

# Recognition of struggle: Transcending the oppressive dynamics of desire

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Recognition seems to present us with an unresolvable predicament, whether we are aware of it or not. The predicament can be formulated in the following way. We inescapably strive to be recognized by others, since recognition is a precondition for our existence as social beings in any society, while the very recognition we strive for constrains us and cements an unequal social order. The first part of the predicament, the relentless striving to reach recognition, is the basic insight conveyed by the Hegelian master-and-slave dialectic (Hegel, 2018). It has been reiterated many times and was axiomatic in the renaissance of the concept of recognition in the early 1990s, associated with authentic self-realization (Taylor, 1992) or the moral call of struggles (Honneth, 1992). The oppressive consequences, on the other hand, have been emphasized by theoreticians who were attentive to existing power asymmetries as well as familiar with Hegel's argument. Recognition was inevitably oppressive, conceived of as ideological interpellation (Althusser, 2001), objectification of the self (Sartre, 2018), a mechanism of subjection (Butler, 1997), regressive assertion of victimization (Brown, 1995), or as a fundamentally skewed concept (McNay, 2008). In this line of thinking, desire for recognition reinforced inequality, instead of realizing more freedom.

This predicament has shaped the contemporary discussion. One response was trying to find a middle way and reconcile opposing dynamics. Recognition was seen to be inherently ambivalent: crucial for personhood and autonomy, as well as for making people accommodate to stratified social positions (Allen, 2021; Ikäheimo et al, 2021; McQueen, 2014). On the ambivalence reading, recognition was a mix: sometimes beneficial and sometimes detrimental. Recognition was vital for personal growth and well-being, yet oppressive when (and only when) it involved misrecognition by the other, as a consequence of its "determining identification and oppressive ascriptions" (Jaeggi, 2021, p. 1; see also Honneth, 2018). From this perspective, there is good recognition, which furthers personal development, as opposed to bad recognition, which constrains people. Is thereby the predicament of recognition resolved? It depends on how the oppressive element is conceptualized. Proponents of the ambivalence reading locate the oppressive mechanisms of recognition to identities and ascriptions. What if the impact of power stretches beyond identities and ascriptions? This article looks at desire and its dynamic. The thesis of what might be called the oppressive dynamics of desire, rather

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than identities or ascriptions, has been chosen as the point of departure. On this line of thinking, desire for recognition is from the very outset shaped by unequal social structures, and satisfaction is conditional on compliance with expectations likewise shaped by unequal social structures.

The thesis that desire for recognition is necessarily oppressive can be found in two basic versions. In the first version, articulated by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*, drawing on Hegel and a Foucauldian analysis of power, recognition involves compulsive satisfaction of a perfectly socialized desire (Version 1). In the second version, articulated by Peter Sloterdijk in *Rage and Time*, drawing on Hegel along with a Nietzschean analysis of the will, recognition involves violent assertion of existing status orders (Version 2). I will reconstruct the two versions against the wider background of Hegel's original master-and-slave dialectic, supplemented by findings from sociological research on expectations. The argumentative strategy is to fully acknowledge the oppressive mechanisms at work *before* trying to find a way to other outcomes (collective emancipation, personal autonomy, more tolerance) with which desire for recognition also has been associated in the tradition from Hegel (see for instance Honneth, 1992; Kojève, 1969; Taylor, 1992).

At stake is desire as a potential political ally. Is desire for recognition trapped in a dynamic which, by necessity, perpetuates existing power orders? Or, is desire for recognition, while shot through with power, still emancipatory? The ambition is to show that the oppressive dynamics of desire do not rule out but set the terms for emancipatory recognition. I will argue that desire may lead to recognition beyond the compulsive satisfaction of social norms as well as beyond the regressive assertion of status. The argument is presented in three steps, where each step corresponds to one mode of recognition: compliant performance, self-assertion, and collective struggle. The first section discusses the impact of power and the compulsive character of recognition (Version 1). The second section accounts for the basic ambiguity of desire and the recognition of one-sided assertion of status (Version 2). The third section discusses how the source of recognition—the generalized other—is reconfigured through collective struggle, in turn affecting desire, potentially making desire for recognition emancipatory.

## 2 | A PERFECTLY SOCIALIZED DESIRE?

As many readers of the *Phenomenology* have observed, the concept of desire was introduced from out of nowhere. It emerged in the fourth chapter on self-consciousness, just before the master-and-slave dialectic. Desire was said to equal self-consciousness; “self-consciousness is *desire*, full stop” (Hegel, 2018, p. 103; emphasis in original). The equation with self-consciousness was enigmatic, and the nature of desire was never further specified. A number of interpretations have since been offered to make sense of desire for recognition within the context of the Hegelian system (Butler, 1987; Jenkins, 2009; Neuhaus, 1986; Pippin, 1989). One line of interpretations stresses the bodily nature of desire (*Begierde*). Desire for recognition was experienced as a lack, like hunger was experienced as a lack of food. It made people aware of themselves through their limitations—what they happened to need, or could not do without. In this way, desire shaped self-consciousness, at a preliminary stage before being acknowledged by others. Upon encountering other actors with their own set of needs and expectations, self-consciousness would grow through the responses of others in social interactions, rather than through bodily needs (Brandom, 2007; Honneth, 2008). In the ensuing master-and-slave dialectic, desire was less a bodily need than a craving to be recognized as a fully worthy person, or participant, by another. That was the specificity of human desire, what set us apart from animals (Kojève, 1969).

In Hegel's master-and-slave dialectic, both parties had to match the demands and the expectations of the other, who could provide or withhold recognition. The other, who was “the other” in relation to the first party, assumed central stage. When desire is desire for recognition, its satisfaction belongs to the other. Everything goes through the expectations and appraisal of the other, as perceived by the for the first party. This dynamic kept the struggle going. The Master and the Slave remained caught in a struggle for recognition, as none of them could escape the mutual dependence and their unfulfilled desire continued to push them beyond existing conditions. The struggle involved a transformation of

relationships of power and status. Yet such a transformation, regardless of how successful, was never enough. The Master had amassed power and privileges, yet failed to experience recognition. Hegel demonstrated that recognition is not completed with ascribed status, but with *the experience* of this appreciation. “The satisfaction of desire,” he wrote, is “the reflection of self-consciousness into itself” (Hegel, 2018, p. 107). The reflection in the eyes of the other must be perceived as an adequate image of oneself for desire to be satisfied. It is not enough to be seen by the other as fully worthy participant. One must moreover *feel* seen as fully worthy participant in social interactions. What satisfies desire is the experience of being appreciated by others. Only then is recognition complete.

Hegel brought attention to the precarious and compulsive character of recognition rooted in the need to satisfy a social other who was at the same time the antagonist over against which the subject had to prove its worth. To this, social science would add that recognition may be different for different kinds of people. Recognition depends on the fulfillment of expectations which are heavily socially stratified. On a daily basis, we encounter the expectations of other people and their socially stratified notions of worth and competence. Regardless of personal opinions, everyone must relate to dominant status beliefs according to which, for instance, men are seen to be more competent than women, and working-class occupations are ranked lower than middle-class professions (Nakao & Treas, 1994; Ridgeway, 2014; Ridgeway & Nakagawa, 2014). Entrenched status beliefs such as these generate expectations which people have to satisfy to be granted recognition in everyday encounters. In addition, there are one’s own expectations, or the expectations of the actor: what one aspires to achieve and expects in returns. These expectations likewise tend to reflect existing social divisions. Social class and gender shape different outlooks and different expectations that are relatively persistent over the life course, what can be expected of others, and of life in general (Bourdieu, 1984; Lareau, 2011; Skeggs, 1997). Recognition thus seems to depend on the fulfillment of socially stratified expectations which set the terms for the interaction.

The struggle for recognition is not separate from other social processes. As such, as a struggle, it must not necessarily correspond to conventional images of a conscious challenge of distinct adversaries. From the standpoint of an external observer, the struggle for recognition is usually hidden in everyday social practices. People marry for love, or they want a good education. The recognition that goes along with marriage or a good education is not always brought to conscious attention. In the lives of individuals, recognition is rarely if ever pursued independent of other goals. Instead, it is embedded in how we access employment, intimate relationships, consumption, educational opportunities, or how we cope with prevailing expectations in any given social context (Ridgeway & Nakagawa, 2014; Sennett, 2003; Weber, 1972). Desire is satisfied as one goes about doing what one usually does, as a friend, as an employee, as a parent, as a consumer, or in other capacities that people assume in the course of their lives. We intuitively know what is expected of us, in our respective capacities, and may navigate sometimes complex social situations to gain recognition seemingly without effort. It has been referred to as practical sense, or the “feel for the game”; the ability to anticipate what should be done in every situation, in relation to the other (Bourdieu, 1998). For this reason, it can be difficult to discern the contestation going on beneath the surface.

Most people seek recognition through existing institutions. It is often—but not exclusively—pursued through activities and positions that confer social esteem or status (Honneth, 1992, chap. 5). Under modern conditions, in the absence of inherited wealth, social status is mainly derived from educational merits and labor market position (Goldthorpe, 1980; Weber, 1972), and translates into life chances, with respect to housing, health, and income, and is typically displayed through life-style and consumption (Bourdieu, 1984). This may be referred to as the straight way to recognition, marked by signs of conventional goals and compliance to stratified social norms. The straight way to recognition is oriented toward achievement: family, work, consumption, education or other achievements that confer social esteem (Honneth, 2003). Such achievements do not automatically generate recognition in the sense that Hegel stressed. But they may certainly seem necessary. People can feel to be fully accepted for what they are, within the prevailing status order, as they match the expectations of being reliable workers, competent managers, respectable couples, responsible parents, or, simply put: someone who fulfills the baseline expectations in the ascribed social category. The experience of being fully accepted is the seal of approval in the eyes of others. Recognition thus becomes the final reward of compliant performance, at the level of experience. It is a reward that is additional in relation to other

rewards of compliant performance. Beyond material compensation directly related to income, career, education, or consumption, for carrying out actions and for holding expectations, which are consistent with prevailing structures of power, recognition carry an extra bonus: the satisfaction from doing so reflected in the eyes of others. Recognition would be the final gratification, given along with other rewards for achievement of conventional goals. It may moreover be the reward from which it is most difficult to abstain, since it is so basic.

To enjoy recognition thus seemed to tie people to the established order at the most fundamental level, beneath the distribution of material resources and the ostensible marks of social status. From here, it was a small step to think of recognition in terms of subject formation. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler articulated the predicament of subject formation specifically in relation to recognition (Allen, 2007). Paradigmatically, she said,

if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are (Butler, 1997, p. 2).

The idea was that recognition made us want to be the kind of beings that we had become. It made people *desire* their own subjection, or the satisfaction it produced.<sup>1</sup> Building on the outcome of the Hegelian master-and-slave dialectic, she saw a consciousness split in two. The power relationship between the Master and the Slave had moved into the subject. With the birth of morality, consciousness had become an instance of power, composed of ethical obligations. This consciousness subdued the body and its desires, much like the Freudian superego, trapping the subject in a “stubborn attachment” (Butler, 1997, p. 31). Recognition was assumed to be necessary, and any recognition was better than nothing. Hence, desire was drawn toward the kind of satisfaction that was available, also when it involved “wretchedness, agony, and pain” (Butler, 1997, p. 61). This was a vicious circle, where a desire produced by power found satisfaction through a preexisting other, in an endless dynamic where both individual desire and the other were shaped by socially stratified forces beyond their control. It could be manifested as being at ease, a recognition spontaneously achieved, without additional effort. Yet more often than not, the stubborn attachment was agonizing and alienating. The struggle was for life and death, as Hegel emphasized, but it was a struggle in which people could fight with tooth and nail, without ever entering into contradiction with structural relationships of power, since they wanted only what was consistent with them.

The idea of a perfectly socialized desire for recognition, articulated most clearly by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*, suggests that people are destined to strive for what can be expected and achieved, at any cost to themselves. It undermined the very idea of desire for recognition as emancipatory. We would be enslaved by a desire, which constantly reproduced the relationships of power in which we find ourselves. It would foreclose subversion, since people were conditioned to desire the kind of recognition which they are likely to receive; in fact, they would depend on it for their lives, while suffering under its weight and requirements. Now, even if Butler’s basic analysis holds, there may be further routes to recognition beyond the stubborn attachment of compliant performance. One suggestion is to focus on times of crises. Material and other circumstances may intervene in the dynamics of desire and subvert the straight way to recognition. Desire is pushed to find new routes, when recognition becomes increasingly difficult to obtain, or the value of traditional investments has been undermined, bereaving them of their capacity to provide recognition. The next section presents such a scenario and discusses the second version of the thesis of the necessarily oppressive dynamics of desire for recognition, focusing on the recognition of one-sided assertion of status claims.

### 3 | REGRESSIVE RECOGNITION OF STATUS

Straight ways to recognition face a crisis. Some authors argue that recognition has undergone a structural change during recent decades and has become ever more precarious (Honneth, 2013). Others diagnose a widening

“recognition gap” (Lamont, 2018). Existing institutions seem increasingly unable to provide sufficient recognition to significant sections of the population. The lack of recognition has been felt within formerly relatively secure working-class and middle-class professions, as people experience that life has become “a struggle to feel seen and honored” and take political action to assert their social status (Hochschild, 2016, p. 144). Traditional investments in work, family, and respectability do not generate recognition in return, to the same extent as earlier. It is a crisis of recognition, exacerbated by dwindling resources and opportunities, deep-seated economic and social change associated with the current stage of capitalism, as well as by cultural and political change associated with international migration and the codification of minority rights (Cramer, 2016; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Hochschild, 2016). Other social groups experienced the crisis of recognition differently. A pervasive sense of disrespect among young people in ethnically diverse neighborhoods seems to have propelled social unrest in large European cities. The contradiction between expectations and the experiences of lived inequality was brought to surface following lethal police shootings, which acted as a brutal reminder to people who lived in the politically marginalized areas where they occurred, on the outskirts of the neoliberal emphasis on competitiveness, and acutely felt that they were not seen as part of society by others in general (Hörnqvist, 2016a; Newburn, 2016). Current Western societies thus appear perforated by a multiplicity of recognition gaps. Not only resources and social status are unevenly distributed but also recognition itself.

Under these conditions, people do not simply abandon the straight way to recognition. Desire tends to remain oriented toward conventional goals which generate status, long after the kind of employment, way of life, or levels of consumption once taken for granted, have been devalued or are out of reach. Yet pressure is mounting, as status concerns cannot be put to rest. Eventually, desire for recognition will be re-oriented. Theories of *ressentiment* capture one such change of direction. The regressive deflection of desire is at the core of *ressentiment*, conceived of as one response to a societal crisis of recognition (Dolger, 2016; Tomelleri, 2017). Under conditions of *ressentiment*, desire is deflected from individual status concerns to find satisfaction in the punishment and degradation of others. Some of those who have placed their hopes on the straight way to recognition start dreaming of violent justice. In the classic Nietzschean take, people suffering from *ressentiment* are unable to assert themselves and defer hope of retribution to other actors, who promise to restore the world by engulfing it in “the thunderstorms of our revenge” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 2.8). It may be delusional, as the existing world is misperceived “through the poisonous eye of *ressentiment*” (Nietzsche, 1989, p. I§11). Yet violent revenge will nevertheless alleviate status anxieties. As opposed to the straight way to recognition, the accumulated, unsatisfied desire is channeled into a defensive affirmation of social esteem.

In *Rage and Time*, Peter Sloterdijk discussed the recognition of one-sided assertion of status claims in a contemporary context of *ressentiment*. The book was written shortly after the terror attacks on prominent Western targets in 2001, including the World Trade Center in New York. To Sloterdijk, the sudden attacks stood for an eruption of rage in world politics, which exposed the political force of anger, pride, and shame; the whole dimension of social life which comprised “human pride, courage, stout-hearted-ness, craving for recognition, drive for justice, sense of dignity and honor, indignation, militant, and vengeful energies” (Sloterdijk, 2010, p. 14). He recalled the ancient concept of *thumos*; retaliatory rage blended with desire for social esteem. It was seemingly forgotten, in an age that came across as oblivious of higher values, yet beneath the surface, *thumos* sustained a mobilization for honor and dignity, drawing on existing social morality. In what was essentially a Nietzschean analysis of one-sided assertion of social esteem, he invoked the Hegelian struggle for recognition (Sloterdijk, 2010, p. 24). The move was perhaps heretical. The staunch embrace of status claims seemed to be the very opposite of the generally assumed outcome of the struggle for recognition, since there was no mutuality involved. In the *Phenomenology*, the lack of mutuality is precisely what explained the failure of the Master to gain recognition. The Master could enjoy whatever the Slave produced, but no amount of coercion could secure recognition. In fact, the one-sided assertion of the Master only made matters worse. After being ignored and abused, the recognition offered by the slave did not mean anything. The result was not “genuine recognition,” Hegel argued, since it was “one-sided and unequal” (Hegel, 2018, p. 114).

Sloterdijk is not alone in associating the Hegelian struggle for recognition with the Nietzschean will to power. Other authors have argued, against Hegel, that also “one-sided and unequal” recognition may be genuine. Robert Williams, in particular, stayed with Nietzsche to bring out the recognition inherent also in one-sided assertion of sta-

tus. His argument was designed to qualify Deleuze's position in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*; a book written in 1962, as a reaction against the dominant French reception of Hegel. Deleuze had argued that the concept of recognition was superfluous, of little relevance to the will to power. Demonstration of status superiority was self-sufficient; what other people thought about it was extraneous. The enjoyment of unrestrained self-assertion was explained solely in terms of the ability to prevail over and against others, but as Robert Williams has showed, there is no escape from recognition. Social esteem is necessarily ascribed by others. To assert one's status makes little sense without an audience to acknowledge the vindicated status. In Deleuze's case, full affirmation involved a double affirmation: first self-affirmation, vividly manifesting a privileged place within the asserted order, and then ostensible signs of confirmation of the manifested place, by others. This double affirmation amounted to nothing short of recognition (Williams, 2012).

Hegel's position that one-sided and unequal recognition was ingenuine, or did not amount to recognition as it would not feel like recognition, made perfect sense in the context of the original master-and-slave dialectic, which was tailored around face-to-face interaction. The other was a specific other, but given a different, generalized conception of the other, where social morality and status orders provide the basic coordinates of desire, one-sided assertion is not necessarily inimical to recognition. The generalized conception of the other is historically linked to the French reception of Hegel (Honneth, 2018). It is moreover tied to a negative valuation of the role of the other. In sharp contrast to the main interpretation of Hegel, which embraced existing social morality and status expectations as indispensable stepping stones for the growth of freedom (Celikates, 2009; Honneth, 1992), Sartre, Lacan, and Althusser saw social morality and the expectations of others as obstacles to freedom (Butler, 1987; Jaeggi, 2021). In Lacan's analysis, the other assumed menacing, monolithic features. It was the big Other with a capital O, issuing imperative demands and impossible to escape. These expectations and ethically elevated demands constituted our desire—desire was “of the Other” from the very beginning (Lacan, 1977, p. 235; Lacan, 1992). The particular needs and expectations of individuals, any individual in the struggle for recognition, including the subject, were immaterial. It was all about pleasing the generalized other, but the one-sidedness was only apparent. The other reproduced in the process would offer recognition in return. What came across as one-sided assertion and a complete disregard of the concerns of specific others was in fact heavily dependent on the generalized other, or a fine-tuned sensitivity of what presented social esteem in the eyes of others (Lacan, 1992; Žižek, 2006). A multitude of individual acts, which could involve mundane personal choices of which clothes to buy or where to spend the vacation, or ruthless assertion to punish offenders and realize higher values, enact, taken together, a shared status order that can provide recognition in return—allow people to recognize themselves in the enacted status order, and feel fully worthy. So, while “one-sided and unequal,” the recognition would nonetheless be perfectly satisfying.

Although often dismissed as ingenuine recognition within the Hegelian tradition, one-sided assertion of status would thus be able to produce genuine recognition, in the sense that it satisfied desire and alleviated status concerns. That is the first conclusion to be drawn from Sloterdijk's discussion of self-assertion, Nietzsche's analysis of *ressentiment*, and Lacan's analysis of desire. A second conclusion concerns the dynamic of desire. Regressive recognition of status is inevitably oppressive, either because desire for recognition finds satisfaction in the devaluation of specific social others, again and again (Nietzsche) or because the generalized other never stops issuing demands insensitive to personal wellbeing (Lacan). In Nietzsche's reading of *ressentiment*, the “angry spectator of everything past” remained forever squeezed between the pain of unsatisfied desire and the futility of the task to restore a bygone past (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 2.20). Although violent vengeance on the other could alleviate status anxieties, it did so only for the moment and the experienced pain would quickly return, only to demand renewed vengeance. Lacan described a similar vicious circle of desire with respect to the generalized other. Its commands were perceived as unconditional, law-like injunctions by the subject. They were not duties in a straightforward way, issued according to a universal moral principle, but rather “weird and twisted” (Žižek, 2006, p. 79), reassured only through the eyes of the other. As such, the generalized other could make people accommodate to estrangement, life-denying conventional tracks, as Butler emphasized, or lash out against others, as Nietzsche suggested. Here and now, the recognition it provided was a welcome relief: the experience of being fully worthy. Yet again, relief was no more than temporary. Interspersed by brief and partial breaks

from a base-line state of distress, one was constantly thrown back to the generalized other, which would never stop issuing demands.

In the first version of the master-and-slave dialectic in *System der Sittlichkeit*, written a few years before the publication of the *Phenomenology* in 1807, the struggle for recognition was explicitly propelled by the desire to restore social esteem. As opposed to the later version, the struggle for recognition was set in motion by a specific event. The struggle started with a theft. Someone was robbed by another (Hegel, 1998). The crime involved the loss of property and a violation of the legal code, although those aspects were secondary. In accordance with a long tradition in Western culture (Pauley, 1994), the crime above all meant a loss of social esteem in the eyes of other members of the community. In Hegel's case, the theft involved a breach of the honor code (*die Ehre*). The theft was an act of disrespect, which put the reputation at risk. The offended party had lost social status and had to recover it from the other, who was at the same time the perpetrator of the crime and the potential provider of recognition. The resolution of the conflict required the intervention of social institutions, which could act as representatives for the whole community (Hegel, 1998). Eventually, the state would step in, but at this point in Hegel's presentation, there was no third party with the capacity to resolve the conflict over status. The initial offence would therefore instigate an open-ended series of confrontations between the two parties, culminating in murder.

The desire at play was essentially ambiguous. It was, at one and the same time, the urge to avenge injustice and the desire to be part of a community as a fully worthy member. The two parties were torn between their immediate responses to acts of disrespect and their overarching striving for social esteem in the community. Hegel's early account of the master-and-slave dialectic illustrated the original ambiguity of the ancient Greek notion of *thumos* (Hörnqvist, 2021). What drove the struggle for recognition, in the early version, was *thumos* in the narrow sense—desire for punishment as status restoration. Yet it was always more than a desire for punishment and linked to the positive state of being recognized as a fully worthy member in the community. *Thumos* in the broad sense referred to assertiveness and acceptance in social life more generally (Cooper, 1999, chap. 11). Desire for recognition seems to remain being marked by the same contradictoriness. In contemporary Western societies, recognition stands for the urge to be fully included in the community but also to distinguish oneself in the same community (Dubet, 2009; McBride, 2013). Nancy Fraser has emphasized the former element as the most primordial: to be recognized is to be accepted “as a full member of society” (Fraser, 2000, p. 113). Recognition essentially means to be considered as “one of us,” a fully worthy participant in social interaction. In the first draft of the Hegelian master-and-slave dialectic, the desire for vengeance was a manifestation of this general desire, when suddenly being deprived of status following an offence. It was the basic desire to regain status as fully part of society. At heart, it was the urge to belong and to escape the anxiety of being dismissed, or being looked down upon, but it did not stop there and evolved into the wish to distinguish oneself, within the group. The desire was transgressive, assertive, and competitive, constantly pulling people in different directions, toward group conformity and toward individual distinction.

So far in the presentation, there are two parallel routes to recognition, both of which are necessarily oppressive yet in different ways. Besides the straight way to recognition via compliance with socially stratified norms and expectations, there is the regressive route marked by one-sided assertion of existing status orders. The second route is rooted in the ambivalence of desire, which can be traced back to the notion of *thumos* in Ancient Greece and the first version of Hegel's master-and-slave dialectic. At the same time, while desire may be inherently ambivalent, its dynamic is historical. Specific political conditions and material circumstances may divert desire for recognition, as suggested by research on reactionary mobilizations in the contemporary crises of recognition (Cramer, 2016; Gidron & Hall, 2017; Hochschild, 2016). In this mode, the dynamic of desire appears inevitably oppressive, as it seeks satisfaction in the devaluation of specific social others, again and again, or in the fulfillment of status expectations of others. Although detrimental to oneself or to others, or simply delusional, asserting one's own status may provide genuine recognition, given a generalized conception of the other. It is essentially the same vicious circle as encountered in the previous section, where a perfectly socialized desire sought satisfaction through a preexisting other, in an endless dynamic where both individual desire and the other remained unchanged, yet this time moving back and forth through regressive self-assertion. So, should we give up hope on desire for recognition? Or, can a desire shot through with power and obsessed

with status unfold in an emancipatory direction, despite its inherent orientation toward either compulsive conformity or one-sided assertion? In the next section, I will continue discussing the mechanisms at work and suggest a third road to recognition beyond the oppressive dynamics of desire for recognition.

#### 4 | RECOGNITION OF THE RECONFIGURED OTHER

The two versions of the thesis that desire for recognition is necessarily oppressive concur in the notion of a generalized other, which fuels the compulsive satisfaction of heavily stratified expectations (Version 1), or sustains the regressive assertion of status claims (Version 2). One way out of the vicious circle goes through taking a closer look at the generalized other. The notion discussed in the previous section was a system of valuation which people seemed unable to affect. The generalized other was curiously aloof. Despite all contestation, people appear destined to acquire recognition by satisfying the generalized other in ways that were socially stratified and insensitive to individual need. I will argue that this essentially Lacanian characterization may on the whole be granted, at the same time as it must be qualified in one crucial respect. The generalized other is not external in relation to the struggle for recognition, as suggested by four sets of reasons: the Hegelian master-and-slave dialectic, research on social cognition, research on class consciousness, and some reflections on what political practice might entail. On all these accounts, the generalized other is transformed in the struggle for recognition, behind the backs of the participants, in turn affecting desire, replacing old expectations and preoccupations with new ones.

1. **The Hegelian master-and-slave dialectic.** Throughout the struggle, the other assumes several different roles. At heart, within the context of the *Phenomenology* as a whole, the two conflicting parties are figures of the same consciousness, who desired the same thing: to be recognized by the other for what they were, or aspired to be. In the dialectic, the other shows up as an actor of its own. The other has the contradictory role of being both potential provider and the one who holds back; the one who approves and the antagonist over against which the subject must prove its worth. The latter aspect is most pronounced in the life-and-death struggle during which both parties “prove their worth to each other” (Hegel, 2018, p. 111, emphasis removed). Further, as counterpart in the struggle, the other is far from immutable. On the contrary, both parties change, as the struggle evolves. The subject gains self-knowledge and transforms through the struggle—that is the whole point. Inversely, the other is transformed, along the way. Now, the same Hegelian line of reasoning should be applicable to the *generalized* other, conceived of as a system of valuation drawing on prevailing status orders and social morality. The generalized other is constantly re-created through a multitude of individual struggles for recognition. Oftentimes, individual action involves simple reproduction. People inescapably enact a status order in the choice of schools or housing, which kind of clothes they buy, what food they eat, where they spend their vacation, or in other everyday practices which tend to reflect existing social divisions, as everyone strives for the recognition they have come to expect. Yet change seems just as inevitable, as people question choices made by previous generations, because they lack the necessary resources, or the aura of exclusivity disappears, or for some other reason. While its constitutive relationships of power are inert, institutionally embedded and resilient, the generalized other appears liable to change in the everyday striving for recognition. The pursuit of desire for recognition in the dual sense of becoming fully part of society while at the same time distinguishing oneself in the same society can destabilize the generalized other and give rise to new status orders and normative expectations just as capable of providing recognition.
2. **Research on social cognition.** Not even a perfectly socialized desire for recognition can fully determine individual action. Given the options *as they present themselves to participants in everyday interactions*, there may be several ways in which one and the same desire for recognition can be satisfied. Two reasons drawn from research on social cognition indicate that there may be more routes than one. First of all, sociological studies have shown that people are sometimes unable to fully appreciate what is expected of them. In cross-category interactions, such as parent meetings in school, managerial evaluation at the workplace, or interaction with health care officials, some



participants seem unable to produce the conduct which will result in recognition, not necessarily because they do not want to, but because they do not know what is expected of them (Calarco, 2014; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Ridgeway, 2014). The desire to satisfy expectations is, in other words, not always sufficient to produce the corresponding behavior that could elicit recognition. Second, one's own perfectly socialized desire may enter into contradiction with the expectations of others and available options in the situation. Based on an action-oriented understanding of cognition (Kiverstein, 2012; Noe, 2004), options beyond the ones made available by existing power asymmetries are regularly disclosed by participants in social interactions, as a result of acquired expectations and competences. In the everyday, skillful and concerned involvement with the world, people may perceive courses of action that they can and want to pursue but are denied in practice (Hörnqvist, 2022). In such cases, even a perfectly socialized desire transcends existing power structures by making people disclose courses of action beyond the immediately available ones, thereby possibly transforming some of the conditions that created it in the first place.

3. **Research on class consciousness.** A range of empirical studies suggest that existing social divisions reappear as moral categories (Sayer, 2005). The distribution of status and resources in a society seem to be the point of departure in a construction process in which people position themselves in a socio-moral world which provides them with recognition. It is a world in which they appear as pillars of society, as hard workers, as respectable care-takers of others, or in some other valued capacity, reflecting class-specific normative conceptions of proper work, notions of deservingness, of desirable family constellations, of appropriate leisure and vacation activities (Bourdieu, 1984; Westheuser, 2021). The generalized other appears class-specific, although one may talk about class-specific concerns and expectations only if one allows for substantial variation at the individual level (Hörnqvist, 2016b). Given one and the same position in the class structure, more than one system of valuation may operate as the provider of recognition. Faced with a crisis of recognition, workers may stress their working-class identity and locate themselves in a moral universe, where they are placed far higher up than in the hierarchies of social class. In that case, they typically distance themselves from the nearest social strata, from an undeserving underclass as well as from unreliable, career-minded managers, and stress their own set of class-specific virtues and values, such as being caring, responsible, and hard-working (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 2000). Alternatively, people in working-class positions may disassociate themselves from being workers and identify as middle class and develop concerns and expectations in opposition to traditional working-class morality. In that case, recognition of social status relies on distancing themselves from their own position in the class structure and instead satisfying typical middle-class norms of respectability and success (Skeggs, 1997; Sayer, 2005). Although the mechanisms involved remains to be better understood, research on classconsciousness indicates that the provision of recognition is liable to change. People acquire recognition under conditions fundamentally dictated by social class. What provides recognition is not freely chosen, nor consciously remodeled—yet not immutable. The generalized other seems to change behind the backs of the participants in everyday social practices.<sup>2</sup>
4. **Some reflections on what political practice might entail.** The changes discussed so far are the product of what people do all the time, also in the absence of conscious struggle. In the context of political conflicts and mobilizations, the generalized other may be questioned more directly. It is in fact hard to think of a political conflict that *does not* tend to reshuffle the generalized other. The generalized other appears to be constantly renegotiated, in a multitude of contemporary struggles. When women's movements mobilize against gender violence, they invoke a world in which the home is a safe place for everyone: whose experiences count and who have the right to protection are simultaneously at stake (Joachim, 2007), and ultimately who are fully worthy participants in social interactions. When worker's movements strike for higher wages or the right to organize, images of corporate control are challenged and there is an egalitarian thrust toward a world in which everyone's work is equally compensated (Silver, 2003), making tacit claims about who are fully worthy participants in social interactions. When people demand school education instead of prison building, they enact a world of equal educational opportunities which include people convicted of crime (Davis, 2011), again making claims about who are fully worthy participants in social interactions. When squatters turn empty houses into social centers for do-it-yourself culture and protest against

urban planning, they challenge notions of rights to the city based on private property (Vasudevan, 2017); when residents in socially marginalized areas protest against the ever-present police controls, they challenge the racism of the police and question the stereotypical image of poor racialized young men as criminals (Glover, 2009); when irregular migrants defy border controls and settle in new countries, they make claims about basic rights beyond traditional notions of citizenship, enacting a world where national borders no longer define access to resources and rights (McNevin, 2011); when climate activists organize traffic blockades or sabotage pipelines, they invoke a world in which ecological sustainability takes precedence over economic growth and question notions of human supremacy (Malm, 2021), once again making claims about who are fully worthy participants in social interactions.

Each of these examples arguably reveals a moment of transformation of the generalized other. It is first felt among those who take part in the struggle: for those who take active part, the enacted status order and normative expectations may operate as a new generalized other, which provides recognition. People will come to see themselves in *that* light, or as part of *that* world, in the fullest sense—as protagonists in the company of others. Through the struggle, people will recognize *themselves* in the world in which they occupy a place as full participants and they will recognize *each other* as full and worthy participants in the world being enacted. The experienced recognition is not conditional on success in terms of political results, equal rights, or resource distribution. To challenge asymmetrical power relationships along with others—organizing strikes, confronting racists, being creative, crossing police lines, exposing corporate abuse, practicing solidarity, sabotaging equipment, offering protection—can produce recognition regardless of whether the goals one is fighting for are achieved. Recognition may be inherent in collective action. In an important sense, it is a recognition of the struggle itself: a by-product of participating in social conflicts in which the generalized other is being reconfigured.

The idea here is that political actions enact a sociomoral world which operates as a substitute generalized other with the capacity to offer recognition. It may not be sufficient. To satisfy desire, the reinvented status orders and normative expectations must have the power to provide recognition. As opposed to the existing other, which has been charged through relationships of power with deep historical roots, political enactments run the risk of being superficial, or lack credibility. In that case, the transformed other will appear as an ideological abstraction unable to provide recognition, much like the Slave in Hegel's original tale whose recognition no longer meant anything to the Master. To move beyond the vicious circles of compulsive conformity and regressive self-assertion, the transformed other has to carry a certain ontological weight. People who take part must believe, fully appreciate the meaning and relevance of the particular struggle. This would involve more than a belief in the justified nature of the fight, or in the feasibility of the goals, and cannot be confined to a reordering of status orders at the level of political theory. To use Gramsci's words, the refashioned other must not be "arbitrary, rationalistic, or 'willed'" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 377). A cause worth dying for can only grow historically. Again, the struggle is the mechanism. The reinvented other is charged, or given the capacity to provide recognition, through the passions and the hardships of conflict, memories, and shared narratives of passed contestations, as well as endless discussions about what to do next.

The recognition of the reinvented other makes sure that people who take part in the fight are carried by more than anger, frustration, and moral conviction. It sustains participation by being experienced as indispensable, or just as precious as one's life. From a phenomenological perspective, the recognition should be no different from other kinds of recognition offered by the generalized other; offering relief of status anxiety in the widest possible sense, ranging from slight unease to embittered despair. The experience may be just as passing and no less elusive. It will last for the moment, or for as long as one takes active part in the struggle—believing in the just cause, risking everything, and being part in collective action, by carrying out grand or trivial tasks. It may further retain some less-rewarding features of the classic superego experience. Like the unreformed generalized other, it is inconsiderate with respect to individual well-being and potentially harmful to the subject. The experience of satisfaction may be treacherous, as it can be produced irrespective of political outcomes and does not necessarily signal actual transformation. Therefore, it is not a reliable indicator as to whether the political mobilization is on the right track.

What happens to desire? The transformation of the generalized other is likely to have repercussions on desire. If the generalized other is reconfigured, through collective action or piecemeal social change, the expectations and moral anticipations that people have to satisfy to alleviate their respective status concerns will change. The very source of recognition is being altered: the other, which comprises the basic determinants of desire (Lacan, 1992; Lacan, 2019). Hence, desire itself will change. It may not change much. Desire for recognition will in many respects stay much the same. It will remain fundamentally marked by unequal power structures, and there is moreover little to suggest that that it will lose its ambivalent character, oscillating between the will to belong and the striving for distinction—that does not change, and nor does it change that satisfaction is granted by a generalized other which is insensitive to individual need. Yet it will change in some respects, to satisfy different status expectations and evaluative norms—in the first instance for those who are most closely involved, yet potentially spreading to wider circles.

The utopian feature of the original Hegelian vision was appealing precisely because it anticipated how a future state of freedom grew out of experiences of injustice and constant struggle. One could discern a development toward personal growth, interpersonal mutuality, and societal freedom. Butler diagnosed an “immanent rationality of desire” (Butler, 1987, p. 5). On the reading presented here, there is no such logic. The transformed other offers recognition to those who participate in the struggle, and may for this reason be considered self-sufficient and unrelated to actual transformation. At the same time, it opens a way out of the vicious circle. Although people appear forced to act on an unchanging desire and a generalized other steeped in power, there is no necessary dynamic of desire. Desire as well as what satisfies desire is not above political contestation, but part of the struggle for recognition. This is the fragile ground for emancipatory hopes: that desire changes in a social context, through everyday strivings and political struggles, which transform the other who provides recognition. Desire for recognition is transformative, in all sorts of directions, some of which may be emancipatory. There are a few other certainties.

On this analysis, then, desire for recognition could be a potential ally in emancipatory struggles. It would be a contradictory and far from reliable ally, yet still a possible ally. It may moreover be a necessary ally, an aspect of political struggle that simply must be taken into consideration. The struggle for recognition is not a separate struggle but one aspect in all political conflict, always entwined with other aspects, such as the distribution of resources (Lamont, 2018; Tully, 2000). At the same time, desire for recognition goes beyond rights, resources, and status. Although contradictory and unreliable, it is a tremendous force. As Rousseau remarked in *Discourse on inequality*, desire for recognition “keeps us almost always in a restless state” and has been the cause to both “what is best and what is worst” in human history (Rousseau, 1984, p. 133). Equal rights enacted in parliamentary assemblies, increased resources to schools or housing in working-class areas, or campaigns to remove stigma and discrimination may be one step on the way to a society closer to the ideal of equal and mutual recognition, but may also serve as a reminder to people that they are *not* fully worthy participants in social interactions. The satisfaction of desire for recognition is a moving target, which does not stop with equal political rights, the redistribution of economic resources, even the abolition of private property, and goes beyond ascribed status or the removal of social stigma—for an important reason. The one thing that can satisfy desire for recognition is *the experience of being seen* as a fully worthy participant in social interactions. So, while being integral in conflicts over rights or resources (Celikates, 2021; Tully, 2000), desire for recognition may push struggles with an egalitarian orientation one step further. It may, in addition, push struggles explicitly couched in terms of recognition beyond the paradigm of identities and ascriptions (Honneth, 2018; Jaeggi, 2021). To be recognized as member of a community with a long history of misrecognition, such as transgender or First nations, must be considered an act of emancipation, yet being ascribed a more adequate social identity may in turn confine people to the kind of recognition which comes with that particular identity. So, desire for recognition may move on to sustain struggles to be recognized *without* qualifications, as fully worthy participants in any social interaction.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

The objective of this article was to see whether desire for recognition might contain an emancipatory aspect, while acknowledging the central claims of the dual thesis that desire for recognition is necessarily oppressive, a worst-case scenario, if you want. Desire for recognition was seen to be caught in an endless dynamic of compulsive conformity (Version 1) or regressive assertion of status (Version 2) to satisfy a preexisting other which had generated it in the first place. Despite that, I suggest, there is a possible way out the individual-level predicament of desire—that everyone inescapably strives to be recognized by others, while the aspired recognition cements an unequal social order—once we pay sufficient attention to the element of struggle. One key feature of collective struggles is the reinvention of the world in the dimensions of order and morality. Provided that the new order carries a certain ontological weight, it will operate as a different generalized other, and people who take part in the struggle will come to see themselves as part of *that* world, as full and worthy social beings, satisfying their relentless and socially conditioned desire for recognition. The struggle is sustained by this desire, the satisfaction of which may grow out of the never-ending efforts to realize heavily stratified expectations (Version 1) or out of acts of one-sided assertion (Version 2), yet transcends the oppressive dynamics of desire, as the very source of recognition is being reconfigured. In the process, both desire and what satisfies desire are transformed. The generalized other is modified, in turn affecting the desire of individuals.

It follows that desire for recognition is a potential yet contradictory and unreliable ally in emancipatory struggles. Political mobilization that strives to be emancipatory should acknowledge this volatility and integrate claims on the distribution of rights and resources with the existential struggle to become fully worthy participants in social interactions, based on an understanding that the satisfaction of desire is a moving target. The task of a critical theory of desire, following Marx's dictum of self-clarification of contemporary struggles and wishes (Marx, 1843), is to understand the transformative dynamic between desire for recognition and its complex relationship to status, rights, and resources. This would bring out the emancipatory dimension of desire, embedded in the multitude of contemporary struggles, in the tension between recognitional self-sufficiency and utopian enactment, while elucidating points of intervention in the vicious circle of compulsive conformity and regressive self-assertion. There is no immanent logic of desire according to which any particular direction would be predetermined, least of all a necessary progress toward freedom and similar outcomes associated with recognition in the Hegelian tradition. Desire can be emancipatory or oppressive, depending on what we do. In the end, the determination of desire is a political question. We may not be free to choose what we desire, but we are free to take part in struggles that will change the course of our desire.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault had argued that the promise to liberate desire was fictitious. We are “always-already trapped” since desire is shaped by power from the outset (Foucault, 1990, p. 83). That people desire their own subjection has been referred to as the general “problematic of desire” (Smith, 2019, p. 126). The position can be articulated in different conceptual frameworks. A similar idea famously appears in *Anti-Oedipus*, as Deleuze and Guattari repeated Spinoza's puzzle that people appear to be fighting for “their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 29).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the presented research covers social class and no other structural relationships of power. Similar dynamics might apply to the gendered, racialized, colonial, or heterosexual nature of the generalized other.

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**How to cite this article:** Hörnqvist, M. (2023). Recognition of struggle: Transcending the oppressive dynamics of desire. *Constellations*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12711>

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