

EMANCIPATION, RECOGNITION, DEMOCRACY

A Talk on Occupy-style Politics

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[Notes:

(1) The paper is a revised version of a talk given to the Morningside Justice and Peace Group (morningsidejandpgroup.org), Edinburgh, on 14 October 2015. The revised version comments on issues which, for reasons of time, my talk did not address.

(2) Evidently, a talk does not have footnotes. But – whilst retaining a “spoken” format – I add (some) footnotes here.]

I start with an explanation: in what follows, I do not discuss *Occupy* – picturing 'Occupations' as events in the recent (2011-2013) past. Instead, my concern is with *Occupy-style politics* – which is, as I see it, an on-going process.

The outline of my talk is as follows:

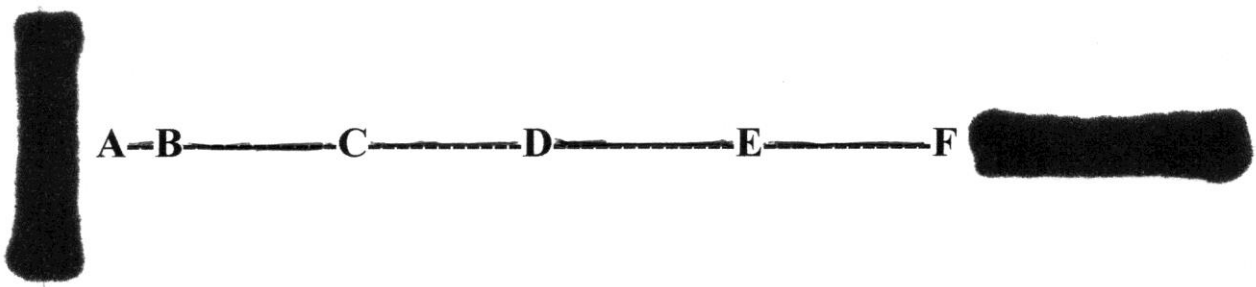
- I start by presenting a schematic diagram of politics-in-general.

- Then I indicate the form of politics that I prefer.
- Then I set out to justify this preference.

At the end of my talk, I add some comments on Occupy-style politics and the challenge that, I propose, it contains.



My diagram – my sole visual aid in the present talk¹ – is as follows:



The diagram presents politics as a graded line. As one moves along the line, politics becomes *less vertical* and *more horizontal*.

Letters on the line stand for forms of politics.

A stands for brutal, out-and-out dictatorship – or tyranny.

B stands for *absolute monarchy* – which is top-down, although questions

¹ The diagram, together with its explanatory wording, comes from R. Gunn 'Occupy Talks' Heathwood Institute and Press (www.heathwoodpress.com) 22 August 2014. See also <http://assembliesfordemocracy.org/2015/09/15/how-assemblies-can-inspire-real-democracy/> - the online record of Penny Cole's and Richard Gunn's contributions to a meeting on 'How assemblies can inspire real democracy' held at Word Power, Edinburgh, on 23 August 2015.

about “legitimacy” may be raised. A *monarch* (however “absolute”) is supposed to be different from a *tyrant* – in that a “monarch” rules in a “just” and “rightful” way. If the people *over whom a king or queen rules* dispute his or her justice or rightfulness, questions about “legitimacy” start to appear.

C stands for what political theorists term *élite democracy*. On this model, parliamentary representatives are voted into office every five or so years – and then, once elections have been carried out, citizens – the people – do nothing at all. It is the representatives (and not the citizens) who take political decisions. The *élite* version of democracy takes a dim view of the electorate: in the words of Joseph Schumpeter, who (writing in the 1940s) champions *élite* democracy, the individual is 'an indeterminate bundle of vague impulses loosely playing about given slogans and mistaken impressions'.

D stands for what is usually termed 'liberal democracy'. Here, representatives are elected (as in Schumpeter) – but the citizens (or in other words the electorate) are seen as having a voice. This voice is expressed in what Jürgen Habermas terms a 'public sphere' – a sphere of debate where citizens (or at least some of them) have their say. The hope is that elected rulers listen to what is said.

E stands for *participatory* democracy – where interaction amongst citizens comes into focus. Active, and interactive, citizens (and not merely their representatives) make political decisions.

F stands for democracy that is *participatory and consensual*. That is: individuals meet together (in assemblies) and seek courses of action upon which they agree. They proceed, in other words, by seeking consensus. In models **C** and **D** and **E**, democracy is present – but in the form of majoritory voting (and majoritory rule). With **F**, the notions of *majoritory voting* and *majority rule* – and, with them, *competition* that results in a winners-and-losers distinction – are set aside. Democracy ceases to be *majoritarian* and takes a *consensual* form.

I should like to underline the distinction between *majoritarian* and *consensual* democracy. Participatory democracy, where individuals take part in making decisions that concern them, may take a majoritarian or a consensual form. Participation may proceed by majority voting – or it may proceed by searching for a consensus on which all present can agree.

Let us imagine a group – an “open” or non-exclusive group – of individuals. Let us imagine that they confront a situation that they share. What form of collective decision-making should such individuals employ?

- One possibility is that they ask themselves the question: what course of action do most of us favour? Which course of action do most of us think appropriate? The easiest way of discovering the *course of action which most of us favour* or the *course of action which most of us think appropriate* is, of course, by voting.
- Another possibility is that the group of individuals ask themselves: what course of action is acceptable to everyone present? On what course of action may we all agree? The easiest – indeed, the *only* – way of discovering the *course of action that is acceptable to everyone* or the *course of action on which we may agree* is through discussion.

If the first of the just-indicated possibilities is selected, majoritarianism is the outcome. If the second is selected, consensual democracy prevails.

What *voting* is to majoritarian democracy, *discussion* is to consensual schemes.

At this stage in my talk, my chief aim is to make the distinction between majoritarian and consensual democracy clear. I am not (yet) concerned with evaluation. However, I offer two evaluative thoughts.

First: there is (so to say) a slippage in everyday terminology. Frequently, it is assumed that democracy *means* majority voting. Why should we make this assumption? Why not question received categories – and see

democracy in terms of discussion instead?

Second: majoritarianism has a number of well-known drawbacks. For example, majority voting is a procedure where there are winners and losers – the winners being the majority (or seeming majority) and the losers being everyone else.² Because there are winners and losers, politics has a competitive edge. A further point is that, in majority voting, nuances (which may be important to an individual) disappear. As a result of such drawbacks, majority voting can be alienating rather than empowering. It is so when a *majoritarian political system* – a system with its own social institutions, its own career-structures and its own claims to authority – takes root. “Voter apathy “ and a majoritarian system go hand in hand.³

I end this section of my talk with an observation. It is that, for Occupy and for Occupy-style politics, *horizontality* (as referred to in my diagram) involves not merely participatory democracy: it involves participatory democracy of a consensual kind. Horizontality involves searching for a consensus – and acting on the consensus that is agreed.

At the start of my talk, I said that I would indicate which form of politics I preferred. I identify *participatory democracy that proceeds by consensus* – **F** in my diagram – as the form that I prefer.

Now comes the difficult step in my presentation. Can I justify my preference?

2 If a system of proportional representation is in operation, then (to be sure) the winners/losers distinction is not clear-cut. But winners and losers there still are.

3 My claim is not that (by contrast) consensual democracy is problem-free. *Of course*, difficulties arise. But some at least of the difficulties have been exaggerated. For example: a frequent objection to participatory democracy (and, thereby, to participatory *consensual* democracy) is that decisions taken at a meeting may affect people who, for one reason or another, cannot attend. This objection may be countered by a question: what counts as *attendance*? What sort of *presence at a meeting* is essential? Let us agree that physical presence is desirable. But, at a pinch, might not *electronic* presence be enough? If use of the Internet is brought into the argument, a number of “traditional” objections to participation lose their sting.

My preference can, I suggest, be justified as follows.⁴

The justification starts from the idea of *emancipation*.

By an *emancipated* condition, I understand one where individuals exist in a free and self-determining way. To introduce an expression which I have no intention of defining: individuals who are self-determining lead “fully human” lives. *Emancipation* and *self-determination* and *fully human existence* are, as I understand them, terms with an interconnected sense.

What does *emancipation* (or *self-determination*, or *fully human existence*) involve? My suggestion is that it involves *interaction* between human individuals. It is (I propose) *in and through interaction* that emancipation – or self-determination, or full humanity – may exist.

You may, of course, disagree with my proposal. You may picture emancipation not in social or interactive but in “solitary” (or “asocial”) terms. In this talk, I do not explain why I reject such a picture. However, I stress that the picture is not one I share. And I offer a thought about how social emancipation is to be seen. If emancipation exists in and through interaction, it involves neither *abstract individuality* nor *abstract collectivity*. On the contrary, it involves – to borrow G.W.F. Hegel's expression – an 'I that is We and We that is I'.⁵ Unless *we* exist, we cannot be free.

Standing back for a moment, I take stock.

I have said that *emancipation* exists in and through interaction. It exists, that is, in “social” terms. Can I be more precise? What *sort of interaction* – or what *sort of social relatedness* – does emancipation (or self-determination, or “full” humanity) entail?

At this point in my discussion, my talk takes a “philosophical” turn. Or, at

⁴ My suggestion draws upon R. Gunn and A. Wilding 'Occupy as Mutual Recognition' Heathwood Institute and Press (www.heathwoodpress.com) 12 November 2013; R.Gunn, R.C. Smith and A. Wilding 'Assemblies for Democracy: A Theoretical Framework' Assemblies for Democracy (assembliesfordemocracy.org) 14 July 2015. 'Assemblies' also appears in *Heathwood Journal of Critical Theory* Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2015).

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977) p. 110.

least, I turn to a philosopher – one whom I have already quoted. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (published in 1807) gives the idea of *mutual recognition* a central place. On the basis of this idea, I suggest, my question about the *sort of interaction that emancipation involves* can be given an answer. Society is (I propose) emancipated when mutual recognition – that is, mutual recognition as the *Phenomenology* sees it – exists.

What is meant by 'mutual recognition'? In a short talk, an adequate account of the *Phenomenology* is impossible.⁶ So too is an account of 'recognition' in present-day debate.⁷ In order to make my turn to mutual recognition intelligible, however, I offer a general comment. And I make two more specific remarks.

My general comment is that *recognition* – by which I understand, roughly, *social acknowledgement* – and *interaction* are closely related themes. Interaction is, so to say, the medium in which recognition (all recognition) subsists. To interact with individuals is to recognize them – whether in a mutual or a non-mutual way.

Now for my more specific remarks.

- First: in each *pattern of recognition*, a distinctive *interactive dynamic* is involved. When, for example, recognition is non-mutual, interaction takes (or tends to take) a fixed and pre-given form. If, by contrast, recognition is mutual, interaction has an *unstructured* character. By *unstructured*, here, I do not mean chaotic or random. My thought is that mutual recognition – or rather, the interactive dynamic that linked to mutual recognition – is answerable *only to itself*. Like a “good” conversation, it follows wherever its subject-matter leads. If it is coerced or channelled by anything *other than itself* – say, by the norms of this or that social institution – it contradicts its own being. In a word, it becomes alienated – to a greater or lesser degree.

(I add a note at this point: if the dynamic of mutual recognition is frustrated, the result is disaster. In order to appreciate the disaster's extent,

⁶ The *Phenomenology* is discussed in R. Gunn *Lo que usted siempre quiso saber sobre Hegel y no se atrevió a preguntar* (Buenos Aires: Herramienta 2015). An English-language version of my thoughts on Hegel is forthcoming.

⁷ On recent accounts of 'recognition', see R. Gunn and A. Wilding 'Revolutionary or Less-than-Revolutionary Recognition?' Heathwood Institute and Press (www.heathwoodpress.com) 24 July 2013.

we can return to the comparison between *recognition that is mutual* and *conversation that is good*. To ignore or undermine such conversation is to trample 'the roots of humanity [*die Wurzel der Humanität*]' underfoot – to quote Hegel once again.⁸)

- Second: we may pause to ask Hegel a question. When the *Phenomenology* speaks of recognition, *what is it* that is recognized? In a mutually recognitive community, what is mutually acknowledged? My suggestion is that, for Hegel, *what is recognized* is freedom – understanding 'freedom' in a self-determining sense. We can, on this point, draw a distinction: if recognition is non-mutual, the freedom (the self-determination) that is recognized is contradicted or “alienated”. If, however, the recognition is mutual, the freedom (the self-determination) is uncontradicted and “non-alienated” - and exists on its own terms. Here, I wish to stress the picture of mutual recognition that these reflections yield. A mutually recognitive society is, thus pictured, a free society. More than this: it is a society where the freedom of *each and every individual* is brought into focus – or accentuated, or cast in relief – by the recognition which *all individuals* give.⁹ That is to say: in a mutually recognitive society, the freedom of *each and every individual* is acknowledged – and the individual *recognizes freedom* in a free and, at the same time, a reciprocal sense. The focus on the freedom of *each and every individual* is vital – to mutual recognition, as a challenge and idea.

I stand back from my points regarding Hegel. These points are as “philosophical” as my presentation gets.

In standing back, I ask what my dip into “philosophy” has achieved.

It has, I suggest, allowed us to form a picture of the *sort of interaction* that emancipation entails. Emancipation (so I suggest) involves, or entails, interaction of a *mutually recognitive* kind. It does so because, where freedom (in the sense of self-determination) is brought into focus and fully human existence – a condition of 'humanity', to employ Hegel's word –

⁸ *Phenomenology* p. 43.

⁹ Marx thinks in these terms when he describes communist society as 'an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all': K. Marx and F. Engels *Collected Works*, Vol. 6 (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1976) p. 506. For discussion, see R. Gunn and A. Wilding 'Marx and Recognition' Heathwood Institute and Press (www.heathwoodpre3ss.com) 24 November 2014.

obtains. The phrases “mutually recognitive interaction” and “interaction *in and through which* emancipation exists” signify the same thing.

But this is not all that “philosophy” has taught us. In the light of what has been said, we may return to Occupy. If emancipation is pictured in a mutually recognitive fashion, *Occupy-style democracy* – **F** in my diagram – has justification. No longer need we merely “prefer” such democracy. We may go further, and give a reason for our preference. Our reason for preferring Occupy-style democracy is that it *is mutually recognitive*. Let me explain.

When I commented on the *Phenomenology* and on mutual recognition, I drew attention to two points. One is that mutual recognition is *unstructured* – in the sense that it answers only to itself. It does not accept the authority of externally-given norms. My second point is that *what is recognized* is freedom. If recognition is mutual, the freedom of *each and every individual* is thrown into relief.

These points map on to Occupy-style thinking:

- The *unstructured* character of mutual recognition maps on to Occupy's commitment to horizontality and the notion of *clearing a space* where discussion is unconstrained. The police lines around a “traditional” 2011 or 2013 Occupation represents the pre-given authority that is suspended – temporarily, at any rate. When an Occupation is defeated, force-lines collapse inwards. The channelling of discussion by social institutions asserts (or re-asserts) its sway.
- The circumstance that *mutual recognition highlights the freedom of each and every individual* maps on to an Occupy-style conception of democracy. That is to say, it maps on to a conception of democracy that is not merely *participatory* but *consensual* as well.¹⁰ Above, I have imagined a group of individuals who ask themselves the question: what course of action is acceptable to everyone present? On what may we (all of us) agree? I have proposed that such a group follows consensual procedures. Drawing the threads of my argument together, I note that *a society where there is mutual recognition and a*

¹⁰ For an excellent account of Occupy and consensual democracy, see D. Graeber *The Democracy Project* (London: Allen Lane 2013) pp. 208-32). (I should that, on more issues than occasional footnotes can indicate, I am indebted to what *Democracy Project* – the best book-length discussion of the Occupy movement – says. This is not to say that I confine myself to Graeber's themes.)

group amongst consensual procedures take place have the same concern or focus. For both, the freedom of each and every individual is pivotal. There can be no question of acknowledging merely freedom-in-general (as distinct from the freedom of individuals), and there can be no question of acting as merely *some of us* see fit. If the focus on *each and every* individual is blurred, both mutual recognition and consensual democracy disappear.

With these reflections, I end the “justificatory” section of my talk. I have outlined an argument through which *Occupy-style politics* and *consensual democracy* can be defended. The remainder of what I say is an addendum – or coda, or epilogue.

It stands back from my argument. And it comments on the politics of what I have said.

My argument has led from the notion of emancipation *via* 'mutual recognition' (in the *Phenomenology's* meaning of the term) to Occupy-style democracy. Here, I comment on this argument's broad character.

The argument is, I note, one that *has nothing whatever to do with* tactics or strategy or estimations of political strength. It does not offer advice about how, instrumentally, to proceed if a goal is most effectively – with the greatest chances of success, and the least expenditure of energy – to be reached.

My attitude to the issues addressed is not that of a general who contemplates a to-be-won field.

Instead, my argument starts with an idea and traces – or attempts to trace – its implications. My starting-point is the idea of emancipation. Hegel's notion of 'mutual recognition' helps us – so I suggest – to understand what emancipation involves. In turn, the Occupy movement's use of consensual democracy illustrates what mutual recognition may mean.

This being so, my aim is not to recommend a course of action that should be followed *if* such-and-such a goal is sought. It is to point towards a course of action which anyone who endorses the initial idea *cannot but* follow. My claim is that anyone who endorses the idea of emancipation has *no alternative but* to favour Occupy-style ideas.

Of course, an argument of the sort that I present is only as strong as its starting-point. Is the emancipation a “strong” initial idea?

I suggest that it is.

Can we reject emancipation (in the sense that I have given the term)? To reject emancipation is – I propose – humanly impossible. To reject it is to reject ourselves.

What follows from my claim that we *cannot but* favour Occupy-style ideas?

Generalisations about history are, notoriously, problematic – but, here, I offer a generalisation that almost certainly holds true. At no point in history has “horizontality” – mutual recognition, consensual democracy – been produced by a politics of a “hierarchical” (or institutional, or disciplined, or career-based) sort.

Attempts to use *hierarchical means* to promote *horizontal ends* are, almost without exception, self-defeating. If mutual recognition is sought by a non-mutually recognitive route, the most likely outcome is more hierarchy – or recognition of a non-mutual kind.

From this generalisation, a lesson may be drawn. It is that a politics which has mutual recognition as its aim must be a mutually recognitive politics. It must proceed – better: it must unfold – in a mutually recognitive fashion. There can be no question of postponing mutual recognition or approaching it (*via* strategic planning) as a more-or-less distant goal. On the contrary: a politics that is serious about mutual recognition – or horizontality, or

consensual democracy – must start as it intends to go on.

In a word, such politics must be prefigurative. By a *prefigurative* politics, I mean one which aims at emancipation – but does so in a specific way. It *anticipates the emancipated world* that it *seeks to bring into being*. To use an often-employed phrase: it *is* the change that it desires. It acts *as though* the emancipation that it wishes to establish already, in the present, exists.

Throughout, Occupy's politics has been prefigurative.¹¹ The Occupations of 2011-2013 saw themselves as, in effect, islands of mutual recognition in an ocean of institutional (corporatist and statist) life. In however temporary and provisional and contradictory a fashion, the “islands” came forward as exemplars of the future – and of a society that did not yet exist. In the Occupy-style politics that 2011-2013 inspired, prefiguration has remained a vital and influential idea.

Let me, now, draw strands of my discussion together. I have argued that we *cannot but* favour a politics of mutual recognition (in which the idea of *consensual democracy* is inscribed). In addition, I have argued that, if it is to be consistent, a politics of mutual recognition *starts as it means to go on*. That is, it has a prefigurative cast.

What does this line of thought imply?

I return to the idea of interaction. When mutual recognition makes a beginning, a dynamic of *unstructured interaction* (or *interaction that answers to nothing other than itself*) comes into play. This dynamic is robust and has a tensile strength. It is (like a “good” conversation) self-sustaining. It has a capacity to renew itself, persisting through thick and thin.

But there is a down-side.

A prefigurative politics exposes itself to dangers. It lacks the inertial weight and the security that institutional status can bring. More than this: in turning to interaction that is unstructured, it *knowingly* takes risks. It *intentionally* casts aside bureaucratic guarantees. In prefiguration, there is always something of “bearing witness” – using that term in a “secular” (a non-spiritual or not-necessarily-spiritual) sense.

¹¹ See *Democracy Project* pp. 232-3. In the enormous literature that the Occupy movement has inspired, references to prefiguration – the word or the idea – are widespread.

In my defence of Occupy-style politics, I have argued that we *cannot but* aim at mutual recognition – and, in taking such an aim, begin with the here and now. We *cannot but* act prefiguratively. If this line of thought is accepted, the notion of “bearing witness” cannot be far away.

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