

# Recognition for Good Europeans: On Axel Honneth's *Recognition*

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## Abstract

Axel Honneth's *Recognition* tells a history of the concept of recognition along national lines. This response argues that a focus on transnational cross-pollination would be preferable on the grounds of historical accuracy, philosophical fecundity, and political cosmopolitanism. It would recognize its existent protagonists as the good Europeans they actually were and bring in others now relegated to the margins. It would lay the groundwork for a creative integration of national traditions, beyond the subsumption of French and British under German models. It would facilitate a theoretical dialogue with traditions beyond the Old Continent. I suggest that Hobbes could be a starting point for such a historical narrative, pointing to the importance of social recognition for his political theory (via Oakeshott), but also to traces of an incipient notion of moral-political recognition closer to the post-Kantian paradigm that Honneth champions.

## Keywords

recognition – transnational history – intellectual history – Honneth – Hegel – Hobbes

Philosophers and historians all too often differ strongly in their habits of reading and thinking, barring each field from learning potentially vital lessons from the other. Axel Honneth's courageous attempt at systematically theorizing a concept of recognition for contemporary political philosophy on the basis of a sympathetic engagement with the history of the concept since the eighteenth century in France, Britain, and Germany is thus especially welcome. It is courageous because, as he himself remarks in the opening, he has no training as an intellectual or social historian, which will necessarily leave his narrative

exposed to specialists' objections on various details (3).<sup>1</sup> Honneth is right, I think, to have judged the potential gains of the undertaking to be worth this risk. My own comments will be not so much concerned with the historical details surrounding one author or another. Rather, I first want to raise some questions about the overall shape he gives his narrative and its philosophical premises. Then, I will consider one author at some length whom Honneth mentions only briefly, Thomas Hobbes. Honneth declares Hobbes to fall outside the scope of his story; I want to argue that he ought to stand at its very beginning.

The bulk of the book tells a history of the concept of recognition: the idea that who we are depends, in some manner, on who others judge us to be. Honneth distinguishes three different philosophical traditions in which this idea plays an important role and takes on distinctly local colours: a French, a British, and a German tradition. In France, his story begins with La Rochefoucauld, continues with Rousseau and Sartre, and concludes with brief looks at Lacan and Althusser. The British tradition is represented by Hume, Smith, and J. S. Mill; the German tradition runs from Kant via Fichte to Hegel. That is a great number of philosophers to consider in a slim volume and Honneth does so deftly, showing his deep acquaintance with the primary texts and, in the British and German cases, but also regarding Rousseau, with current debates in the secondary literature.

Each national tradition of theorizing recognition was shaped, Honneth argues, by its distinct social and institutional contexts. In France, La Rochefoucauld and Rousseau, under the impression of intrigue-ridden courtly life, in which the power of the aristocratic class had been curtailed and individual power depended on personal proximity to the monarch, started a tradition of "French negativism" about recognition. For them and their heirs, the desire for others' recognition mainly leads us to feign virtues we do not have. In the end, we fall prey to our own scheming, deceiving ourselves about who we are, until we completely lose our sense of self. The British, by contrast, take a more positive view of recognition. The Scottish Enlightenment thinkers Hume and Smith, worrying about ever increasing greed and selfishness under then nascent capitalism, thought that people's concern over how others judge them would serve as a socially useful check on egoism. In politically backwards Germany, finally, the philosophically inclined sons of the bourgeoisie developed a concept of recognition beyond empiricism and sentimentalism. Mutual recognition between free and reasonable beings now came to be seen

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<sup>1</sup> Where only page numbers are given, the reference is to Honneth 2020.

as the very heart of what it meant to understand oneself, and to be, in fact, free and reasonable—an Enlightenment revolution in thought *in lieu* of a political revolution.

The first three chapters deal with one national tradition each; in the fourth, Honneth pulls it all together to argue for an integration of various elements of all three traditions. The Germans lay the foundation. From the British, he argues, they can take the idea of an internalized spectator representing the viewpoint of an ever-widening circle of others as the psychological mechanism by which our empirical selves actualize the structure of mutual recognition that the German Idealists thought was so crucial for our self-understanding, and our moral and political thought, but only ever theorized for our transcendental selves. From the French, particularly Althusser, Honneth thinks we can learn something about ideology critique: institutions that are formally egalitarian (e.g. marriage) might nevertheless enable relations of domination when certain inequalities are ideologically cast as natural and hence beyond the scope of institutionally guaranteed liberties (e.g. when women are taught that subservience naturally befits their gender).

Let me raise two objections to this general approach to the history of recognition. There is, first of all, the question of Honneth's focus on France, Britain, and Germany. He sees the problem clearly: "It is all but inevitable that we ask whether this obvious dominance [of the three countries in textbooks and scholarly literature] merely reflects the theoretical imperialism of three powerful nations or whether it is due instead to the substance of their work" (6–7). To cite pragmatic reasons "would inevitably be suspected of merely regurgitating the philosophical perspective of the dominant European powers;" an argument is needed to establish the rationality of his choice, he thinks. The first point to note here is that Honneth does not seem to think that an argument is needed for his focus on Europe. Why is it fine to be pragmatic, even silent about one's focus on Europe, but not about one's focus within that horizon? That appears somewhat arbitrary. More to the point is the fact that he does not actually provide an (original) argument for why it is rational and, hence, legitimate to focus on France, Great Britain, and Germany. He cites "a consideration" found in the works of Reinhart Koselleck and Jerrold Seigel, according to which the three countries in question between themselves exhaust the forms modern European bourgeois life has taken (7). *If* this is so, he proposes, "then the changes and colorings of the idea of recognition in these countries would largely exhaust the meanings this term can have" (8, my emphasis). But is it so?

Granting the assumption that representative forms of life produce representative theoretical articulations, two problems still remain. First, even if the three traditions would exhaust the meanings the term *has* had, that would not

suffice to conclude that they also exhaust the meanings it *can* have. Who is to say whether some potentials did not remain latent or that new developments are impossible? Or, to return to the earlier point, whether it has not had other meanings outside of Europe? Secondly, the consideration cited remains purely hypothetical. The truth of the antecedent is not argued for; the reader is asked to take it on faith that Koselleck and Seigel have established as fact that France, Germany, and Great Britain exhaust the forms of modern bourgeois life. Honneth himself makes it hard to believe they have, when he writes that Seigel “like Koselleck, *operates on the premise* that these do not merely represent three random examples, but rather the paradigmatic patterns of development of bourgeois society in modern Europe” (8, my emphasis). Have they established a firm conclusion, on which Honneth could establish the rationality of his own focus, or is it merely their premise?

The entire passage remains couched in the most cautious language (“Perhaps it will help ...”, “If it is true ...”, “... basis for my hope ...”), which suggests that Honneth himself does not think he is entitled to a more confident conclusion. I wonder whether he would even need one. The root problem, to my mind, is his own, very demanding conception of rationality. Honneth here shows himself to be a Hegelian when he tries to make the actual, i.e. the factual dominance of these countries, historically and in the academic literature, look rational.<sup>2</sup> Why take on this burden? There seems to be no shame in honestly acknowledging that one deals simply, pragmatically with the traditions one knows best. We all must start somewhere and cannot go everywhere. The admission of finitude loses its sting if one self-consciously positions one’s own account as one contribution to an ongoing, self-critical, and collaborative research program that remains open to future dialogue with other traditions. On this broadly pragmatist picture, rationality would consist, in a nutshell, in “not blocking the road of further inquiry” (Peirce).<sup>3</sup> For this reader at least, to try and make the factual dominance of certain traditions look rational by saying “they exhaust all possibilities” does more to reenforce suspicions of merely justifying the *status quo* than it does to dispel concerns about theoretical imperialism.

There is, secondly, within Honneth’s triad the question of German superiority. Honneth acknowledges that the British and French have something to teach the Germans. Particularly in the French case, the lessons are truly minimal. Rousseau “supplements” Hegel, according to Honneth ... by not contradicting him (156–162). Only Althusser, among the French, has anything to offer

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hegel 1986, 20f.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Haack 2014, 319–39.

the Germans and even that is limited: he points to a problem in Hegel's theory. The better solution to that problem, for Honneth, is provided by the very non-French Ian Hacking and Sally Haslanger (169). The British offer a minor modification that complements the transcendental German concept of recognition on the empirical side. In neither case is anything of the French and British tradition allowed to touch the substance of the German concept. The problem here is not, of course, that some philosophical concepts of recognition are more convincing than others. I am not advocating the relativist conclusion that everyone has to be a little bit right. To the contrary, I even agree that what Honneth calls the German conception is the most philosophically interesting one.<sup>4</sup> The problem rather seems to be making this about national differences at all.

As it is, the framing can feel sadly reminiscent of those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German philosophers who might have had a kind word or two to spare for Diderot, and surely read their Rousseau, but thought Voltaire was beyond the pale and "Frenchness" in general a term of insult. Why, in the twenty-first century, do we need to tell histories that pigeonhole philosophical conceptions into national cultures, especially when a closer look at the authors in question—as Honneth's very own book also makes clear!—would encourage the telling of a genuinely transnational and European history in which ideas repeatedly cross borders in both directions? The influence of Hume on Kant, of Rousseau on Kant and Hegel is well established. Honneth himself draws attention to the influence of Smith on Kant and of La Rochefoucauld on Smith (70). Durkheim, whom Honneth mentions only briefly, once described his project as seeking to show the social nature of Kant's categories.<sup>5</sup> French and British Hegelians have their cameos in Honneth's story. J. S. Mill was influenced by the German Romantics. Why not make such transfers and translations the focus and starting point?

Honneth has his reason and not a bad one either: he wants to tell not just an intellectual history but also a social history of the idea of recognition. "There is one point, however, at which I hope to manage to go beyond the already familiar results of the history of modern ideas: I will place special emphasis on the question of whether the particular sociocultural conditions in a given country have lent a specific coloring to the idea of recognition" (4). Given that social and institutional contexts in Europe, certainly by the late eighteenth century, correlate fairly strongly with national contexts, it would make some

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<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, I'm also a German citizen.

<sup>5</sup> Durkheim 1995, 8–9.

sense to develop a social history of ideas along national lines. The problem is only that Honneth does not, in fact, tell a social history. Of the 170 pages of his book, no more than a handful are concerned with socially contextualizing ideas, generally in the form of suggestive, but brief sketches at the beginning of each chapter. The goal of carefully contextualizing ideas in a non-reductionist manner is entirely laudable. For the most part, it is just not executed here. The contextualization falls entirely by the wayside in the final chapter when Honneth turns to synthesizing a concept of recognition for our own times. If one is serious about contextualizing ideas, why not actively highlight the particular socio-institutional context in which that concept is meant to do critical or analytical work?

One might hope that, at the very least, there is no harm done by such contextualization, however inchoate it remains. It does seem to come at a rather high price, however, at least in the way Honneth does it with his focus on national contexts. Consider, for example, his presentation of Rousseau and Sartre as the two key representatives of “French negativism” about recognition. He does not claim a direct influence of Rousseau on Sartre. What then explains the parallel? Surely, Honneth cannot mean to tell us that eighteenth-century courtly life in Versailles and twentieth-century intellectual life in the *Quartier Latin* presented one and the same social and institutional context? His approach invites this question, though, and if he wants to argue that these are relevantly similar a lot more would need to be said.

Then consider all that Honneth must leave out of the picture to tell his story of three coherent and distinct national philosophical traditions. In the French context, Honneth himself briefly mentions Montesquieu, Durkheim, and Mauss as three thinkers of recognition who do not at all fit his image of “French negativism” (52). Nothing further is made of the fact. In the British context, Honneth briefly mentions the neo-Idealists F. H. Bradley and T. H. Green at the end of the nineteenth century, only to conclude that in virtue of their Hegelianism they are not properly British (92–3). That seems like an instance of the “No true Scotsman” fallacy, named in honour of the gentleman who claimed that no Scotsman would ever commit murder, only, when presented with a counterexample, to revise his claim: no *true* Scotsman would ever commit murder. For Honneth, it seems no British person can be a Hegelian; if they are, they are not truly British. Inversely, the American theorist Judith Butler seems to have qualified for honorary French citizenship as a student of Kojève—him, in turn, presumably no true, i.e. “German” Hegelian for Honneth (129n49). The reader comes away with the impression that “Germans” are simply those who agree with what Honneth thinks Hegel said on recognition, whereas those who do not are “British” at best and “French” at worst,

irrespective of their actual citizenship. The three national labels seem to be wielded as polemical concepts (*Kampfbegriffe*), not as categories of a social or contextualist history of ideas. Honneth might, in each case, have good reasons to read his authors as he does. Yet taken together these omissions and interpretive twists start to look suspiciously like so much Procrustean cutting and stretching to make the subjects of the inquiry fit a schema set out in advance.<sup>6</sup>

Kierkegaard once remarked that Hegel would have been the greatest philosopher of all times had he prefaced his system with the declaration that it is just one big thought-experiment. In a similar spirit, I want to suggest that my objections here concern Honneth's overall framework, not the substance of his readings. If instead of rationalizing the factual dominance of the Big Three and shoehorning authors into national boxes, Honneth would have set out to trace the various inflections the concept of recognition has received in modern European thought as it crossed the borders back and forth between France, Germany, and Great Britain, paying careful attention to how intellectual influences and social context combined in individual authors, and with an understanding that the networks traced are incompletely described, but open to elaboration by fellow inquirers and to dialogue with other traditions of thought in other social contexts, perhaps even beyond the borders of the Old Continent, then I think all the objections raised here would be moot.

Allow me now to heed my own call for constructive elaboration. For the rest of these comments, I will focus on just one author, whom Honneth mentions once and only to discard him quickly from his history: an Englishman who wrote his major work in Paris and anticipated some German insights, Thomas Hobbes. Honneth claims that the idea of recognition plays no role in Hobbes's political thought, surprisingly because his anthropology pays careful attention to it. Is Hobbes's thought really bifurcated along these lines? Istvan Hont has made the case for Hobbes as the originator of a modern concept of recognition. He argues that man in the Hobbesian state of nature is not motivated by physical needs only but equally by psychic needs for others' recognition. Moreover, "the dynamics of psychological need were bound to overwhelm the dynamics of physical neediness, and it was the first, not the second, that was foundational for understanding politics."<sup>7</sup> Honneth disagrees:

6 The unfortunate effect is that one begins to wonder about even Honneth's most careful readings: does he really think the late Rousseau did not develop a more positive view of our desire for recognition, or does he merely have to argue that to preserve the fiction of a distinct and coherent French tradition? (30f).

7 Hont 2015, 11.

[Hobbes's] notion of the social contract is based on his claim that individuals in the state of nature are so deeply concerned for their physical safety that they prefer to be subjected to a ruler who can guarantee their safety. The monarch enthroned on the basis of such strategic calculations by isolated subjects in turn is charged primarily with ensuring political stability rather than with satisfying the desire for social recognition. (11–12)

The two claims combined—(1) that individuals establish a sovereign because of fear for their physical safety and (2) that the sovereign primarily guarantees physical safety—lead Honneth to conclude that there is a “gap between Hobbes’s psychological-anthropological insights [which emphasize our desire for recognition] and his political theory” (12). Regarding the first point, Hont’s conclusion can be supported by a distinction drawn by Michael Oakeshott. Oakeshott has argued that the death humans fear most of all, for Hobbes, is not just any death, but shameful death at the hands of a competitor in the race for recognition:

whereas animals may fear anything which provokes aversion, with men the chief fear (before which all others are of little account) is fear of the other competitors in the race. And whereas with animals the ultimate dread is death in any manner, the ultimate fear in man is the dread of violent (or untimely) death at the hand of another man; for this is dishonour, the emblem of all *human* failure. This is the fear which Hobbes said is the human passion “to be reckoned with.”<sup>8</sup>

Such a reading would close the gap that Honneth sees and thus would be preferable on grounds of interpretive charity.

Regarding Honneth’s second point, to present the preservation of political stability and the satisfaction of our desire for social recognition as an either-or is a false dichotomy. For Hobbes, excessive desire for social recognition—pride, as he calls it—is precisely the principal *source* of political instability. It is easier to see this if, for a moment, we do not think of the state of nature as tribal warfare between “savages,” but keep in mind the other example, much closer to home, which Hobbes gives of a state of nature: civil war (13.11).<sup>9</sup> *Leviathan* was

<sup>8</sup> Oakeshott 2000, 87–88.

<sup>9</sup> All Hobbes references are to Hobbes 1994, by chapter number and paragraph.



born out of the experience of civil war.<sup>10</sup> For Hobbes, the chief cause of civil war is that some proud people think they know better than the sovereign. The task of the sovereign is to keep those proud people in check. (Recall that the Biblical Leviathan is, after all, king of the children of pride. Job 41:34; Hobbes, 28.27). Law is one of the means to this end. Hobbes already declared pride a violation of the ninth law of nature (“that every man acknowledge other [sic] for his equal by nature. The breach of this precept is *pride*.”). The sovereign turns this and similar “precepts of reason” into civil law and enforces them. Considerations of pride also enter into how breaches of law are dealt with. The teaching of Chapters XXVII (Of Crimes, Excuses, and Extenuations) and XXVIII (Of Punishments and Rewards) can be summarized in the phrase that “with great power comes great responsibility”: the more public a crime, the prouder and more rebellious its spirit, the less extenuation there may be for it. Finally, the sovereign does not merely restrict the pursuit of social recognition but actively shapes it. Already in Chapter XVIII, Hobbes demanded such regulation:

Considering what values men are naturally apt to set upon themselves, what respect they look for from others, and how little they value other men, from whence continually arise amongst them emulation, quarrels, factions, and at last war, ... it is necessary that there be laws of honour and a public rate of the worth of such men as have deserved well of the commonwealth ... (18.15).

Thus, Honneth is right that it is not primarily the task of the sovereign to *satisfy* the desire for social recognition. It is, however, a primary task of the sovereign to *manage* the struggle for social recognition with a view to keeping its excesses in check precisely because those are the principal threats to political stability. The problems caused by our recognition-desiring nature are at the heart of Hobbes’s political theory and there is no gap between it and his anthropology.

Is Hobbes’s relevance for the history of the concept of recognition exhausted in this fact? Let me conclude with a very brief, necessarily inchoate, and perhaps unorthodox suggestion. The kind of recognition that both Hont and Honneth have in mind in their discussion of Hobbes is primarily social recognition: the desire for certain forms of social standing, honour, admiration from others, etc. That is to look at Hobbes through “British” or “French” lenses

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, by the book’s own account, it would not have been legitimate to write it during any other time. Hobbes, R&C, 14.

(in Honneth's sense) only. What if there is another form of recognition operative in Hobbes's political theory that is much closer to the moral recognition that Honneth finds in Kant, Fichte, and Hegel? Honneth identifies three defining features of such recognition. First, it is normative, not merely cognitive. It does not simply cognitively register certain descriptive features of the individuals in question but ascribes a normative (moral, political) status to them. Secondly, it is not merely evaluative, but constitutive of who these individuals are. It establishes a permanent normative standing (e.g. a free citizen, a carrier of infinite moral dignity, etc.), and does not merely ascertain contingent normative qualities (e.g. a virtuous person). Finally, unlike social recognition, this moral-political type of recognition inherently requires mutuality. Where it is not reciprocal, social pathologies arise.

All three features are distinctly present in the recognition which inhabitants of the Hobbesian state of nature show each other the moment they contract to establish a sovereign and, subsequently, in the relations of recognition obtaining between subjects and sovereigns (formally, at least, however materially unequal they also are). Let us look at the contractual moment in Chapter XVII:

... in such manner as if every man should say to every man *I authorize and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.* (17.13)

We have mutuality: every person is contracting with every other person. We have normativity: they recognize each other as bearers of natural rights to self-governance. The recognition is, finally, constitutive. The state-of-nature inhabitants are now established as either subjects or sovereigns. In Hobbes's political philosophy, no person is both and *tertium non datur*. Being subject or sovereign has nothing to do with those personal qualities that social recognition is concerned with. It is a political status constituted through an act of mutual normative recognition. Where mutuality is lacking, problems arise. Subjects that do not recognize their sovereign are, of course, the primary threat for Hobbes. The Biblical exegesis of Part III of *Leviathan* is primarily concerned with making sure subjects do not think they have religious grounds for rebellion. Sovereigns that do not recognize their subjects' rights or do not care for their wellbeing, too, are a threat to stability that Hobbes is well aware of. Although, of course, he does not believe in any earthly power to act as a check on sovereigns, *Leviathan* often reminds sovereigns of their own enlightened self-interest in treating their subjects responsibly (Part II especially can be seen as an education in sovereignty. Cf. Ch. XXX, esp. 1, 15f).

So much for a first indication in which direction such a reading could go. Obviously, the entire framework of Hobbes's philosophy differs markedly from the German Idealists—but so does Honneth's own. If the rough picture I have sketched here has some validity, we might have some confidence that concepts of mutual, normative, and constitutive recognition are not limited to, and even predate the context of transcendental or speculative idealism. We might find in Hobbes our starting point for a historical narrative that recognizes its many protagonists as the good Europeans they were, traces the emergence of a genuinely European concept of recognition, and shows its *good* European spirit not least by its openness to voices beyond the continent. In the meanwhile, we can all be grateful to Prof. Honneth for a thought-provoking book.

### About the Author

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