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Published in:
Ethnic and Racial Studies

DOI:
[10.1080/01419870.2022.2104619](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2104619)

Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (APA):
Lægaard, S. (2023). A political turn in recognition theory? *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 46(3), 502-511.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2104619>

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A political turn in recognition theory?

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The official version of this comment has been published online in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* on 28 July 2022.

DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2022.2104619 Link to abstract and full text:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01419870.2022.2104619>

The debate on multiculturalism and recognition

Clayton Chin and Geoffrey Brahm Levey's article on "Recognition as acknowledgement" (Chin and Levey 2022) picks up on a long-standing discussion in the political theory of multiculturalism, namely the theory of multicultural recognition. The discussion of policies of recognition was one of the debates that started and from the outset shaped the political theory of multiculturalism. Recognition was made the central theoretical category in discussions of multiculturalism by Charles Taylor in his seminal essay on multiculturalism and the politics of recognition (Taylor 1992/1994). But recognition in a broader sense could be said to be central to all discussions of multiculturalism, including classics like Iris Marion Young's book on the politics of difference (1990) and Will Kymlicka's liberal theory of minority rights (1989, 1995). These were all concerned with identifying how established (mainly liberal) political theories were in various ways blind to or failed to take properly account of various forms of cultural, ethnic, racial and linguistic difference and to articulate alternative political theory frameworks that could remedy the identified forms of blindness. So, in one broad sense, all multiculturalism is about recognition.

In another, more narrow and technical sense of recognition, discussions have taken place between different multicultural theories about how to conceptualize multiculturalism and difference, which theoretical categories to use in doing so, and whether these required new fundamental political principles or could be combined with established liberal principles. Much focus within multiculturalism debates were on these latter questions, which extended the debates in the eighties between liberals and communitarians. Proponents of recognition were often understood as those who joined Taylor in criticizing the possibility for adequately addressing multiculturalism within a liberal framework, against liberal multiculturalists like Kymlicka, who argued that liberal egalitarianism could incorporate the importance of culture as a context of choice and justify minority rights on that basis. In the narrow sense, disagreements between different multicultural theories were therefore often understood in terms of whether they argued for an alternative recognition-based framework or whether they argued for multiculturalism on liberal foundations. This way of understanding the theoretical landscape has shaped subsequent theories of multiculturalism, e.g. Tariq Modood's civic multiculturalism (2007/2013, 2020), which is explicitly non-liberal, and Alan Patten's theory of equal recognition (2014), which seeks to recue the project of multiculturalism on liberal foundations.

Because the theory of multiculturalism was born out of and has continuously been shaped by these debates, recognition has always been central to discussions about multiculturalism. Paradoxically, this has at the same time meant that there has been relatively little reflection on the adequacy of the concept of recognition in relation to the types of problems that multicultural theory is supposed to be able to address.

It has either been assumed (to paraphrase Nathan Glazer) that “we are all recognition theorists now”, or that acceptance of the category of recognition marked the divide between liberal and non-liberal multiculturalism. It is therefore welcome that Chin and Levey revisit the theoretical category of recognition and consider the central question whether it is in fact adequate for handling the types of questions that we want multicultural theory to address.

Chin and Levey sketch a picture where the understanding of recognition has either been focused on accommodations of specific practices relative to established general rules or on recognition of minority cultures in ways that are primarily suited for capturing the claims of national minorities. One way to understand this is partly as an expression of the noted disagreement between liberal and non-liberal theories of multiculturalism. Liberal theories of multiculturalism have generally been concerned with establishing equal opportunities or equal treatment in some sense defined by fundamental liberal principles. Liberal multiculturalists have then argued that this mainly requires accommodations, e.g. in the form of group differentiated rights. On the other side, multiculturalists who have not been satisfied with this fundamental liberal approach have followed Taylor in focusing on an understanding of recognition with a more symbolic function where recognition was about expressions concerning the positive value of minorities. This latter approach has mainly been shaped by the types of (mainly Canadian) cases with which theorists like Taylor, Kymlicka and Patten were concerned, which predominantly concerned national and linguistic minorities.

I agree with the basic claim made by Chin and Levey, which I take to be that multiculturalism has to be about more than accommodations, and that the existing theories of symbolic recognition have not been developed to address minority groups that are not national or linguistically defined but are rather the products of processes of migration into established nation-states. Chin and Levey propose a multicultural concept of recognition as a form of acknowledgement which is supposed to provide a symbolic form of recognition suitable for immigrant minorities. My comments concern some of the ways in which they seek to motivate and cash out this specific concept of recognition rather than the need for it in the first place.

One way to situate both Chin and Levey’s contribution and my comments to it is to start out from a very generic idea of the structure of recognition. When we discuss recognition, in any context, it seems that we can always identify certain aspects. At the very least, it seems that recognition has to involve, first, some agent who is the subject of the act of recognition and, second, something else that is the object of recognition. The act of recognition furthermore must involve, third, some form of stance adopted by the agent towards the object. We can distinguish between different accounts of recognition depending on how they specify recognition with respect to these aspects.

As I understand them, Chin and Levey propose to answer the questions about especially the object of recognition and the type of stance adopted by the agent of recognition in relation to it in a different way from classic theories like Taylor’s. My comments accordingly focus on their views in these respects. I agree with them that the object of recognition should be minority status rather than the pre-existing cultural identities often assumed in classic recognition theory. But at the same time, I think that they at some points seem to slip back into a more classic understanding of the object of recognition. Furthermore, whereas classic recognition theory has tended to assume that recognition involves positive value judgments, Chin and Levey propose an alternative in terms of what they call acknowledgment. I think this is a promising move that avoids many of the problems of classical theories. In this respect, my comments focus on how we might understand this move as a form of political turn and the reasons there might be for pursuing a political theory of recognition. Both of these aspects connect to more general debates about the methodology and type of political theory that I will remark upon along the way.

Minority status as the object of recognition

If multiculturalism should be tailored to a specific type of minority, namely post-immigration minorities, then we need an account of what characterizes such minority groups. Chin and Levey follow Modood in basing this account on a sociological understanding of how minority status is constituted. They note how Modood proceeds from an understanding of difference and identity, not as something that exists and has some form of significance independently from the political context in which groups find themselves, but as the “fact of negative difference”. The point here is that minority status is something that is constituted in political and social processes characterized by unequal relations of “alienness, inferiorization, stigmatization, stereotyping, exclusion, discrimination, racism, etc.; but also the senses of identity that groups so perceived have of themselves” (Modood 2014, 34).

This point of departure marks a different approach in methodological terms; rather than starting from a fundamental philosophical theory about what matters for justice (e.g., equal opportunities as defined by some form of liberal egalitarianism) or the good life (e.g., affirmation of the value of one’s authentic cultural identity) and then show how this requires some form of minority rights or symbolic recognition for certain groups, the approach starts from specific types of experienced minority exclusion. This is a more sociological starting point, an understanding of minorities as for the purpose of political theory partly constituted by negative reactions from the rest of society.

This approach offers an alternative to the often unreflective but understandable assumption in most debates about multiculturalism, namely that multiculturalism must be about “culture” and accordingly must be based on an account of what culture is, how we can distinguish and individuate cultural groups, and why culture matters politically. Kymlicka answers these questions by seeing culture as a context of individual choice. Taylor answers by appeal to an idea of a human need for authentic self-expression, which he links to national cultures. Both are accordingly applications of pre-existing general philosophical theories, be it a liberal theory of distributive justice or a neo-Hegelian account of conditions for self-formation and the good life. By following Modood’s sociological approach, Chin and Levey’s point of departure is not only different from those of liberal multiculturalists like Kymlicka or recognition theorists like Taylor, but also from multiculturalists like Bhikhu Parekh (2006), who bases his theory on a philosophical theory of culture.

Here, I would like to make two critical remarks. While I agree with the sociological focus on minority status, it seems to me that Chin and Levey proceed to make further claims that either sit uneasily with this approach or at least does not follow immediately from it. One of their claims is that this account of recognition is primarily associated with enabling a sense of belonging. In making this further claim, Chin and Levey are also in agreement with Modood and other members of the so-called Bristol School of Multiculturalism (BSM) (Levey 2019) who precisely link multiculturalism and national belonging. But, on the face of it, it is not clear why a point of departure focused on negative difference leads to a concern with belonging. In fact, one way to see this part of Chin and Levey’s position is that they here invoke just another pre-existing theory. Where Kymlicka had his theory of culture as a context of individual choice and Taylor had his theory of authentic cultural identities, Chin and Levey join the BSM in proceeding from yet another general theory, this time merely one about the need for belonging. My quarrel here is not with the notion of belonging as such, nor with the claim that it can be relevant for understanding the position of minorities. My point is rather that the same can be said for Kymlicka’s and Taylor’s respective theories. They also pick out what seems to be reasonable and relevant perspectives. But the point in the sociological focus on

negative difference was to start out with specific dynamics characteristic of the immigrant minorities whose particular situation Chin and Levey seek to capture. Exclusion and discrimination as examples of problems faced by immigrant minorities can arguably be identified and seen as problems without relying on an account of belonging. So why is belonging a more appropriate framework than contexts of choice or authenticity? If negative difference as a point of departure provides an alternative to the latter two types of theories, why does it lead to a theory of belonging instead?

A related critical point is that, while Levey and Chin in keeping with the focus on negative difference reject the thought that recognition is directed at some pre-existing cultural difference, they revert to a focus on identity. Following Young, they retain an understanding of negative difference according to which exclusion is a matter of how identities are marked by negative differences. And following Taylor, they still write of how minority groups have “inherited identities” for which they seek recognition. But if we take the point of departure in negative difference seriously, is the language of identity helpful here? Identity-language easily leads to the assumption that identities are features that exist in and of themselves, independently of the political context. If we speak of multiculturalism and minorities in terms of recognition of identities, we risk slipping back into the classical problems of recognition theory where we assume that there is some essence to minority groups considered in themselves, independently from the social and political relations they enter into, which is original or authentic and that it is this that requires recognition. But the point of focusing on negative difference is precisely, I take it, that the problem multiculturalism seeks to address is how society and state reacts to immigrant groups. The aim of multiculturalism is then not to recognize some pre-existing identity but to identify the ways in which minorities are excluded and to address the mechanisms leading to this exclusion. For this reason, I find the continued use of identity-language problematic or at least unhelpful when viewed in the light of the fundamental correct claim that multiculturalism should start from and seek to address negative difference.

A political turn in recognition theory

I now turn from the object of recognition to the stance that the agent of recognition (usually the state) is supposed to take towards the object. Classic theories of recognition, such as Taylor’s, assumed that recognition involves expression of a positive valuation – or at least a presupposition of positive value. This assumption leads to several problems and objections. Not only does it clearly (and intentionally) clash with liberal neutrality, it also faces questions about whether such value judgments are sound (some cultures might involve traditions or norms that are not worthy of positive valuation by the state) and whether the state can actually positively value different cultures if they involve opposite norms. However, if the object of recognition is not some pre-existing cultural identity but the negative difference experienced by immigrant minorities, this puts further pressure on the classical view. The fact of negative difference is clearly not something to be positively valued. Rather, negative difference must be brought to light and addressed as something to be overcome.

Chin and Levey’s proposal to conceive of multicultural recognition as acknowledgement therefore makes very good sense against the starting point in negative difference. They suggest that the aim of such acknowledgment is the symbolic inclusion of post-immigration communities within the political community as equal members. This means that recognition as acknowledgment is focused on identifying how minority status in the noted sociological sense involves obstacles to equal membership. Drawing further on James Tully, Patchen Markell and Elisabetta Galeotti, Chin and Levey point out how recognition in this sense is a

political process of struggling for the distinctive good of acknowledgement as a posture or act by the state that symbolically includes minorities as equal members in the political community.

My comment at this point takes the form of an interpretation of how we might understand this move from recognition as positive valuation of some pre-political identity or culture to acknowledgment of negative difference with a view to securing symbolic inclusion of minorities as equal members of the political community. I should say from the outset that Chin and Levey might not agree with my interpretation. But I think that it offers an interesting perspective on the noted move which both offers additional support for it and situates it in relation to broader methodological debates in political theory.

My suggestion is to understand this move as a form of political turn in the theory of recognition. It might be political in several senses. Just as John Rawls (1993) proposed to base principles of justice on political values that could be expected to be shared amongst reasonable citizens rather than on substantive (religious, ideological, or moral) values on which citizens could reasonably disagree, one can understand Chin and Levey as engaging in a political turn in recognition theory. Rather than directing recognition at what in Rawlsian parlance might be called a metaphysical object of recognition, i.e., some supposedly pre-political feature of groups which are assumed to be constituted independently of how they are part of a political context, towards which the state then is supposed to adopt a valuational stance, they seem to suggest that the object of recognition should be the political status of groups and that the stance of the state relative to this should be one of affirming a political status, not a metaphysical one of pronouncing something about the value of, e.g., a culture or an identity.

The suggestion that the theory of recognition might be understood on the model of Rawlsian political liberalism might sit uneasily with many multiculturalists. The reason for this is that political liberalism is linked to the idea that the state should be neutral, which many multiculturalists take to be impossible or even as an ideological cover under which particular (majority) norms are universalized as holding for all, thereby institutionalizing and upholding a structural inequality between majority and minority groups.

However, to say that we might think of a political turn in recognition theory does not commit one to adopting wholesale either Rawlsian political liberalism or even the broader idea of liberal neutrality. My suggestion is merely that the distinction between political and (what Rawls called) metaphysical offers a way of understanding different answers to what should be the object of recognition and the stance involved in recognition. We can make a move from what we could describe as a metaphysical to a political theory of recognition without doing so for the reasons Rawls provided for going from comprehensive to political liberalism, and even without thereby committing ourselves to liberalism.

If we recall Chin and Levey's affirmation of Modood's focus on negative difference as the point of departure for a theory of recognition, i.e., that recognition should be concerned with how a group is being viewed and treated by the surrounding society rather than with what the group in some sense is in itself, then the political move makes good sense. Negative difference is a product of social and political dynamics and negative identities are relational constructs that emerge from such processes. A political move in recognition theory similarly focuses recognition on the relational rather than on some supposedly pre-political inherent identity or groupness. So, perhaps surprisingly given Modood's insistence on not offering a multiculturalism based on liberal foundations, taking negative difference as the point of departure for the theory of recognition fits very well with what I have called a political move in the understanding of both the object of recognition and the stance the state is supposed to adopt to it.

Chin and Levey note that this approach naturally raises the question about what equal membership then means. But this is exactly the point viewing recognition as acknowledgment, namely that it leads to a

discussion of which ways of reacting to a minority group are in fact compatible with equal membership and which are not. In this way, the move is political in a further sense, namely in the sense that it opens a political discussion about the meaning of equal membership (with respect to immigrant minorities) rather than taking the form of an application of philosophical principles supposedly justified independently of political deliberation. So not just is the move political in a sense similar to how Rawls's political liberalism was political, it is also political in the sense called for by some theorists of agonistic democracy (e.g., Tully and Owen 2007) and political realism.

There are several positive implications of conceiving of recognition in such political terms. One is that the focus is drawn away from the noted classical discussion of whether multicultural recognition is compatible with liberalism or whether it rather involves a rejection of fundamental liberal principles. Recognition as acknowledgment is not a matter of rejecting or changing established (more or less liberal) principles for political membership. It is rather a matter of acknowledging that certain facts and circumstances are relevant to these principles and should therefore be taken into account. Kymlicka's liberal multiculturalism was an early example of such an approach since he took culture to matter primarily as a context of choice which links to the liberal concern with equality of opportunities. His theory of minority rights did not take culture to introduce new values or considerations but drew attention to how culture matters for an already accepted political principle. Recognition as acknowledgment can be understood in an analogous way where the focus is on negative difference and how it matters to equal membership.

Another positive implication of the political turn in recognition theory is that it makes clear that multicultural recognition is not (and should not be) a matter of granting "special claims" or offering "special treatment" for minorities. This has been the standard understanding of multiculturalism for a long time, especially when multiculturalism has been discussed as a matter of special group rights or exemptions from generally applicable laws. Such a framing of multiculturalism easily gives the impression that it is about giving minority groups special – in the sense of better – terms than others. But the point informing theories of recognition within what I have suggested calling the political turn in recognition theory is the opposite, namely that minorities only ask for recognition similar to what the majority already enjoys. Recognition as acknowledgment is a matter of drawing attention to ways in which minorities are excluded with a view to including them as equal members. So it is (and should be) a claim for equality rather than for special preference.

This might mean several things. If recognition is affirmation of the value of some culture, then it means that minority cultures should be affirmed just as the majority culture is already affirmed. But if we understand the theory of recognition as political in the noted sense, then this rather means that the position of minorities should be acknowledged in the respects in which it is relevant to equal membership, so that members of minorities can enjoy the same kind of equal membership as members of the majority.

The political reading also avoids the noted problems facing classical theories of recognition, namely that if recognition involves the affirmation of the value of a culture and if cultures are genuinely different (which they must be for the claim for recognition to make sense) then the state cannot affirm the value of cultures with too different content, e.g. in terms of the norms those cultures involve. But this problem does not arise if the theory of recognition is understood as a political theory of recognition.

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