

# Recognition, multiplicity and the elusive international

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## Abstract

This article argues that the normative promise of recognition theory in International Relations has become increasingly inadequate to the cross-cutting and intersecting issues characteristic of a globalised and fragmented world. Engaging in critical readings of cosmopolitan forms of recognition theory, the critique of sovereignty and Markell's influential critique of recognition theory, I suggest that the increasing ontological specificity of recognition theory in IR has come at the expense of its ability to develop links between different areas of international politics. The result is a failure to deal with recognition's simultaneity, or the co-existence of analytically distinct and internally coherent recognition orders that is characteristic of the international. Building on this insight, I argue that a more historically-sensitive and materialist approach to recognition can be grounded in the concept of multiplicity. By opening recognition up to processes of interaction, and not merely reproduction, multiplicity frames the international more clearly as a historical presupposition, rather than a limit, of recognition. Furthermore, placing recognition struggles within the state, international institutions or transnational movements in relation to each other ensures that IR can contribute to the further development of recognition theory by situating recognition struggles at the intersection of different moral geographies.

## Keywords

Cosmopolitanism, global challenges, multiplicity, recognition, sovereignty

## Introduction

This article explores the limits of recognition theory for the discipline of International Relations (IR), with a particular emphasis on the role that recognition plays in a world of pervasive interdependence, fragmentation and emergent global challenges. Most clearly

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associated with the work of Axel Honneth, recognition has expanded from an intervention in social and political theory to driving a range of scholarship in IR. However, due to the fragmented and differentiated nature of international society, the normative potential of this import remains heavily contested. Cosmopolitan-leaning scholars have illustrated the considerable role that recognition relations and practices play in the shift towards a more globalised concept of world society, while others have emphasised sovereignty, the organising principle of the states-system, as an inevitable source of misrecognition. Both approaches identify significant and real, but theoretically incompatible tendencies in international politics. Given the universal normative claims arising from recognition theory in IR post-Honneth, those hoping to build on the promise of transnational recognition struggles as potential sites of transformation must consider what such an ambitious programme can offer in what Beardsworth (2018) terms a 'globalised and fragmented world'. This points towards a need to systematically interrogate the significance of IR for recognition theory; not merely as an extension of Honneth's approach, but as an analytically distinct contribution centred on the international as a constitutive force in struggles for recognition.

By emphasising the importance of the international for recognition, I take the position of a sympathetic critic of recognition theory, less concerned with adjudicating between its different strands than with what their central insights can offer our understanding of world politics in an era of global interdependence. This approach rests on negotiating the considerable empirical support mustered by different approaches to recognition while maintaining the explanatory power of their very different, and often mutually exclusive, ontologies. As such, I begin by arguing that the central problem is that of the simultaneity of different forms of recognition, each of which is structurally differentiated and associated with a different sphere of international life. Relations of recognition that have played a transformative role in world politics as key drivers of global civil society, such as the World Social Forum, co-exist in international space with those which drive continued appeals to the failed ideal of sovereign autonomy, or underpin global marketplaces. This juxtaposes the continued dependence of recognition theory on identifying patterns of normative consensus with historical processes of integration, fragmentation and differentiation that come into focus once one no longer takes the domestic-social foundation of recognition theory for granted.

Engaging in critical readings of Brincat's (2017) cosmopolitan approach to recognition and political approaches to recognition in the work of Epstein et al. (2018), as well as the influential critique of recognition developed by Markell (2003), I show how this tension is immanent to recognition theory as it has developed in IR. I suggest that while an agonistic framing of the pathologies of sovereignty provides valuable insights into relations between states, it fails to address the diverse empirical and normative practices which are emphasised by critical and international political theory. Similarly, de-emphasising the significance of sovereignty with the aim of securing the transformative potential of recognition runs the risk of rendering the substantive issues that IR poses for recognition theory as contingent upon its emancipatory logic. Rather than accepting this split as a function of theory, I build on the work of Schick (2015) to argue that the 'difficulty' of recognition for IR emerges from the structure of the international as such. This sets the ground for an approach which places the historical ground of recognition theory centre-stage, less with the aim of demonstrating the empirical weakness of recognition theory than with how the specificities of the international might transform it.

In the latter sections of the paper, I move to consider how framing recognition as multiple and historically emergent might more adequately capture the problem of simultaneity. Drawing on recent debates around the concept of multiplicity as an ontological foundation for IR, I suggest that Rosenberg's (2016) critics are correct in suggesting that multiplicity can be developed in ways that are sensitive to multi-scalar, functionally differentiated and contingent patterns of global interdependence. This greatly expands the conceptual and historical resources upon which recognition theory might draw. I show how multiplicity lies at the core of the spatial differentiation of recognition practices which is key to IR's distinct contribution to the recognition debate. Central to this argument is the question of how recognition is produced through a web of co-existent social geographies and their points of intersection. I suggest that without these resources, we are unable to address the emergence of recognition in liberal societies as anything other than a miraculous occurrence in isolation from the international, commercial and colonial links that were foundational to its practice in areas such as liberal jurisprudence (Shilliam, 2009). This situates recognition more clearly with respect to processes of interdependence and fragmentation that are vital parts of contemporary international politics. By expanding recognition to include interactive, as well as reproductive, practices of recognition, the international can be more clearly situated as a historical presupposition of recognition as it emerges within societies, in addition to its role as a distinct source of recognition struggles.

## **Recognition at Stake in international theory**

The development of recognition since its revival in the work of Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor and others has been one of refraction of its central logic through a huge variety of social scientific fields, each with their own structures and patterns of justification. For IR this is doubly true; firstly for the way that the functional dynamics of recognition become transformed when considered in light of relations between societies, and secondly due to the ways that this dilutes or replaces the normative logic that been central to its appeal in social and political thought. As such, recognition has been a productive if troubled import that has been reconstructed in different ways by scholars interested in the normative dynamics of the realm of 'recurrence and repetition' (Wight, 1995). The tensions involved have not undermined the considerable appeal it has exhibited for scholars addressing a variety of issues, including global challenges, which are dependent upon actors' normative expectations and understanding of their interdependence. Indeed, recognition theory has resonance with contemporary turns in IR that have emphasised the roles of emotions and practices, among others which seek to move IR beyond a narrow focus on superordinate political authority (Adler and Pouliot, 2011; Hutchison and Bleiker, 2014). In this respect, recognition has much to offer a post-positivist project that is concerned with the ways that conditions of global interdependence have the potential to change not just the 'minds', but identities, constitutions and normative expectations, of actors in international politics (Epstein et al., 2018).

Given the differences between international theory and the domestic focus of much social philosophy, the now-considerable scholarship on recognition in IR has grown from key analytical distinctions between the two, including the role of recognition in

IR's traditional focus on the relations between states (Agné et al., 2013; Daase et al., 2015; Lindemann and Ringmar, 2012), the potential of recognition 'above' or 'beyond' the states-system (Brincat, 2017; Hayden and Schick, 2016), and whether recognition can be reconstructed to reflect the role of misrecognition in international affairs (Epstein et al., 2018). The conceptual range opened by these debates has meant that IR scholars sometimes consider patterns of social integration or the normative transformation of social order as grounded in overlapping but distinct concepts that all fall semantically within the single term 'recognition' (Bartelson, 2013). However, for critical and cosmopolitan theorists, the diverse sites in which recognition practices play a role provides important insights into the normative structure of the international. The aim of such scholarship is not to characterise international politics as manifesting some deeper form of recognition that transcends the contingencies of international life, but rather to establish the potential for reflection, solidarity and transformation within it.

Attempts to locate functionally important recognition practices demand strong claims on the structures and dynamics of international life, mirroring Honneth's emphasis on the role of recognition in social reproduction. In the pluralist environment of contemporary 'campfire' (Sylvester, 2013) IR, this results in a diverse and fragmented range of recognition-theoretical scholarship with differing ontologies, each of which speaks for a particular form of recognition. However, given the ways that global challenges increasingly press scholars to build bridges between disparate fields, the synthetic or monist approach to recognition taken by post-Honneth scholarship remains an important attempt to develop a space for reflection on how contemporary world politics intersects with the normative dynamics identified by recognition theory. Despite the criticisms I set out below, I nonetheless maintain that recognition theory in its monist form remains emblematic of a need to foreground vulnerability and reciprocity as a way of historicising dominant ideas of universality. Such thought, I argue, has a historical ground and a drive towards synthesis which cannot simply be subsumed under political reason. The aim of my account, then, is not to arbitrate between particular theories of recognition to establish their disciplinary or normative priority. Rather, I pursue a more pragmatic approach that hinges upon how they are related and can be made intelligible to each other. This can be formulated as follows: *Given the variety of recognition practices revealed by IR scholarship and the deep claims they make upon the structures or institutions of international politics, how might IR play a role in the debate over recognition at a global scale?*

This is not a question of locating the correct bundle of normative practices that can underpin a more difference-sensitive spin on cosmopolitan themes. Rather, the aim is to situate the considerable achievements of social recognition with respect to its often-constitutive 'outside', in colonial expropriation and persistent relations of hierarchical dependence, among others. This, therefore, constitutes an attempt to address how IR might meaningfully engage the *simultaneity* of different and often contradictory recognition practices that co-exist when viewed from an international or global perspective. Honneth (2012: 330, 2014) makes only tentative claims on the potential of international recognition, seeing the progressive extension of universal standards through institutions such as the UN as a driver towards recognition at a global level while acknowledging the difficulties involved in locating more 'abstract forms of solidarity'. Such claims sit uneasily IR's generally more sceptical approach to claims of moral progress, which

suggest that practices of recognition such as those embedded in international society are polycentric and contradictory, often embedding rather than transforming systematic forms of exclusion (Holm and Sending, 2018; Zarakol, 2018). At the same time, treating struggles for recognition entirely within the realm of strategic action, or through the lens of social integration, misses the important ways that recognition reaches, as a normative principle, between particular groups or identities, either transnationally or in dialogue with institutional standards.

Engaging with this problem of simultaneity is essential in situating IR with respect to the value that other disciplines have found in recognition theory. Schick and Hayden (2016: 2), for example, note that while recognition is a relative newcomer to IR it has a 'particular place in the history of philosophy, as well as in modern political and social theory that attends to the ethical and political meaning of an intersubjective, shared yet conflictual world'. It is the specificity of IR with respect to this history that has driven the diverse range of scholarly responses to recognition. This raises three issues that are central to the argument that follows. Firstly, enquiries into recognition within IR have highlighted the ways that it poses existential problems for agents as they are situated within the structures of international politics. In so doing, they reveal the close relationship between actors' normative expectations and their constitution in and through the international, exceeding the domestic-social focus of much recognition theory. Secondly, given the depth of these claims on the character and constitution of international actors, accounts of recognition often depend on establishing their normative priority regarding other recognition claims, rendering them contingent or otherwise marginalising them. Thirdly, in failing to understand how these different instantiations of recognition can co-exist and intersect, IR's contribution to the recognition debate becomes split along ontological lines. This forecloses much of the specific contribution that IR might make to recognition theory by removing its ability to speak between recognition struggles in their diverse forms.

Schick's (2015) taxonomy and critique of recognition theory provides valuable insights into how these patterns of differentiation arise by dividing its key strands into rationalist and primordialist approaches. The first rationalist strand, corresponding to the adoption of recognition in liberal thought and centred on the work of Charles Taylor, emphasises the role of reason in clarifying interdependence as a starting point for the negotiation of just social orders. As a result, it frames recognition primarily as a distributional problem between naturalised social actors; having identified recognition as a need, it then seeks rational ways to fulfil it. For Schick, while such framings can reveal a great deal about the different ways that recognition plays a role in, for example, international society, they are unable to conceptualise recognition as anything other than the affirmation of existing identities. The result is an approach which is deeply inadequate to a discipline increasingly focussed on the historical persistence and recalcitrance of hierarchies in international politics (Hobson and Sharman, 2005; Zarakol, 2018), as well as issues surrounding the transformation of global social structures raised by emergent global challenges.

By contrast, Schick (2015: 92) defines primordialism as those strands of recognition theory which emphasise the constitutive role that recognition plays in social life. By identifying a foundational link between recognition and the development of subjectivity, Honneth's work establishes its priority as a historically-instantiated but universal

presupposition of social struggles based in gendered, racialised or class distinctions. This normative priority is cemented by placing emphasis on the functional role that recognition plays for processes of social reproduction (Brincat, 2017: 11), in turn providing a critical standard by which social structures can be evaluated. Haacke (2005: 193), among others in IR, has argued that the value of Honneth's scheme arises from its ability to analytically differentiate between different experiences of disrespect, considerably broadening the concept's critical and theoretical range. Brincat (2013: 247, 250) further suggests that disrespect can be understood as the 'systematic key' to understanding recognition while distinguishing between different forms of social interaction 'with regard to the level, type and mode of interaction embodied in them, including the very structures of world politics'. For such authors, recognition offers a unified critical standard that bridges the social theory and IR.

While the primordialist strategy is successful in expanding the normative scope of recognition theory to include projects of social transformation and the developing nature of subjectivity, a prominent line of criticism, including that of Schick, foregrounds the political failings of its normative universalism (Epstein et al., 2018; Foster, 2011; Markell, 2003; Schick, 2015). By making recognition 'always already present in our fundamental attunement to one another' (Schick, 2015: 95), primordialism is grounded on a recovery of authenticity which fails to capture the reflexive and existential depth of the problems that it poses. Rather than taking these stabilising features as a given, Schick (2015: 101) builds on Gillian Rose's 'speculative Hegel' to argue that recognition theory should re-centre on its constitutive 'difficulty', including that posed by subjects' own refusal of recognition as a site of mutual vulnerability and implication in relations of power. This process 'involves a thorough examination of those factors that have fostered misrecognition' (Schick, 2015: 88), showing how the process of coming to know again – re-cognition – can be short-circuited through appeals to reason, tradition or authenticity. As a result, an ongoing and relational sense of vulnerability can be restored to recognition. This 'offers no new security' (Rose, cited in Schick (2015: 99)), but allows us to explore 'the gap between the (universal) promises of modern law and (particular) social and political experience' (Schick 2015: 99).

Schick's nuanced critique provides valuable insights into what it means for recognition to be 'at stake', both vital and uncertain and by emphasising its agonistic and contingent elements opens considerable space for recognition to be reconsidered in the context of a 'globalised and fragmented' world (Beardsworth, 2018). However, while the international clearly constitutes an important site of the 'difficulty' that Schick describes, I argue that the full consequences of this insight can only be fully understood by working through the specific difficulties IR raises, particularly in light of the different ontologies deployed by theorists of recognition in IR and the simultaneity of forms of recognition in contemporary world politics. Both cosmopolitan attempts to extend Honneth's work to the global level and critical engagements with misrecognition raise historical responses to recognition's difficulty to the level of transhistorical truths, providing important insights while isolating recognition from a great deal of the contingency characteristic of the international. In Kompridis' (2015: 347) terms the purpose of recognition becomes providing 'some degree of *immunity* as insurance against the unpredictability of the future, against chance and contingency, against challenge and criticism'. For IR, this

problem of contingency can be expanded to include co-existence with other, radically different spheres of recognition relations and practices which are similarly justifiable on their own terms. In the following sections I pursue this line of inquiry by examining how specific cosmopolitan and political framings of recognition theory justify this pattern of reification. I then propose a closer engagement with multiplicity as a way of orienting recognition scholarship in IR towards the historical production of recognition in and through the international.

## **Beyond the state: Cosmopolitan geographies of recognition**

As a systematic extension of Honneth's approach to the field of IR, the work of Brincat (2017: 2) epitomises scholarship that has sought to align recognition theory with a reconstructed and relational form of cosmopolitan thought. In doing so, it aims to justify a transformative approach to recognition in IR by emphasising the emergence of distinct forms of transnational solidarity beyond the limits of the states-system. While applicable to a wide range of issues and particular struggles for recognition, I focus here on how Brincat adapts Honneth's project by locating recognition practices within the structures of international politics while continuing to maintain its normative grounding within a distinct picture of human needs. Emphasising what in Critical Theory is termed 'postmetaphysical justification' therefore allows Brincat (2017: 4) to make strong claims on the reality of a cosmopolitan sphere that possesses 'unique social demands for the realisation of institutional promises of freedom'. This bridge between IR and the deeper philosophy of recognition, I argue, produces a specific form of cosmopolitan geography that can engage meaningfully with struggles for recognition at a global scale. However, while this approach presents a consistent and systematic approach to recognition and disrespect beyond the traditional concerns of IR, it has the consequence that recognition in these other areas are rendered as ultimately contingent upon this cosmopolitan logic. By raising the monist reading of recognition to the level of a transhistorical truth, it marginalises the contingency that is central to IR.

Drawing directly on the structure and logic of Honneth's project, Brincat situates their argument for a distinct, cosmopolitan form of recognition as an extension of the triad of love, rights and solidarity that were key to Honneth's (1995) original account. However, where Honneth's argument grounds his concept of recognition in social practice, Brincat (2017: 2) suggests that cosmopolitan recognition 'constitutes an entirely unique dimension beyond [. . .] local forms of ethical life'. Fully developed, this presents the opportunity for an approach to cosmopolitan thought that is responsive to an era of global interdependence and which can produce positive accounts of global difference and diversity in relations that run 'across, over and *beyond* the state' (Brincat, 2017: 2, emphasis in original). While many aspects of our lives are at least partially constituted or conditioned by their international dimension, these are not fully determined by their inter-*state* nature, involving a broader array of practices including trade, engaging with charities or NGOs and online. This broad reading of cosmopolitan practice can, then, be empirically grounded in the social relations 'characteristic of late, 'globalised' modernity' and which in many cases, make it possible (Brincat, 2017: 5–6).

Contrary to Schick's relatively abstract concept of 'difficulty', Brincat (2017: 11) is therefore engaged with recognition specifically as a wide-ranging critical theory centred on the practical work that recognition does in reproducing social orders. Within this, the limits imposed by state sovereignty as an 'unequal structure' of recognition (Wendt, 2003: 515) remain as an influential but partial expression of normative expectations that often causes us to forget the mutuality that is central to recognition as such (Brincat, 2014). This has the benefit of bringing a recognition-theoretic reading of contemporary disciplinary problems, such as the international and increasingly globalised constitution of social reproduction, into dialogue with the traditional concerns of IR. Similarly, where social theory finds its historical limit in the boundaries of the nation state, a cosmopolitan lens on Honneth's project might more adequately address the ways that normative expectations are no longer expressed in exclusively domestic-social terms. The central logic, however, remains the same; the dynamic of recognition and disrespect provides a normative standard through which 'all societies – including international society – can be judged by the degree to which all members are provided the opportunity (and conditions) for successful self-actualisation' (Brincat, 2017: 8).

A considerable strength of this approach lies in its ability to situate IR's encounters with recognition within a single, relationally constituted frame. States and international institutions can be understood in their broadest sense as structured instantiations of recognition relations that in turn structure or otherwise circumscribe the normative constitution of everyday life. For Brincat (2013: 249–250), this affords recognition theory the ability to conceptualise and respond to disrespect, as the 'systematic key' to fostering forms of human flourishing, in ways that are both expansive and culturally sensitive. Importantly, it further ensures that the intersection of recognition practices at the domestic, international and transnational levels can be understood as essentially continuous with Honneth's (1995) work, where the universalisation of LGBTQI rights, the struggle against apartheid and transnational democracy provide new perspectives on the triad of love, rights and solidarity respectively. In each such case, it is access to normative resources through international or transnational practices of solidarity that allows progressive movements to relate their struggles to a cosmopolitan moral sphere. Given the 'highly contested' and 'weakly developed' state of cosmopolitan society (Brincat, 2017: 24), their success is hardly guaranteed. But by engaging with cosmopolitan forms of recognition and their limits, IR might generate analyses which result in distinct obligations towards those marginalised by prevailing international institutions.

By locating meaningful practices of recognition within the social structures of international politics, it becomes possible to disaggregate a variety of recognition orders rather than viewing the international monolithically as the frontier of ethical life. However, this emphasis on cosmopolitan recognition as fundamentally continuous with Honneth's approach leads to some important conceptual limits. Despite Brincat's (2017: 26) observation that international society constitutes a plurality of public spheres that display an 'emergent form of communicative understanding', this plurality is not developed fully in theoretical terms. Rather, specific recognition orders are primarily addressed through their relationship to authentic recognition and the functional role they play in fostering or constraining its development. While this approach leads to a more substantive engagement with elements of mutuality that are often drastically underestimated in



IR, the contingencies of international life are not fully developed in terms of their specific material, conceptual or normative logics.

The partial nature of this approach can be seen through the indeterminacy and weak institutionalisation of cosmopolitan recognition and is expressed conceptually in the ‘distance’ of what Honneth has termed ‘more abstract forms of solidarity’ (cited in Brincat, 2017: 26–27). That such forms of solidarity are not readily apparent but are mediated through an increasingly complex web of global relations suggests that the ambivalence of recognition remains a central issue in a world where cosmopolitan ambitions are ‘cornered by state and market’ (Brincat, 2017: 28). Given that, on Brincat’s account, campaigns for greater levels of cosmopolitan solidarity must emerge through, and in dialogue with, existing institutions of international society, considerable space remains for explorations of these institutions less as limits than as specific sites of emergent recognition practices. While Brincat is correct in arguing that cosmopolitan recognition is irreducible to these, such an approach would place considerable weight on the social and historical basis of cosmopolitan recognition. Equally as important are the ways that this shift in context might prompt reflection on the limits of recognition theory specifically as a social, rather than an international, theory. As will be explored below, work on recognition in areas such as sovereignty makes a strong case for these dynamics to be structured politically in ways that cannot be translated into an expression, limited or otherwise, of cosmopolitan social values.

## **International misrecognition and the critique of sovereignty**

Brincat’s cosmopolitan geographies demonstrate the value of recognition for IR by reaching beyond the largely domestic focus of much social theory towards a broader range of interhuman practices which are central to the contemporary structures of world politics. However, for some, this concern with the ways that international society impedes authentic recognition fails to account for the central role played by sovereignty, now theorised as an irreducible source of *misrecognition* with deep implications for the development of subjectivity. As a result, where Brincat positions IR as continuous with Honneth’s emphasis on domestic relations of recognition, scholars emphasising the primacy of the political instead perceive an essential disjuncture between domestic and international life. This suggests that progressive readings of recognition, in response to the ‘hard facts’ of an international society comprised of sovereign states, can pursue normative universalism only by retreating behind a restricted set of cosmopolitan practices and institutions. Whether misrecognition emerges concurrently with, and exists alongside, or subsumes ‘primordialist’ recognition therefore bears directly on how IR’s contribution is situated with respect to the broader recognition debate.

This reading places a fundamentally political logic at the centre of recognition struggles, bounding recognition within the limits of the nation-state and undermining the claims of cosmopolitan recognition to any kind of analytical or normative primacy. In the work of Epstein et al. (2018: 787) the central pillar of this critique resides in the concept of sovereignty, the symbolic structure of which underpins the ‘structural impossibility of actors being recognised in the ways that they want to be’. Turning the left-Hegelian

reading of recognition on its head, the struggle for recognition instead conceals and is constituted by a desire for unimpeded sovereign agency. Given the continued empirical relevance of the state in international politics, the critique of sovereignty offers considerable potential in understanding the recalcitrance of the statist international order as a historical limit on cosmopolitan recognition; one which persists regardless of its ability to offer 'alternative normative resources' (Brincat, 2017: 27). While this does not entail an outright rejection of the reality of those cosmopolitan practices which reach beyond the restrictive analytical frame of inter-state relations, it does suggest the need for a more sanguine assessment of their potential limits in what Beardsworth (2018) has termed a 'globalised and fragmented world'.

This problem runs deep indeed. For the authors of a special issue on *Misrecognition in World Politics*, sovereignty necessarily fails to satisfy the desire for recognition; a desire which remains under the surface as the 'engine of human agency' (Epstein et al., 2018: 788). In this respect, the authors go further than Wendt (2003: 507) whose teleological argument for the inevitability of a world-state characterises sovereignty as a 'structure of *unequal* recognition' (emphasis added). Rather, sovereignty is the site of a systematic denial of authentic recognition, even for those actors that attain it in some historically circumscribed form. This being the case, the pursuit of recognition itself becomes part of the broader problem; dependent on the myths of sovereign agency and of autonomy while simultaneously presupposing subjects' need for affirmation in the eyes of others. It is for this reason that Markell (2003: 5) argues that recognition depends on 'not the misrecognition of an identity [. . .] but the misrecognition of one's own fundamental situation or circumstances'. When the predominant structuring principle of international politics is grounded in the deep desire for independence, and contemporary global issues are manifestly emergent from increasing levels of interdependence, then the conceptual gulf between political and cosmopolitan readings of recognition becomes absolutely clear.

Does IR's contribution to the debate merely consist, then, in the negation of recognition through the pathologies of sovereignty? While Epstein et al.'s argument provides a convincing exploration of sovereignty as a locus of misrecognition, the extent to which it is painted in strokes specific to the state form suggests not. In particular, they formulate the problems posed by sovereignty in terms that are 'self-consciously structural and state-centric' while nonetheless maintaining that it sovereign agency works as an ideal 'at all levels of analysis' (Epstein et al., 2018: 788, 793). This suggests a fuller account of misrecognition, as the driver of human agency, which might reach towards a critique of the cosmopolitan geographies that are central to Brincat's argument. However, by developing a state-centric understanding of sovereign agency through the conceptual structure of recognition, the authors reveal the key dynamics not of sovereignty as it practiced, but as it appears in that abstract and idealised form. As such, misrecognition works as what Kochi (2016: 87) calls a 'hinge concept', which 'has transhistorical importance at a very abstract level' but whose link to the international depends on 'alternative modes of concrete meaning within differing historical and cultural epochs'. While the authors are correct to note that sovereignty has no 'stable meaning and reference' (Epstein et al., 2018: 792), the conceptual limit they identify ultimately lacks a great deal of empirical content.

From this perspective, insisting on the irreducibility of misrecognition drastically understates the ambivalence of recognition and the ways that it is transformed by particular contexts. The authors are surely correct to argue that misrecognition tells us something about the central institution of sovereignty that goes deeper than the primordialist approach with its view of misrecognition as a ‘pushing-into-the-background’ rather than as holding existential implications for subjectivity (Foster, 2011: 260; Schick, 2015). But it is also possible to overstate the lessons of misrecognition as it inheres in the concept structure of sovereignty by extending it to forms of misrecognition where sovereignty may be involved but is not at stake, as well as conceptually overdetermining the contingent, historical form that sovereignty takes. In particular, viewing the struggle for recognition as driven by a desire for greater agential capability and as, *a priori*, a ‘struggle to the death’ (Epstein et al., 2018: 788) emphasises Hegel’s dyadic ontology at the cost of any empirical content. That not every recognition struggle ends in victory or death, and that many are suspended between these extremes through processes of institutionalisation and structuration, suggests that while it is indeed true that states cannot reach an ideal state of sovereign agency, recognition for IR must be understood as a historical as much as an ideal phenomenon.

## Recognition, emergence and context

Both Brincat’s cosmopolitanism and the critique of sovereignty cement their claims on recognition by embedding these dynamics within differing readings of its Hegelian conceptual logic. As a result, while each reveals important aspects of the contribution that IR might make to the broader debate around the significance and potential of recognition, this contribution is fundamentally split along ontological lines. This split, through which different theories of recognition become incompatible, poses considerable difficulties for the discipline as it turns to address issues, including emergent global challenges, which depend on fostering more inclusive forms of recognition in a globalised and fragmented world. Rather than resolving these ontological differences, I argue that the simultaneity of these different forms of recognition can more adequately be understood in historical terms, by taking an ‘engaged, interpretive approach to ontological issues, which folds ontology back into history and practice rather than serving as its ground’ (Markell, 2006: 30). As emphasised above, the aim is not to adjudicate between these different approaches, but to understand how the practices which each have identified co-exist and intersect; what I have termed the problem of simultaneity. This question is immanent to the theory of recognition as it has developed in IR.

Rather than straightforwardly substituting normative theory for history, the conceptual specificity and partiality of recognition observed in the accounts above points towards the question of its emergence, character and contingency in particular historical circumstances; an area where I argue IR can make an important and productive contribution. Put simply, the ability of subjects to place demands on recognition and to understand themselves reflexively as subject to mutual obligations depends on the world in which they position themselves; a world which is to a great extent not of their making. Markell’s (2003) influential *Bound by Recognition* is useful here for the ways that it addresses, in detail, the links between a generalised concept of sovereign agency and its

specific historical instantiation in the form of the sovereign state. I argue that this link points towards a constitutive role for the international at the level of recognition's 'conceptual structure' (Markell, 2003: 118) before turning to consider how multiplicity might underpin a parallel move in IR's engagement with the geographical and temporal logics from which recognition arises.

Markell's critique of recognition has its foundation in two arguments which, taken together, greatly chasten the conceptual and normative reach of recognition theory. First, they suggest that the desire for recognition reflects an aspiration to sovereignty, or 'the prospect of arriving at a clear understanding of who you are and of the nature of the larger groups and communities to which you belong, and of securing the rightful recognition of these same facts by others' (Markell, 2003: 12). Secondly, this desire for clarity is reflected in a misrecognition of 'one's own fundamental situation or circumstances', of finitude, plurality and interdependence, by way of an 'antidote to the riskiness and intermittent opacity of social life' (Markell, 2003: 5). The consequence is that of perpetuating injustice through the pursuit of a stable, practical relationship between past, present and future. This is further exacerbated by the impossibility of acknowledging that recognition can only be satisfied through uncertain and difficult relations to others. Indeed, where the appeal to a shared horizon of meaning is a contentious but nonetheless justifiable line of argument for social theorists such as Honneth, the difficulties posed by the international ensure that even more progressively minded theorists in IR often limit their arguments to presuppositions or potentialities. This intrinsic sense of multiplicity, uncertainty and value pluralism suggests that Markell might speak more broadly to IR's disciplinary preconceptions beyond the concept of sovereignty as such, instead pursuing what he terms a 'politics of acknowledgement' (Markell, 2003: 35).

Markell's account has resonance with contemporary re-appropriations of classical realism, engaging extensively with the thought of Hannah Arendt and the concept of tragedy. Tragedy, in this case, provides a link between action and identity by making it possible for 'acts to be meaningful' while also making 'us potent beyond our own control, exposing us to consequences and implications that we cannot predict' (Markell, 2003: 63). The desire for recognition, then, serves as one way in which the inevitable failures of sovereign agency are stabilised and the 'imperfect simulation' (Markell, 2003: 22) of autonomy is maintained. This tendency 'anchors sovereignty in knowledge' (Markell, 2003: 13) with the result that the plurality and unpredictability of social life both constitute and threaten agents' sense of themselves. As Epstein et al. argued in the case of state sovereignty, this leads to a perpetually unsatisfied search for autonomy. However, due perhaps to their closer engagement with human rather than state action, Markell remains more closely engaged with the historical context of this tragic condition than the structural and state-centric approach observed above. This parallels what Hayden (2016) calls the 'third term' of recognition, or the 'world' within which (mis)recognition is grounded and to which it responds. Rather than isolating the fundamental dynamics of intersubjectivity, as in much recognition theory, Hayden (2016: 106) shows how the co-creation of the world as a shared material artefact lies at the centre of pressing problems in global politics, including the destruction of shared worlds that motivates genocide. From the point of view of IR, a close engagement with such contexts and their opacity is a difficult and necessary component of what recognition is.

Markell provides some guide as to how the desire for sovereignty can be grounded in social terms, foregrounding the historical persistence of contradictions in Hegel's theory of recognition which, 'despite his claim that it is contradictory and cannot ultimately satisfy the desire that animates it, this social relationship does not simply collapse under the weight of its own incoherence' (Markell, 2003: 109). Crucially, this account of the way that recognition struggles persist is developed with reference to Marx, who similarly aimed to ground the logic of Hegel's system within its historically specific context and dynamics. 'A social form,' Markell suggests, 'precisely because it has spatial and temporal extension, can be structured in ways that accommodate contradictions, organising opposed forces in ways that permit them to exist together' (Markell, 2003: 110). The issue for IR is not that recognition is a distributional problem, or that the conceptual core of sovereignty is an irreducible source of misrecognition, but rather that the struggle for recognition is structured in ways that make reference to the international in material, temporal and spatial terms. Where Marx and others note how Hegel's 'thing' – the objects of nature transformed through labour – serve as a potential site of transformation in the struggle for recognition (Epstein et al., 2018: 801; Markell, 2003: 111–112), for IR this object is the structure of the international as it is historically constituted.

Building on these points, I argue that the considerable normative resources identified by the philosophy of recognition in its different forms together point towards a need to historicise the emergence of recognition as a problem within the broader dynamics of social – now international – life. Such an argument is prevalent among Honneth's materialist critics, who emphasise the contingency of the normative consensus at the core of his more general moral claims (Borman, 2009; Fraser and Honneth, 2003; Kochi, 2016; Zurn, 2005). IR potentially doubles this process of contextualisation, situating social theories of recognition within their international conditions and historicising the ways that recognition finds articulation through the prevailing institutions of global politics. Thus when Epstein et al. (2018: 796) quite rightly note how Markell 'encounters sovereignty' rather than starting from it, Markell nonetheless provides a way of historicising its pathologies through a conscious emphasis on the modern state; following Williams' critique of Kojève and Sartre, he actively warns against 'reducing recognition to one of its possible instantiations' (Markell, 2003: 119). Indeed, the meeting point between Markell's emphasis on the emergence of the state, as a historical solution to the problem of recognition, and the range of recognition practices pointed out by IR scholars has been described as a historical shift away from domestic recognition and towards recognition by international society through principles including the standard of civilisation (Onuf, 2013; Weinert, 2016; Zarakol, 2018). Situating the pursuit of recognition by states as a historically influential and ultimately contingent pursuit of sovereign agency allows IR to build on Markell's approach, asking how the problem of recognition's simultaneity might transform the way contemporary recognition struggles are understood.

## **Historicising recognition: Simultaneity and multiplicity**

This section illustrates how IR provides an important site for the further development of Markell's argument, particularly in light of the international and cosmopolitan practices that inform and structure contemporary recognition struggles. Engaging with recognition

in terms of their plurality and simultaneity is central to IR's contribution to the broader recognition debate, both as a relatively autonomous sphere and as a constitutive dimension of social life within states. Having seen that recognition can be historically constituted and persist in asymmetric or solipsistic ways despite its immanent conceptual logic, attributing a greater degree of recognition or misrecognition to one social form or another cannot easily stand as a transhistorical normative standard. Recognising this, Weinert argues that IR might transpose the universal claims of recognition theory into an explanatory problem: 'how is recognition produced if it is not automatically extended to the other?' (Weinert, 2016: 197). This is not merely a case of locating limits on authentic recognition, but of acknowledging that countervailing forces may themselves be other spheres of recognition relations and practices. From this perspective, the role that IR might play for recognition theory centres on the necessity of engaging with multiple forms of recognition, each of which emerge and are structured in distinct ways. In a globalised and fragmented world, the way that such recognition relations intersect and persist despite their apparent contradiction suggests that IR stands as an important counterpoint to both the totalising claims of social philosophy and the ahistorical employment of tragedy.

For scholars including Rosenberg (2017, 2016, 2013) and Matin (2020), multiplicity provides the ontological starting point for IR's contribution to such debates. While Markell (2003: 15–16, 110–111) is rightly suspicious of how spatial concepts such as multiplicity defer difficult questions in recognition theory, these historical factors are essential to the contribution that IR might make when, at a historical level, multiple such geographies intersect. In this respect, where the international has often served as an ideal limit for the 'internalism' of social theory, IR might show how it functions as a relatively autonomous historical presupposition of recognition struggles. The result, particularly in the cases of international law and decolonisation, may well reaffirm the ways that the state or international society become reified (Kaczmarek, 2019) in pursuit of an 'imperfect simulation of the invulnerability they desire, leaving others to bear a disproportionate share of the costs and burdens involved in social life' (Markell, 2003: 22). However, it also sheds light on the range of recognition practices that Brincat theorises as a *sui generis* sphere of cosmopolitan practices, and the dependence of domestic struggles for recognition on material relations facilitated by global markets and value chains (among others). A central benefit of multiplicity, then, lies in how it foregrounds the problem of simultaneity through its emphasis on 'Co-existence, difference, interaction, combination, [and] dialectics' in international as well as social life (Rosenberg, 2016: 139).

While Rosenberg's accounts emphasise the constitutive role of *societal* multiplicity, they point towards the further development of the concept in ways that might engage with relations parallel to or above the states-system. This has been a central theme in recent historical sociology and English School scholarship, which has developed Rosenberg's (2017) anti-realist 'IR of just about anything' to incorporate different forms and levels of interaction. Preceding Rosenberg's work on multiplicity, one influential attempt at adding this depth to international theory has been made by Buzan (2004), who differentiates the international, transnational and interhuman dimensions of world society in English School theory according to their respective geographies, functions and capacities for interaction. In Buzan's (2004) view, each of these structures constitutes

‘the operating environment’ (p. 134) for the others, pointing towards the grounding of inter-state recognition in other forms of social practice. By understanding recognition as emergent from patterns of historical interaction including, but not encapsulated by, inter-state relations, it becomes possible to consider how they might inform the structure of recognition without reducing them to a single reproductive logic or normative structure. In this sense, the success of particular recognition struggles is less the issue than is their emergence in the context of existing distributions of power and institutions. For Rosenberg, once more, ‘whether viewed in the long term of world history or at the quotidian level of shifting political conjunctures, social development – meaning causally cumulative change – is shaped by interactive, as well as reproductive, logics of process’ (Rosenberg, 2013: 27). This interplay, I suggest, whether (among others) in political economy (Matin, 2020; Shilliam, 2009), a structural shift towards external affirmation by other states (Onuf, 2013; Zarakol, 2018), or colonialism and the suzerain character of the states-system (Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Hobson and Sharman, 2005) gives global struggles for recognition their form and specific articulation.

Critical responses to Rosenberg’s work support this argument while by pointing towards the limits of a focus on societal multiplicity. This includes the role played by processes including climate change (Corry, 2020; Kurki, 2020), and non-state social actors as sources of multiplicity which suggest the need for a ‘deepening’ (Powel, 2018) of the concept and a multi-scalar view of the international. For Kurki (2020: 569), multiplicity does not have a ‘singular meaning’ but reaches towards more fundamental questions around co-becoming or co-determination, including the ‘dynamics and opportunities created by the condition of exposure to others in relations’. This has clear consequences for recognition theory, internationalising the vulnerability emphasised by Schick (2015) and positioning the international as a contingent but irreducible source of recognition’s constitutive difficulty in ways that parallel scholarship on the problem of harm in international politics (Brincat, 2013; Hoseason, 2018; Linklater 2007, 2011; Mitchell, 2014). Where IR has provided a domain-specific and historically-circumscribed form of the ‘politics of acknowledgement’ that Markell pursues at the level of political theory, the extent of global interdependence signalled by emergent global challenges seems to considerably broaden this agenda precisely because new forms of multiplicity do not simply supplant the old. Rather, understood in Markell’s terms, struggles for recognition are in part constituted by their displacement onto the international as a kind of ‘spatial fix’ (Harvey, 1981); one that is hardly timeless or immutable, but is capable of accommodating, structuring and suspending demands for recognition that may seem incompatible when viewed through the lens of social theory.

Weinert has built upon Buzan’s formulation of world society to show how the shifting terrain of the international can provoke a developing awareness of interdependence, resulting in efforts to build normative projects and shared worlds. Drawing on a shift towards an understanding of shared global heritage articulated by supranational actors such as UNESCO (Weinert, 2017, 2018), they argue that the universalist character of world society cannot be viewed as a contiguous normative tapestry but reflects understandings of interdependence that are highly contingent and often differentiated. Accepting this differentiation suggests that recognition emerges not from different areas of world society but plural, differentiated world *societies* that find articulation in spatially and

normatively distinct ways. For these ‘discrete’ (Weinert, 2018: 29) societies, including rights, sport, religion, the global economy and the planetary environment, practices of recognition are embedded in distinct aspirations to globality while nonetheless being historically circumscribed. From this perspective, cosmopolitan thought can be understood as a specific, humanist effort at building shared worlds that emerges from a particular commercial, colonial and religious context and which far from exhausts the wide range of ways that universalism has historically been expressed (Pasha, 2020).

By globalising the phenomenology of recognition, Weinert’s analysis shows us how IR might build on ontological multiplicity to contribute to the broader debate around recognition theory. In the case of global heritage, for example, they argue that the shift towards constructing heritage as held in common was prompted by a ‘commitment to apprehending and constituting the world as partly a shared cultural space’ that arose in response to conflict (Weinert, 2017: 424). Intuitively, the challenges posed by increasing levels of global interdependence provide greater opportunities for this kind of response by provoking reflection on a shared sense of vulnerability. This suggests that there is a great deal more empirical work to be done in areas beyond Weinert’s immediate concern with the embedding of cosmopolitan ideals within practices of global governance, including the more materialist analysis developed by Rosenberg (2013) in the theory of uneven and combined development. How this awareness of mutual vulnerability arises from religious practices as distinct from, for example, interactions through global markets or the states-system, and how the norms of contemporary world society intersect with the more particularistic practices and prejudices of international society, remain essential questions if recognition is to be understood as an emergent feature of societies rather than a social fact.

An approach to recognition that incorporates interactive multiplicity therefore stands in a productive tension with the more totalising normative claims arising from post-Honneth recognition theory. Where the latter frames struggles for recognition in terms of their functional significance for a cosmopolitan sphere of freedom, the former points towards the emergence and conditioning of this sphere by a broader, contingent range of interhuman practices with their own politics and dynamics. Despite global interdependence often being seen as the starting point for a convergent politics of recognition, I contend that the continued role played by unevenness, asymmetry and fragmentation in world politics shows how multiplicity can play a vital role in more materialist analyses of recognition that go beyond reproductive logics towards a greater understanding of its historical emergence. Central here, as Brincat (2017: 13) illustrates, are areas where struggles for recognition draw on the normative resources offered simultaneously by different recognition orders as a way of transforming the increasingly globalised conditions of social life. In such cases, the intersection of different spheres of recognition is contingent, political and historically delimited. In this regard, a central lesson to take from Markell’s argument is that the pathologies of recognition, located in the drive towards sovereign autonomy, emerge far more strongly when recognition is theorised from the perspective of a singular, unified sphere of social life, legitimating totalising strategies aimed at social integration. By contrast, if a shift towards a shared politics of recognition is possible, then it is most likely in those spaces where contingent and functionally differentiated recognition practices increasingly come to intersect.



## Conclusions: Uneven and combined recognition?

This paper began by arguing that the central issue confronting contemporary approaches to recognition in IR was that of their simultaneity; the co-existence, differentiation and interpenetration of manifestly different social relations of recognition in what Beardsworth (2017) has termed ‘a globalised and fragmented world’. Cosmopolitan scholars such as Brincat suggest that IR can contribute to the debate surrounding recognition by developing the actuality of a cosmopolitan sphere of freedom continuous with domestic-social forms of recognition. Others, including Epstein et al., have argued from a more political reading that the desire for recognition lies at the core of problems understood as fundamental to state sovereignty. Both provide powerful, persuasive and ultimately irreconcilable pictures of recognition and its consequences. In an era of global challenges, which increasingly brings the recognition dynamics of sovereign states, the governing institutions of international society and an increasingly globalised civil society into opposition, recognition theory risks becoming limited to specific domains of global politics and losing a great deal of its ability to speak between them.

Asking after the contribution that IR can make to our understanding of recognition when the conditions of life are simultaneously globalised, fragmented and diffuse, I argued that the international constitutes both a key site of recognition and a historical presupposition of much recognition theory. For authors such as Schick, the ‘difficulty’ of recognition lies in its ability to embrace existential vulnerability under conditions of uncertainty. Others, including Markell, suggest that the affirmative model of recognition offered by Honneth subordinates contingency and uncertainty under the drive to sovereign autonomy or the functional imperatives of social integration. However, insofar as recognition theory from Hegel onward has taken the emergence of the modern state as its model, the international persists empirically while being conceptually encoded as its ideal limit. In this respect, just as the emergence of recognition theory raises normative questions for the discipline of IR, so the international poses a historical challenge to the research programme of social philosophy. The international plays this role not because it is as-yet only weakly actualised as a potential sphere of freedom, or because it serves as the highest expression of a pathologised drive to sovereignty, but because it is a contingent and recalcitrant site of historical multiplicity. By contributing to our understanding of the international as a historical condition, IR might re-frame these issues to foreground the emergence of recognition alongside, and as an answer, to the problems posed by interdependence.

Reading multiplicity into recognition theory simply as a warning against the theoretical closure of the international as a site of recognition understates some of the challenges it raises for the future position of recognition theory in IR. Building on the problem of recognition’s simultaneity I suggested that examining processes of interaction, in addition to reproduction, allows us to more clearly situate different social logics of recognition within the greatly broadened concepts of world society proposed by scholars such as Buzan and Weinert. Reconsidering recognition through this lens raises important questions: how is it that recognition offers *these* freedoms or forms of self-realisation in exchange for *that* form of subjectivity in the context of *those* (asymmetric) relations of power? Furthermore, it restores the potential for more materialist analyses of the

conditions from which different forms of recognition emerge. Through such accounts, we might understand struggles for cosmopolitan forms of recognition as historically-situated attempts to articulate a sense of ‘globality’ (Weinert, 2018: 29), and where the grammar of such struggles is formed at the intersection of different moral geographies. This lays for the ground for future work which examines the emergence and structuring of new forms of recognition through an explicitly multi-scalar lens, foregrounding the simultaneity of different recognition practices as well as the tensions that result when relatively autonomous spheres of recognition increasingly intersect under conditions of interdependence. Perhaps most importantly, placing historical multiplicity at the heart of recognition ensures that the central ‘difficulties’ of the international, as a presupposition and a source of recognition struggles, can be understood less as a limit than as an opportunity for the continued development of recognition theory in contemporary IR.

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