis might benefit from further considering the hazards of narrative and mimesis. Such dangers of misrecognition are made apparent in Leeb’s critique of the logic of identity at work in the ethics and politics of recognition. Many forms of recognition, identification, and story-telling promote exclusivity. The other is not only marginalized and controlled through select elite cultures, but more prominently through the everyday medium of popular culture and the media (the culture industry) as well as prevailing political, religious, and other organizations and movements.

Lyotard, of course, critiqued the essentializing tendencies of narrative that consolidate the plural event of the world and of various language games into one identity and totality. Adorno likewise examined the assertion and reproduction of identity and totality through the moment of non-identity. He argued for the playful emancipatory potential in mimetic identification while simultaneously analyzing its multiple pathologies in promoting subordination through identification. Mimesis can be playfully responsive to what is non-identical or it can be a repetitive absorption in the everyday life that makes us non-responsive and inattentive to others in their suffering, exploitation, and domination. Adorno’s critical strategy relates the emancipatory and responsive aspects of mimesis to the critical reflection of non-identity thinking, such that practice calls for reflection if it is not simply going to reproduce what already is.

We might accordingly ask: (1) how identification, mimesis, and narrative are involved in the many injustices of the world—each time identity is asserted against the other and narratives of us vs. them emerge—and (2) how do we distinguish those kinds of identification and narrative that open up to and respond to the other from those that preempt, label, and exclude the other? That is, although Schiff mentions these different prospects of narrative, it is important to further consider what distinguishes these different uses of narrative and responsiveness from nonResponsiveness.

Misrecognition

Claudia Leeb argues through an analysis of Jacques Lacan’s critique of Hegel’s “struggle for recognition,” from which nothing ethical can proceed according to Leeb, that the very paradigm of recognition from Hegel to Axel Honneth, Simon Critchley, and Judith Butler is inadequate to questions of difference and for articulating a radically feminist and democratic politics of transformative inclusion. Because recognition operates at the level of the ego and the same, it replicates and heightens rather than resists the logic of totality and identity that exploits, excludes, and dominates others in classifying them as other.

An analogous strategy is deployed in Levinas, yet different in that he drew an ethical conclusion from it, where questions of the ego’s recognition and knowledge of the other are always too late and anachronistic in relation to the encounter with the other. The other’s singularity and materiality that Lacan approaches through the Real, which disrupts identification and totality, is where the ethical already occurs in Levinas. Indeed, the disruption of totality must be an ethical one through the other if it is even going to begin to address and respond to the other at all and not merely be a new configuration of power and the political. My first question thus concerns ethics and politics: does a politics of the subject-in-outline presuppose or need to more explicitly address the ethical dimension, and does it matter whether it is an archaic ethics without norms, as in Levinas, or the more traditional normative theory one finds in contemporary theories of recognition?

This question is particularly relevant given Leeb’s assessment of Simon Critchley’s work, who adopts strategies from both theorists of interruption (Levinas, Derrida) and reconciliation (Habermas, Honneth). I concur with her critique to the extent that Critchley problematically assimilates Levinas’s ethics of radical alterity to Honneth’s ethics of recognition. Yet he also
argues that subjectivity, individuality, and ethical commitment are formed in the non-identity of an asymmetrical, infinite, and unfulfillable responsibility originating within a particular situation and in relation to a singular other. To this extent, Critchley is not only offering a theory of recognition.

Leeb concludes that “Democratic theories, such as Simon Critchley’s, ...fail to grasp that it is the identification with the Other, or in the seeking of recognition from the Other, that brings total closure in a political community.” Such theories tacitly presuppose the Other as an identity that does not lead to the contestation or transformation of the socio-political order. That is, if the diverse plurality of concrete others is lost in the great or “big Other,” which mediates social interaction, then there is no other that can challenge and transform the social-political order. However, instead of reaffirming such an order through a fixed and reified Otherness, which ignores the concrete particularities of class, gender, and race, and repeats the categories through which the other is recognized and categorized, is not the self and its economy of the same placed into question through its exposure to the other? An exposure that is ethical in being prior to recognition and decision? It is here, in this an-archic displacement, in which perhaps self and other can be encountered?

One remaining question I have in the space remaining concerns the gap and transition between a theory of the subject-in-outline and the ethical and social-political demand for greater or transformative inclusion and social justice: Does the subject-in-outline have a normative dimension, which is necessary for the political according to ethical universalists such as Habermas and Honneth, or does it have an ethical orientation through the very non-identical and asymmetrical encounter and relation of self and other? If the latter, is there a need for an ethics of the other in addition to the subject-in-outline, or Lacan’s theory of desire and the Real, precisely in order to critique and redress the failure of the ethics and politics of recognition and their multiple misrecognitions of diverse and concrete others? Do not both feminism and democracy call for a radically disruptive and reorienting “ought” coming from the other that would transform the restrictive “is” of the self and its identity?

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Endnotes

2. Schiff, 63.