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Three concepts of recognition

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I

A superficial glance at the current usages of the concept of recognition within academic international relations conveys the impression that this concept has become to this discipline what a Swiss army knife is to a boy scout. During the past years, several books and articles have appeared in which key international practices and institutions are explained with reference to different mechanisms of recognition. Fabry (2010) offers an account of how new states are admitted to international society by virtue of being recognized by other states, while Reus-Smit (2011) has argued that the struggle for recognition of individual rights played an important role in the development and expansion of the international system. Both Lebow (2010) and Lindemann (2010) maintain that the struggle for recognition has been a major cause of international conflict. By contrast, Honneth (2011) and Wolf (2011) argue that mutual recognition between states is necessary to push international relations in a more peaceful direction.

This renewed interest echoes broader concerns with recognition within social and political theory. When this concept found its way back into social theory after decades of relative neglect, it was welcomed as an alternative to materialistic and rationalistic accounts of social order, and has since been used to explain how agents and their identities are constituted through interaction (Pizzorno 1986, 1991). Largely simultaneously, political

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theorists started to propose mutual recognition as a way of resolving social conflicts by restoring respect and justice between the parties (for overviews, see Tully 2000; Zurn 2003; Kompridis 2007).

Although the concept of recognition has been able to perform a variety of different roles in these theories, there is no systematic account available of this concept and its meaning. As Paul Ricoeur (2005) has noted, despite its central role in modern philosophy, the concept of recognition has never been subjected to any sustained philosophical analysis. But instead of providing a philosophy of recognition himself, Ricoeur focuses on ways in which this concept actually has been used within modern philosophy, and then seeks to distill a few basic connotations from these usages. These are worth rehearsing for the purposes of this article. First, in the most basic sense, recognition is about the cognitive ability to *distinguish* and *identify* something as being itself and not something else (2005, 25). But in order to identify and distinguish something as this rather than that, we need recourse to criteria for including objects into different classes or categories. In this article, I will refer to this sense of recognition as *epistemic recognition*. In a second sense, recognition is a matter of *acknowledgement*. Such acknowledgement can assume two main forms, self-recognition or mutual recognition. Recognizing oneself is a matter of acknowledging oneself as an agent by virtue of possessing certain capacities, such as the ability to think, speak and act autonomously, as well as the willingness to assume responsibility for one's acts (2005, 69–149). Finally, the mechanism of *mutual recognition* is a way of accounting for how an unequal and conflicting relationship between two parties can be transformed or resolved by means of a reciprocal acknowledgement of their identities and values. This latter conception implies that the parties involved all are equally entitled to respect and human dignity (2005, 150–218).

To Ricoeur, these senses of recognition overlap and condition each other. Epistemic recognition appears to be the most basic form of recognition, being a necessary condition of both self-recognition and mutual recognition. For example, in Milan Kundera's (1998) novel *Identity*, the failure of Jean-Marc to correctly identify his beloved Chantal leads to a sequence of misunderstandings that eventually undermine both their relationship and their individual sense of self. Furthermore, while mutual recognition presupposes some prior capacity to act, full self-recognition will necessarily involve mutual recognition, insofar as the former to some extent is the result of the latter. As Ricoeur states this point, being recognized 'would for everyone be to receive the full assurance of his or her identity, thanks to the recognition by others of each person's range of capacities' (2005, 250). As we shall be able to note, however, most theories of recognition within academic international relations are mute when it comes to the conditions of epistemic

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recognition, implying that the classificatory grounds for recognizing an entity as an actor of a certain kind already are given or at least sufficiently unproblematic. Finally, most theories of recognition find it difficult to account for the relationship between self-recognition and mutual recognition other than in vague dialectical terms, by giving explanatory or normative priority to either of them at the expense of the other. As Markell (2007, 101) has noted, this cuts to the very heart of recognition: 'is recognition a response to something that already exists, or does it bring something new into being?' As we shall note, this issue is of relevance to contemporary international theory as well.

These different senses of recognition mix and mingle in contemporary international relations theory. First, the concept of recognition is widely used in order to explain how states are constituted through interaction, and how the modern international system has emerged as a by-product of such processes. In this context, the concept of recognition is used to explain how and why states are individuated from each other, how the international system thereby becomes stratified along status lines, and why conflict between states therefore is possible or even inevitable. Second, the concept of recognition has long enjoyed wide currency within international legal theory in order to account for on what grounds states might be admitted as members of international society, emphasizing the norm of sovereign equality. Third, the concept of recognition has recently been invoked to explain how the more undesirable consequences of international anarchy can be mitigated through the mutual recognition of collective identities. Here the concept of recognition is used to suggest a way out of the international system, by telling us how the conflicts this system engenders can be resolved by increasing respect for cultural and other differences.

Thus, the concept of recognition carries the burden of explaining not only how the modern international system once was formed and stratified, but also how an international society of nominally equal actors has been able to emerge, and, finally how this system or society eventually might be reformed or even transcended. Yet there is something enigmatic about this apparent versatility, since clear distinctions rarely are made between the constitutive, reproductive, and transformative powers attributed to recognition. This fuzziness in turn makes it hard to formulate questions about the relationship between different forms of recognition, as well as to understand how the transitions between these are carried out in political and legal practice.

The main purpose of this article is to clarify the logic behind these different usages, by distinguishing between what I take to be three distinct *concepts* of recognition, each rooted in different theories of recognition, and each with its own range of normative implications. While the primary

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focus in this paper is on different concepts of recognition and their meaning, I shall also provide a brief account of the actual *practices* of recognition in international politics. Doing this, I shall assume that these practices consist of *speech acts*, or otherwise symbolic acts that communicate the acknowledgement of the ontological, legal and moral status of certain objects and subjects. I shall also assume that these practices are shaped by different conceptions of recognition, but only to the extent that these latter are used in, or implied by, such speech acts.

While I would like to argue that different concepts of recognition are analytically distinct, they are also interrelated. The second task of this paper is therefore to explore the *connections* between the different usages of these concepts in international theory. How do political, legal and moral recognition relate to each other, logically as well as historically? Doing this, I shall address two assumptions common to the post-Hegelian lore. According to the first, there is a *necessary* relationship between political, legal and moral recognition to the effect that they form a historically progressive sequence, and that the mechanism of recognition gradually will propel the international system from a primitive state of war into a morally mature community of all mankind. By contrast, I shall argue that such assumptions cannot be warranted, at least not with reference to theories of recognition. International practices of recognition – by virtue of their focus on state actors – are more likely to reproduce and even reify the modern international system than to transform it. According to the second and corollary assumption, the chief outcome of practices of recognition is to bring *inclusion* into an international system, society or moral community. By contrast, I would like to argue that theories of recognition have been instrumental in justifying different forms of *exclusion* in world politics, thus bringing about a hierarchical relationship between those entities that merit recognition and those who do not.

II

Although all of the above usages of the concept of recognition appear to reproduce many of the original ambiguities of Hegel's ethics of recognition (compare Williams 1997, 334–43), I think it would be advisable to unpack the different concepts of recognition before any attempt to discuss their relationship is made. Such is the task of this section. Yet while doing this, it is important to bear in mind that since the present analysis is restricted to the usages of the concept of recognition in international relations theory, it should come as no surprise that while the theories under consideration differ in terms of their assumptions about the nature of social and political order, they share a focus on the *sovereign state* as

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the paradigmatic subject and object of recognition. Thus, in the present context, the concept of sovereignty functions as a source of self-identity and a principle of self-recognition, which allows a peculiar kind of actor – states – to become a possible object of recognition, while excluding those actors that do not conform to this symbolic form from the purview of possible recognition. As we shall note, however, while the theories of recognition discussed below all carry some commitment to the principle of sovereignty, they differ widely about its ethical implications and the kind of political order entailed by this principle.

Political recognition

Political recognition concerns what counts as a relevant actor, and how these actors acquire their status or standing in the international system by virtue of being recognized by other similar actors. Theories of political recognition assume that actors and their status are constituted through acts of recognition, and then set out to explain how these actors end up being what they are and acting in the way they do.

Normally, theories of political recognition seek to explain three things. First, they account for how states become states, and acquire certain characteristics peculiar to states. Second, these theories account for how states acquire their relative standing through interaction with other states, and how the international system becomes stratified as a consequence of such interactions. Third, since these theories view the above processes as outcomes of a *struggle* for recognition, they also purport to explain why conflict is possible and even inevitable among states stuck in such a system. At the heart of these accounts we find the notion that the struggle for recognition takes place between unequal parties, in which the stronger party is in a position to grant or withhold recognition to the weaker one, and in which the stronger party is likely to perceive demands for recognition as challenges to its standing. This assumption goes some way to explain how the international system is reproduced through the struggle for recognition among its constituent parts, all while these parts remain trapped in such tragic predicament precisely by virtue of being parts of a system based on a differential logic of Self and Other. Thus, theories of political recognition are primarily concerned with the formation and reproduction of the international system, and less with the prospects of its transformation or eventual transcendence.

A nice blend of these explanatory concerns can be found in Erik Ringmar's (1996) *Identity, Interest and Action*. This book tries to explain why Sweden decided to enter the Thirty Years War in 1630 in the absence of *prima facie* good reasons for doing so. As he states, 'people act not only

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in order to win things, but also in order to defend a certain conception of who they are' (1996, 3). In the ensuing explanation of the Swedish decision to enter the war, Ringmar emphasizes that this decision was based on a desire to be recognized as a sovereign on behalf of Gustavus Adolphus, and a concomitant wish to gain recognition of Sweden as a sovereign state on a par with other powers in Europe at the time. The motive for going to war was thus found in the mismatch between the Swedish self-perception at the time, and the way Sweden and its king actually were perceived by then dominant European powers. Thus, the Swedish king went to war in the hope of bridging the gap between these perceptions, taking his struggle for recognition right to the battlefield, as it were. In this account, the quest for individual self-esteem and sovereign statehood are intertwined, and together form a potent recipe for violent conflict.

Reflecting slightly different priorities, the dynamics of political recognition can help us understand how the modern international system has been constituted by struggles for recognition by individual actors. In his seminal *Social Theory of International Politics* (1999), Alexander Wendt purports to explain how states are socialized into the international system and acquire their specific characteristics. As he states with reference to state identity, 'identity is at base a subjective or unit-level quality, rooted in an actor's self-understandings…the meaning of those understandings will often depend on whether other actors represent the actor in the same way, and to what extent identity also will have an intersubjective or systemic quality' (1999, 224). The fact that states are partly 'constituted by internal structures in no way precludes them forming identities and interests by interacting with each other…much of what is interesting about states in the international system is constituted by their social relations with each other' (1999, 245).

Other authors are less concerned with how states become states, but more with the consequences of the constant quest for standing that comes naturally in a stratified international system. Departing from materialistic and rationalistic explanations of international conflict, these theories emphasize the quest for recognition as an important and independent cause of violent conflict. A stratified international system can be expected to generate a struggle for standing among states, and this independently of – and sometimes contrary to – their material interests. Depending on the cultural contexts in which interaction takes place, the quest for standing will give rise to patterns of conflict of different character and severity. As Ned Lebow has emphasized in his *Cultural Theory of International Politics* (2008), the struggle for standing is a perennial source of conflict in the international system, since states are likely to protect their esteem even at high costs. This is especially true of honor-based societies, which

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are more likely to protect their standing with violent means if challenged by actors perceived as inferior (Lebow 2008, 61–72). In more general terms, Lebow has argued that 'the most aggressive states are rising powers seeking recognition as great powers and dominant powers seeking hegemony' (Lebow 2010, 93). Similar arguments have put forward by Lindemann (2010) and Wolf (2011), both of whom regard various forms of disrespect as important sources of interstate conflict.

The main problem confronted by theories of political recognition concerns the relationship between the characteristics of states prior to their entering into recognition games with other actors, and the characteristics they take on as a consequence of those interactions. While the mechanism of recognition explains how a given actor acquires some of these characteristics, which in turn help explain how and why it acts in certain ways but not in others, the actor in question must nevertheless be assumed to possess some basic capacities to act that make it possible to enter into interaction with others in the first place. In Ricoeur's terminology, this would be tantamount to saying that mutual recognition presupposes some prior self-recognition on behalf of the agents of their own capacity to act autonomously. To Wendt, distinguishing those aspects of statehood that exist independently of recognition by other states represents a major theoretical challenge. In his view, the state is a corporate person endowed with certain essential properties such as intentions and purposes, but as a corporate person, the state also functions as a site for those parts of its identity that are acquired through its interaction with others (Wendt 2004). How states acquire such basic corporate identities cannot be accounted for by theories of political recognition, since these simply have to assume the existence of pre-constituted actors as a baseline for their explanatory endeavor (Bartelson 1998).

To theorists of political recognition, recognition is an important mechanism for creating and transforming international orders. Yet these theorists differ widely as to whether the mechanism of recognition merely serves to reproduce international anarchy, or, whether the struggle for recognition ultimately is likely to push this system in a more peaceful direction. Underlying this disagreement are different views about whether the struggle of recognition makes war merely possible, or whether it makes war inevitable. To the former, struggles for recognition do not necessarily have to issue in war, since more peaceful ways of attaining esteem and standing are available. To the latter, the practices of political recognition cannot but perpetuate, and possibly even aggravate, the tragic predicament of international anarchy. To those who have been wrestling with this issue (Wendt 1999; Lebow 2008), the question whether the struggle for recognition will perpetuate or transform the international

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system is ultimately a question of the extent to which the social or cultural context in which this struggle takes place is mutable enough to permit a modicum of peaceful progress.

Legal recognition

Legal recognition concerns on what grounds a state should be admitted as a member of the international society of states, regardless of its relative status. If theories of political recognition told us what to count as a state, theories of legal recognition thus tell us what it takes for a given state to qualify as a member of international society, since being recognized in such terms means being *accepted* as a member on the basis of sufficiently precise and widely shared criteria of statehood. In this sense, states are constituted as *bearers of rights* as a result of being legally recognized by other states, and the existence of an international society can be seen either as a precondition or as a consequence of a generalized practice of legal recognition among states. As Onuf (2011) has pointed out, understood in this way, legal recognition is the great equalizer in international affairs, since it endows states with the same set of rights and obligations solely on the basis of their sovereignty, irrespective of their relative standing within the international system. Thus, legal recognition can be seen as a way of handling the fallout from perpetual struggles for political recognition in the international system, ideally transforming this system into a society glued together by shared norms and shared interpretations of those norms.

To explain this equalizing and ordering function, theories of legal recognition have to answer two main questions. First, on the basis of what criteria should political entities be recognised as sovereign states? These criteria need to be both sufficiently precise and widely shared in order for legal recognition to perform the desired equalizing function. Second, who should interpret these criteria and decide whether legal recognition should be granted or withheld? Either legal recognition is attained by being successively recognized by other states, notably by dominant powers, or granted by some international authority on behalf of (the majority of) its members. While both these questions concern the basis for granting recognition, they presuppose that the concept of legal recognition itself is unproblematic. Yet this is hardly the case. Since any act of legal recognition presupposes the prior identification of the entity in question as a state and nothing else – that is, prior epistemic recognition – it will necessarily reflect the bias of underlying classificatory schemes. Furthermore, to the extent that legal recognition is granted on grounds other than the mere effectiveness of government, such recognition necessarily will depend on

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some underlying normative standard of what constitutes legitimate rule (Wight 1972).

While the natural law tradition had little use for a concept of recognition, the meaning and significance of legal recognition have been widely discussed and contested in modern international law. According to the *declaratory* theory of statehood, states attain legal status by virtue of their sheer existence rather than a consequence of being recognized by other states. Thus, from the viewpoint of the declaratory theory, the practice of legal recognition is redundant when settling issues of statehood in practice, since it cannot affect the legal status of a state once in existence (Crawford 2006, 4). According to the *constitutive* theory, however, the rights and obligations that come with statehood derive precisely from being recognized as a sovereign state by other states. This latter view seems to have originated in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, where he held that 'the state has a primary and absolute entitlement to be a sovereign and independent power *in the eyes of others*, i.e. *to be recognized* by them'. While the legitimacy of a state is an internal matter, 'it is equally essential that this legitimacy should be supplemented by recognition on the part of other states' (Hegel 1991, 367).

Similar views of the constitutive powers of legal recognition became common in 19th and early 20th-century international law. Partly this was a consequence of the legal positivist emphasis on consent as the sole source of valid norms. Thus, Oppenheim could argue that 'international law does not say that a State is not in existence as long as it is not recognized, but it takes no notice of it before its recognition. Through recognition only and exclusively a State becomes an International Person and a subject of international law' (quoted in Crawford 2006, 15). In the absence of any shared criteria as to when recognition is to be granted to a state aspiring to international personality, the constitutive view runs the risk of reducing recognition to a mere manifestation of national interests among the recognizing states, rather than a matter of the correct interpretation and application of legal principles. Therefore, to legal positivists taking the constitutive view, legal recognition was in constant danger to become but a consequence of political recognition.

To avert this danger, both Kelsen and Lauterpacht developed versions of the constitutive theory according to which recognition should be granted only on the basis of criteria simultaneously constitutive of the international legal order (Koskenniemi 2001, 384–86). To distinguish between political and legal recognition was then of utmost importance. As Kelsen argued, 'the legal act of recognition is the establishment of a fact; it is not the expression of a will' (Kelsen 1941, 608). To Lauterpacht, 'in granting or withholding recognition States do not claim and are

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not entitled to serve exclusively the interests of their national policy and convenience regardless of the principles of international law in the matter…although recognition is thus declaratory of an existing fact… such declaration is constitutive, as between the recognizing State and the new community, of international rights and duties associated with full statehood' (Lauterpacht 1944, 385). But in the absence of any central authority in the international realm, 'it is to be hoped that the political integration of the international community…may, alongside other improvements, render possible the collectivization of the process of recognition as best in keeping with its nature and purpose' (Lauterpacht 1944, 458).

Given the starting points of this article, it would be hard to maintain any sharp distinction between the declaratory and the constitutive views of statehood, since the former easily collapse into the latter. If sovereignty claims best are understood as speech acts, and if we admit that such speech acts are constitutive of political and legal reality, then a state would become a state by virtue of its *successful* claims to sovereignty, the benchmark of that success being nothing less than these sovereignty claims being recognized as such by other similar entities. Hence, as Crawford (2006, 28) has observed, in the absence of sufficiently precise criteria of statehood, cruder versions of the constitutive theory are likely to return by the back door, making legal recognition prey to political considerations. The view that this has been the case in practice finds ample support in studies of the actual practice of legal recognition. As scholars of international relations have pointed out, the criteria for recognizing states and admitting them into international society have varied considerably over time. In the modern international system, sovereignty has been granted on very different grounds, ranging from principles of dynastic succession, via principles self-determination and territorial control, to modern standards of human rights and democracy (Barkin and Cronin 1994). But even during periods when criteria of legal recognition seem to have been both precise and widely shared among actors, international legal sovereignty has been constantly compromised in practice, mainly through contractual arrangements between states (Krasner 1999, 26–36).

Recent studies of the practice of legal recognition have emphasized its constitutive role in international society. As Fabry (2010, 7) recently has argued, 'recognition is an indispensable precondition for a political community's status as a sovereign state in international relations and law.' To him, the modern practice of international recognition has been intimately connected to the right of self-determination of peoples, understood either as the absence of foreign interference, or in positive terms as a right to membership in international society (2010, 9–14). Yet admittedly, the practice of recognition is characterized by 'the persistent lack of agreement

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among parties affected by bids for independence as to who may become independent' (2010, 14). The predominant solution to this problem has been to recognize *de facto* statehood on the basis of effective governmental control over a territory, with few additional requirements made about the form of government needed to obtain international recognition. But since the end of the Cold war, some scholars have argued that democratic governance ought to become a necessary condition of international recognition (Franck 1992; Slaughter 1995), a view that appears to have gained widespread acceptance during the last decades. In contrast to this view, Cohen (2012, 21–79) has provided a philosophical defense of a dualistic sovereignty regime: states should be recognized on condition that they respect the norms of sovereign equality and basic human rights, including the political rights and the political equality of their citizens. In a similar vein, others have argued that the recognition of individual human rights *by* states is what warrants the international recognition *of* states, and that such double-barreled processes of recognition go some way to explain the evolution and expansion of the international system of states (Reus-Smit 2001, 2011).

Legal recognition of sovereignty presupposes the possibility of an international society to the same extent as an international society only can be built on the basis of a generalized practice of legal recognition. Simultaneously, however, the theory and practice of legal recognition are prey to political and moral considerations. Since neither the criteria nor the authority necessary to apply these are uncontested, legal recognition cannot escape its debt to the practice of political recognition. Struggling to reduce this debt, legal recognition cannot avoid positing a normative framework from which sufficiently precise criteria of membership in international society can be derived. And to the extent that these criteria also contain assumptions about the legitimacy of different forms of government, they also presuppose a strong evaluation of what constitutes rightful rule. But since no such account of political legitimacy ever is likely to command universal acceptance, the grounds for granting legal recognition are therefore equally likely to remain hotly contested within international society, to the point of threatening its very societal character. Thus, theories of legal recognition leave us with the problem of justifying actual practices of recognition in terms *independent* of the will of the states themselves. This is exactly what theories of moral recognition promise to do.

Moral recognition

Theories of moral recognition go beyond the insistence that states ought to enjoy equal rights and obligations within an international society, and

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require that we should start out from a presumption of equal moral worth when discussing the relationship between different communities or cultures. Originally developed to account for how social conflict and injustice between groups can be overcome *within* societies, theories of moral recognition presuppose that equal worth constitutes the basis from which a shared moral framework can develop as a consequence of mutual recognition among actors (Honneth 1995, 92–130; Taylor 1995, 72–3). While political theorists have debated whether such recognition primarily is a matter of justice, or fundamentally a question of identity, theorists of international relations have primarily taken an interest in the latter (compare Kompridis 2007).

As Ricoeur has argued, the idea of mutual recognition is best understood as a response to the Hobbesian challenge of how to account for the emergence of social and legal order among actors stuck in a state of war (2005, 150–218). Hence, in the international realm, moral recognition takes us beyond the mere recognition of rights, and into the thick recognition of social and cultural identities, arguing that such recognition ultimately will provide an escape from the more undesirable consequences of international anarchy, by providing possibilities to create more encompassing identities out of such encounters. As Honneth (2011) has stated 'the path for civilizing international relations primarily lies in sustained efforts at conveying respect and esteem for the collective identity of other countries'. As stated by Wolf (2011, 125), 'mutual respect is a *sine qua non* for an open exchange of ideas required for jointly identifying the most efficient solution for a common problem'. Such views have recently attracted considerable interest within international relations theory, since if such reciprocal respect and esteem can be attained among actors otherwise stuck in a struggle for standing and esteem, then the international system might even transcended in favor of a less bellicose world order (Haacke 2005).

Hopefully the practice of moral recognition would help replace particularistic identifications with more universalistic allegiances, gradually giving rise to a global sense of community in the process. But although these theories regard mutual recognition as way of overcoming identity-based discord in the international system, they are open to the common objection that overcoming cultural and other differences might not be sufficient to escape the logic of international anarchy. What makes the international system so hard to reform or transcend are not primarily the presence of cultural differences and the absence of moral recognition between collective identities, but rather the absence of overarching and legitimate authority that could help settle such disputes. To their critics, theories of moral recognition are therefore bound to backfire by

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re-entrenching the very same kind of conflicts they promise to deliver us from.

Although theories of moral recognition entertain the possibility of moral progress in world politics, it is difficult to avoid the impression that moral recognition is inseparable from the practices of political recognition, and this for several reasons. First, when applied to international politics, theories of moral recognition tend to assume that the entities to be morally recognized already are *given*, be they national communities of cultures. It is therefore tempting to argue that moral recognition actually depends on prior political recognition of these entities, constituting them as bounded containers of distinct cultures. Second, although theories of moral recognition assume that the acknowledgement of equal worth ideally should ensue from thick recognition, it could equally well take place between unequal parties, thereby consolidating status differences at a deeper existential level. Third, and generally, simply by virtue of their universalistic aspirations, theories of moral recognition can always be recast as expressions of particularistic identities, thus inviting suspicions that moral recognition is necessarily parochial in character (Walker 2009).

III

But how do these conceptions relate to each other? Since they all capitalize on the ambiguities inherent in the concept of recognition, there is little clear water between the different senses of recognition explored above. Political and legal recognition are difficult to distinguish with any precision due to their tendency to take the existence of states for granted, and legal and moral recognition tend to converge on the emphasis on rights. Finally, as seen above, moral recognition seems difficult to detach from political recognition. Yet it is tempting to assume that these different concepts represent different stages in the development of the international system. If political recognition endows actors with statehood and helps explain the emergence of the international system and the occurrence of conflict within it, then legal recognition entails that this system can be transformed into an international society based on sovereign equality. Finally, theories of moral recognition suggest that this society could evolve into a peaceful world community based on reciprocal esteem and respect between actors.

This possibility of a progressive sequence has led some authors to suggest that the very mechanism of recognition has the capacity to take us from the bare essentials of political life into conditions of moral maturity. This is how Kojève read Hegel's *Phenomenology*. To him, the creation of the modern state represented the culmination of the struggle for recognition by individuals. To him, 'individuality can be fully realized, the desire for

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Recognition can be completely satisfied, only in and by the universal and homogeneous State. Such a state 'completes History, since Man, satisfied in and by his State, will not be tempted to negate it and thus to create something new in its place' (Kojève 1969, 237).

A more recent version of this kind of argument envisages the creation of a *world state* as the proper end of history, thus taking us beyond the limitations of Hegel. According to Wendt (2003), the logic of recognition itself makes such an outcome inevitable. To him, 'recognition is a social act that invests difference with a particular meaning – another actor…is constituted as a subject with a legitimate social standing in relation to the Self'. This further implies that 'insofar as people want to be subjects, therefore, they will desire recognition of their difference' (2003, 511). When individuals or groups struggle to gain recognition from each other, 'the effect of mutual recognition is to constitute collective identity or solidarity' (2003, 512). When transposed to the international system, the struggle for recognition among states in a condition of anarchy gradually will enable 'states to develop supranational We-feeling and thereby overcome…the fundamentally tragic character of their struggle for recognition' (2003, 517). Propelled by the logic of mutual recognition, the international system will first take on distinctive societal traits, then turn into a world society 'which expands positive freedom for both individuals and states' (2003, 520), leading to the formation of a collective security community, until finally culminating in a world state in which recognition has been universalized (2003, 524). But if collective identities are constituted through recognition by others, who would recognize a world state? To Wendt, in the absence of extraterrestrial recognizers, such recognition can only come from inside that state itself (2003, 527). A similar point has been made by Abizadeh (2005, 48), who argues that 'a collective identity can receive either the external recognition of an external other or the internal recognition of its own constituent parts, and the latter does not necessarily depend on the former'. This means that 'cosmopolitan solidarity or identity does not require an actually existing other in contrast to which it must constitute itself' (2005, 58).

To the critics of this view, the struggle for recognition may as well lead to an entrenchment of existing differences between Self and Other, thus aggravating their sense of separateness without giving rise to any shared identity in the process. As Markell (2003, 103–13) has argued, since the desire for sovereignty that propels the struggle for recognition only can find its fulfillment in the subjugation of the Other, the practice of recognition cannot but reinforce the patterns of injustice resulting from that desire. Thus, it might be objected that the struggle for recognition might as well fail to yield more encompassing identities in international politics.

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Rather, once generalized, the logic of recognition perpetuates the tragic predicament of a mankind divided into bounded groups, who will 'remain locked in their cycles of identity-based conflict' (Greenhill 2008, 361).

Yet one thing seems clear. Theories of political, legal and moral recognition all assume that in order for the mechanism of recognition to kick in, there has to be some sense of self-recognition and self-identity among the actors. To most of the above accounts, the prior claim to sovereign authority constitutes such a basic requirement for entering into recognition games, whatever their expected outcome. The political, legal, and moral processes of recognition discussed above all involve actors who are sovereign, or at least aspire to sovereignty, in the basic sense that they are endowed with the capacity for autonomous agency, or seek to attain such agency in the course of recognition. While this presupposition might seem warranted in the context of European state formation, it also brings a discernible cultural bias to those theories.

This should become plain once we put the theories of recognition into their proper historical context. Since recognition in the sense of acknowledgement presupposes a prior *identification* of the actor to be recognized, and since such identification in turn presupposes the possibility of *distinguishing* those actors that are fit for recognition from those who are not, actual practices of recognition will always depend on underlying schemes of classification. Since these schemes are historically variable and culturally contingent, the practices of political, legal, and moral recognition have also conditioned the differentiation between the European states system and its non-European outside. It is therefore important to remember that while theories of recognition seek to account for the *inclusion* of actors into some larger sociopolitical whole, the actual mechanisms of recognition have simultaneously served to *exclude* certain actors from membership. Such exclusions need not to be the outcome of any intentional withholding, but might as well result from prior failures to identify an actor as an object of possible recognition due to its lack of fit with the categories of available and predominant classificatory schemes. Since international practices of recognition have been intimately connected to the principle of sovereignty, a group of people must display some recognizably state-like qualities in order to qualify as an object of possible recognition. If this requirement is not met, then recognition is unlikely to be forthcoming for the simple reason that the entity in question falls outside the epistemic range of possible objects of recognition. That this has been the case is evident from the history of European imperial expansion, but is also reflected in the contemporary international hierarchy with full-fledged states on top, and a wide range of more dubious political beings at the bottom of the global order.

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While struggles for political recognition paved the way for the creation of an international society based on the principle of sovereign equality among European states, this was not the case in the rest of the world. During European expansion, recognition was frequently withheld on the grounds that non-European peoples either lacked sovereignty or were uncivilized, or both. While the American Indians were certainly politically recognized by the Spaniards during the *conquista*, this did not mean that their societies or their members were recognized as bearers of rights according to the *ius gentium*, let alone were found worthy of moral esteem and respect (Anghie 2005, 13–31). During later phases of imperial expansion, encounters between Europeans and peoples on other continents led to intense interactions that sometimes also issued in some form of political recognition, but without legal rights or moral respect being granted to those peoples in the process. Non-European societies frequently were denied membership in the Family of Nations on the grounds that they were uncivilized, which meant that they lacked effective means for asserting their rights and gaining international legal recognition. This exclusion in turn paved the way for their annexation by European powers, their admission on unequal terms into international society, or forced these societies to conform to Western standards of civilization in the interest of obtaining legal protection under international law. As Benton (2002) has shown, imperial legal regimes gradually evolved from a condition of legal pluralism in which the existence of multiple legal systems were recognized by imperial powers, to later state-centric colonial regimes in which such differences were cancelled out. And by the end of the 19th century, the hierarchy between civilized and uncivilized societies that constituted the basis for exclusion had been firmly institutionalized and entrenched in legal practice (Anghie 2005). As Havercroft (2008, 118) has argued, 'this meant that indigenous peoples were often left at the mercy of the sovereign states that had colonized their ancestral lands'.

But on those rare occasions when legal recognition in fact was granted to non-Europeans, this was done without any concomitant moral recognition of the entity in question by the dominant powers. Thus, Grotius, who has been credited with establishing the rights of sovereign states in international law, also provided the legal foundations for a much more flexible application of the principle of sovereignty in dealings with political communities outside Europe (Keene 2002). When sovereignty was granted to political beings lacking the essential characteristics of statehood, this was merely a pretext for depriving them of control over trade and dispossessing them of their territories. This was done by providing colonial powers with watertight legal grounds for doing so through various contractual arrangements. As the dealings between the British and the Sultan of Muscat indicate,

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the former granted the latter sovereignty to secure his cooperation in the abolition of slave trade, but were neither aware of the precise extent of his sovereignty claims, nor of his ability to exercise *de facto* control over the peoples and territories to which these claims were addressed. These legal details were simply inconsequential given the British policy to abolish slave trade, and no considerations of equal moral worth arose from this encounter (Keene 2007). Thus, from a postcolonial perspective, the practices of political, legal and moral recognition look like little but advanced forms of back-scratching, through which Western powers have secured their dominance over the rest of the world by excluding those entities that do not conform to the Western state form, or to Western standards of civilization, from consideration as legal and moral equals. When non-Western states eventually were admitted to international society, they were stigmatized and kept in a position of inferiority (Zarakol 2010).

Today the insistence that states must be democratically governed in order to obtain legal recognition performs a similar discriminatory function in the international system. The interpretation and application of the principle of self-determination is a case in point, since the grounds for granting legal recognition on the basis of self-determination implies that the people or a community in question not only is recognized as an actor in its own right, but also that the people or community in question is democratically founded by virtue of being based on popular consent. Since such popular consent constitutes a requirement of both self-determination and democratic legitimacy, recognition of a positive right to self-determination easily spills over into the demand that a state must be democratically governed in order to merit international recognition of its sovereignty (Buchanan 2004, 261–88). This shift to democratic governance as a ground for recognizing states has been regarded as a deviation from the norm of non-interference, and, by implication, a return to imperial legal practices (Marks 2003; Anghie 2009).

But equally often moral recognition might be a way of compensating for the lack of legal recognition of actors deemed unqualified for full statehood by parts of the international community. As Fabry has pointed out, since the positive right of self-determination cannot be universally applied for reasons of impracticality, it has 'not led to a disappearance of claims to statehood that stand outside of its confines' (2010, 13). Moral recognition then becomes a way of handling the mismatch between proliferating claims to self-determination and the restrictive recognition of such claims. This is the case when moral recognition is granted to peoples to which members of international society is unwilling to grant legal recognition for political or other reasons, such as stateless or indigenous peoples. Such communities are sometimes able to command moral

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recognition in the absence of legal recognition, perhaps on grounds that their sheer existence reflects the intrinsic value of human diversity and therefore ought to be granted some autonomy in relation to those states within which they happen to find themselves (Tully 2001; Anaya 2004).

In our postcolonial predicament, different practices of recognition have created and sustained a hierarchical international order with developed and predominantly Western states on top, granting full political, legal and moral recognition to each other, and a residue of political beings that are excluded from full-fledged membership in international society. Some of these beings already enjoy political recognition, or are involved in struggles to attain it, but are for various reasons not legally recognized as sovereign states. While some of these have gained moral recognition, and are regarded as legitimate candidates for self-determination, others remain outside the scope of both legal and moral recognition by virtue of being seen as too weak, rogue or undemocratic.

IV

Thanks to the ambiguities of the concept of recognition, it has long been a versatile tool in the hands of lawyers and politicians. In this paper, I have tried to distill three basic senses of recognition from the ways in which this concept currently is used within international theory. While these usages differ in terms of explanatory priorities and normative implications, they also share some underlying assumptions about the possible objects of recognition, the sources of their identity, and the causes of conflict among them. When it comes to the object of possible recognition, these theories all assume that some state-like features are necessary in order to be recognized by other, similar actors. And while these theories of recognition purport to explain the emergence, reproduction, and eventual reform of the international system, they do so by assuming that the sociopolitical world ultimately consists of distinct and bounded groups of people, stuck in a condition devoid of overarching political, legal, and moral authority.

But by making such assumptions, these theories also presuppose a particularistic social ontology along with a theory of identity according to which the Self is constituted by its differential relationship to the Other. This difference between Self and Other is not only a condition of possible recognition, but also a permissive cause of the violent practices that legal and moral forms of recognition hopefully would help us escape. Whatever their precise relationship to the principle of state sovereignty, the ensuing quests for political, legal and moral recognition all seem to be grounded in aspirations to autonomy and identity that invariably must lead to conflict in a world devoid of overarching authority. Therefore, when seen from

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within the international system, recognition appears to be both poison and antidote.

But are these underlying assumptions about political identity warranted? Does the Self really need an Other in order to constitute itself as a Self? Such a differential logic of identity seems foundational to many modern theories of international relations. For example, to Carl Schmitt (2005), a sharp differentiation between friend and enemy is a defining characteristic of the political world. Similar assumptions about the sources of political identity have been endlessly reproduced within realist scholarship. In seeming support of such lines of reasoning, some social psychologists have argued that all groups depend for their cohesion and identity on distrust and hostility towards other groups and their members, and that such differentiation between Self and Other is an inescapable feature of social life (Tajfel *et al*. 1971; Tajfel 1981). Given that assumptions like these also underpin many theories of recognition in academic international relations, I have argued that we should be careful not to pin too much hope on recognition between states as a source of peaceful reform in the international system, but instead focus on the functions performed by practices of recognition in the *maintenance* of particularistic political orders, as well as on the *exclusions* that these practices invariably bring about.

That is not to deny that practices of legal and moral recognition frequently serve important purposes by being instrumental in conflict resolution in the present. But although practices of recognition certainly are instrumental in resolving some conflicts, they are also likely to entrench and aggravate others. But if that is the case, another normative challenge concerns whether theories of recognition can be modified in such a way that practices of recognition do not lend themselves to an automatic reproduction of the current international system and the re-entrenchment of conflicts. The emphasis on *internal* recognition by Wendt and Abizadeh represents an important step in this direction, yet one that is susceptible to the objection that the mechanism of recognition would have outlived its usefulness as a driver of moral progress the very moment a world state has come into being. While internal recognition might still be needed to maintain the self-esteem of individuals and groups within a world state once attained, there is no Other left to endow the world state with recognition from without.

But provided that theories of recognition tend to presuppose a differential logic of identity, why assume that theories of recognition could provide an escape out of an international system structured accordingly? To be sure, there are other ways to account for sociopolitical identities that do not assume that their formation entails a differential logic or a struggle for recognition. For example, as Brewer (1999) has argued, there

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is no reciprocal connection between the mechanisms that bring people together in groups and those that pull these groups apart. In her terminology, 'ingroup love is not a necessary precursor of outgroup hate' (1999, 442). Rather, to her, identity formation is a complex processes that involve both integration and separation as constitutive features. Consistent with this view, Lebow (2012) has recently offered a sustained critique of contemporary theories of identity and identity construction in the social sciences, arguing that the idea of unitary identities and that the differential logic frequently invoked to explain them both lack empirical support. By contrast, Lebow argues that social and political identities are fluid, and that processes of identity formation are integrative rather than exclusionary in character. Individuals and groups become what they are not in contradistinction to any real or imagined others, but by emulating and incorporating characteristics from a variety of scripts and models.

But even if notions of unitary identity and the differential logic of identity commonly invoked to sustain them both are illusory, particularistic allegiances remain important *social facts* in their own right, and as such also constitutive of the segmentation of the modern international system. To say that the modern international system ultimately is based on a misconceived view of the sources of political identity does nothing to alter the structure of that system, but it does beg a series of questions about the relationship between our notions of political identity on the one hand, and the actual segmentation of the modern international system on the other.

I believe that further inquiry into the theory and practice of recognition can provide important insights into the nature of this relationship. This would require that we regard recognition less as a *solution* to a series of problems – such as the formation, reproduction, and transformation of the international system – but more of a *problem* integral to that system. Doing this would compel us to inquire into the prehistory of the international system, and describe how the anterior conditions of recognition first evolved, until it became possible to look back upon and reconstruct the historical trajectory of that system precisely as an outcome of practices of recognition. In that regard, we would perhaps be better off no longer taking Hegel as our starting point, but rather – and true to the spirit of his work – as the point of emergence from which it becomes possible to narrate the past, present, and possible future of the international system in terms of recognition. This is not to suggest that we ought to posit any universalistic order from which our current international system would look like little but a tragic and perverse deviation, and within which the theory and practice of recognition hardly would make any coherent sense. What I would suggest that we do, rather, is to pay close attention to the historical contexts within which theories and

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practices of recognition have evolved, inquiring into what kind of prior conceptual commitments they have presupposed in order to become intelligible and viable, and what functions they have performed once they were incorporated into the self-understandings of those actors whose intercourse they undeniably have informed since.

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The recognitive practices of declaring and constituting statehood

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Ever since the emergence of the modern state system there has been considerable disagreement as to which political entities should be recognized as states and on what grounds. In contemporary political and legal thought, this question has primarily preoccupied scholars of international

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