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The Post-politics of Recognition in Hegemonic Struggles:
The Road from the New Left Movements to the Crumbling of
Liberal Hegemony

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Abstract

In the history of post-WWII Western emancipation movements, a marked shift took place from a liberation to a recognition paradigm. The latter embodies a distinctly post-political conceptualisation of social justice in its (re)formulation of the political with respect to the personal and with respect to social relations. As a result, recognition politics not only gives way to the fragmentation of justice claims, but also weaponises them against each other, as for instance 'sexual and gender minority' politics have expropriated crucial political arenas from feminist politics. These permutations of recognition politics are not the result of spontaneous, inevitable development, but that of political intervention devised to transform, neutralise, and absorb radical politics. Recognition politics has thus become a basic hegemonic strategy of transformism, consensus-building, and the forging of 'common sense.' Despite the mechanisms deployed to manage its internal contradictions (like the rainbow coalition and intersectionality), reinvigorated criticisms have blamed recognition politics for the crumbling of the current hegemony of liberalism. However, recognition seems to have been so deeply embedded in the social and cultural imagination that apparently neither internal critiques, nor the currently emerging counter-hegemonic projects can shake it off.

Keywords: *ideology, hegemony, post-politics, personal/political, feminism, intersectionality, rainbow coalition.*

1. Introduction: *The politics of recognition politics?*

Since its revival in moral and political philosophies in the 1990s, recognition has been conceptualised in various ways to grasp issues like the ‘adequate’ recognition of someone’s universal human dignity and/or particular merits, and the lack of such recognition due to, for instance, demeaning stereotypes about certain undervalued groups. Recognition and its ‘disturbances’ (also referred to as misrecognition) have been approached, for instance, as the satisfaction or infringement of a basic (either specifically modern or universal) human need and hence as the universal driving force behind social conflicts (compare Taylor, 1992, and Honneth, 1992), or as struggles over social status inequalities under the specific historical circumstances of the post-socialist age (Fraser, 1995).

The recognition paradigm of justice has received various criticisms, which pointed out, among other things, its inadequacy for grasping (and redressing) the complexities of (unequal) social, let alone economic relations. In fact, recognition issues have been analysed as increasingly displacing and marginalising concerns about economic injustices, since they have been increasingly disembedded from and overrepresented to the detriment of redistribution issues (Fraser, 1995: 68). Another line of critique contends that recognition embodies the same logic as misrecognition if it is supposed to make amends within the same non-reciprocal (power) relationship that enacted misrecognition in the first place, and thus often it is no more than a paternalistic gesture (Fanon, 1986: 169–173). Moreover, recognition advocates frequently presume that the power mechanisms of recognition interact with pre-existing identities, while in fact they are integral to subject formation, and hence they fail to realise that what they consider emancipatory recognition involves the incorporation of power relations into individual subjectivity (McNay, 2008: 2). The centring of recognition as the primary (or only) foundation for justice has thus been critiqued, *inter alia*, as overlooking or even legitimating certain mechanisms of power and thereby coming up short of an adequate analysis of injustices and their causes.

Many of these and other analyses inevitably touch on questions of ideology and politics such as, for instance, the relationship between ideology and subjectivation (e.g. Althusser, 1971; Honneth, 2007). However, what the *specific politics* of recognition politics is, and how its conceptualisation of *the political* (in actual recognition claims) appears and plays out in the wider politico-ideological landscape of hegemonic struggles has received less attention.

This theoretical paper will address these questions in the context of the emergence and recent cracking of liberal hegemony. After outlining my theoretical framework, I will overview the changing tenor of the personal/political relationship in emancipation movements from the emergence of New Left movements to today’s post-political recognition politics through the example of Anglo-American feminism, and subsequently explore how these forms of politics were/are embedded in hegemonic projects. As part of this, I will explore in what ways recognition politics contributes to hegemony, and what its inherent contradictions are that have, according to some of its discontents, enabled the rise of the populist right.

2. Ideology, hegemony and (post-)politics in a Gramscian theoretical framework

The advantage of a Gramscian theoretical framework in approaching such cross-cutting questions like recognition is that it does not collapse either the economic, social, political, or cultural level of the 'relation of forces' under any of the other levels. For Gramsci, the material forces of production provide the basis for the formation of social classes, whose collective political consciousness moves from individual mechanical cooperation to organisation based on solidarity and finally to full-fledged ideologies that confront each other (Gramsci, 1979: 180–181). The prevailing ideology propagates itself throughout society, presenting itself as a universal answer to the questions around which political struggles are waged, forging an intellectual and moral unity around economic and political aims, and thereby creating the hegemony of a social group over subordinate groups (*ibid.*, 181).

Ideology in this understanding is not the covering of truth with lies, but the mechanism with which the hegemonic group forges the consent of the groups over which it asserts its hegemony; for in Gramsci's conception, hegemony differs from domination in that the former rests largely on consent while occasionally also resorting to coercion, while the latter relies predominantly on coercion. Thus, to establish hegemony, the leading group has to make concessions to the subordinate groups, creating an equilibrium in which its own interests prevail with this limitation (*ibid.*, 161, 182). Ideological struggles are waged and won in civil society (the level of the superstructure that is frequently considered 'private'), which thus becomes an entrenchment of hegemonic ideology (*ibid.*, 12, 235). Thus, unlike the situation in 1917 Russia, where civil society was not developed, the extensive civil society of modern Western societies functions as a buffer zone against the immediate seizure and sustenance of (state) power; for this reason, in such societies the strategy of frontal attack ('war of manoeuvre') cannot succeed, but instead, the ideological foundations of an alternative hegemonic bloc have to be laid first ('war of position') (*ibid.*, 235–239). Hegemonic endeavours, for this reason, are always directed to changing the culture that society's norms, rationality and self-interpretation are grounded in (Kiss, 2018: 232–241). If a hegemonic project succeeds, its conceptions of 'life and man' sediment itself even in the diffuse, uncoordinated, unreflected aspects of thought and sentience – in other words, they become 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1979: 326–331).

Neo-Gramscian approaches, mostly following Cox (1981; 1983), have theorised hegemonic projects on a global scale led by a group of countries or, in an era of intensifying transnationalisation, increasingly by (a certain fraction of) the transnational capitalist class. The hegemonic bloc also encompasses an array of politicians, bureaucrats, intellectuals, media workers and a layer of mostly middle-class locales (Robinson, 2005: 565), with international organisations playing a central role in administering its mechanisms (Cox, 1983: 171–173).

This hegemonic warfare is strikingly played out today as the current Western cultural hegemony is cracking before our eyes. The current hegemony as an unfolding project predates the end of the Cold War, yet it was the demise of the

Soviet Union that has heralded a unipolar capitalist world order with what some have called the uncontested hegemony of liberalism (Mouffe, 2005: 9–10). One of the central cultural principles of liberal hegemony is a universalist view of the human as an autonomous individual existing prior to (and unformed by) social relations, self-interested, and instrumentally rational (Rupert, 1995: 660), which construes social and economic problems as individual ones. The other central ideological underpinning of the current hegemony is the mainstream liberal conception of politics as rational consensus-based decision-making rather than the arena where antagonistic forces struggle with each other (Mouffe, 2005: 10–11), which stigmatises discontents as irrational and immoral. However, this post-political denial of rationally unresolvable conflicts and the propelling of politics into the moral register only exacerbates conflicts (ibid., 2–5). The unwritten thought censorship of anything challenging the liberal consensus (Žižek, 2002: 544–545) thus made it easier to channel growing discontent into a counter-hegemonic bloc. After early, arguably ideologically incoherent and undefined attempts at contestation following from the internal contradictions and tensions of liberal capitalism (Rupert, 1997: 105), liberal hegemony started to be seriously challenged in the Euro-Atlantic area in the 2010s, with right-wing populism on the rise and alternative historical blocs emerging first in the semi-peripheries and then in the core as well.

In the following, I will examine how recognition politics fits into this landscape, beginning with an overview of the major shifts in Anglo-American emancipatory politics since the 1960s, choosing feminist (later transmuted as gender) politics as an example. My purpose is not to provide a historical overview of feminist politics, recognition politics, or radical politics (all of which, of course, predate this era), but to explore how the contentions between the different conceptions of the political in emancipatory politics are part of a larger hegemonic struggle.

3. From the personal is political to the political is personal, from liberatory politics to post-politics

New Left theory and movements unfolding in the 1950s and 1960s were characterised by a remarkable focus on the key role of ideology in maintaining repressive social structures (Kiss, 2018: 45). One of the central questions of different traditions such as Critical Theory and American black and feminist liberation movements was how individual experiences and identities are (partially) produced by ideology. In the mainstream emancipation claims of today, many of these key insights about the relationship between the personal and the political have changed beyond recognition. In the following, I will highlight a major shift in Western emancipation movements through the example of Anglo-American feminist organising and theorising.

‘The personal is political’ is perhaps the most well-known slogan of second-wave feminism, highlighting its focus on issues considered to be personal. This catchphrase has been used in slightly different, albeit connected senses ever since. It emerged from women’s experience of organising in New Left and other

liberation movements, where men who dominated the movements did not take sex-based subordination seriously, impelling women to have discussions separately from men. This is also revealed in the first written use of the slogan, a 1969 memo entitled *The Personal is Political* written by Carol Hanisch. The memo, whose title and content are both greatly indebted to collective feminist thinking (Hanisch, 2006), addressed a general nervousness of men in these movements about the burgeoning women's liberation movement. Many of the men and women in the New Left political group that Hanisch participated in criticised women's consciousness-raising groups as 'navel gazing' and 'therapy.' Women were typically ridiculed for bringing their 'personal,' especially 'body issues,' into the public arena, which were seen as individual problems only pertaining to the people involved. The idea of 'the personal is political' contested such separation of political and personal issues.

Consciousness raising, as Hanisch argued in her memo, was not about coming together for support or to solve 'personal problems.' By sharing 'personal' stories, women could recognise that many of their experiences in the spheres of sexuality, relationships, family, and reproduction were far from unique – they were actually rather widespread among women. Consciousness raising often, as in Hanisch's example, fuelled both an analysis of the political origin of 'women's problems' and political action aimed at changing the political arrangement instead of trying to find individual solutions to political problems. The personal is political thus originally meant the criticism of the ideological separation of the private and the public sphere, highlighting the political nature of the separation itself as well as of the issues deemed to be private and personal. This also involved an analysis of the individual personal experience as having been formed in a political environment.

Similar arguments were put forward in the *Redstocking Manifesto* the same year (Redstockings, 1969), interpreting the man-woman relationship as a class relationship, and conflicts between individual men and women as class conflicts that should be solved collectively. While the manifesto describes women's suffering as a political condition, it also states that the Redstockings regard their personal experience and their feelings about that experience as the basis for an analysis of women's common situation. Experience as a key concept connecting the personal with the social and the political has a complex, dual status here and in many second-wave feminist accounts: it is both the starting point of analysis given that existing knowledge is permeated with patriarchal ideology, and also in need of analysis given that it is rooted in women's oppression.¹

¹ Scott (1991: 787) was partly right in the early 1990s when she claimed that much of Anglo-American feminist theorising used experience as a foundational concept, but she played down the fact that many feminist critiques did not take experience at face value, but rather as a politically constructed phenomenon to be analysed and transformed itself (see e.g. Sarachild, 1975; *Women's Liberation Workshop*, 1969). Scott suggested an approach that was exactly the opposite of what she simplistically attributed to earlier feminist analysis, and was not any less reductive from a theoretical and methodological perspective: that experience should not be the origin of explanation, but that which should be explained (Scott, 1991: 797). See Alcoff (1997) for a detailed criticism of Scott and a feminist phenomenological approach to experience.

Feminist approaches, especially since the 1980s, raised questions about the consequences of this circular interdependence of the personal and the political for feminist politics: if 'woman' is (partly) constructed by patriarchal power relations, how can the feminist movement contest these power relations by relying on this identity as its very basis? Some of the responses, however, subverted the political critique of the women's liberation movement. Probably the most noted contribution to this question in academic feminism is the early work of Judith Butler (1990). This postmodernist-influenced approach forecloses the political as it conflates the politically constructed and contingent with the fictitious by claiming that there is only performance without 'identity' (i.e. women)² and by relativising the political materiality of reproductive biology. It also paralyses political action by liquidating the subject of feminism (i.e. women as agents and matters of politics) in arguing that the category of woman should not be the foundation of feminist politics (e.g. Butler, 1990: 3–33). Even though some of these claims are toned down or revised in Butler's subsequent work (e.g. Butler, 1992), some feminists have critiqued this approach not unjustly as undermining or reversing the idea of the personal is political.³ One of the more rewarding approaches to this basic question influenced by postmodernist (and postcolonialist) theories is Spivak's strategic essentialism, which strives to carve out a representative essentialist position in which to do politics, while remembering the pitfalls of this strategy (Spivak and Harasym, 1990: 45). In other words, feminists entering the political arena can assert identities as constructed and provisional rather than fixed and metaphysically true.⁴ While the idea that women do not share an eternal, pre-political essence is not new in feminist politics, the focus of postmodernist approaches is increasingly on the subject, as opposed to the women's liberation paradigm's main interest in the political.

There were certainly other, often interlocking trajectories that arrested the feminist critique of the complex personal/political interrelation. Out of several developments in the personalisation of the political, anchored in the increasingly prevalent discourses of psychology and human rights,⁵ I highlight the ones that are the most central in today's gender discourse as paradigmatic examples of wider tendencies of individualising, minoritising and victimhood-focused perspectives in emancipatory politics.

Probably the most far-reaching turning point in the changing feminist politicisation of the personal was the so-called feminist sex wars, a fierce series of debates and clashes in the American and British feminist scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s (see e.g. Ferguson, 1984, and Dines and Jensen, 2008, for a summary). The dissension flared up around questions of sexuality and its

² Identity here does not refer to self-identification, as opposed to its most widespread use in contemporary gender discourse.

³ That 'the personal is political' has been reversed in mainstream (academic) feminism is a frequently made claim in certain non-mainstream feminisms, see e.g. Bell and Klein (1996). Postmodernism was also subject to intense debates between feminists in the 1990s.

⁴ This is the inversion of Hekman's definition of identity politics (Hekman, 1999: 4).

⁵ On the role of the rationalised language of psychology and the moralised language of human rights in the exercise of political power in liberal democracies and global relations, see e.g. Rose (1996) and Mutua (2002), respectively.

relationship to power. There had been serious debates about some of these questions among feminists before, yet what had an important role in sparking the sex wars was the legal strategy developed by two anti-pornography feminists, Dworkin and MacKinnon, of enabling women to start civil suits against pornographers to curb a burgeoning industry that they analysed as being based on and actively nourishing patriarchal power structures.⁶ Among the feminists opposing the legalist anti-pornography strategy, some were critical of the porn industry but rejected what they interpreted as censorship, while others even celebrated the allegedly transgressive and beneficial potential of practices like sado-masochism and pornography (see e.g. Califia, 1994). Both the anti-porn and pro-porn ('pro-sex') camps included many lesbians, but many in the latter group started to speak less for women than for 'sexual/erotic minorities' like homosexuals and sado-masochists and of sexuality as external and resistant to rather than enmeshed in power relations (see e.g. Duggan and Hunter, 2006 for a 'pro-sex' rendition of the events and actors).

This 'pro-sex' politics was heralded in academia by Gayle Rubin's *Thinking Sex* (1984). In this momentous piece, Rubin famously claims that sexuality in Western societies has been structured in a repressive and punitive framework, leading to a sexual oppression that is distinct from other oppressions but whose logic is similar to that of racism (Rubin, 1984: 267–284). Certain 'erotic non-conformists' or 'dissenters,' as the argument goes, have been persecuted by right-wing anti-sex 'morality crusaders' throughout history in waves of panic (such as the AIDS panic), including today's 'anti-porn fascists.' Rubin's main claim is that sexuality and gender are distinct arenas of social practice with their own hierarchies and therefore they should be separated analytically; sexuality thus should not be considered as the territory of feminist analysis but of an autonomous theory and politics of sexuality yet to be developed (*ibid.*, 308–309). The article indeed has a lasting legacy: it was instrumental in the consolidation of gay and lesbian studies and in the later foundation of sexuality studies as a distinct research area with a distinct research matter.⁷

As opposed to the radical feminist critique of sexuality as a main site of the reproduction, eroticisation and naturalisation of various (including gendered and racial) power relations through acts of submission, humiliation, and violence (e.g.

⁶ There were certainly many other ideological and strategic issues at stake in the sex wars, including legalism, censorship, victimhood or liberation centredness, agency, and industrial lobbies. These are, however, more distantly related to my topic and therefore not addressed here.

⁷ It is more than ironic that Rubin's call for sexuality studies, an important event in the history of inciting discourses of sexuality, actually cites and vastly misreads Foucault as a theorist of the social constructedness of sexuality. Foucault analysed how the idea of sexuality appeared in a specific historical time to produce knowledge about the vitality of the population, and how the different strategies that penetrate and control everyday pleasure have produced rather than repressed polymorphous sexualities. Rubin's programmatic text is, in my analysis, another event in the deployment of the biopolitical apparatus of sexuality, which conspicuously employs a rhetoric that Foucault referred to as the repressive hypothesis (Foucault, 1978: 1–13). The evocation of repressed sexuality and the imminent threat of the 'prudish,' 'right-wing' anti-porn activists also appeared in many other 'pro-sex' polemics in the sex wars (and since then), as for instance in Califia's writings (1994).

Lorde, 1982), the ‘pro-sex’ approach suggests that this very critique contributes to the demonization and persecution of repressed sexual practices like sado-masochism. What this reterritorialisation of sexuality by ‘pro-sex’ advocates means is that the analysis of a vast array of power relations is banned from the territory of sexuality. Although Rubin declares that sexuality is political and that it is not completely divorced from gender and other relations of power, what her description of sexuality suggests is that sexuality is political to the extent that it is oppressed by politics, not that it is engendered by and infused with politics (at least not the sexuality of ‘erotic non-conformists’). With this shift in mainstream American feminism, the analysis of the political nature of sexual desires and practices is confined, and the politicality of the personal is proscribed in the name of ‘sexual minorities.’⁸

The analysis of power relations was pushed back even further in the name of newer minorities. With the emergence of transgender activism in the late 1980s, the concept of ‘gender identity’ (i.e. the inner feeling about oneself as a man, woman, or something else) became a more and more dominant idea about gender (Feró, 2019: 173–174). Today’s mainstream (though not only) conception of gender identity in transgender activism is that it is inborn (Brubaker, 2016: 36), therefore it is unrelated to the materiality of the body and to gender norms (i.e. the sex-specific social expectations, unwritten rules, and sanctions, which are instrumental in reproducing the hierarchical relationship between men and women). What the idea of an innate gender identity entails – and what mainstream transgender activists demand to be recognised – is a transcendental feminine or masculine essence in our innermost selves. This radically diverts from the idea of the personal is political as formulated by the women’s liberation movement, which analyses personal subjectivity (including our personal feelings about ourselves) as having been formed in relation to the social, cultural, and political environment (including gender norms). There is thus a necessarily antagonistic relationship between mainstream transgender activism and critical theories (including system-critical feminism). As transgender activism has become the cutting-edge human rights issue (Feró and Bajusz, 2018: 181), the critical analysis of gender identity as having been formed in relation to gender norms has been increasingly excommunicated and stigmatised as the questioning of transgender identity and experience, and as such, as transphobic hatred.⁹ In other words, while the women’s liberation movement attempted to highlight the political nature of the personal, newly emerging minorities attempted to withdraw crucial parts of the personal from feminist political analysis by claiming it to be their own private territory.

⁸ There had been various streams of gay and lesbian (or homophile) politics before, some of which did not consider gayness or lesbianism as an inborn characteristic, but rather as a radical potentiality to liberate sexuality for all, or as a basis of female solidarity and resistance (Jagose, 1997: 30–57).

⁹ See Allen et al. (2018) for a philosophical discussion of claims made by a transgender scholar that gender-critical feminist views on gender count as “propaganda” because they do not accept transgender identity and experience as evidence in themselves without any further analysis. See Csányi (2017) for the summary of a debate in Hungarian online media following a leftist feminist discussion of experience as politically constructed rather than flowing from some inner gender essence, with one response conflating leftist feminist analysis with the right-wing populist government’s natalist rhetoric.

Even as approaches influenced primarily by postmodern theories on the one hand and trends oriented mostly by questions of sexual and gender minorities on the other are based on rather different and conflicting theoretical presuppositions, there are significant commonalities between them. They each pioneer an extreme conception of human subjectivity that is influenced by different psy-discourses (Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and post-war American psychology-sexology),¹⁰ while they do not centre theories of the political.¹¹ Besides, even though these two conceptions of the subject contradict each other in many respects, these two gender approaches have converged at certain points. For instance, Judith Butler oriented herself early towards the ‘pro-sex’ side of the sex wars (see Bracewell, 2016: 23), and in spite of her continued suspicion of ‘identities’ in her later work, she asserted the importance of recognising and validating transgender and intersexual identities, and reaffirmed the (partial) territorialisation of gender from feminist analysis by these newly emerging claimants (Butler, 2004: 1–16). At the same time, Butler’s work has informed the idea that gender is a spectrum with countless ‘non-binary’ gender identities, combining a concept of gender as unfixed and ‘fluid’ as theorised in gender performativity with a concept of gender as a personal and innate characteristic as postulated by gender minority discourse. Even though these two currents might seem to be substantially diverging, they are also often mixed in contemporary gender discourses, especially in activism.

The above-mentioned events in Anglo-American feminist analysis suggest that although the relationship of the personal and the political never had a unitary interpretation in feminist analysis, a significant shift in its conceptualisation has taken place since the emergence of the women’s liberation movement. This also meant a change in the predominant conceptualisation of justice. The women’s liberation paradigm did not frame its aims in terms of recognition and did not expect recognition from existing social institutions but struggled to be liberated from them. Moreover, it typically did not analyse women as a subordinated status group but more as an exploited sex class, positing an antagonistic relationship that cannot be overcome by recognition. The mainstream gender paradigm of today, on the other hand, is markedly characterised by a recognitive logic within the existing social system. Mainstream feminism and especially sexual and gender minority activism are struggling for the social and legal recognition of their misrecognised identities and experiences, which they presume to exist prior to (mis)recognition (Fraser, 2005: 298–299; Jagose, 1996: 61). This recognition model does not presuppose antagonisms in questions of (in)justice, but rather attempts to solve

¹⁰ As accounts of the inner life and conduct of humans through which individuals come to understand and act upon themselves, such psy-influenced theories of the subject advance techniques of governing the self that feed into techniques of governing others in liberal political settings (Rose, 1996). These gender discourses are therefore at the forefront of progressing governing techniques.

¹¹ Their attempts at theorising the political are typically extensions of their theories of subjectivity (possibly supplemented with reflections on the content, terrain, strategies or any other facet of actual or envisioned politics) rather than theorisations of the driving forces and workings of the political. See such attempts in e.g. Butler and Scott (1992).

social problems within the same structure through technical means (like, for instance, visibility and representation).

Between these two paradigms there is a fundamental discrepancy: one construes social struggles as morally motivated, allowing for the possibility of social resolution, the other as springing from clashing antagonistic interests or incongruent values (Honneth, 1992: 145–151). The recognition paradigm of justice is thus distinctly post-political in that it negates politics on two interrelated levels: it denies the antagonisms inherent in capitalist social relations (and hence contemporary emancipation politics) as well as the political nature of (some aspects of) the personal. Accordingly, the current hegemony of recognitive justice not only has marginalised redistribution claims, as its most popular critique states, but it has also solidified a post-political conception of social justice struggles as resolvable moral conflicts as opposed to radical political challenges that tend(ed) to understand them as antagonistic political conflicts.

This major change in the dominant forms of emancipatory politics, in short, can be described as a conversion from the critique of to the convergence with hegemonic ideology. With this I do not mean to suggest that emancipatory politics were ever uniform with respect to their relationship to hegemonic ideology.¹² There has certainly been a diversity of feminist activisms since the 1960s until these days, yet a marked shift can be clearly observed. This striking rearrangement from feminist ideology critique that grew out of New Left movements to today's hegemonic recognition politics can be understood through the immense power of the capitalist system to absorb and neutralise critiques for its survival (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 27). Of course, such absorption is typically not a spontaneous process, but a result of political intervention. In the next section I will look at how recognition politics has emerged and fared with respect to hegemonic struggles.

4. The unrecognised contradiction of recognition politics and its symptom management

The omnipresence and continuous fragmentation of identities and recognition claims in late capitalism has been commonly voiced in social sciences. The ubiquity of identity claims has been interpreted, among other ways, in the context of globalisation's simultaneous globalising and individualising pressures, the more transitory and elusive nature of contemporary power relations, and consumerism selling life-styles and brands of identity (Bauman, 2001a; 2001b; Braidotti, 2005–2006). As for the motivations of corporate, NGO or individual actors to recognise or represent identity-based claims, the economic benefits of non-discriminatory employment (and marketing), 'diversity' as a newer form of symbolic capital, and consequently recognition as a new currency in certain social settings are among the notable ones (Watkins, 2018; Nagle, 2017).

¹² As, for instance, many feminists continued to contest the reversals of the idea of the personal is political, yet these critiques have been gradually forced out of the mainstream both in academia and the media.

Besides the interweaving social, economic, technological and cultural aspects, there are political and ideological factors contributing to the ubiquity of recognition claims that are worth examining in the context of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic endeavours. First, it is essential to look at how these forms of politics emerged. Not long after the radical liberation movements started to unfold, philanthropic foundations like the Ford Foundation started to shovel billions of dollars into projects and groups (including black and women's rights organisations and many more) whose visions matched their own, establishing a well-resourced institutional basis hidden behind the façade of self-organised services and informational networks (Watkins, 2018: 21–24). As a result, a wide array of NGOs and lobby groups featuring an anti-discrimination paradigm of emancipation were set up, which socialised with the political elite rather than their supposed constituency – this way absorbing a large number of cadres from liberation movements and engaging their energies with bureaucratic tasks rather than militant organising (ibid.). This anti-discrimination model, based on the logic of legal and social recognition, did much to entrench the recognition paradigm in the common sense conception of social justice. There were other points of intervention as well, most notably academic knowledge production. Both black studies and women's studies (later renamed gender studies) were institutionalised under the tutelage of the Ford Foundation, which also actively influenced the later development of these fields, including encouraging critical thinking within acceptable limits (Roelofs, 2003: 44; Watkins, 2018: 24–26).¹³

McGeorge Bundy, who played a salient role in this strategy as the president of the Ford Foundation for over a decade throughout the 1960s and 1970s, explicitly stated that this intervention was aimed at preventing organisations from radicalisation and served to make the world safe for capitalism (Roelofs, 2003: 125; Watkins, 2018: 22).¹⁴ This intervention in both the political and the academic fields sufficed to absorb and domesticate actors and endeavours antagonistic to the ruling elites into hegemonic political structures – a process that Gramsci calls 'transformism' (Gramsci, 1979: 58). Enormous amounts were spent to fundamentally shape the social and cultural imagination with respect to social conflicts and possible alternatives (or the lack thereof), effectively marginalising and sidelining the radical challenges to the prevailing economic, political and social system. Today's mainstream emancipatory politics, thus, is not the result of a spontaneous and inevitable institutionalisation and moderation of earlier radical politics as the mainstream historical narrative would have it, but that of carefully crafted political work.

The transformism of radical challenges is also strongly related to another important requisite of hegemony, namely the forging of consent (Gramsci, 1979: 181–182). The mainstreaming of recognition politics through the neutralisation of liberation movements not only managed to incorporate the active figures of the

¹³ For a detailed account of how foundations de-radicalised women's studies, see Proietto (1999).

¹⁴ Besides such statements, the timing and direction of funding also suggests that elite patronage has been typically a response to the challenge of grassroots movements rather than motivated by conscience: in the case of black organising, funding was primarily reactive and directed at moderate organisations (Jenkins and Eckert, 1986: 827).

antagonistic forces, but also widened the consensus by addressing members of their social groups. From this perspective, bigger social groups are more worth recognising, as the bigger the specific group is, the more people can be included in the consensus.

This, of course, might clash with other political, economic and social considerations, as the fragmentation of identity claims attests. There might be an internal logic to the splintering of identity claims based on a group's purportedly shared problems, as certain members of the group always feel excluded because of internal differences within the group, as did many black women from both black and women's movements. However, this dismemberment was not as logical and necessary a development as it might seem from today's compulsory intersectionality paradigm. As the establishment of identity-based politics itself, the further fragmentation of identities serves the hegemonic logic as it further fragments the (potentially) dissenting base and the scope of problems addressed. It thus should not come as a surprise that the focus on minority women, especially black women, and the intersection or interconnection of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality that have come to dominate gender studies since the 1990s, is to a considerable extent indebted to the Ford Foundation's programme to mainstream minority women's studies since the mid-1980s (Chamberlain, 1994: 222–223; Hill, 1990: 24–38; Goss, 2007: 1186–1187). Thereupon, in the early 1990s, philanthropic organisations, including the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation started to increase their funding for sexuality research, which was an important factor (besides the breakout of AIDS epidemic in the 1980s) in legitimating sexuality studies as an academic research area (Aggleton, Parker and Thomas, 2015: 3–4). The mainstream approaches of gender studies and activism since the 1990s, which are frequently presented as superseding former, allegedly essentialist versions of feminist analysis, were thus supported by philanthropic donors at a time when legalist radical feminism started to question something as foundational in the economic and social structure as patriarchal sexuality.

Besides its role in transformism and consensus-making, recognition politics also contrives to sediment the mainstream liberal conceptions of the human, society, and politics as 'common sense.' The most mainstream form of recognition politics is based on a concept of the human as an autonomous, self-enclosed individual whose values, predilections, and choices are independent of its social, cultural, political and economic context, as exemplified by some contemporary 'feminisms' calling for a recognition of women's choices rather than scrutinising them in relation to their wider context (see Budgeon, 2015: 307). Furthermore, mainstream recognition politics assumes a conception of social problems as a matter of old-fashioned stereotypes (rather than following from antagonisms, for instance), and of their political redress as a matter of learning tolerance. There are, of course, significant differences between various recognition politics as to how extreme they are in both these respects. For instance, the problems faced by women and American blacks are more difficult to reduce to the recognition paradigm because they are deeply embedded in redistributive matters, whereas the problems faced by 'sexual and gender minorities' are more distantly related to

redistributive questions and can easily be presented merely as a matter of individual tolerance, interpreted as moral and intellectual advancement (see Feró and Bajusz, 2018: 180–182). Besides, ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘gender identity’ (in their mainstream conception) presume a fully autonomous, inborn mental or psychic domain as the basis of their recognition claim that is unparalleled in black and women’s rights claims. The recognition politics of ‘sexual and gender minorities’ is thus closest to the ideal type of the hegemonic conception of the human, society, and politics, so it is not surprising that they have become so central in discourses about social justice.

The history of Anglo-American feminist and gender-based politics suggests that the transformism of radical dissent has been a continuous process of rolling out the hegemonic logic of fragmentation and then the mainstreaming of the most atomising recognition claims. This not only fractured the dissenting base into various minority women camps, but even weaponised newer and newer ‘minority’ claims against the bigger dissenting groups. This suggests that there is an internal conflict in hegemonic mechanisms: the requirement to forge and extend the consensus contradicts the pressure to mainstream forms of politics that embody hegemonic logic to the fullest, which, however, not only include very few additional people in the consensus, but also alienate or exclude others from it.

The current state of recognition struggles suggest that the latter aspect of hegemonic mechanisms became so dominant (maybe even self-propelling) that it started to undermine the consensus in two ways. First, by trumping many concessions that were previously granted to other claimants. For instance, while radical feminists have for long argued that queer and LGBT politics threaten women’s liberation (see e.g. Jeffreys, 2003; 2014; Sweeney, 2004), the conflictual relationship between women’s and LGBT activism has become more obvious to many women as transgender politics became extremely central, which effectively radicalised more and more of them.¹⁵ The logic of weaponising recognition claims against each other means that the most favoured recognition claims do not stop at colliding with just one other rights-claiming group, as for instance transgender recognition politics even started to hurt some gay and transsexual interests.¹⁶ Second, as the ideas of the completely autonomous individual, limitless self-determination, and tolerance as a non-conflictual solution for all social issues are brought to their logical conclusion, the values underlying ‘common sense’ become more and more transparent and contested. There is some irony in the fact that this self-liquidating logic follows from the internal antagonisms of liberal recognition

¹⁵ For instance, the 2016 initiative to modify the Gender Recognition Act in the UK to grant legal gender recognition on the basis of self-identification only, besides other issues like the exponential rise in child referrals to gender clinics, the growing censorship, stigmatisation, and retribution of gender-critical voices, including in the Labour Party, etc, drew many women (as well as numerous men) to the gender-critical side. See Cooper (2019) for a summary of the debate and a naïve argument for ‘interconnected coexistence.’

¹⁶ See the initiative by some gays and lesbians to drop the T from LGBT <https://www.change.org/p/human-rights-campaign-glaad-lambda-legal-the-advocate-out-magazine-huffpost-gay-voices-drop-the-t>, or a letter by transsexuals protesting against the transgender activist push to amend the Gender Recognition Act <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/transsexuals-tell-msps-that-act-changes-could-have-horrific-impact-on-women-1-4912495>

politics, which in turn follow from the inherent political antagonisms that recognition politics are meant to handle.

Of course, certain political strategies have been developed to manage these problems. One strategy of forging consensus with fragmented identity groups is the rainbow coalition. This concept, not surprisingly, has also been transformed through the past decades: the original Rainbow Coalition was an autonomous alliance spanning racial, ethnic and class lines founded in Chicago in 1968 by some young Black Panthers and other radical group members to fight, among other issues, for a classless society, and against divisive ethnic tensions, police brutality, and the Democratic mayor's urban renewal policies that destroyed poor neighbourhoods (Williams, 2013: 126–130). The concept was later appropriated for forging actual political constituencies, ranging from those of Jesse Jackson, the first African-American mayor of Chicago to Barack Obama, the first African-American president of the United States (*ibid.*, 13–14). In the meantime, it was incorporated by recognition politics. In a paradigmatic reconceptualisation, the traditional coalition is contrasted with the rainbow coalition, wherein the former's members work together along shared interests while agreeing not to bring up differences, while the latter's programme is not based on some 'principles of unity,' but rather on the affirmation and support of each constituting oppressed group's experiences and claims (Young, 1990: 188–189). In this conception, there are no inevitable conflicts between different identity groups, and if conflicts should arise, public discussion and fair decision-making can solve or handle them (*ibid.*). Once a code word for class struggle (Williams, 2013: 128), the rainbow coalition has become a post-political tactic of handling fragmented recognition politics.

Another conceptual device mitigating the contradictions of recognition politics is intersectionality, a quintessential expression in gender studies and 'progressive' activism that is meant to address the interaction of different axes of social relations like gender, race, sexuality, and so forth.¹⁷ As we have seen, intersectionality was to a large extent fostered by the Ford Foundation's social engineering. While this concept is definitely useful in the legal context in which it was originally formulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), the problem that it was used to address emerged precisely from the Ford Foundation's own anti-discrimination approach of disaggregating social problems into discrete obstacles faced by disjunct groups (Watkins, 2018: 27). Since then, intersectionality has been divorced from this legal context to be championed as a concept of universal validity for all social formations. By today, intersectionality has become a rather vague buzzword in classrooms and activism, most frequently used as a prescription for diversity, representing people or identities of different types (Gordon, 2016: 346–354). It has served to manufacture a(n allegedly) unified platform not only between splintered and shifting identities, but between different theoretical and political approaches as well (Davis, 2008: 71–76). Intersectionality is thus meant to not only manage the fragmentation of an identitarian base, but also to outsmart its conflicts as well: it is typically conjured as a consensus-creating signifier, a

¹⁷ Exactly because of its ubiquity, intersectionality is employed in vastly different conceptions and theoretical frames, and it has been critiqued in feminist theory from different perspectives.

promise of transcending ‘divisions’ while eluding the question of power relations to institutionalise an all-inclusive liberal agenda (Carbin and Edenheim, 2014: 233–241). It is, at the same time, often used as a rhetorical weapon in vicious fights over conflicting claims in online and offline activism (Gordon, 2016: 350). In spite of extensive black, postcolonial, and leftist feminist criticisms of its recent use (see e.g. Salem, 2016 for an overview), intersectionality has remained a shorthand for up-to-date and progressive in mainstream gender discourse. Not questioning that there is a huge amount of valuable scholarship working with intersectionality, this concept is, in its most dominant deployment, a post-political tool of settling conflicts in a way that it converges with hegemonic logic under the guise of a universal, objective, and all-purpose toolkit of bridging ‘divisions.’ In essence, intersectionality and the rainbow coalition with their utopian promise of an unconflicting base are post-political symptom management techniques for keeping the contradictions of recognition politics under control, remaining within its logic, of course.

5. Recognition politics and the rise and fall of hegemonic projects

As recognition politics became such a central strategic element of the hegemony of liberalism, it is not surprising that severe blows to the hegemony, especially the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in 2016, reinvigorated struggles over the role of recognition with respect to liberal hegemonic endeavours. Among the wide range of contributions, many liberals have argued for a return to classical liberalism and the abandonment of fallen identity/recognition liberalism, deemed as a leftist current in liberalism and a major cause of rising right-wing populism (see e.g. Lilla, 2016; 2017; Fukuyama, 2018; *The Economist*, 2018). Francis Fukuyama, for instance, who predicted the end of ideology and the final triumph and universalisation of liberal democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union (1989: 4), now argues that his prophecy was not fulfilled because liberal democracy could not fully solve a problem that has grown to become its biggest enemy: the part of the soul that craves for recognition (Fukuyama, 2018: xi–xii). Responses to such arguments have included assertions that Democratic politics must be identity politics and there is no other form of politics at all – in the vein of the Thatcherian post-political ‘there is no alternative’ (Goldberg, 2016; Yglesias, 2016). Of course, debates between similar positions are not new (compare Taylor, 1992, and Habermas, 1994), but after Trump’s presidential election the stake of the debate became the future of the hegemony.

Another foray of hegemonic rearguard struggles has attempted to reformulate the role of recognition in the ailing hegemony in relation to the role of redistribution. Economy-focused criticisms of the obscuring of redistribution issues by recognition issues, postulated since the ascendancy of recognition, are now voiced with a new force by some liberal and left-leaning intellectuals in liberal establishment media (e.g. Pearce, 2016; G. Fraser, 2016; Klein, 2016). Calling for a combination of diversity with redistribution – also referred to as ‘intersectional left’ politics – these critiques have, in effect, argued for including more people in the consensus by recognising problems of the redistributive sort. Some new

political endeavours appearing in this volatile situation have even critiqued certain elements of recognition politics. For instance, the *Feminism for the 99%* manifesto argues that certain aspects of so-called progressive recognition-based issues have converged with the needs of capital under neoliberal capitalism (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019: 34–38). The basic assumption is that these forms of recognition politics give unsatisfactory responses to misrecognition problems because they omit something from the political plane (by obscuring the structural conditions fuelling misrecognition problems), not that they add something to it (by restructuring structural conditions; i.e. by transforming dissent, manufacturing consent, and forging ‘common sense’). The project thus aims to adjust to each other recognition and redistribution struggles (by adding an economic perspective to cultural claims and vice versa), and thereby unite existing and future movements into a broad-based global insurgency by overcoming divisions of culture, race, ethnicity, ability, sexuality, and gender cultivated by capital among the 99 per cent of society (ibid., 56–57).

Such approaches are built on the idea explicated in Nancy Fraser’s theories that the basic difference between claims formulated in terms of Marx’s economic writings on the one hand and in terms of recognition on the other is that the former revolve around economic, while the latter around cultural issues. Honneth has rightly pointed out contra Fraser that the crucial difference between the two paradigms is that one construes social struggles as unresolvable interest- or ideology-based conflicts, the other as resolvable moral conflicts (Honneth, 2003: 127–128). These two matters are, of course, not unrelated: as there are finite resources, their redistribution is the arena of social struggles that is most self-evidently connected to clashing interests (although there do exist moralised renditions of redistributive wrongs). While Fraser’s analysis points to an important aspect of a historical shift in social justice struggles, it misses the post-political reconceptualisation of emancipation struggles that has made the sidelining of certain streams in these struggles possible. Her dual model of justice thus tries to combine and balance recognition and class struggle (even though not by simply adding them together), theorising them as endeavours to redress the inseparable cultural and economic realms of injustice, rather than as two contradicting paradigms of justice based on incompatible conceptions of social relations under capitalism.¹⁸ The currently hegemonic recognition claims, as I have argued, have been taking shape as underpinnings of the ‘intellectual and moral unity’ of ascending liberal hegemony and as a remedy to counteract the antagonism-based grammar of liberatory politics, which questioned exactly this unity. Attempting to combine elements from these two is hence fraught with contradictions. Lacking an adequate theorisation of conflicts, and as such, politics and ideology, the proposal of *Feminism for the 99%* fails to comprehend political conflicts between different claims in its desired alliance. Its approach remains trapped within the post-political imagination of liberal hegemony in spite of its radical anti-capitalist rhetoric, and

¹⁸ This problem is not solved (or is maybe even aggravated) by adding a third, political axis to the model, as in Fraser’s later work. The most influential debates on recognition between feminist academics (most of all, Judith Butler, Iris Marion Young, and Fraser herself) also do not touch on the crucial questions of the political.

eventually ends up embracing and amending central strategic elements of hegemonic ideology.¹⁹

Despite the renewed debates, recognition politics has not been dethroned as the current hegemony's main strategy even as the hegemony is crumbling. Recognition politics has apparently been so deeply incorporated into the cultural hegemony of liberalism that very few can imagine a different strategy. Meanwhile, as some critiques of recognition politics have rightly pointed out, the emerging right-wing counter-hegemonic bloc also relies on recognition politics, which demands the recognition of identities not valorised by progressive politics, such as white, heterosexual, and man (Fukuyama, 2018: 91–92; Lilla, 2016). Recognition politics might even have become an essential foundation of hegemony: the success or failure of any hegemonic project seems to greatly depend on how many people feel they are reflected in it.

6. Conclusion

Contemporary recognition politics is characteristically post-political. As we have seen through the history of Anglo-American feminist politics since the 1960s, the women's liberation movement that has grown out of New Left movements started to question the ideological division of the private/public and highlighted the political constructedness of the personal. Several later streams of gender activism and theory undermined this dynamic conception, some even reversing the women's liberation movement's critique of ideology best summarised in the slogan 'the personal is political.' Some approaches, such as the conceptualisation of (part of) sexuality and gender as the untouchable inner essence of sexual and gender minorities, have tended to re-privatise and re-personalise what the ideology critique of liberation movements uncovered as political.

As opposed to many critiques of contemporary recognition politics whose analysis considers solely recent economic, social, and technological changes and presume that ideology critique has magically adjusted to the late capitalist *Zeitgeist*, I have argued that this shift took place through hegemonic recuperation that actively shaped rather than merely adjusted to late capitalist norms. Recognition politics emerged as the dominant form of emancipatory politics through the political intervention of the transformism of radical politics, marginalising and stigmatising some forms of politics while supporting and fashioning others. Recognition politics, besides neutralising challenges to the prevailing hegemony, has also become a crucial mechanism for forging hegemonic consensus and for sedimenting certain views about social justice and human nature as common sense.

¹⁹ At the level of party politics, Jeremy Corbyn in the United Kingdom and Bernie Sanders in the United States attempted to (re)introduce the language of class struggle in a political scene dominated by recognition politics, several elements of which they also kept. This 'intersectional left' strategy, however, does not seem to be successful at the current moment: the Corbyn-led Labour Party lost in the 2019 general elections to the Tories, and Sanders dropped out of the 2020 Democratic presidential race.

Although recognition politics proved to be an effective mechanism for absorbing and neutralising leftist systemic critique, it is not devoid of contradictions. Through the constant fragmentation and weaponisation of identity groups against each other, recognition politics continuously shrinks hegemonic consensus. It is therefore not surprising that after the most serious blow to liberal hegemony to date, namely Donald Trump's election to the White House, arguments against recognition politics reinvigorated on the liberal side. Meanwhile, many leftist critiques leave the essence of recognition politics unchallenged as they stay captives of an unexamined economism that assumes that ideology is hiding something, namely economic structure, from our view rather than actively adding something to and changing it by forging consensus and sedimenting common sense. They thereby typically downplay the role of civil society actors (including academics, intellectuals, media workers and civil activists) to centre the economic elite (or Capital itself) as the decisive agentive force behind hegemonic struggles, interpreting cultural formations as consequences of capital's working, rather than as the most important form of warfare in the struggles. In accordance with this, such analyses often prefer to interrogate neoliberalism (a more recent, radicalised version of liberal rationality), rather than liberal hegemony (the restriction of our common sense to the different versions of liberalism, as described in Žižek, 2008: 2). Such enterprises end up becoming entangled in the post-political rationality of liberal hegemony. It seems that the logic of recognition politics has been so deeply embedded in the social and cultural imagination that even some (avowedly) anti-capitalist endeavours are trapped in it, while the emerging right-wing counter-hegemonic bloc is also founded on it—on the recognition of the identities not recognised by liberal hegemony. Currently, it seems very difficult to even imagine any hegemonic project without recognition politics.

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