Does Recognition Entail Epistemic Injustice?

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This paper examines recognition theory as to its epistemic presuppositions. Motivated by the inability to convincingly state the difference between recognition and ideological recognition, I argue that no such difference can be made unless the epistemic injustice present at the core of recognition is examined more critically. My contention is that the core mechanism of recognition favors the dominant and as such epistemically oppress the dominated. I show how the dominated deal with this. Following in the footsteps of Frantz Fanon I agree that the dominated do not actually seek recognition by the dominator. In fact, their reluctance or even refusal to do so is another way of pointing out the epistemic injustice inherent in Hegelian-based social recognition.

"There is not an open conflict between white and black. One day the White Master, *without conflict,* recognized the Negro slave." (Fanon 2008, 169)

The Hegelian-based recognition approach agenda is to advance the idea that the moral and just basis of social interaction hinges upon the successful reciprocal recognition between people, collectives and institutions (Taylor 1994; Honneth 1996; Fraser 2000).[1] Recognition would require a struggle by the misrecognized to be recognized (Honneth 1996) so illustrated at the start of G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) in which he describes the inaugural myth of recognition: the lord-bondship dialectic. This myth describes the willingness of one person (the master) to risk her fundamental freedom in a struggle for life or death, to *gain* recognition. What is presumably gained is the right to be considered the unambiguous, unchallengeable, and normative source for another person (Hegel 1977, 111–18). In short: to be treated as a free and equal person (Iser 2019). Theories that derive from this myth consider this mechanism of gaining recognition by struggle necessary to further moral progress towards more social justice. Non-violent examples of such struggles are for instance the work of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi. "Just wars" are an example of struggles that include violence.

This paper deals with a problem that has been raised concerning the core tenet of the Hegelian-based recognition approach (Honneth 2007). This problem concerns the necessity to make a clear distinction between Hegelian recognition and ideological recognition, the former as we've seen, defined as a struggle-based liberation and equalization practice and the latter defined as a practice that subjugates and dominates people for the purpose of perpetuating a social status quo. The problem is that, according to Louis Althusser, the two kinds of recognition are indistinguishable from one another (Althusser 2014; Honneth 2007). Given the agenda of the original Hegelian-based recognition approach, it is crucial that this is not the case. If Althusser is right, then the foremost Hegelian-based recognition thinker Honneth has to admit that: "recognition appears merely to serve the creation of attitudes that conform to the dominant system" (Honneth 2007, 323). In short, *recognition would subject, rather than respect*, the latter being an important cornerstone of Honneth's recognition approach (Honneth 1996). Hereafter, when speaking of recognition, I mean Hegelian-based recognition and when I speak of ideological recognition, I mean the Althusserian kind.

Honneth considers an act of recognition to be a promise. A promise could be that if I act according to what would make me be recognized, then I will receive a certain social reward, for instance to be socially included. Honneth refers to the fulfillment of the obligation the promise entails as "material fulfillment". His claim is that ideological recognition never makes good on such promises while proper Hegelian recognition does. An act of recognition is non-ideological when it convincingly and beneficially makes good on the promise it entails. If it does not, then it is a case of ideological recognition (Honneth 2007).

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[1] See (Iser 2019) for an introductory overview.

Honneth's reasoning is as follows. Recognition requires what he calls a moderate form of value realism which postulates that one can perceive really existing morally correct qualities, that is, virtues of another person or group to which we respond rationally (Honneth 2002, 255). They are really existing in what Honneth calls the lifeworld, a pre-given context into which we are socialized. Moral qualities can only be recognized from within this lifeworld (Honneth 2002, 255). Honneth adds a moderation proviso: he assumes that the rational evaluation is dependent upon our level of integration into the lifeworld (Honneth 2007, 336). Call this the value realism claim.

Hegel famously stated that "what is rational is actual; and what is actual is rational" (Hegel 1991, 20). This idea of the tautological relation between rationality and actuality is echoed in Honneth's value realism: what is recognized is rational and what is rational is recognized. Therefore, according to this line of reasoning, most recognitional encounters in the lifeworld cannot be credible as ideological forms of recognition: they would not have been part of the lifeworld in the first place had they been irrational. What is irrational cannot be recognized and made part of the lifeworld.

Closely related to this recognitional rationality is reasonability. What is needed is a way to evaluate acts of recognition as to their reasonability in the sense that a recognizer should be able to articulate the reasons the recognition is morally correct. Honneth does readily admit that there clearly is irrationality and unreasonability to be found in the world (Honneth 2007).

He therefore specifies further and suggests that ideological recognition is irrational because it fails to materially fulfill an evaluative promise. This kind of recognition is still value realistic given its definition, but it is not justified because unlike true recognition, the act of recognition explained as a promise (for instance, workplace autonomy is liberating) does not become fulfilled in a real sense (workers are still dominated). Call this the material fulfillment claim.

Motivated by the inability to convincingly state the difference between recognition and ideological recognition, I argue that no such difference can be made unless the epistemic injustice present at the core of recognition is examined more critically. My contention is that the core mechanism of recognition favors the dominant and as such epistemically oppress the dominated. I show how the dominated deal with this. Following in the footsteps of Frantz Fanon I agree that the dominated do not actually seek recognition by the dominator. In fact, their reluctance or even refusal to do so is another way of pointing out the epistemic injustice inherent in Hegelian-based social recognition.

1. Is Value Realism's Historical Relativism Justified?

A value realist holds that value claims are sociologically constructed facts that really exist (Oddie 2013).[2] Value claims such as "our elders deserve our respect" are evaluative qualities or properties (*Werteigenschaften*) (Honneth 2007, 327–28) of these facts.[3] The totality of these facts makes up what Honneth calls the lifeworld.

Honneth adds a historical relativism proviso to the value realist's claim: facts are not only socially constructed, but they are also situated *historically* which we have to understand as meaning that there are values that were morally justified within their socio-historical context. By arguing this, Honneth aims to show that what could be construed as ideologically constructed recognition was actually justified social recognition of the Hegelian kind. I will argue contra Honneth that historical relativism does not save him from the Althusserian charge. In fact, it possibly aggravates it: it could *itself* be an act of ideological recognition.

Honneth argues for this position by giving three examples. the virtuous house slave Uncle Tom from Harriet Beecher's novel (Beecher Stowe 2009), the "good" housewife and mother of the 1950's

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2   Value realism is often conflated with moral realism. The difference is that value realism is about the axiological domain (good, bad, better, worse) while moral realism is about the deontic domain (permissibility, impermissibility, obligation etc.) See (Oddie 2013) and (Honneth 2002).

3   Value realism can take a propositional form which is called cognitivism or a non-propositional form. The latter can be nihilistic, that is, that value terms are considered meaningless, or they can be linked to a positive account of the acceptability of the claim made. I take Honneth to be of the latter kind thus "elder respect is good" is non-propositional and contingent on the positive act of recognition. See (Oddie 2013, 2).

and finally the heroic veteran soldier. Honneth asks whether it is not justified that Uncle Tom enjoys his self-esteem, that he is right to be proud of his ability to please his white master. After all, it is an expression of the slave's self-worth. Similarly, doesn't the public esteem enjoyed by the good housewife as a caring mother compensate for the disrespect the stereotype entails, to be excluded from other work outside the home? And isn't it justified that the self-esteem male heroism provides to veterans of war who otherwise lack employment as a source of prestige and reputation?

According to Honneth: "In each [of the three examples], these possibilities of interpretation give us a clear sense of the fact that upon closer inspection of the historical circumstances, a particular *dispositive* of esteem that we hold in retrospect to be pure ideology can prove in fact to be a condition for a group-specific attainment of increased self-worth" (Honneth 2007, 327). In other words, Honneth assumes that because the examples of stereotypes provide self-worth, self-respect, or self-esteem these stereotypical acts of recognition are justified and therefore not ideological. How then does a society arrive at the obvious conclusion that women are not just "good housewives" or that there is no such thing as virtuous slavery? When those concerned revolt. Then and only then, according to Honneth, is recognition no longer a positive affirmation of behavioral expectations, only then is it is unmasked as a practice of domination whose mechanism was ideological recognition (Honneth 2007, 327).

This line of reasoning is contradictory. Why do women or black people revolt? Because their social and historical circumstances demand it. But Honneth would have us believe no such demand existed prior to the revolt, but rather that the moral situation for women and black people was perfectly fine since these groups experienced "increased self-worth" given the values present in the lifeworld (Honneth 2007, 327). *Incipit contradictio*.

Honneth's value realism itself is on shaky grounds. Like its sister-concept *moral realism* it seems to suggest that *is* implies *ought*.[4] Honneth's historical relativism aggravates the situation: all existing wrongs are always justified given their socio-historical context and the apparent capacity of humans to distill self-worth/esteem/respect, we need only to apply the proviso.

2. Is Recognition Applying Epistemic Power to Dominate?

Honneth's value realism is at odds with epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), a concept that is concerned with credibility or prejudice as a judgement bestowed upon a knower by a hearer that the hearer exploits via agential or structural identity power.[5] In the current section, I argue that recognition applies these powers which connect recognition to epistemic injustice. I do not mean to suggest that recognition and epistemic injustice are incompatible. Fricker and others[6] show various ways of marrying the two theories. I find the combination unattractive because of the underlying problems with value realism as I have shown in the previous section.

To illustrate the epistemic nature of recognition I will borrow Honneth's example of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The opening of Beecher Stowe's book illustrates a case of epistemic injustice. Two gentlemen, as Beecher Stowe takes care to introduce them, are negotiating the trade of slave Tom. Tom's master, Mr. Shelby, confides to slave trader Mr. Haley, that Tom (never *Mr*. Tom) runs his farm and is trustworthy, something which would surely increase the price Haley is willing to pay for Tom. But Haley is incredulous. Slaves are merchandise and no amount of Christianity obtained by the slave will change his mind. Mr. Shelby is adamant Tom "really *did* get it", referring to Tom's religion. He retells that when he sent Tom off on an errand with a large sum of money he said to Tom: "I trust you, because I think you're a Christian - I know you would n't [*sic*] cheat" (Beecher Stowe 2009, 48).

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4   See Jip Maat's essay in this volume.

5   I am following the "knower-hearer" terminology of the founder of the theory of epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker (Fricker 2007). It might seem counterintuitive that the knower is in a position of disadvantage. It helps to realize that it is only the hearer that can grant understanding and thus credibility to the knower. It is the task of the knower to show she knows. In our present discussion the knower therefore corresponds to the recognizee and the hearer with the recognizer.

6   See (McConkey 2004; Congdon 2018; Fricker 2018; Giladi 2018)

Tom is not considered a credible, knowledgeable person other than being considered so for the purpose of the trade between Shelby and Haley. Tom's capability to run the farm makes no real difference as to Tom's personhood. Even his Christianity is nothing more than an extra attribute that does not necessarily make Tom more valuable as merchandise. It does not enhance his credibility per se, testimony of which we find in Mr. Shelby's affirmation that he believes Tom will not disenfranchise him because he thinks Tom is a Christian. Mr. Shelby establishes Tom's trustworthiness, not his Christianity.

The social power, the power to grant credibility, is with Mr. Shelby, and not with Tom. The hearer holds a particular kind of social power over the knower which is defined as "a practically socially situated capacity to control other's actions, where this capacity may be exercised [...] by particular social agents, or alternatively it may be exercised structurally" (Fricker 2007, 13). A specific kind of social power is identity power: a power dependent upon "shared imaginative conceptions of social identity" (Fricker 2007, 13). Fricker distinguishes between two kinds of epistemic injustice that uses identity power to control people. The first kind, *testimonial injustice,* occurs when a person is done harm in her capacity as a knower when identity power is at work to her disadvantage. This is normally the effect of an identity-prejudicial stereotype. Tom is not credible as a competent farm manager, because his identity is determined by an agent, Mr. Haley for instance, using the identity power just mentioned. Another way of saying this is that the agent Mr. Haley is not recognizing Tom by epistemically oppressing Tom. When he "got religion" (Beecher Stowe 2009, 48), he was still not credible enough. His Christianity did not matter in issues of credibility. In short, Tom is not recognized as a person. It is necessary that Tom's credibility is deflated on account of the fidelity to moderate value realism. The lifeworld has not yet sufficiently absorbed the idea that black people are people and should be heard credibly.

The second kind of epistemic injustice Fricker distinguishes is *hermeneutical injustice* and it is suffered when identity power is wielded in a structural manner via prejudices and stereotypes. It is therefore not agential but present in ubiquitous discursive practices. This kind of epistemic injustice is based on a hermeneutic inequality: the social situation is such that a person is unable to articulate her social experience because there is an interpretative gap between her ability to articulate her situation and the collective resources available to her to comprehensively enunciate that situation (Fricker 2007, 148–75). The only way to talk about her social experiences is by using the discourse of the oppressor. That discourse is likely not to have the means, or otherwise does not allow her to express her social situation. The canonical example is suffering from sexual harassment in a society that lacks such a concept (Fricker 2007, 149–52) or suffering the feeling of insignificance in a world that lacks #blacklivesmatter or #metoo.

Fricker also considers hermeneutical injustice to be structural because it is based on identity stereotyping and prejudices. Frantz Fanon (Fanon 2008) gives an example to illustrate this point, referring to white priests discussing how to address blacks: "Oh the blacks. They must be spoken to kindly; talk to them about their country; it's all in *knowing* how to talk to them" (Fanon 2008, 15, emph. added). How to talk involves talking "like an adult with a child [...] smirking, whispering, patronizing, cozening" (Fanon 2008, 19). Tom is confronted with structural, hermeneutic injustice as well in this way, wherever he turns, in a very subtle way made clear by Beecher Stowe already in the opening of her book: it's always Tom, never *Mr.* Tom. She takes care to make sure the reader understands this when introducing Mr. Shelby and Mr. Haley, *gentlemen*. Another, well-known example of a discursive practice that is an instance of hermeneutic injustice is the racist use of the word *boy* to address an adult African American, apparently still common (Achtenberg 2006; Bennett-Alexander 2010).

3. Do the Dominated Seek Epistemic Recognition?

How does epistemic injustice come about in recognition? How do testimonial and hermeneutic injustice relate to the act of recognition? To show both kinds of epistemic injustice are inherent in recognition, I briefly re-examine recognition's Hegelian roots. As we saw before, Hegel's lordship-bondage dialectic plays out as a struggle for life or death, to attain recognition (Hegel 1977, 111–18). The victor of the struggle for recognition becomes the dominator, allowing the other to live, cancelling the other-being (*Anderssein*) (Hegel 1977, 141–42) and thereby unilaterally recognizing the other. But this victory comes at the price of not being recognized herself. After all, the slave has not genuinely recognized the

dominator. She is only coercively recognizing. She is only *pseudo*-recognizing.

Political republicanist philosopher Frank Lovett's investigation into domination observes that the resolution of the master-slave encounter is that "domination turns out to be self-defeating" (Lovett 2010, 136). Even worse, the slave is now not even considered a competent judge of recognition, because her misjudgment - not genuinely recognizing the dominator - has cost her autonomy, her freedom. She is now condemned: "to be a 'mere' slave who does not count as an autonomous and competent judge" (Iser 2019). Credibility is therefore decided by the dominator. Epistemic judgement in the form of a credibility assessment is at the core of recognition. The dominator gets to determine the credibility of the dominated by virtue of being the normative source which was after all what was at stake in the struggle from the start.

While pseudo-recognizing the dominator, the slave is looking for self-recognition which is alluded to by the continuation of the epigraph of this paper when Frantz Fanon writes: "But the former slave wants to *make himself recognized*" (Fanon 2008, 169). She does not seek recognition by the dominator which would not only be based on testimonial injustice since it is the dominator who determines credibility. At the same time, given the value realism required by recognition, the slave suffers from hermeneutic injustice: what is recognized is actual, and what is actual is recognized. And there is no way out. Being recognized is rather unattractive to the slave. She would have to conform to and perpetuate a stereotype. She would be captured in ideological recognition.

The refusal, be it conscious or unconscious, to struggle for recognition is exemplified in what political scientist James C. Scott (Scott 2008) calls infrapolitics, a resistance strategy by the oppressed versus their dominator that is purposefully hidden, made unknown, made *unrecognizable* to the latter, via what Scott calls hidden transcripts. These transcripts are defined as "a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (Scott 2008, xii) while the dominant does the same. Scott then compares the two hidden transcripts to understand the resistance to domination. It's instructive to consider one such transcriptive practice in relation to what Fricker calls epistemic contribution: "a loosely unified social epistemic capability on the part of the individual to *contribute to the pool of shared epistemic materials* - materials for knowledge, understanding, and very often for practical deliberation" (Fricker 2015, 76, emph. retained).[7] I will consider graffiti as one such epistemic material as well as an example of a hidden resistance transcript.

Graffiti practitioners, writers or graffers as they refer to themselves, use the public space to express themselves through graffiti and tagging, the latter being a practice of leaving one's name in calligraphy, preferably in highly public yet hard to access places. The prevailing sentiment graffers express is that the practice provides them with respect. Myra Frances Taylor (Cottman, Marais, and Frances Taylor 2012; Frances Taylor 2012) diligently catalogued the sentiment and observed that the act of recognition is a two-step process. First step is to gain recognition by the widespread placement of one's tag, one's "ego-footprint" (Frances Taylor 2012, 61). The second step is to make sure it is in a daring place. Various types of recognition are granted: style recognition, street recognition, reputation recognition and likewise respect (self-respect, peer respect, community respect, universal respect is gained. All of which adds up to credibility: "street creds").

At the outset, graffiti seems to defy Scott's definition of *hidden* transcripts spectacularly since graffiti is rather public. But is it? There are two hidden transcripts related to graffiti. A public one that has institutionalized graffiti as "street art", as a mural expression of a legitimate artistic, cultural nature. Hence cities commission graffiti, creating the literal public transcript for all to see on murals throughout the city. But at the same time, there is a hidden transcript by the dominant at work. One that recognizes uncommissioned graffiti as vandalism categorized as criminal and/or juvenile, i.e., "kids messing around" (Cottman, Marais, and Frances Taylor 2012).

The second aspect treats graffiti as an epistemic material: "materials for knowledge, understanding and very often practical deliberation" (Fricker 2015, 79). Earlier, we saw Fricker define the

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7   Following Martha Nussbaum's capability approach, Fricker intends epistemic contribution to be regarded as a fundamental capability necessary for human flourishing. Having this capability curtailed because one is blocked from contributing, or when one's contribution suffers a credibility deficit (testimonial injustice), or when someone's contribution is marginalized (hermeneutical injustice), is detrimental to such flourishing (Fricker 2015, 78-80).

ability of a person to contribute to these materials as epistemic contribution. It is an essential part of attaining epistemic justice. The Honnethian idea is that the oppressed struggle for recognition so that the dominant accepts them into the lifeworld. In this way I could agree with graffiti as an expression of struggle. But that is not what empirical research shows. Graffiti artists do not spray to vandalize the public sphere. Sprayed on the walls of the city, hidden in plain sight their work is a transcript meant for their *own* recognition - Fanon's self-recognition - within their own subcultural context. In this manner graffiti is an expression of what Fricker calls a fundamental enunciation of a human capability, namely, to epistemically contribute. This must happen, because this is the only genuine way to voice one's social situation without suffering testimonial or hermeneutical injustice.

The dominator cannot understand graffiti unless it is "Banksyfied", that is, it is made recognizable, presenting an imagery that fits the evaluative framework of the dominator. Balloons, little girls, monkeys, recognizable people etc., stir the dominator's imagination while the predominantly hip hop inspired graffiti identifies the graffers as vandals. Because graffiti is considered vandalism, unless you are Banksky and your work is part of the epistemic pool, the epistemic social powers that be, have crafted an ingenious way to counter graffiti. Namely by commissioning their *own* "graffiti". This measure exploits, ironically in my opinion, an unwritten law of the graffer that one does not deface graffiti (Nash 2013, 442). This plays into the hand of the dominator: vandalism is curbed. To my mind it is censorship and a tell-tale sign of epistemic oppression (Dotson 2014) because they are not allowed to contribute epistemically, they are curtailed in what Fricker calls the human capability of epistemic contribution.

4. Conclusion

The spirit of new capitalism contains the idea that workers are "creative 'entrepreneurs' of their own labor" and self-management and autonomy is granted and expected (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). According to Honneth this spirit shows that there exists a kind of recognition that is irrational (Honneth 2007, 343). It is not irrational in the sense that the beliefs of these creative entrepreneurs within companies is somehow incongruent logically. Rather, it is irrational as to the "real expression to the actual value articulated" (Honneth 2007, 345), the value being that the workers are free and not dominated whereas in reality they are. To illustrate: workers enjoy autonomy, are self-managing and believe their working conditions are the result of their own decisions. But they are still dominated, because ultimately by employee-employer contract they remain at the mercy of their employer's will.

Ironically, this situation mirrors Uncle Tom's situation. Both worker and slave are considered to do nothing wrong by honoring their boss or master and in doing so they are doing something right, as in, they're increasing their sense of self-worth, a tell-tale sign of successful Honnethian recognition. But the promise of emancipation, the insistence of the spirit of new capitalism on the autonomy of the worker, is never materially fulfilled: the worker ultimately does not enjoy real autonomy but remains subject to her boss. Of course, this is not expressed as such by the bosses. The public transcript transcribes a discourse of freedom, emancipation, and entrepreneurship and not of profit seeking and efficiency. That latter discourse is hidden, transcribed only by the financial controllers, and only voiced in board rooms. I think Honneth is right that this is a kind of irrationalism. But to my mind this irrationality is ultimately not the result of ideological recognition, but as I have argued inherent to how recognition works. Workers do not have the epistemic access to the hidden transcripts of the dominant. They are blind to their own oppression because the dominant has morally categorized them as Kantian creative entrepreneurs: all things wrong are their own fault. Full self-autonomy means full responsibility. These values really exist in Honneth's lifeworld. Aspiring to them through acts of recognition is expected. And so, for the board room director's values. If anything, Honneth would have to admit, the lifeworld is corrupt and perverted. If that is so, why is it still a source of normativity?

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