



Multiculturalism Bites

Nancy Fraser on Recognition

David Edmonds:

In Britain, Christmas Day is a national holiday, but Passover or Eid are not. In this way Christianity receives more recognition, and might be seen to have a higher status in British society, than Islam or Judaism. The way a society is run, or the way its institutions operate, can appear to privilege one group or people, or one way of life, over another. Professor Nancy Fraser, of New York's, New School is an eminent political theorist whose work has emphasised the significance of 'recognition'.

Nigel Warburton:

Nancy Fraser, we're going to talk about recognition in relation to multiculturalism. Could we begin by talking about just what 'recognition' means for you?

Nancy Fraser:

Yes. Recognition is a concept that is having quite an interesting revival in political philosophy. It's a way of talking about forms of respect and disrespect that drop out of the standard models of distributive justice which focus on who gets what.

The question of whether the institutions of society express equal respect for everyone can't be analysed in terms of the distribution of resources, and it's an order to analyse that question that we are now using this term 'recognition.'

NW:

So does it differ from respect or is it just another way of saying respect?

NF:

Well recognition has to do with respect, esteem, prestige: the way society values different traits, different activities. It has to do with what I would call 'patterns' of cultural value. Do our institutions, for example, express in their design, in their structure, a sense that heterosexuality is a valued family form and homosexuality is not? The focus is on what the institutions are *saying*, implicitly or explicitly, by the way they're designed.

NW:

So why does that matter so much because I might think all I need is toleration, I don't actually need respect.

NF:

Well in my analysis the question is 'Do I have the possibility to be a full participant in society, to participate on equal terms with others?' And I call that question, the question of parity of participation. So I would say that if the institutions are designed in such a way, that everyone has equal chances for full participation on full terms of parity, that's what we mean by reciprocal recognition, by equal respect.

NW:

For me, and this might be wrong, it's also got a psychological element: if you respect somebody you might actually bolster them in such a way that they're capable of acting; whereas if you show disdain for people, it may cummulatively have the effect of stopping them doing things in the public sphere.

NF:

You're hitting on an important and subtle point, actually. That's probably true but what do we do about it? It could be counterproductive to try to engineer politically correct ideas about other people.

Let's take an example. Suppose we had a society in which the institutions really did adequately respect racial, religious and cultural minorities, really did give everyone equal chances of fair participation. But suppose there were some number of, let's say, curmudgeonly, backward citizens who's still harboured, racist or anti-Muslim, or whatever, sentiments.

I'm sort of tempted to say 'Well, that's a shame but nevertheless the society in the design of its institutions has succeeded in giving adequate recognition', and my hope would be that ideas would in the end follow the sort of institutional change.

There are other theories of recognition such as Charles Taylor who I think would disagree, who would put much more emphasis on the psychological. But my view is that whether or not I feel hurt or disempowered by the fact that others have a certain view of me, that is not the essential thing, because first of all I could be wrong in my feelings: I could be picking up a sense of disrespect by a certain oversensitivity.

Secondly, what if I don't let it get to me? Does that mean the injustice doesn't exist if the institutions still prevent me from parity of participation? So I don't think the psychological is crucial, it's not that I deny that that's an area, but it's not crucial.

NW:

So in terms of multiculturalism, how would this issue of recognition arise?

NF:

Well, we could take examples having to do with religion, with gender, with sexuality. So I just mentioned the whole issue of marriage. If you have an organization, legally underpinned, of marriage, that says marriage can only be between a man and a woman, then you are denying gays and lesbians from full participation in society. So that's a clear case of what I would call 'misrecognition', that is the lack of genuine reciprocal recognition.

But suppose you have social welfare programmes that implicitly favour wage earners over caregivers: that expresses also a certain kind of message about what society thinks is valuable, and it could be a message of disrespect or misrecognition if these institutions work in a way that prevents women or other caregivers from full participation.

But then, you could also take examples having to do with whose holidays are treated as public holidays and whose are not, issues about whether you have the public display of Christian crosses as opposed to Jewish stars, or Muslim crescents. In other words what is even public recognition sends a message about who is the ideal typical first class citizen and who by contrast is a sort of dubious second class citizen.

NW:

Well if we took the example marriage, if you say a marriage is between two people that shuts off certain religious groups who think that bigamy polygamy is a perfectly acceptable and even required? So how do you sort out whose view of the good life should be recognized?

NF:

This is a truly difficult question. It could be that we really have to stretch our minds a little bit to get around this kind of a question. I have to say that if I could be convinced, and I'm not at the moment, but if I *could* be convinced that polygamy could be dissociated from male domination and patriarchy and that it was a really genuine choice and expression of autonomy of women or men who live that way, then I might feel a lot less worried about it: I might be willing to stretch and say the society should recognize that. Of course I would also want to make sure that children's interests were protected and so on.

My approach is that, in so far as possible, we should try to translate questions about the good life into questions about fairness. Is anybody being dominated? Is anybody having something thrust upon them that is not a genuine choice? Now, I don't think that every question can be translated into a fairness question. I accept that there are still going to be value questions that we have to decide. I don't think it's the role of the political philosopher to give us the answer to those questions. I think what we as political philosophers should do, or even as citizens and activists, is to try to work to create conditions under which members of society, the citizens,

can themselves decide these value issues. But, and here's the crucial issue, on fair terms of interaction, because the debates that we have about these questions now are undercut by severe power asymmetries and not everyone can really participate on equal terms.

NW:

One of the asymmetries that arises in that context is surely an asymmetry when you use a democratic voting process, because we're often talking about minorities. Even if the majority of the minority vote in favour of a certain outcome, they're still going to lose: they're not going to get their particular way of life acknowledged by the wider society. Is it all going to come down to a democratic vote? In which case minorities are going to be exploited.

NF:

I think that the key is to figure out what sorts of issues allow for, quote unquote, 'peaceful coexistence' of different forms of life' so that you can pluralize institutions, and which questions do require a sort of common public framework? So for example, let's just take the question of nature. We have a general tendency and sort of modern western rationalism to think of nature as relatively valueless, as a, sort of, supply of resources for human exploitation and use.

But we have at the same time various religious communities, or in first nations native communities, that have a much thicker, more value-laden ethical view of nature. Now it's an interesting question as to whether these two can coexist because if the sort of hegemonic view of nature as a sort of valueless pool of resources for exploitation is allowed to just triumph everywhere, it will surely drive out the possibility of small communities of native peoples to maintain a way of life that has a different idea of nature.

That's an example of a case where separation may not be enough. But where there are different ethical conceptions that can coexist and where both of which, or all of which, pass the test that no one's being dominated or exploited, then I don't see any reason why we shouldn't just pluralize and let people choose which one to affiliate to.

NW:

I know you said that philosophers shouldn't decide the particular cases, that it should be done by negotiation of the people involved. But it seems to me if there are practical issues that arise that make it impossible to come to a conclusion - for instance with holidays, you're arguing that every group should be recognized in having their own public holidays - well, every day will be holiday then...

NF:

Sounds good to me. There may be practical considerations, constraints that prevent that kind of absolute symmetry. So in cases like that then you have to think of ways in which even if you do institutionalise a majority preference that the minorities are not penalised, that they get some kind of compensations, exemptions, alternatives, this as a practical matter might be necessary.

NW:

By structuring society in a way that it recognizes different groups, doesn't it actually emphasise difference because it tells you that these people need to be respected in this way, these other people over here need a different kind of recognition? Wouldn't that entrench differences?

NF:

Well every society necessarily institutionalises some recognition order or another. So we already have these things entrenched: this sense that this is what a first class citizen looks like and this is something else.

So I think the alternative is not recognition or no recognition it's *which* recognition and what counts as a fair symmetric equal respect form of recognition. Now, that said, I do share your concern about not wanting to promote separatism. The way I've tried to analyse this is not to think in terms of recognizing identity; rather in terms of recognizing one's equal status as a full partner in social action. And that might sound purely verbal or semantic, but it puts the emphasis on interaction, and in that sense it sort of discourages us from associating

multiculturalism or recognition with separatism. What we care about is that people interact in society not that they act in little separated enclaves only with their own kind. But we care that they interact as peers.

NW:

Well we care about that, but there are presumably groups who don't care about that and would like to be separatists, would like to keep the coraled area for their own way of life and not have any interference from outside.

NF:

Absolutely right, and my approach does not entail that everyone must participate in everything. What it does entail is that we have an obligation to remove entrenched obstacles that prevent people from participating in case they want to.

NW:

So do you have a name for your approach?

Respondent: I call it the view of recognition as a question of status: the Status Model of Recognition, where the question is equal status as opposed to the standard Identity Model of Recognition that is focused more on the psychological and on the question of identity. Analysing recognition, associating it with a question of status, raises all sorts of interesting questions about the relation between status and class, and that brings me back to what we started with: the relation between questions of distribution. which I think of as class questions, and those of recognition, which I think of a status questions. And these are in a sense two different orders of equality/inequality that are not exactly the same, that can't be neatly mapped on to one another or reduced to one another. I would oppose efforts to talk about multiculturalism in a way that disconnects it from questions of socio-economic equality and inequality.

NW:

What you're saying is that recognition of status is incredibly important, but it has to be seen in connection with economic inequalities. But what is the connection? I don't quite understand how they are so entwined, you could have one without the other quite easily.

NF:

You could think about the sorts of very simple societies that anthropologists used to analyse: the societies they called 'primitive' societies. They were societies in which you could say everything was recognition: everything was organized in terms of orders and structures of prestige and what you got, the question of distribution and economy, simply followed from that recognition hierarchy.

And you could take the other extreme. Imagine a society in which everything was sort of determined by the market. Prestige simply followed automatically from what you had, how much you had. My thought is that our society is like neither of those two extremes. We have to deal with something more complicated in which we have two different orders, orders of stratification or domination in equality. Too many current discussions of multiculturalism ignore this other dimension of distribution and class, the political economy side and that if you really want to understand and think about redressing inequality, you have to think about both of these together.

NW:

Some European politicians have been very pessimistic about the future of multiculturalism in Europe. Do you share that pessimism?

NF:

Well that question admits of a couple of different interpretations. I am pessimistic that there has been such a backlash against diversity, against toleration, against equal respect. I guess I might be pessimistic that that will turn around anytime soon. But I firmly believe that it is only right that it does turn around at some point, and I suppose it's really connected to the level of socio-economic insecurity that people are experiencing, which again brings me back to that whole question of the relation between recognition and distribution. One way which they can be related is that people who feel that they're the losers in, let's say economic globalization,

that their forms of life are threatened and their standing in societies threatened, will often react defensively by insisting on their superiority in some other respect. We have this long history in the United States, white racists gave poor white Southerners a sense of being superior to somebody even as they were really living a miserable living existence economically.

NW:

Nancy Fraser, thank you very much.

NF:

My pleasure, thank you.