

THE HUMAN REALITY: A STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION AND JUSTICE

*"A thoroughly peaceful world is
contradicting the nature of this
historicity.*

*Human existence is, therefore, best
understood in terms of the fight to
death for recognition, but since
recognition is not mutual and one
sided it will remain unrealised".*

(Kamal 2004, p. 1)

Abstract

This paper follows a seminar discussion held 18th May 2014 on the topic: Recognition and Justice. The seminar, with reference to contemporary advocates of recognition and justice (Charles Taylor 1994, Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth 2003), focused on the struggles for recognition: what it means to recognise and be recognised and the limited

theoretical approaches to understanding recognition and justice. This latter point is the focus of this post-seminar paper. With specific reference to the contested meaning of 'Welcome to Country' (herein WTC) rituals I explore here the ideas of recognition and justice with respect to the experiences of Aboriginal people in Australia.

Introduction

Recognition and justice are incoherent, weighty concepts inextricably linked to one another in multifaceted and intricate ways. The nature of which is controversial among scholars. Various attempts have been made to clarify precisely what is, *and is not*, an act of recognition. This paper experiments with applying Hegelian philosophical accounts of the master / slave paradigm and acts of recognition in relation to the rituals of recognition in the context of the colonised / coloniser.

Recognition as Hegel philosopher Ikäheimo outline "requires not only that someone be recognised by another, but also that the

person being recognised judges the recogniser capable of referring recognition” (Ikäheimo 2002, p. 450). In contrast, contemporary theorists of recognition, Fraser and Honneth (2003) argue ‘recognition’ reveals the contest between recognition as critical for self-realisation and on the other hand fails to account for wider structural power and specifically distribution of wealth. De-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon (1952) offers a more critical account of Hegel’s model of the master / slave and recognition.

This paper is organised in two parts. The first section of this paper will provide an overview of *The Hegelian Legacy*. This will provide the philosophical background in understanding both contemporary theories of recognition and justice and help frame how contemporary political struggles can be realised. Specifically, this section of the paper will draw on political scholars, namely Franz Fanon (1952) to construe Hegelian thought in both a colonial and post colonial context to scrutinise the relationship between ‘black’ Aboriginal people and ‘white’ Australian people of past and

present. This will be done to suggest how realms of colonialism have ensured its hegemony over time. The second section of this paper will provide a case study of what Charles Taylor (1994) refers to as ‘mutual recognition’ within an Australian context and its capacity to truly be actualised. Specifically, this section of the paper will examine both ‘Welcome to Country’ and ‘Acknowledgments of Country’ as in relation to the literature on recognition.

Therefore the argument presented in this paper will mirror that in Glen Coulthard’s text, *Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Recognition in Colonial Contexts* (2006) and take shape in suggesting that despite the Hegelian ideal of reciprocity, the politics of recognition in contemporary Australia seemingly replicates the very formation of colonial power that Aboriginal people’s demand for recognition have both historically and politically aspired to surpass.

Keywords: *Acknowledgment of Country, Colonialism, Freedom, Hypocrisy, Mutual Recognition, elf-Consciousness and Welcome to Country.*

Dissecting Hegel's Master /Slave Paradigm

German philosopher Gerog Hegel is the indisputable philosophical theorist on recognition (Taylor 1994, Blunden 2003). His work continues to be influential in contemporary political analysis. His thoughts on 'recognition' are outlined in his chapter on "Lordship and Bondage" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977). Initially, this paradigm was thus shaped to mirror Hegel's comprehension on the conflict that reigned between the French (the master) and the German (the slave) cultures at beginning of the nineteenth century where he was raised in Prussia (Villet 2008). From the point of Hegel scholarship, relations of recognition are considered "constitutive of subjectivity: one becomes an individual subject only in virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by another subject" (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p. 11). That is, our sense of who we are is determined through our interaction with others. This then suggests a 'dialogic model' of self is evident (Honneth 1995). Hegel contends, "self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for

another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (1977, p. 178). According to Coulthard (2006) Hegel's master / slave paradigm goes beyond providing an 'ontological' model on the interpersonal nature of human subjectivity. Instead, this model summarises what Hegel deems as the 'intersubjective conditions' needed for the human beings to see (or rather realise) themselves as free beings (Coulthard 2006, Taylor 1994).

Coulthard and Kamal propose Hegel's master / slave paradigm can be understood as a 'normative story' which "opens the understanding of the historicity of human existence" (Kamal 2004, p.1) in that it suggests, it is only through 'intersubjective recognition' that our freedom can be actualised. Hegel's repeated assertion that relations of recognition be mutual led contemporary recognition theorists, namely, Charles Taylor, to construct a politics of mutual, or rather, 'equal recognition' (1994) referring to it as 'a vital human need' (Zurn 2003).

The concern however, as Hegel, explains arises once two

consciousness's' both desire to sustain the certainty of their being for themselves. Consequently, each 'consciousness' desires to confirm its existence by forgoing the other (Robert 2002). Hegel regards this as a 'life and death' struggle. According to Villet (2008) "it then seems that the realisation of self-consciousness is really a struggle for recognition between two individuals bound to one another as unequals in a relationship of dependence" (p.5). That is to say, one person is the 'master'. The other is the 'slave'. Hegel continues by proposing that the 'slave' is aware that he is objectified and unseen as a self-aware being (Villet 2008) by his master.

Unexpectedly however, Hegel argues despite the master's mighty status, often the 'master' does not find his position totally satisfying (Villet 2008). By contesting his own 'otherness' in the consciousness of the slave, the Master has to refute any natural impulse which would otherwise allow him to recognise the slave as equal to himself (Villet 2008). On the other hand, the slave however is able to develop some gratification in their position.

Whether this is through work or via the 'struggle' itself. This gratification inevitably enables the slave to 'rediscover' himself and in turn progress to having a "mind of his own" (Villet 2008, p.3).

However, just as Coulthard suggests, for Hegel "the revolution of the slave is not simply to replace the master while maintaining equal recognition. This, of course, would only temporarily invert the relation, and the slave would eventually meet the same fate as the master" (2006, p.4). Instead, Hegel's point is to move past the "patterns of domination and inequality" (Coulthard 2006, p.167) that therefore establish unsettling relations of recognition.

Drawing a parallel to Hegel's theory on master / slave paradigm Frantz Fanon's text, *Black Skins, White Faces* (1952), can be incorporated and refined to therefore shed light on the relationship between the colonised and coloniser in the Australian context. Contrary to Hegel's idea, Fanon contends that, in "actual contexts of domination (such as colonialism) the terms of recognition usually determined by

and in the interests of the master (the coloniser)” (Coulthard 2006, p. 167) in an attempt to protect and maintain colonial ladders. In this text, Fanon reinterprets Hegel in the colonial context explicitly on the relationship amid the white settler (the master) and the black man (the slave) and argues in a world where there are no black voices (Fanon 1952) “the white man is not only the other but also the Master” (Gillen and Gosh, p.175). Fanon went on further to argue:

“Racialisation of this lord-bondsmen relationship brew a new and disabling discontent – for whenever the black slave faced the white master, s/he now experiences the disruptive charge of envy and desire.” (Gillen and Gosh, p.175).

To comment generally, perhaps the event that occurred on Australia Day in 1972 which led to four Aboriginal men to set up a site on the laws of Parliament House with a sign that read ‘Aboriginal Embassy’ could lead one to see the applicability of Fanon’s thoughts here.

To juxtapose Hegel’s belief that there may be some reciprocity in

his ‘theoretical’ master / slave paradigm, in reality the ‘black slave’ is unable to find solace in his dispossession (whether it be cultural or economic). As a result, “he does not come to regard the white master as an object because he never turns his own negativity into an object in the first place” (Oliver 2004, p.5). According to Villet (2008) while the ‘black slave’ wants to be recognised as a subject, the master will provide no such recognition. The slave is denied recognition on the basis that he is not considered ‘human’. This is not to say that the slave is seen as an animal.

Rather, the ‘slave’ as seen as a resource, or an obstacle to surmount to secure land and labour (Villet 2008). As Taylor (1994, p. 66) notes, “dominant groups tend to entrench their hegemony by inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated”. According to Coulthard (2006) it is this “dialectical interplay between the structural/objective and recognitive/subjective realms of colonialism that ensured its hegemony over time” (p.6).

It could be argued from Fanon’s ‘actualised’ reinterpretation of

Hegel's master / slave paradigm, colonial permanence that therefore shapes particular social structures within society is dependent on ensuring the 'colonised' (in this case the Aboriginal) are transformed into 'objects' of 'colonial' law. In hand with this argument, Coulthard contests:

"Indeed, one need not expend much effort to elicit the countless ways in which the liberal discourse of recognition is limited and constrained by the state, politicians, policy makers, and the courts in ways that pose no fundamental challenge to the colonial relationship", (2006, p.7)

After all, "when there are no more slaves, there are no masters" (Fanon 1952, p. 194).

Thus far, this paper has examined The Hegelian Philosophy and Franz Fanon's re-interpretation of Hegel's master / slave paradigm. This section went on to consider the relationship between the 'black' slave and the 'white' master in a colonial context and evoked thought on how colonialism has perhaps maintained its hegemony over

time. The following section will proceed with a case study. Specifically, 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgments of Country' as in relation to this literature on recognition.

Since the 1960's it seems as though addressing the experiences of 'injustice' felt by Aboriginal people in Australia through modes of 'reconciliation' and 'recognition' has seemingly increased. Consider, for example, the general adoption of 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgments of Country' as an official part of state ceremonies that was introduced by Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd following the opening of the 42nd Federal Parliament. Rudd (2008) claimed that:

"In 1972, when we opened the old parliament, no aboriginal or Torres Strait islander were invited. There was no welcome to country; they were not welcome at all.... I [now] celebrate the fact that Indigenous Australia is alive, well, and with us for the future. Today we begin with one small step, to set right the wrongs of the past.... In this ceremonial way... let this become a permanent part of our ceremonial

celebration of the Australian democracy" (Everett 2009, p.55)

It seemed that the introduction of 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgments of Country' in hand with other key developments made on the road to reconciliation including the passage of Aboriginal Land Rights Act (1983) and the passing of the Wik Decision in 1996 could be read in the vernacular of "mutual recognition" (Taylor 1994). The acts of 'Welcoming' and 'Acknowledging' Country prior to public events has become commonplace in Australia. Rudd vowed that such rituals would now become a permanent part of future parliamentary openings, therefore 'recognising' and 'responding' to perceived neglect and injustice faced by Australian Indigenous people and expand on the relationships between the 'colonised' and the 'colonisers' (Merlan 2014). 'Welcome to Country' is best understood as a ceremony performed by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people to "welcome" visitors to their traditional land (Creative Spirits 2015). 'Acknowledgments' on the other hand are generally a short-spoken statement of traditional

belonging on the part of Indigenous people or groups to the place or region in which the event is taken place (Merlan 2014).

'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgments' can be said to been generated as part of the Australian state's to transition from a colonial to 'post colonial' nation, that is, forget its colonial past by acts of reparation and moral renewal. Amongst the Australian political community it has been said "these practices create the possibility of a bridge serving a function of cultural inclusion, by establishing a new dialogue about a renegotiated sense of belonging" (Pelizzon and Kennedy 2012, p. 58). Critical analysis of these rituals however suggests something different. Hypocrisy lies at the heart of these rituals and therefore cannot be seen as true expressions of Indigenous recognition that serves as a means of justice. Nor is 'mutual recognition' it's primary objective. Instead, Just as Taylor contends, the concept that is often thought as 'equal dignity' derives its idea of what rights and entitlement are worth having from the perspective of the hegemonic culture (Mcqueen 2015). In this

instance the ruling 'colonising culture'. This then enforces the colonised to conform to the expectations of colonisers culture and hence relinquish their particularity. As Taylor (1994, p. 66) notes, "dominant groups tend to entrench their hegemony by inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated". It is here where we can concur Fanon's reinterpreted thought on Hegel's abstraction that in the case of colonial domination, the term recognition is therefore used and determined by the interests of the coloniser (the master) in an attempt to preserve the colonial order and reinstates the master's power. It can be argued that this hypocrisy in Australian politics regarding 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgments' is thus two fold.

The following will now elaborate on the first. Despite the commonality of such practices it appears that there is no single central policy about what is expected from both 'Welcome to Country' and 'Acknowledgment' ceremony at an institutional level. Rather, the content of these rituals varies geographically to echo current Indigenous and non-

Indigenous relations. In Canberra for instance, Merlan (2014) reveals, all-political institutions have 'generic acknowledgments' of traditional custodians that may be used given the time is 'appropriate'. The 'host' therefore determines this 'appropriateness' (Merlan 2014). In the Northern Territory however no such 'protocol' has been encouraged, suggested and or utilised (Merlan 2014). Individual Institutions have the sanction to determine if, when and how 'Welcomes' or 'Acknowledgments' are therefore preformed. Thus, as Alcoff (1991) would suggest, it seems a speaker's location (by location, this paper refers to the social location or social identity of the speaker) has an "epistemically significant impact on that speaker's claims, and can serve either to authorise or dis-authorise one's status of recognition" (Alcoff 1991, p.6). In any case, however, the fact that the 'host' of an event where either a 'Welcome to Country' or 'Acknowledgment of Country' is warranted, the speaker has the authority to determine what is or rather *is not acknowledged* regarding Indigenous ties to land past and present. Alcoff would

contest “the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken ‘mainly a conversation of ‘us’ with ‘us’ about ‘them,’ of the white man with the white man about the primitive-nature man...in which ‘them’ is silenced” (1991, p.6). Thus, much like Hegel before him, Taylor argues “a person or a group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning one in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being”(1994, p.25). Similarly, Fanon contended (1952), ‘colonial liberal’ delusions of recognition have served as engines of black bellicosity and injustice.

The second hypocrisy noted in ‘Welcome to Country’ and ‘Acknowledgements’ as acts of recognition can be noted in the following quote seen in Pelizzon and Kennedy text *Welcome to*

Country: Legal Meanings and Cultural Implications (2012):

“The welcoming that occurs is done by those whose claims to prior ownership of that place have already been denied to those who already inhabit that place and do not recognise the claims of others. Contained in the act of being Welcomed to Aboriginal Country thus rests an acquiescence of a ‘difference from’, and ‘otherness’ from the people whose Country the audience is welcomed to”

A more critical perspective is offered by anthropologist Kristina Everett who argues such rituals “may be a ‘safe’ kind of inclusive gesture of recognition all the time knowing that such acts are not legally enforceable” (2009, pp.53). Everett continues by suggesting that this ‘patronising’ inclusion of Aboriginality merely paints an idea of sharing country in state representations without legal or political consequences (2012, p.63). Moreover, Honneth argues that subjects need entire ‘legal’ recognition to therefore merit any sort of true justice. Land, for Aboriginal people, is the foundation of one’s individual identity as ‘human’ (Merlan 2014).

Jade Kennedy in the text *Welcome to Country: Meanings and Cultural Implications* asks the question “How can I welcome you all to my Country and then watch you dismiss all that my Welcome implies as soon as I finish?” (2012, p.67). According to Creative Sprits (2015) less than 1 per cent of total land mass in NSW has been successfully claimed by Aboriginal people. Yet, both ‘Welcome to Country’ and ‘Acknowledgments’ have several engagements a week (Kowall 2010). It has been argued such rituals merely enable the ‘whitefellas’ of politics to ‘recognise’ the idea of ‘Aboriginality’ without ever having to really address Aboriginal interests (Kowall 2010). For Fanon however, Indigenous people “will always involve struggle for recognition – then the best the colonised can hope for is white liberty and white justice; that is, values secreted by their masters” (1952, p. 221). Just as Fanon’s reinterpreted version of Hegel’s master / slave paradigm suggests, it seems those in power ‘bestow’ their subordinates in ways in which they deem as sufficient. In an Australian context the wide range of adopted ceremonies

surrounding ‘Welcome to Country’ and ‘Acknowledgement’ paints a very incomplete picture of recognition. Thus, it can be concluded that colonial rule is both sustained by a pattern of misrecognition. Unlike a time where Australia had obvious ‘white’ assimilation policies and otherwise racist laws

it seems under modern imperial conditions that formed as a result of colonialism “oppression has become increasingly invisible” (Alfred 2005, p. 58). This paper has presented the argument that despite the Hegelian ideal of reciprocity, the politics of recognition in contemporary Australia seemingly replicates the very formation of colonial power that Aboriginal people’s demand for recognition have both historically and politically aspired to surpass. It seems that the idea that political forms of recognition in an Australian context is partial, *both* incomplete and one-sided.

The question that remains if the effects of colonial power are now more ‘invisible’, how is it politics of recognition or rather misrecognition can ever *truly* be addressed?

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