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Why Overcoming Prejudice is Not Enough: A Rejoinder to Richard Rorty

ABSTRACT

Misrecognition, taken seriously as unjust social subordination, cannot be remedied by eliminating prejudice alone. In this rejoinder to Richard Rorty, it is argued that a politics of recognition and a politics of redistribution can and should be combined. However, an identity politics that displaces redistribution and reifies group differences is deeply flawed. Here, instead, an alternative 'status' model of recognition politics is offered that encourages struggles to overcome status subordination and fosters parity of participation. Integrating this politics of recognition with redistribution enables a coherent Left vision that could redress injustices of culture and of political economy simultaneously.

KEYWORDS: Recognition, Redistribution, Identity Politics, Deconstruction, Social Democracy, Multiculturalism

I welcome Richard Rorty’s response to “From Redistribution to Recognition?” There, in what was effectively a proposal for a united front
of the Left, I sought to demonstrate that social democrats and multiculturalists need not be at war with each other. Rather, it is possible, and desirable, to combine a politics of recognition with a politics of redistribution. The trick is to abandon affirmative approaches, which encourage zero-sum thinking, in favour of transformative approaches, which promote synergy. On the recognition side, this means replacing identity politics with a politics aimed at deinstitutionalising unjust value hierarchies; on the distribution side, it means replacing neoliberal economics with democratic socialism or social democracy. By thus combining a deconstructive politics of recognition with a democratic-socialist politics of redistribution, one can do justice, I argued, to each of the two Lefts. One can also envision reforms that could redress injustices of culture and political economy simultaneously.¹

Rorty is sceptical of this proposal. Writing as a social-democratic critic of the cultural Left, he sees my interest in recognition as a “symptom of blindness to our current political situation.” In his view, the post-Vietnam Left has already won the cultural revolution, having largely succeeded in dispelling stigma that used to mark racial minorities, women, and gays. Preoccupied with combating “sadism,” however, it neglected the fight against “selfishness,” allowing the rich to win the class struggle, as “culture pushed economics aside.” Equally unfortunately, the cultural Left substituted the dubious project of affirming the distinctive cultures of disadvantaged groups for the time-honoured goal of “eliminating prejudice.” What is needed now, contends Rorty, is a return to an earlier strategy, favoured by the pre-Vietnam Left. Prioritising economics over culture, shared humanity over group differences, the Left today should emphasise redistribution while continuing to oppose lingering prejudice. Instead of following my proposal to combine redistribution with recognition, it should drop the idea of “cultural recognition.” That idea has nothing useful to contribute to contemporary politics.²

In what follows, I aim to rebut Rorty’s conclusion about what the Left should be doing today. On the one hand, I shall defend a specific interpretation of recognition as an indispensable dimension of social justice. On the other hand,
I shall argue, contra Rorty, that major injustices of misrecognition cannot be remedied by eliminating prejudice alone. In this way, I hope to demonstrate that a politics of recognition is politically useful and indeed morally required. In combination with redistribution, it remains an essential ingredient of a viable Left politics for our time.

The question, of course, is what kind of politics of recognition. Most of Rorty’s arguments are directed against traditional identity politics. Premised on what I have called the identity model of recognition, such a politics aims to counter demeaning representations of a disadvantaged group by validating its purportedly distinctive cultural identity. I agree with Rorty that this kind of politics of recognition is problematic. From my perspective, the difficulties can be summarised under two counts. First, by treating misrecognition as a free-standing cultural harm, identity politics abstracts the injustice from its institutional matrix and obscures its entwinement with economic inequality. Thus, far from synergising with struggles of redistribution, it all too easily displaces the latter. (I have called this the problem of displacement.) Second, by seeking to consolidate an authentic self-elaborated group culture, this approach essentialises identity, pressurising individual members to conform, denying the complexity of their lives, the multiplicity of their identifications, and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations. Thus, far from promoting interaction across differences, it reifies group identities and neglects shared humanity, promoting separatism and repressive communitarianism. (I have called this the problem of reification.)

In general, then, I agree with Rorty that the identity model of recognition is deeply flawed. But I draw a different conclusion as to what should be done. Whereas he proposes to jettison the politics of recognition altogether, I have proposed to reconstruct it in a form that discourages both the displacement of redistribution and the reification of group differences.

My suggestion, in brief, is to reinterpret recognition in terms of status. From this perspective, what requires recognition is not group-specific identity but rather the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction. Misrecognition, accordingly, does not mean the depreciation of group identity. Rather, it means social subordination in the sense of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life as a result of institutionalised patterns of cultural value that constitute one as relatively unworthy of respect.
or esteem. To redress the injustice requires a politics of recognition, but this does not mean identity politics. On the status model, rather, it means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by *deinstitutionalising patterns of cultural value that impede parity of participation and replacing them with patterns that foster it.*

This approach differs from Rorty’s in that it takes misrecognition seriously as a species of unjust subordination. The underlying premise is that justice requires social arrangements that permit all members of society to interact with one another as *peers.* Insofar as institutionalised patterns of cultural value impede parity of participation, they violate justice and cannot be justifiably ignored. In fact, misrecognition is institutionalised throughout the world in a host of laws, government policies, administrative regulations, professional practices, and social customs that constitute some categories of persons as less than full members of society. Examples including marriage laws that exclude same-sex partnerships as illegitimate and perverse, social-welfare policies that stigmatise single mothers as sexually irresponsible scroungers, and policing practices such as racial profiling that associate racialised persons with criminality. By no means simple by-products of political economy, such instances of misrecognition cannot be redressed by a politics of redistribution alone. On the contrary, the only way to overcome the injustice is to replace institutionalised cultural patterns that subordinate people with patterns that establish them as peers.

In contrast to Rorty’s rejectionism, the status model avoids throwing out the baby of recognition with the bathwater of identity politics. Far from displacing the politics of redistribution, this approach appreciates that institutionalised patterns of cultural value are not the only obstacles to participatory parity. Rather, equal participation is also impeded when some actors lack the necessary resources to interact with others as peers. Thus, from this perspective, maldistribution too is a serious injustice. Under capitalist conditions, moreover, it is not a mere expression of status hierarchy and so cannot be remedied by a politics of recognition alone. For the status model, therefore, claims for recognition must be linked expressly with claims for redistribution.

Likewise, the status model does not encourage reification of group identities. From its perspective, culture becomes an object of political concern only when
institutionalised patterns of value deny some social actors the chance to participate fully and equally in social life. Redressing the injustice requires affirming group differences only in cases where the obstacle to parity is underacknowledgement of distinctiveness. In other cases, the remedy could be universalistic recognition of denied humanity (which is Rorty’s all-purpose solution), deconstruction of the terms in which group differences are currently elaborated, or some combination thereof. In all cases, the aim is to promote the broadest possible range of social interaction. In addition, the ideal of participatory parity serves as a justificatory standard for testing recognition claims in the public sphere. Inherently dialogic and democratic, this approach avoids the monological and authoritarian propensities of identity politics, which often appeals to cultural authenticity. Thus, far from reifying group differences, the version of recognition politics that I am proposing discourages separatism and repressive communitarianism.

In general, then, the status model of recognition escapes Rorty’s criticisms of identity politics. Its advantages stand out sharply, moreover, when we compare it to the approach he recommends. In fact, Rorty vacillates among several mutually contradictory claims. In some passages, he suggests that all misrecognition has already been eliminated, thanks to the cultural revolution that began in the 1960s. In others, he suggests that while some misrecognition persists, it can be redressed by a politics of redistribution. In still other passages, he suggests that while redistribution alone may not suffice to dispel all lingering misrecognition, that result can be achieved by familiar liberal reforms aimed at eliminating prejudice.

Of these claims, only the third requires substantial attention. (The first extrapolates one set of positive cultural trends to the point of utopian fancy, overlooking their uneven institutionalisation and powerful countervailing tendencies; the second rests on a vulgar economic determinism that is belied by the highly differentiated character of contemporary capitalist society.) Thus, the question is: does a politics focused exclusively on redistributing resources and eliminating prejudice constitute an adequate left politics for today? Can such a politics mount a credible challenge to the full range of contemporary injustices, which includes misrecognition and maldistribution?

In my view, the answer is no. The problem is that not all misrecognition can be dispelled by eliminating prejudice, even in combination with redistribu-
tion. For one thing, misrecognition is not purveyed primarily through prejudice, if by that we mean derogatory attitudes and beliefs. Rather, it is relayed through institutions and practices that regulate social interaction according to norms that impede parity. Since these often operate below the threshold of consciousness, only an effort aimed at changing such institutions and practices can remedy the injustice. (And of course only such an effort can avoid the illiberal temptation to substitute the re-engineering of consciousness for social change.)

In addition, not all misrecognition takes the form of denying common humanity. In some cases, the injustice arises from a failure to acknowledge group differences. Examples include US court rulings holding that employers’ failure to provide pregnancy leave does not constitute sex discrimination because it does not deny women a benefit provided to men; firefighter job application procedures that test climbing speed on ladders designed for persons whose height falls in the normal range for men, thus disadvantaging many women; and regulations mandating uniform headgear for Canadian mounted police, effectively closing that occupation to observant Sikhs. In these cases, the problem is not prejudice in Rorty’s sense of disregard for shared humanity. Rather, parity of participation is impeded because norms tailored to the situation of dominant or majority groups are applied across the board, to the detriment of those situated differently. Thus, the nub of the injustice is failure to recognise, and accommodate, differences. Contra Rorty, therefore, it cannot be remedied by stressing what everyone shares. On the contrary, the only way to establish parity of participation is to replace problematic difference-disregarding norms with alternatives that are difference-accommodating. The latter must convey more than that women and Sikhs, too, bleed when pricked. They must convey, for example, that persons who can give birth have as much legitimacy in the workplace as those who cannot; and that being a Mountie does not exclude being a Sikh.

Pace Rorty, then, justice sometimes requires recognition of differences. But such recognition neither contradicts nor supersedes respect for what everyone shares. If anything, it deepens the latter, providing the means to realise universalism more fully. The rationale runs roughly like this: the universalist norm of the equal moral worth of human beings requires ensuring all members of society the possibility of participating on a par with others. This
in turn requires removing obstacles to participatory parity in whatever form they arise, including failure to recognise group difference. Thus, recognition of group difference is sometimes necessary to assure respect for common humanity.

Nevertheless, Rorty is right to worry that difference-regarding recognition carries risks. What begins as a means for assuring participatory parity can easily take on a life of its own. Readily reified, such recognition can end up freezing group differences, stifling individuals, and fuelling the very antagonisms one intended to regulate. The solution, however, is not to retreat to inadequate forms of difference-blind universalism. Rather, one must add yet another - deconstructive - layer of recognition that helps counteract tendencies to reification. In part this means engaging in cultural agitation aimed at propounding a lively sense of the constructedness and contingency of all group classifications. Stressing the fundamental openness to historical change of identifications, such a deconstructive cultural politics can help defuse the risks associated with the politics of recognising difference.

Sometimes, moreover, deconstruction has more straightforward institutional implications. This is so in cases where misrecognition arises from compulsory systems of classification, which force individuals to identify with one side or the other of a conceptual polarity. In the United States, for example, citizens are sometimes compelled to identify as gay or straight, black or white, in ways that violate the complexity of their sexual and/or ethnic identifications. Here the appropriate redress is neither abstract universalism nor simple affirmation of difference but rather deconstruction of current classifications. Contra Rorty, therefore, deconstruction can be politically useful - provided that it is understood not as an esoteric academic philosophy but as one element among others of a multifaceted strategy for remedying status subordination.

The moral here is that no one-size-fits-all approach can suffice. Because misrecognition comes in several different forms and guises, a multi-pronged effort is required. The aim should be to tailor recognition remedies to misrecognition harms, supplementing universal respect with difference-regarding esteem where necessary, and adding a healthy dose of deconstructive scepticism about all classificatory systems that claim more than contingent validity. More
consistently pragmatic than Rorty’s, such an approach is the only one that can hope to remove the full range of obstacles that now stand in the way of participatory parity.

For all these reasons, I conclude that the Left should reject Rorty’s proposal to turn back the clock. Instead of returning to the strategy of the pre-Vietnam Left, it should build on the gains of the forty years, which have expanded and deepened the meaning of social justice. Thus, far from dropping the politics of recognition, the Left should adopt a version of the latter aimed at overcoming status subordination and fostering parity of participation. In this way, it can succeed in avoiding the traps of identity politics, including the reification of group identities and the displacement of struggles for redistribution. Equally important, it can redirect energy now being wasted on internecine polemics and begin to focus on the difficult task at hand: integrating recognition with redistribution in a coherent Left vision that can guide the fight against injustice in the coming period of accelerating globalisation.

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Notes


4 For a fuller account, see Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition.”