

OCCUPY AS MUTUAL RECOGNITION

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Recent waves of revolutionary struggle – the Occupy movement in New York and elsewhere, London on the steps of St. Pauls, Cairo at the time of Mubarak's fall, Greece and Spain in response to neoliberalism-imposed austerity, Gezi Park in Istanbul...the list is endless – throw into relief a common issue. The issue is that of *recognition*. Occupy-style events and initiatives point towards a future where mutual recognition serves as a guiding thread in human interaction. The present short paper explains the sense in which this is the case.

What follows carries forward arguments made in Gunn & Wilding, ['Revolutionary or Less-than-Revolutionary Recognition?'](#) and R.C. Smith, ['In defence of Occupy's emphasis on non-dominant, non-hierarchical organisation'](#).

1. *Recent revolution*

In the period of struggle which opened in 2011 and which continues today, revolution presented a face which mainstream commentators found unfamiliar. Throughout most of the twentieth century, revolutionary transformation tended to be associated with the triumph of a centralised will. In the public squares and occupied sites of Cairo and Madrid and Athens and London and New York and Istanbul, however, something different was happening: the occupations 'enacted solidarity-based horizontal networks'.¹ They turned to 'autonomous forms of self-organization'² which emphasised 'direct democracy, horizontal self-management and mutual aid'.³ At odds with capitalist imperatives, exchange within the movements took on a not-for-profit character.⁴ In place of top-down vanguardism, struggle adopted a carnival

¹ G. Aitchison and A. Peters in D. Hancox, ed., *Fight Back! A Reader on the Winter of Discontent* (London: OpenDemocracy 2011) p. 57.

² J. Roos, 'Autonomy: an idea whose time has come' *ROAR Magazine* (23 June 2013) <http://roarmag.org/2013/06/autonomy-revolution-movements-democracy-capitalism/>.

³ L. Oikonomakis and J.E. Roos, "'Que No Nos Representa': The Crisis of Representation and the Resonance of the Real Democracy Movement from the Indignados to Occupy' (conference paper February 2013) <http://media.roarmag.org/2013/02/Resonance-Real-Democracy-Movement-Indignados-Occupy.pdf> p. 10. On horizontalism, see D. Graeber, *The Democracy Project* (London: Allen Lane 2013) especially Ch. 4; on direct democracy, see C. Hansen, 'What would real democracy look like?' *ROAR Magazine* (2 August 2013) <http://roarmag.org/2013/08/real-direct-participatory-democracy/>.

⁴ Ryan Hickey makes a useful contrast between mutual aid and 'liberal charity' in the context of Occupy Sandy ('To

atmosphere wherein considerations of 'caring' took pride of place.⁵

How should the crowd-insurgencies and occupations of the post-2011 period be regarded? Their significance is difficult to bring into focus. Their justification is not instrumental: that is, they do not seek to expend a minimum of political energy to bring about a desired result.⁶ Their claim is not that they are well-attuned to achieve a determinate outcome; it is that anything short of autonomous action is self-defeating in the end. Likewise, the significance of post-2011 initiatives are missed if they are seen as assertions of hedonism: although they at times resemble carnivals, those who participate know that they are dancing out in the political open and under threat of repression – in short, they know that they are dancing at the very edge. Are they, then, motivated by Quixotic altruism? Or bearing witness, in a quasi-religious sense? Such approaches fail to catch the atmosphere of the events they categorise. The 'fun' and the 'caring' which they involve⁷ are *real* fun and *real* caring, and are important for their own sake. If Occupy-style events are not merely instrumental protests, so also they are not merely invocations or provocations of the repression which they frequently unleash.

How then should we think about them? We offer two suggestions. One is that their anomalous character – “anomalous”, that is, in the terms of the existing world – testifies to their revolutionary character. The other is that we should attend to formulations offered by the revolutionaries themselves.

One of the most telling formulations comes from the Occupy Wall Street movement. According to Yotam Marom, 'Occupation in general, as a tactic, is a really brilliant form of dual-power struggle because the occupation is both a home where we get to practice the alternative – by practicing a participatory democracy, by having our radical libraries, by having a medical tent where anybody can get treatment, that kind of thing on a small level – and it's also a staging ground for struggle outwards'.⁸ The notion of what Marom calls 'a home where we get to practice the alternative' is fundamental to post-2011 revolution. Occupied spaces – frequently the parks and squares of major cities – have become what Roos and Oikonomakis (following

Destroy is to Build: Occupy Sandy and Mutual Aid', *The Occupied Times*, <http://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=7656>. The former involves a 'radical approach to basic human interaction' which 'seeks to erase the assumption that human relations exist upon predation and exploitation'. On mutual aid in the Indignados and Aganaktismenoi (Greece) movements see Marina Prentoulis & Lasse Thomassen, 'The Legacy of the Indignados', *OpenDemocracy* <http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/marina-prentoulis-lasse-thomassen/legacy-of-indignados>. Another fascinating 'prefigurative' feature of Occupy has been free education, whether in the form of 'teach-ins', free libraries or various 'free university' projects. See Mike Neary & Sarah Amsler, 'Occupy: A New Pedagogy of Space and Time?', *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 10, 2 (2012) available online at <http://www.jceps.com/PDFs/10-2-03.pdf>.

⁵ In Graeber's words: Occupy Wall Street is 'less about fun, or not so primarily about fun' than it is 'about caring' (*Democracy Project* p. 240).

⁶ See Georges Bataille on the notion of 'expenditure' in his *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1985).

⁷ See Graeber as quoted in note 4, above.

⁸ N. Klein and Y. Motam, 'Why Now? What Next? Naomi Klein and Yotam Maron in Conversation about Occupy Wall Street' *The Nation* (9 January 2012).

Hakim Bey) refer to as 'Temporary Autonomous Zones'.⁹

Before proceeding, we may raise a question about the formulations just quoted: to what social space do the 'Autonomous Zones' (however 'Temporary') belong? In what social and conceptual context does an occupied space count as 'home'? An answer to such questions is supplied by a further revolutionary affirmation: the direct democracy, the horizontalism, the not-for-profit exchange or mutual aid and the 'caring' which goes forward in the occupied zones has what theorists and practitioners refer to as a *prefigurative* status.¹⁰ That is to say, it offers itself as an exemplar – to be sure, an experimental and tentative exemplar – of the world at which revolution aims. This affirmation suggests an answer to the questions we have raised. To the extent that occupied zones are prefigurative, they are (so to say) fragments of a social space which is not yet in existence. If they are anticipations, their homeland is a pattern of interaction which is alien to – and, hence, anomalous within – the present world.

In the light of our comments, we renew our original query: how should the events and initiatives of the post-2011 period be regarded? Is there a concept or set of concepts which allow us to do justice to the atmosphere – so to say, the pitch and pathos – of current revolutionary experience? We think there is. The term *recognition* is, when understood aright, a key which makes the events of recent years intelligible. More than this, the notion of specifically *mutual* recognition illumines the sense in which the occupations of Zuccotti Park and Syntagma Square and Gezi Park count as prefigurative and as glimpses of what may be. Our general view can be summed up in an (adapted) quotation from Marx: the history of all hitherto existing revolutions is the history of struggles over recognition. More to the point in the present context is that present-day revolution has made recognition and mutual recognition an explicit and – so we claim – vital theme.

2. What is mutual recognition?

In the conversation with Naomi Klein quoted earlier, Yotam Marom declares (with reference to the Occupy Wall Street movement): 'It feels like something has been opened up, a kind of space that nobody knew existed, and so all sorts of things that were impossible before are possible now'.¹¹ What sort of 'something'? Because the declaration has a poetic ring, a literal answer to this question may seem impossible. But an answer there is. The 'something' which comes into being in occupied spaces is

⁹ J.E. Roos and L. Oikonomakis, "'We Are Everywhere!': The Autonomous Roots of the Real Democracy Movement' (conference paper September 2013) <http://roarmag.org/2013/08/autonomous-roots-real-democracy-movement/> p. 19. On 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' see Hakim Bey [Peter Lamborn Wilson], *T.A.Z.* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia 2003) pp. 95-132. For comment see J. Holloway, *Crack Capitalism* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), p. 35.

¹⁰ On prefiguration, see Roos, 'Autonomy'; Oikonomakis and Roos, "'Que No Non Representan'" pp. 2, 21; Roos and Oikonomakis, "'We Are Everywhere!'" pp. 4, 20, 22; Graeber *Democracy Project* p. 233. Aitchison and Peters invoke the notion of prefiguration when (in Hancox, ed., *Fight Back!* p. 58) they refer to Occupy's 'democratic egalitarian ethos' as a 'rough approximation of the free society participants want to see'.

¹¹ Klein and Motam, 'Why Now? What Next?'

mutual recognition. Let us explain.

Our explanation must start with a clarification – a clarification which is, in effect, a clearing operation. In the last twenty years, the term 'recognition' has received widespread attention from mainstream political theorists. During the 1990s, it became a watchword under which liberalism extended its scope to encompass multiculturalist issues.¹² Later, from the 1990s onwards, Axel Honneth published a series of works arguing that 'recognition' may lie at the centre of a revitalised Critical Theory tradition.¹³ Our claim is that both multiculturalist and Honnethian understandings of 'recognition' are seriously defective. Multiculturalism (so we maintain) makes its peace with forms of alienation which a more searching account of recognition subjects to critique. Its fundamental difficulty is that it tends to equate recognition with respect for pre-given social identities; in our view, by contrast, free and open-ended interaction – interaction where nothing is pre-given – is crucial to how recognition is to be seen. Regarding Honneth, our response comes in two stages. First, we agree with Honneth that a vital and challenging critical theory must place the notion of recognition at its core. Honneth's proposal that a "normative monism" of recognition¹⁴ is to be defended meets with our wholehearted support. Second, however, we point to weaknesses and fatal difficulties in Honneth's view of recognition. In various of his works, he distinguishes between three 'spheres of recognition'¹⁵ – love (rooted in familial relations), respect (whose home is the legal system) and achievement (whose home is the state). And he regards an emancipated society as one where such distinctions are made more consistent but never challenged in a root-and-branch way. The outlines of a multiculturalist view of recognition reappear in Honneth's discussion: in place of a focus on free interaction, respect for social identity based on bourgeois society's chief institutions – the family, civil society and the state – governs Honneth's theoretical claims.

No doubt, more can be said about multiculturalist and Honnethian views than the present short paper attempts. Elsewhere, we have discussed such views in greater detail¹⁶ and do not repeat this detail here. Our chief concern for the present is to warn a reader that currently-widespread understandings of recognition and our own understanding are fundamentally distinct.

In place of a detailed consideration of recent political theory, we offer a sketch of what, in our view, 'recognition' means. We propose that it is fundamentally more radical than the version which appears in the multiculturalist or the Honnethian

¹² See, especially, Charles Taylor in A. Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994).

¹³ A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1995); *The Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2010); *Das Recht der Freiheit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp 2011); *The I in We* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012);). See also N. Fraser and A Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?* (London: Verso 2003). The list could be extended.

¹⁴ *Redistribution or Recognition?* p. 3.

¹⁵ For example, *Redistribution or Recognition?* pp. 138-50.

¹⁶ See R. Gunn and A. Wilding, 'Revolutionary or Less-than-Revolutionary Recognition?' Heathwood Institute and Press, <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/revolutionary-less-than-revolutionary-recognition/>.

outlook. The view of 'recognition' which we favour is one which sheds light on Occupy-style initiatives and which opens on to not only a critical but a revolutionary perspective.

The starting point of our sketch is uncontroversial. In common with numerous theorists,¹⁷ we view *recognition* as *social acknowledgement*. Controversy enters the picture, however, when we respond to the questions: “Just *what* is acknowledged?” and “What does *acknowledgement* entail?”

Regarding the first of these questions: what is acknowledged is, in our view, individuals' freedom – understanding *freedom* in terms of self-determining action. An individual is, for us, free through the actions which he or she performs.

Regarding the second of these questions: the key point to bear in mind is that, in our view, *recognition* (or *acknowledgement*) has not merely a cognitive but a constitutive force. This distinction, which may have a complicated appearance, is in reality straightforward. Recognition is *cognitive* when something is found to be an object of a familiar kind (as then an individual advances through a misty landscape and exclaims “Ah! This ghostly figure turns out to be only a tree!”). Recognition is, by contrast, *constitutive* when something is *made what it is* through the recognition concerned (as when performing the locution “I promise...” brings a new obligation into existence). Our claim is that recognition in the sense which concerns us is intrinsically constitutive. Without remainder, an individual's identity is *made what it is* through the recognition it receives. Stated differently, it depends entirely on how he or she is seen.

Standing back from our answers, we note ways in which they depart from conventional wisdom. In focusing on freedom, we prise recognition as a concept away from notions of group-defined identity; instead, we launch discussion where self-determination – ultimately, as we shall see, interactive self-determination – is the stake. Issues of identity are indeed raised, because *what one is* depends on how recognition takes place; but they are raised in a secondary fashion and in the context of debate on how non-alienated freedom may obtain. In focusing on constitution, further, we cast notions of fixed and unchanging personal identity – in a word, *essentialist* identity – to the winds. In place of spectral invocations of what used to be termed the “soul”, we turn to a picture where individuals are *endlessly at issue* in recognition's play.¹⁸

Are our answers compatible? The importance of this enquiry, or potential objection, can scarcely overestimated. At first sight, it may seem that incompatibility must be admitted. How can freedom – and, especially, self-determining freedom – count *as*

¹⁷ And with the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where one meaning of 'recognition' is said to be 'the action of acknowledging as true, valid or entitled to consideration'.

¹⁸ In a famous passage, Marx declares that the 'essence of man' is the 'ensemble of social relations': see K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works* Vol. 5 (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1975) pp. 4, 7. The declaration is frequently seen as an affirmation of determinism, but our discussion of recognition suggests that nothing of the sort is entailed.

freedom, if it depends on recognition by other people? Although our account of recognition turns on freedom, does it not undermine the notion of freedom itself? Our reply is that, despite appearances, our answers are compatible. But a caution must be introduced. Our answers are compatible if, and only if, the following condition is present: if individuals *who are recognized* recognize *those who do the recognizing*, then and only then can the requirements of *freedom as self-determination* and *recognition as constitutive* be fulfilled. Both sets of requirements are fulfilled because (a) recognition is recognized as freely given and (b) individuals' freedom is constitutively recognized as real. Summing up these formulations, we may say: freedom *qua* self-determination and recognition in its constitutive meaning flourish together, and exist in and through one another, on a terrain where specifically *mutual* recognition exists.

How may mutual recognition be pictured? We know of no other way than to picture it as unconstrained interaction – by which we understand interaction which is open to all comers and where any issue whatever may be raised. The *to and fro* rhythm of unimpeded interaction and the *mutuality* of mutual recognition seem to us to go hand in hand. If interaction is made to flow in pre-established channels, the rhythm that is intrinsic to it (the rhythm of a “good” conversation which is open to all comers and which “follows the argument wherever it leads”¹⁹) seems to us to be interrupted. If recognition ceases to be *mutual*, in the sense just indicated, it adopts a distorted or self-contradictory – in a word, an “alienated” – form. Ending the *to and fro* flow of open-ended interaction and mutual recognition has momentous consequences. Not merely does recognition deny itself, but so too does the freedom (the self-determination) to which mutual recognition is linked.²⁰

An attempt to follow through these all-too-brief comments on our understanding of recognition might, with advantage, explore contradictory or “alienated” forms of recognition present in the world today. It might explore instances of what Hegel terms 'one-sided and unequal' recognition²¹ – where interaction is channelled in a distorting manner into relations of power.²² Or it might explore recognition which goes forward in terms of role-definitions – where, for example, parties to a market exchange acknowledge one another as 'proprietors'. If the first sort of instance highlights the distance between one-sided and mutual recognition, the second highlights the contrast between abstract or attenuated recognition – so to say, recognition which is “thin” – and recognition which is full-voiced. Whichever sort of

¹⁹ Compare the form which debate takes in Occupy-style events. See, for example, the documentary *Fault Lines: History of an Occupation*, <http://youtu.be/K4VLYGfGDZg>.

²⁰ If the image of mutually recognitive interaction as conversation strikes a reader as too genteel, an equally valid example would be the movement and actions of a revolutionary crowd or gathering. For discussion to this effect, see G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) p. 357 (on the French Revolution) and J.-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (London: New Left Books 1976) pp. 345-63 (on 'group-in-fusion'). In our 'Recognition Contradicted' (forthcoming in *South Atlantic Quarterly*), we refer to a situation where 'the dynamic of crowd activity has itself served as revolution's space' – and this is basically the same Hegelian and Sartrean idea.

²¹ *Phenomenology* p. 116.

²² See Gunn and Wilding, 'Revolutionary or Less-than-Revolutionary Recognition?' section 3.

instance is chosen, the vital contrast is that between contradicted (or “alienated”) recognition and recognition which is mutual and where a to-and-fro dynamic is sustained.

And it is the theme of mutual rather than contradicted recognition that, here, our discussion pursues. In pursuing it, we return to political issues raised in our paper's first section.

3. The politics of mutual recognition

What may mutual recognition *as we have pictured it* look like in practice? What is the 'new world'²³ which the occupations of Tahrir Square and Syntagma and Gezi Park prefigure – or, stated differently, about on to in a proleptic or ekstatic fashion?²⁴ Our suggestion is that, once evident qualifications have been admitted, the theoretical image of mutual recognition and the practical image of occupied space map on to one another.

In making this claim, we reiterate that the mutual recognition which is exemplified in post-2011 occupied space is mutual recognition *as described above*. If recognition is seen in a multiculturalist fashion, and equated with respect for pre-given group identities, it goes without saying that post-2011 events do not turn on recognitive issues alone. If recognition is understood in terms modelled on the spheres of bourgeois society,²⁵ as is the case in Honneth's writings, it goes without saying that recent revolution has other-than-recognitive aims. By contrast, the full aims come into focus when the enemy of recent revolution is specified as 'the neoliberalisation of urban and economic space'²⁶ and when occupations are seen as bringing 'new prefigurative forms of direct democratic praxis'²⁷ into existence. In a word: for the scale and scope of post-2011 revolutionary aims to become visible, theory must raise its eyes from merely-multiculturalist and ultimately reformist perspectives. In order to appreciate these aims, theories of recognition which make their peace with a contradicted and “alienated” world are inadequate. Our claim is that, once the notion of mutual recognition is reformulated along the lines that we have sketched, these aims (and the radicality of recent uprisings) come into view.

The direct democracy and horizontalism practiced in revolution's occupied zones is, we propose, the direct democracy and horizontalism of mutual recognition. Above,

²³ Again, we borrow a Hegelian phrase: see *Phenomenology* p. 7.

²⁴ In referring to prolepsis, we allude to Ernst Bloch's notion of not-yet existence: see the opening pages of his *The Principle of Hope*. Ek-stasy, or standing ahead, is a recurrent theme in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. A. Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books 1969) pp. 134-40 sheds light on the conception of *time* that prolepsis and not-yet-existence involves.

²⁵ That is, the spheres of the family, civil society and the state.

²⁶ Cemal Burak Tansel, 'The Gezi Park Occupation: Confronting Authoritarian Neoliberalism' (posted on www.adamdavidsmorton.com on 1 June 2013).

²⁷ Roos, 'Autonomy'.

we have suggested that, in a mutually recognitive situation, individuals *who are recognized* recognize *those who do the recognizing*. Stated differently, each individual both *recognizes* and *is recognized*.²⁸ The equality that this requirement involves, and the circumstance that this equality takes the form of to-and-fro interaction, is mirrored in the horizontalism of revolutionary occupations. The circumstances that *what is recognized* is freedom and that freedom is at issue in recognition's play are mirrored in revolution's concern with direct democracy: where such a democracy is present, each individual is free not *in spite of*, but *through*, each other. A further allusion to recognition comes in the occupiers' insistence that direct democracy seeks a 'consensus' that is acceptable to all participants²⁹ – rather than turning at once to majority voting.³⁰ To employ terminology which we have introduced earlier, what takes place in autonomous zones is “good”, or mutually recognitive, conversation. Through participation in such a conversation, freedom *qua* self-determination becomes experientially real. The 'fun' and 'caring' (Graeber) of occupations, and their carnivalesque atmosphere, is caught – before police crack-downs take place – by dwelling on the non-alienated freedom and non-alienated recognition that, conjointly, a space of mutual recognition entails.

Earlier in this paper, we stated that post-2011 occupations do not seek to justify themselves instrumentally. We may explain this comment by saying: in virtue of their prefigurative or status, they are *their own* justification. As anticipations, they point towards their own goal. In emphasising their prefigurative status, however, we point not only to their strength – they are like bubbles coming to the surface in almost-boiling water – but to their fragility and vulnerability as well. If an occupation is an anticipatory embodiment of *mutual* as distinct from *contradicted* (or “*alienated*”) recognition, the mutual recognition which it embodies is contradicted for its part. Participants in an occupation know this, and are all too well aware that they dance dangerously. The 'fun' and 'caring' of occupation is tinged with fear and calls for admiration of bravery – and intense respect. The contradiction to mutual recognition is all too clear in the police lines which confront occupation or the emergency laws employed to clear occupied space. It is present, too, in the circumstance that the 'home' which occupation builds is likely to be impermanent. If the home is one where 'we get to practice the alternative' (Motam), the experiment in living which is attempted is likely to be cut short before complex issues can be faced. Any single “bubble” of mutual recognition is likely to be short-lived in a world where contradictory recognition is prevalent. The metaphor of almost-boiling water suggests a different set of odds, as does that of cracks spreading across the face of reification. We make no attempt to speculate on which set of odds is the most telling.

²⁸ In Hegel's formulation, individuals – or, in his terminology, self-consciousnesses – '*recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another' (*Phenomenology* p. 112).

²⁹ See, once again, Graeber, *Democracy Project*, Ch. 4 and pp. 297-8: 'I would like to see something like the principle behind consensus – in which respect for radical, incommensurable difference becomes the basis for community – generalized to social life itself'.

³⁰ 'Democracy...is not necessarily defined by majority voting: it is, rather, the process of collective deliberation on the principle of full and equal participation' (*Democracy Project* p. 186).