

HIERARCHY OR HORIZONTALISM? - A POSTSCRIPT

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[This discussion comment appeared on the Heathwood Press website underneath the article 'Hierarchy or Horizontalism? - Critics of Occupy'

<http://www.heathwoodpress.com/hierarchy-or-horizontalism-critics-of-occupy/>]

We are in broad agreement with Robert Smith's comments on our 'Hierarchy or Horizontalism?', but should like to respond to his questions and add three points of our own. Robert's questions are the following:

- Do we agree that, in decisions about hierarchy and mutual recognition, 'normativity' (which need not be 'institutional') is an issue? Our answer is “yes”: we find Robert's comments intriguing and would welcome further debate on this. For us, the topic of recognition is undeniably normative. Indeed mutual recognition, as both a concept and a practice, is – so we suggest – in a unique position to provide a normative ground for critical theory. To put it very briefly, it provides a conceptual armoury for critical theory by allowing the critical theorist to explain and analyse what is wrong with contemporary society (contradictory recognition) – while grounding this critique in a substantial notion of the good (mutual recognition). Importantly 'the good' is here not something utopian or ideal but a phenomenon which already exists in the interstices of the present world.
- Do we agree that mutually recognitive dynamics are 'vulnerable to hierarchy (and not the other way round)'? And how is this vulnerability to be seen? Our view is that mutually recognitive dynamics *are* vulnerable in this fashion. Mutual recognition has, for better or for worse, no natural inertia – whereas social institutions (or 'spiritual masses') possess a weight and momentum which propels them in their way. By definition, mutual recognition and self-determination are “artificial” rather than “natural”. For this reason, a re-emergence of hierarchical structures is always possible; islands of chosen hierarchy may become nodes on which crystals of contradictory recognition can grow. Horizontalism needs to be vigilant if it is to continue – not least when (in Robert's words) it is 'constantly under threat by alienated, hierarchical dominant society'. In our view, mutual recognition possesses internal strength. But the strength is not that of a dam which halts a river. It is the strength of flowing water which may erode stone.
- Does the 'flexibility' to which our paper refers encompass a 'self-educating and self-transformative' dynamic? Once again, we agree – more than this, we

emphasise – that such is the case. Where there is mutual recognition, individuals learn from one another. Where there is contradictory recognition, by contrast, learning becomes frozen: individuals confront one another not as openings towards a novel future but as threats. On the notion of self-transformative social movements, we offer a reference: Raul Zibechi's 'Social Movements as Spaces of Learning' (in his *Territories in Resistance*) indicates something of what transformative political practice might mean.

From Robert's questions, we turn to our own points – which are points of clarification. One point takes its cue from a passage in Robert's comments; the others attempt to shed further light on how 'flexibility' is to be seen.

First: Robert writes in support of our formulations on 'the notion of “flexibility” and the potential use of hierarchical forms when it comes to large scale issues (i.e. combating climate change)'. While welcoming this support we hope that our article isn't taken as endorsing a compromise – here on the issue of how to tackle climate change – where horizontalism or mutual recognition must, so the reading would run, give way to hierarchy. In fact we find ourselves more sympathetic to the opposing view, that a decentralised and non-State (a "commoning") approach – exactly the approach criticised by Harvey in Ch.3 of *Rebel Cities* – might actually be more effective in tackling ecological problems. Where 'flexibility' (which we link to mutual recognition) sheds light on the issue is by *not assuming* from the outset, as Harvey sometimes does in his *Rebel Cities*, that only one approach to global issues (a *dirigiste* approach) can be effective.

Second: in section 5 of our paper, we argue that the notion of flexible constitution can be given a mutually recognitive reading. In arguing this, we do not – we here emphasise – attempt to reconcile a reader with hierarchical organisation. We would be horrified if reader saw us as making a peace with hierarchy – even on a temporary basis. For us, mutual recognition ends where hierarchy begins. This is so because hierarchy *per se* involves contradictory recognition. The toxin of hierarchy remains a toxin, whether or not mutual recognition selects it. Radioactive material – to employ a metaphor in footnote 139 of our 'Revolutionary or Less-than-Revolutionary Recognition?' (Heathwood 24 July 2014) – remains radioactive material. Our aim, in section 5 of the present piece, is *not* to say that (some) hierarchy can be compatible with mutual recognition – *but* to say that mutual recognition has sufficient resilience to (if necessary) handle toxic and radioactive material and survive. Mutual recognition is, we think, resilient in this sense *especially* if it is the context – in metaphorical terms employed in section 5: the 'ocean' – in which hierarchical organisation appears.

Our third point concerns the sense in which mutual recognition may be a context or 'ocean'. In section 4 of 'Hierarchy or Horizontalism', we referred to Elinor Ostrom's view (discussed by Harvey) that autonomous organisations may be pictured as “nesting” in organisations of a hierarchical kind. We emphasise, here, that we do not

endorse the notion of “nesting” – whether of mutual recognition in hierarchy or the reverse. The picture we sketch in section 5 is altogether less comfortable – more dynamic and, in a word, contradiction-ridden – than the metaphor of “nesting” implies. At the core of our picture is the notion that mutual recognition has, to borrow a phrase from Hegel, 'power to preserve itself in contradiction' (*Encyclopedia* para. 382 *Zusatz*). It has this power owing to the 'conversation' that it involves (see section 5). This discussion need not be small-scale or intimate or capable of being “nested”. On the contrary, it may be as far-reaching as it is widespread: it may have an indefinite number of participants, and it may be resumed as readily as (on a given occasion) it may be broken off. Thus pictured, the conversation may be compared to a sea in which (to change the metaphor) icebergs of hierarchy may – if and only if circumstances require it – be permitted to float.