

ARGUING OVER PARTICIPATORY PARITY

ON NANCY FRASER'S CONCEPTION OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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Over the last decade, Nancy Fraser has been developing a comprehensive and incisive critical social theory, one that, to use Marx's phrase, can further the "the work of our time to clarify to itself (critical philosophy) the meaning of its own struggles and its own desires"¹ or, to use Max Horkheimer's conception, would count as an adequate interdisciplinary social theory with emancipatory intent.² What then are the requirements for an interdisciplinary social theory, one critically oriented towards emancipation? First and foremost it must offer a theory of society, that is, some description and/or explanation of why social and institutional structures, cultural understandings, personality structures and the like have taken the particular shape they have today. More than a mere sociology or social psychology or combination of their results, however, a critical social theory also needs some kind of account of what emancipation means. Or, at the very least, some kind of account of the normative standards it evokes in denouncing various institutional formations, social expectations, cultural understandings, and the rest as non-emancipatory, oppressive, repressive, subordinating or whatever terms of negative assessment are going to be used. Finally, of course, as anyone who is familiar with reading critical social theory from Germany in the last thirty years will be well aware, a critical social theory also requires a fair amount of philosophical reflexivity about the standards of evidence it uses, the procedures it uses to investigate contemporary society, the ways it goes about justifying its normative standpoints, and so on. In other words, an interdisciplinary theory with emancipatory intent is supported by at least three kinds of reflection. First, is the more or less comprehensive social theory that gives us an empirically accurate picture of our contemporary situation, of "the meaning of

our time's struggles," as it were. Second, is some account of why certain of "our time's desires" are worthwhile desires, desires that point us toward the right struggles—we need an account of the normative standards employed in comprehending contemporary society. Third are the requirements of "critical philosophy clarifying our time to itself": critical social theory needs a philosophically reflective account of its own methodological procedures and standards of rationality.

There is however a fourth desideratum any critical social theory must meet. We might call this, for lack of a better word, "perspicacity." That is to say, the struggles and wishes of the age that the theory picks out as important, the way in which it analyzes contemporary social formations, its particular analytic lens on the present, have to somehow insightfully illuminate the important social conditions, social changes, and social actors that we ought to be attending to. To put the perspicacity requirement in another way, the social-theoretic, normative, and methodological tasks of critical social theory can't become so overwhelming and hyper-reflexive that they overshadow, in the end, the question of whether that critical social theory picks out important practical issues. No matter how accurate the empirical social theory, no matter how unassailable the normative framework, no matter how cogent the methodological self-understanding of the theory, if, at the end of the day, that critical social theory doesn't tell us something insightful and practically useful about the actual struggles and wishes of our actual age, then it has missed its target.

I believe that Nancy Fraser's critical social theory fulfills the first three tasks as well as other contemporary social theories, and I would contend that it better fulfills the requirement for perspicacity than others, giving a more insightful theory of the social

world we find ourselves in and of the prospects and avenues for progressive change of that world. However, rather than try to vindicate that judgment here, I will leave that task to you, the reader of her recently co-authored book with Axel Honneth.³ As I think you'll find, Fraser has many interesting things to say there about many different aspects contemporary social reality, new social movements, and ongoing struggles to increase social justice in an evermore globalized, interconnected, and culturally pluralistic world, one that in certain ways perpetuates and intensifies the social subordination and oppression of some in favor of others. The following, more limited, reflections fall into two parts. In the first part, I will sketch out a few of the main features of Fraser's view with an eye toward trying to highlight how those features contribute to the power of her critical social theory. Then, in the second half of the essay, I'd like to explore some more critical reflections—in particular, concerning the normative standard of “parity of participation” which she proposes as the overarching normative framework for her theory. As I have elsewhere focused critical attention on the methodological and socio-theoretic aspect of her claims—especially concerning the use of Weberian categories for understanding social struggles for recognition—I won't be attending to that here, except briefly as a lead-in to the critical reflections on parity of participation.⁴

Let me briefly highlight three distinctive features of the theory which greatly contribute to its increased capacity to comprehend the present in comparison with other theories: 1) a bivalent social theory focusing on both maldistribution and misrecognition; 2) an account of misrecognition as status subordination rather than harm to personal identity; and 3) a normative standard of justice in terms of parity of participation.

Bivalence

First, and perhaps most famously, Fraser argues that the most prominent injustices in contemporary society cannot be comprehended by a social theory that focuses exclusively on either maldistribution or

misrecognition. We need, rather, a theory that is (at least) bivalent or bifocal: one simultaneously attentive to those injustices causally rooted in the class structures of the political-economy and those causally rooted in institutionally-anchored status hierarchies, without, however, reducing either dimension of injustice to the other.⁵ She argues that social theories that attempt to explain all injustices in terms of one or the other dimension of social ordering inevitably end up distorting the phenomena they are trying to capture and, perhaps more worrying, end up recommending strategies of political action that may be ineffective or even counterproductive in fighting injustice. Thus theories that attempt to reduce all social struggles and injustices to their political-economic roots—purveyors of the “it's the economy, stupid” analysis—will simply not have the conceptual resources needed to capture the important cultural, symbolic, and evaluative dimensions of social struggles to overcome demeaning, denigrating, and hate-based evaluative patterns aimed at certain groups and which function to deny their members an equal role in social life. Worse, such economic theories may recommend remedies to rectify maldistributions that in fact have the unintended consequence of actually intensifying the patterns of misrecognition members of the oppressed group are already subject to: witness the backlash stigmatization suffered by the recipients of means-targeted redistributive welfare programs. As theorists of recognition such as Axel Honneth, Charles Taylor, and Iris Young have repeatedly pointed out however, purely distributive theories of justice, in focusing exclusively on the uneven allocation of the material benefits and burdens of social cooperation, systematically overlook the asymmetrical structures of cultural evaluation and social recognition that underlie new social movements focused on identity-constitutive group membership.⁶

However, many theorists of the politics of recognition have oversold such insights and made the complementary errors of either overlooking economic injustices or of reducing all social injustices to matters of misrecognition—Axel Honneth's account

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of recognition struggles represents the most articulate account of such a reductionist, "monofocal" recognition theory. As Fraser convincingly argues, it is simply implausible to think that many of the injustices apparently caused by political-economic structures can be captured theoretically in terms of problematic patterns of comparative evaluation of the worth or dignity of persons. Consider for instance, the problems of de-industrialization under conditions of globalization, or of the transfer from one nation-state to another of quality wage labor jobs, or of the instabilities caused by rapid and unpredictable global capital flows, or of the massively asymmetrical ecological burdens externalized by the developed nations onto underdeveloped nations. These and like injustices arise from a different kind of social ordering than captured in theories of recognition, one whose effects are analytically independent of the structures of institutionalized patterns of cultural evaluation and esteem. Of course there will be important relations of mutual reinforcement and mutual interference between the political-economic and the cultural-symbolic orderings of society, but we need a theory that analytically distinguishes them in the first place in order to perceptively analyze such interrelations.

Fraser's singular contribution is to have constructed a careful bifocal theory that can attend simultaneously to the recognition and distribution dimensions of social institutions, without inaccurately reducing either one to the other. Only such a theory can be sufficiently attentive to the interconnections, the interferences, the mutual reinforcements, and the negative and positive feedback loops that occur between economic and cultural forms of injustice. To put it briefly, Fraser's bivalent critical theory is opposed on the one hand to theories that say, "It's the culture, stupid" and, on the other hand, to those insisting "It's the economy, stupid." If misrecognition and maldistribution have different causal roots and follow different logics, then we should not expect that changing institutionalized patterns of cultural value will itself overcome maldistribution, nor that changing economic mechanisms of material distribution will itself overcome

systematic misrecognition. Social injustice involves at least two analytically distinct forms of social ordering, and an adequate critical social theory needs to attend at least to both.

Now, I said "at least two" different forms because Fraser has consistently left open the possibility for a further development of her theory in order to embrace a third analytically distinct form of social ordering: namely, political forms of exclusion.⁷ For here we seem to find a form of injustice that is not the causal result directly of either distributive structures or patterns of cultural value, but rather of state-centered political and legal forms of exclusion from democratic political practices which result in the institutional subordination of some groups vis-à-vis others. Fraser hasn't developed this third analytically distinct axis of social subordination, but I, with others, would encourage her to do so.⁸ I look forward to the results, for we should expect the same sorts of advantages to accrue to such a "trivalent" social theory. I take it that there is no going back behind Fraser's insight into the need for at least a bivalent social theory. It seems incontrovertible that a critical social theory cannot hope to accurately or perspicaciously describe contemporary social reality if it either reduces misrecognition to maldistribution, or maldistribution to misrecognition. But it also seems that critical social theory needs an account of legal institutions and formal political structures, as independent causal sources of injustice, if it is to adequately diagnosis the struggles and wishes of our age.

Status Model of Recognition

Let me now turn to a second, more recent innovation that Fraser has introduced in the context of her critical social theory. Within the last five years or so Fraser has been trying to analyze misrecognition not in terms of what she calls an "identity" model of recognition but, rather, in terms of a "status" model of recognition.⁹

According to Fraser, identity models of recognition, such as those put forward by Honneth and Taylor, start from psychologi-

cal premises about the intersubjective conditions for the development of a sense of personal identity, identify various cultural and symbolic patterns of disrespect and denigration that may impede the development of personal integrity, and then assess these demeaning patterns as an injustice, since they harms individuals' capacity to form healthy self-respect and self-esteem. In contrast to the identity model's focus on psychological and cultural factors, Fraser's status model is sociological from the get-go: it treats recognition from the external perspective of a sociological observer rather than the internal perspective of individuals engaged in intersubjective relations of recognition and identity-formation. Thus, although it does not deny the multiplicity of kinds of social affinity groups, collectivities, associations, coalitions, and so on found in complex societies, it focuses only on those groups which owe their existence as a group to being placed in a subordinate social position because of entrenched patterns of cultural value. According to the status model, then, misrecognition arises not merely from cultural and symbolic slights, but only from those anchored in social institutions that systematically deny the members of denigrated groups equal opportunities for participation in social life. Thus, legitimate recognition struggles are seen as those aimed at changing institutionalized patterns of cultural value that subordinate certain persons and groups in such a way that they are denied the opportunity to participate in social life on an equal basis. Misrecognition proper occurs not in a purely cultural realm of stigmatizing symbolic patterns or a psychological realm of demeaning evaluative attitudes, as implied by identity models of recognition, but rather in cultural value patterns that are institutionally anchored and systematically subordinating.

For example, while we can clearly identify a set of cultural values and symbolic meanings that differentiate Italian-Americans as a group in contemporary America, and these values may be demeaning and stigmatizing, it is (perhaps) no longer the case that these cultural and symbolic stereotypes are anchored in asymmetric social structures

that systematically deny parity of social participation to Italian-Americans; in this respect, Italian-Americans no longer constitute a status group. In short, on the status model, there can be no misrecognition through culture alone: misrecognition occurs only through institutionally-anchored, status-denying patterns of cultural value, not through "free-floating" attitudes and symbolic patterns.

Parity of Participation

The third distinctive feature of Fraser's theory is its clear articulation of a normative framework—one using the yardstick of "parity of participation"—for assessing both the relative merits of various claims made by citizens to more just distributional and recognition structures, and the relative prospects of success for proposed remedies for overcoming social injustice.¹⁰

The basic idea is that we should call unjust precisely those social structures that deny some members of society the opportunity to participate in social life on a par with others. Fraser explicates the norm of participatory parity in terms of two sets of necessary conditions for justice:

Justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers. For participatory parity to be possible, I claim, at least two conditions must be satisfied. First the distribution of material resources must be such as to ensure participants' independence and "voice." . . . The second condition requires that institutionalized patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all participants and ensure equal opportunity for achieving social esteem.¹¹

According to the first "objective" condition, participatory parity is impeded by economic structures such as the gendered division of unpaid reproductive labor that systematically make wives more dependent on husbands than husbands are on wives, and no-fault divorce laws which have rein-

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forced the asymmetries of exit options open to husbands and wives in such a way as to deny equal voice to women. According to the second “intersubjective” condition, participatory parity is impeded by institutionalized cultural value patterns such as those evinced in the legal remnants of coverture that deny wives both equal respect as persons and equal opportunities for achieving social esteem. Under coverture, equal respect is denied, for example, by the so-called “marital exemption” to rape laws whereby the act of marriage is taken as full consent to any and all future sexual acts performed by the husband, while equal opportunities for self-esteem are denied by the inability of wives to participate in the contestatory definition of their roles in the sex-based division of labor and so to participate in defining the evaluative schemas that code their contributions as of much less worth than husbands’ and other adult males’.

I’d like to briefly consider now three advantages promised by this normative framework of participatory parity.

Capacious Norm of Social Justice

The first advantage is that participatory parity revitalizes an older tradition in normative social theory that attempted to get a handle on social justice, broadly construed. That is, it is not a theory restricted to the formal conditions of justice as evinced in ideal legal and political structures modeled on the equal rights of all, the kind of theory epitomized by Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* and developed by liberal political theorists since.¹² Recall that for Rawls, his two principles of justice are designed to apply to a “well-ordered” society, that is, one whose major social institutions are not themselves guilty of major injustices and problematic internal structures. But of course, we know from everyday life that that is simply not our situation. It’s precisely because our basic social institutions, across a wide spectrum—not just political or legal institutions, but also educational institutions, familial structures, socialization practices, mass-communications institutions, civil society organizations, economic relations of production and distribution, ma-

ior cultural discourses, and so on—seem not to be well-ordered that social theory is spurred to develop interdisciplinary theories with emancipatory intent. That means that we need more expansive and incisive normative standards for evaluating a much broader range of social phenomena than have been provided by deontological, Kantian-inspired theories of justice, which typically focus only on ideal distributions of rights and responsibilities according to formal definitions of fairness. Rather, Fraser’s normative framework, as a capacious ideal of social justice writ large, holds out the promise of fulfilling older ambitions of critical social theory to think seriously about the prospects and deficiencies of contemporary society as it is. And, of course, the capaciousness of the norm of parity of participation is written into its formulation: it requires the widespread democratization of social institutions, broadly understood, in order to allow for each to participate in social life as a peer with others, not simply to be treated as an equal before the law with some equal chance of voter input into governmental policies.

Via Negativa: Specificity Without Undue Argumentative Burdens

The second advantage of Fraser’s framework is that it can underwrite this capacious normative ideal without, however, taking on the traditional argumentative burdens associated with deep and broad utopian thinking about social relations. It achieves this by a sort of *via negativa*: rather than painting a detailed canvass delineating the features of a fully just society or of a well-ordered society, the participatory parity framework specifies what count as injustices in current social relations. There is thus no need to take on the significant—perhaps unbearable—burdens of argument for a utopian specification: there is no immediate theoretical demand for arguments about the empirical plausibility of the proposed utopia, no need for complex assessments of the inertia of traditional social structures, no requirement for bridging principles for connecting the principles of ideal theory with non-ideal reality on the model of “partial compliance the-

ory,"¹³ no methodological obligation to account for why others have not been able or willing to envision such utopian ideals, and so on.¹⁴ Furthermore, such a *via negativa* tracks much more closely the public language of assessment actually used by citizens and social movements. We as everyday members of the social world tend to gauge phenomena in terms of concrete harms, violations, disruptions, injustices, distortions, pathologies, and so on. We tend not to abstractly compare our entire political and social institutions, structures, and procedures against an ideal standard of the good and just society.

Also, the *via negativa* standard of participatory parity is more ecumenical and less contestable than a grand theory specifying the necessary and sufficient conditions for justice and the good life. Here the benefits are, not the least, practical benefits. We can spend less time arguing about the rightness of basic normative principles and more time and effort identifying and remedying concrete violations. This ecumenical character follows not only from the starting point of identifying impediments to parity, but also from the fact that parity is a deontological standard of justice, not a teleological specification of the good life. Therefore it can respect the conditions of reasonable pluralism we find in the world today, acknowledging that different persons and groups have different and incommensurable understandings of what makes a worthwhile life, while at the same time making substantial normative judgments concerning what we owe any person simply as a person. It's precisely by focusing only on the requirements of justice that all people ought to recognize as binding on them that the theory promises to avoid the philosophical disputation that comes from the reliance of utopian and ideal theories on contestable anthropological and teleological premises concerning who we are and who we want to be. Thus surprisingly, it is the thinness and negative character of the framework of parity of participation that secures its ecumenical character and so makes it able to do so much actual work in assessing contemporary social formations.

Critical Assessments of Claims

The third advantage of Fraser's normative framework is that it fosters a truly critical attitude towards the welter of competing claims evinced in the public sphere of modern, complex, and pluralistic democratic societies. Rather than simply taking all claims to maldistribution and misrecognition as justified on their face, the framework of parity of participation helps us to sort out worthy from unworthy claims. Take for instance the claims made by various hate groups and fascist minorities that they suffer from misrecognition in the broader society. Here, while it may be true that existing social structures impede their members' capacity to develop full self-esteem in the light of their xenophobic vision of a worthy life, and precisely because that vision is denigrated by the larger society, Fraser insists that we should not acknowledge their claims for expanded recognition as justifiable. While it is certainly true that their attempt to develop an integral identity is impeded, and so they appear to suffer a form of misrecognition, on Fraser's model the crucial question is one of social relations of subordination not psychological experiences of identity deformation. Precisely because their xenophobic vision of a worthy life is aimed at the denial of equal respect and an equal opportunity for the development of self-esteem for other social group members, such groups violate the intersubjective conditions of participatory parity; their claims for expanded recognition should therefore be denied. Likewise, some claimants to have suffered distributive injustices fail *prima facie* in the light of the objective condition for participatory parity. Thus, a system that funded public schools only by means of local property taxes may be couched as an issue of justice and liberty, even though such systems demonstrably limit the equal independence and voice of those students who grow up in class-segregated school districts, and so deny them the objective conditions of parity of participation.

This capacity for a critical assessment of claims is particularly useful with respect to some forms of identity politics that mobilize

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the jargon of authentic group meaning and membership in order to further their claims. Here Fraser is particularly sensitive to the ways such an understanding of group membership can be used to reify contingently constructed group identities as quasi-natural states of affairs that all group members are held accountable to. However, not only is such a reification of group identity empirically and historically false, it also often functions to mask the specific forms of power and control that have been mobilized in constructing and policing that group identity. Thus the jargon of authenticity is often used within groups to structure internal relations of status subordination by coding some as less authentic than others or of incorrectly realizing the putatively natural, “authentic” identity. Fraser’s normative framework provides an insightful way of spelling out why merely invoking some heretofore misrecognized distinctiveness is not sufficient to carry legitimate claims to redress. For, once we couch misrecognition in terms of status subordination, it becomes clear that misrecognition can occur not only across groups, but within groups as well. This is particularly clear in the case of multiply intersecting differences, where different group members may suffer from various forms of status subordination depending on their sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and so on. Any claims to redress of misrecognition and proposed remedies must themselves be scrutinized for their expected effects in terms of other forms of misrecognition, and maldistribution—and for such tasks, we need a clear, persuasive, and compelling normative framework such as Fraser has provided us.

Arguing over Participational Parity

I’d like to turn now, in the second section, to some more reflective and critical comments about Fraser’s normative framework of participatory parity. First I simply raise three areas of question for discussion, and then I try to develop some socio-theoretic worries about the status model of recognition that, however, can only be answered by

clarifications concerning the character of the normative theory Fraser has proposed.

Various Worries

1. Deontology without Ethics—Really?

I wonder first whether the substantive evaluations she proposes as examples of her theory can really be carried on fully at the deontological level, and without a “pre-mature” turn to ethical evaluations, as she claims. Take, for instance, what she considers to be an easy case of unjustifiable status subordination: the denial of the right to marry to same-sex partners. Here, Fraser argues that since the denial of same-sex marriage constitutes a status subordination that denies gays and lesbians the intersubjective conditions for parity of participation, we can remain at the deontological level of justice, “without recourse to ethical evaluation—without, that is, assuming the substantive judgment that homosexual relationships are ethically valuable.”¹⁵ Its not so clear to me, however, how the requisite distinctions between who can and who can’t marry can be made while remaining at the supposedly ecumenical level of justice claims. For instance, its unclear how, simply on the basis of the norm of participatory parity, we can deny the substantial benefits and entitlements of marriage to groups larger than the dyadic pair of traditional marriage. This would seem to be a facial denial of parity to some, and by means of institutionalized cultural patterns that devalue non-dyadic romantic relationships, but it may be that, for some other reasons (perhaps historically-specific and particularistic ethical reasons?) we would nevertheless want to deny such parity to non-dyadic relationships.

In general, I am not as confident as she is that, for instance, issues about same-sex marriage, sex-segregated primary schools, or duties to future generations for environmental stewardship, or even what the “objective” conditions of independence and voice require in terms of material distributions, can be decided wholly independently of assumptions about particularistic ideals of the good life.¹⁶ Considering that debates about the intersubjective conditions of parity will

necessarily involve differing interpretations of cultural values, symbols, and representations, it seems particularly unlikely that these can be carried out without reference to thick hermeneutical judgments, judgments which seem to be ineliminably bound up with context-specific horizons of value. I share the hope for a non-sectarian language for contesting recognition and distribution claims; I'm skeptical of its practical possibility for the most important issues facing us today.

2. Flattening the Radicalism of New Social Movements

Secondly, I also wonder whether the focus on status equality, and the deontological framework of justice generally, even as it delimits an important normative baseline of minimally acceptable social structures, seems, nevertheless, to miss some of the radicalism of many social movements. For many current struggles aim primarily not to secure a society free of injustices, but more fundamentally to restructure our ways of life, our practices of self-realization, our notions of the good life. For example, queer politics aims at much more than merely overcoming the status subordination currently inflicted on some because minority sexualities are denigrated and despised in the broader culture. Rather, such politics may aim, for instance, to liberate all forms of sexuality—normal and queer, majority and minority, celebrated and despised—from the debilitating ethical framework of sexual shame. Here the idea is to mobilize not so much to correct an injustice visited on some, but to basically reconstruct all of our social practices of sexual shaming in such a way as to promote all forms of sexual autonomy. The point here is not to get straight society to tolerate certain forms of queerness as acceptably small deviations from normal, but to fundamentally remake the ethical self-understanding of society towards, as Michael Warner puts it, “a frank embrace of queer sex in all its apparent indignity, together with a frank challenge to the damaging hierarchies of respectability.”¹⁷ Consider also how much of the content of recent anti-globalization and anti-capitalist protests is missed by fo-

cus only on the objective, material conditions needed for each person's independence and voice. Here the deep critique of, say, the careerism, competitiveness, and egoistic individualism embedded in the anonymous imperatives of capitalist economic structures may simply fly under the radar of a theory focused solely on economic injustices to individuals.

One way to put this worry is to say that, although a deontological focus on justice has clear philosophical and methodological advantages over competing normative frameworks, it may cause us to theoretically foreshorten the semantics and grammar of many social movements, and so may lead to a diminution of the ambitions of a critical social theory looking to comprehend the struggles and wishes of the age in thought. I am not suggesting that we ignore issues of economic and cultural injustice, nor that we cede the priority of the right over the good that is the cornerstone of a justice-based normative framework. My worry is rather whether such a framework alone is sufficient to fulfill the aspirations of many important social movements, and of a radical critique of the present that is the hallmark of critical social theories. Said in terms of the tasks of critical social theory I introduced at the beginning, the worry is whether the gains in methodological astuteness come at the cost of a less accurate and perspicuous account of the struggles and wishes of the age.

3. Priority Relations Between The Different Conditions Of Participatory Parity

A third area of concern is highlighted by the fact that normative theories of justice have usually been concerned to adumbrate distinct priority relationships between the different principles they advance. For instance, Ronald Dworkin insists that questions of principle—roughly, considerations of individual liberty rights—trump questions of policy—roughly, considerations of the collective goals of a society, while John Rawls carefully outlines the priority relations between the commutative and distributive aspects of justice as fairness.¹⁸ Fraser, however, has not said much about how she envisions the principle of participatory par-

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ity working in those cases were we must decide between adequate redistribution and sufficient recognition. Such questions are even more pressing if we follow her suggestions and posit a third analytically independent axis of social ordering in terms of political decision making processes, and then analyze political marginalization and exclusion as a third analytically distinct form of the denial of participatory parity. Fraser does suggest many ways to finesse various tensions between redistribution and recognition in actual practice, and perhaps such practical solutions are the best that can be hoped for here. But it seems it would tell us something important about the shape of a critical social theory to know how it proposes to prioritize claims in those situations where we cannot completely satisfy all of our normative principles simultaneously.

Prima Facie Objections to Conceiving of Misrecognition as Status Subordination

I'd like now to turn, at a bit greater length, to certain confusions I have about the character of the normative framework Fraser has advanced, and in particular about how she conceives of the relationship between normative theory and social practice. Rather than turning directly to this framework, however, I'd like instead to approach the issues obliquely by considering a set of prima facie objections to Fraser's socio-theoretic proposal to uncouple the theory of misrecognition from theories of personal identity formation, and to reconceptualize misrecognition in terms of status subordination. Since I have elsewhere considered at length the advantages and disadvantages of the status model of recognition in comparison with Honneth's and Taylor's identity-based models,¹⁹ here I will present my reservations about Fraser's model in terms of a set of examples that problematize her claim that the status model can pick out all and only those harms that we intuitively understand as recognition harms. In other words, these examples are meant to raise prima facie objections to her claim that status subordination is the best frame for conceiving of and diagnosing

misrecognition. As I hope to suggest, the only adequate way to assess the socio-theoretic import of these problematic examples is by turning to the normative framework, and this in turn will open some important questions about exactly how the standards of parity of participation are to be understood and employed.

1. Examples of Status Violations without Harm to Identity

Consider first the possibility of a status violation that is not actually connected to one's identity, to one's sense of self—it surely may be a wrong, but I think we should not call it a case of misrecognition. Yet Fraser's social theory would seem to force us to accept it as a case of misrecognition. Imagine a mid-level manager in a corporation. She may not achieve participatory parity precisely because she is excluded from decision-making procedures, and she is so excluded because of a set of institutionalized cultural value patterns, a set of patterns that define her group—mid-level managers—as to be excluded from participation. Yet, it would be strange to say that she had suffered a harm of misrecognition, since the exclusion in no way attacks or threatens her sense-of-self, her fundamental identity, that with which she strongly identifies.²⁰ At a different level of institutionally anchored norms, imagine a national procedure for weighting the political influence of individual citizens such that citizens in some communities were accorded more influence than in other communities. This situation obtains, for example, in the U.S. constitutional scheme of federalism with respect to (at least) Senate representation and Presidential representation, by means of the Electoral College. Here we have an apparently clear violation of participatory parity with respect to formal democratic institutions, one that reflects an institutionalized set of cultural values that codes urbanites as of less political trustworthiness and patriotic zeal than rural persons—in short, as of lower status as a group. And yet, I think we should hesitate to call this form of status subordination a case of misrecognition. Isn't the hesitation here precisely that the injustice seems unconnected

to the social bases of one's sense-of-self, does not seem to arise from an attack on one's identity?

2. Examples of Misrecognition without Status Subordination

Consider now the possibilities for identity-based harms that are independent of status subordination: here the idea is that some individuals may suffer harms because of cultural patterns of contempt or stigmatization that attack their fundamental sense-of-self, but where those symbolic patterns are not anchored in socially subordinating institutions. Imagine a gay man who lives in a progressive, cosmopolitan and tolerant city, yet remains in the closet about his sexuality because his self-esteem is undermined by stereotypes in the mass media and culture portraying gay men as licentious libertines.²¹ Alternatively, consider a physically disabled person whose interests in removing barriers to mobility is in fact secured by a high level of compliance with anti-discrimination legislation, but who is regularly subject to overly solicitous attempts to help her with physical tasks, attempts that tend to infantilize her because of her physical disability. In this case, she feels a violation of the social bases for her self-respect, as she is treated as incapable of full individual autonomy and hence as lacking full human dignity. Yet this harm to her sense-of-self is not institutionally anchored in ways that violate her capacity to operate as an equal in the major activities of social life. In both cases, it seems that we have cases of misrecognition rooted in harms to the social bases required for the healthy development of a person's identity, but harms which are "free-floating" in cultural value hierarchies and merely attitudinal patterns, and so do not constitute institutionally-anchored obstacles to participatory parity. Hence they are cases of misrecognition without status subordination.

3. Some Prima Facie Objections

If one can suffer a status subordination that is unconnected to misrecognition, and one can suffer misrecognition without status subordination—contrary to the analysis of

Fraser's model—then it seems that the status model is in some ways strikingly unsuited to an analysis of recognition politics, and precisely because it sidesteps consideration of the social psychology of identity formation and maintenance. Surely many forms of culturally-elaborated misrecognition do in fact lead to institutionalized status subordination, and many forms of culturally-unelaborated status subordination may later develop demeaning and stigmatizing images as a kind of false legitimization of unjustifiable social arrangements. Nevertheless, it appears that a theory of social justice oriented to the struggles and wishes of the age cannot avoid an account of the internal connection between individual identity formation and the intersubjective conditions of recognition that make it possible. Otherwise it will over-diagnose all forms of status subordination as unjustifiable forms of misrecognition, and yet be unable to diagnose institutionally unanchored identity-based harms as the misrecognitions they appear to be.

Three Types of Response to the Prima Facie Objections

Now, the key questions in handling these prima facie objections concern whether a critical social theory should in fact be worried about, on the one hand, any and all forms of status hierarchy and, on the other, all forms of cultural and attitudinal disrespect. These questions cannot, however, be addressed purely at the level of empirical social theory, for they clearly involve normative issues about what kinds of social structures and processes are truly deleterious to justice and which are comparatively harmless; or so I shall now argue.

Consider how one might respond to the examples of managerial hierarchies, unequal voting powers, the self-closeting of sexual minorities, and disrespectful infantilization of the disabled: "Well," one might say, "those simply aren't the kinds of social interactions and structures critical social theory needs to be worried about. Since they are not significant, persistent, and truly harmful forms of status subordination that

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actually deny equal respect and equal opportunities for self-esteem, we need not account for them in our theory. And further, its precisely a liability of identity-based theories of recognition that they identify any and all harms to identity as worrisome forms of misrecognition. Finally, it is this deference on the part of identity-based theories to any claimants for expanded recognition that leads such models down the road to an unreflective endorsement of the claims of both intolerant hate groups and illiberal purveyors of the reifying jargon of authenticity.” This response boils down to the claims that these cases simply are not examples of injustice, and so we need not worry about the inability of our social theory to identify them.

However, its not clear how persuasive this response can be, especially given the fact that Fraser appears to be committed to democracy at both the first order of social relations, and at the second order of adjudicating claims about those relations. Let me explain. The most natural way to understand the response above is as a denial, from the point of view of one who has insight into what justice is and what it truly requires, that ordinary social participants have a satisfactory grasp on what justice is and requires. On this understanding of the response—let me call it the expertocratic understanding—the counterexamples do not have traction against the theory of status subordination, since critical social theory articulates clear and justified normative standards that theorists can use to substantively evaluate whether the first-order claims of social actors are warranted. The theory thus reserves the appellation “misrecognition” only for those examples of status subordination that it means to condemn and never for those institutionalized hierarchies it takes as justifiable, and it never uses “misrecognition” in reference to those instances where individuals experience some identity-based disrespect or denigration that the theorist doesn’t countenance as real or serious injustices. This expertocratic approach has the advantage of being able to clearly adjudicate conflicts over recognition claims, while saving the socio-theoretic account of misrecognition as status subordination. The problem is that it seems to violate

our democratic scruples by treating social participants as comparatively incapable and undeserving of performing the delicate tasks of distinguishing between justifiable and unjustifiable social structures.

Fraser clearly recognizes the participatory and egalitarian deficits of this expertocratic understanding, and rejects it, insisting that

the norm of participatory parity must be applied dialogically and discursively, through democratic processes of public debate. In such debates, participants argue about whether existing institutionalized patterns of cultural value impede parity of participation and about whether proposed alternatives would foster it. . . . For the status model, then, participatory parity serves as an idiom of public contestation and deliberation about questions of justice. More strongly, it represents the principle idiom of public reason, the preferred language for conducting democratic political argumentation on issues of both distribution and recognition.²²

Here we seem to be invited towards an alternative, let us say, populist understanding of the response to the prima facie objections. In the case of slights to personal integrity experienced by persons as instances of violations of the intersubjective structures of expectable recognition, the theory must take them seriously as examples of misrecognition. But then Fraser’s insistence on the difference between institutionally-anchored and merely free-floating cultural value patterns and attitudes collapses. What then counts as misrecognition is just what the identity theorists seem to claim: those social conditions that persons in fact experience as impeding their equal opportunity to achieve an intact and integral personal identity. In the case of those institutionalized status subordinations, such as managerial hierarchies and unequal voting power, that aren’t registered in the everyday public sphere as caused by disrespectful patterns of cultural evaluation, critical social theory on the pop-

ulist interpretation need not worry about them. They are simply status hierarchies that we theorists must acknowledge as justified, since there is no democratic debate and contestation over them as examples of possible misrecognition. So, the populist understanding of the response apparently saves the everyday sense of what the difference is between pressing recognition harms and unimportant differences in status, but in doing so, it undercuts the response to the *prima facie* socio-theoretic objections. Status subordination turns out to be just a theoretical way of talking about what social participants experience and thematize as identity deformations. The status model of recognition then collapses into a populist interpretation of the identity model, and social theory is no longer fully critical vis-à-vis existing forms of hate groups and the politics of authenticity.

Given that the expertocratic understanding of the response saves the theory from the counterexamples at the price of an unattractive Platonist understanding of the theory, and that the populist response concedes the objection, and so saves our democratic scruples at the price of giving up the theoretical advantages of the status model of recognition, it is perhaps not surprising that Fraser has endorsed a more subtle division of labor between everyday social participants and critical social theorists. She suggests we employ a “rule of thumb” for the intellectual division of labor when assessing proposed remedies to injustice: “when we consider institutional questions, the task of theory is to circumscribe the range of policies and programs that are compatible with the requirements of justice; weighing the choices within that range, in contrast, is a matter for citizen deliberation.”²³ Although in the context of her argument, this division is suggested as appropriate for the evaluation of proposed remedies for injustice, perhaps we could extend it here to the initial diagnosis of justice violations as well. Thus, to return to my counterexamples, the theorist would delimit the range of what are to count as injustices—including only those status hierarchies that are unjustifiable and excluding all

those identity-based slights that are seen as unimportant—and then allow democratic participation to investigate and determine which amongst that range of phenomena are to be counted as significant enough to deserve remedy. The problem in this understanding—perhaps we could call it the agenda-setting understanding—however, seems to me the same as that which follows from the expertocratic understanding: it presupposes that only the theorist has the best insight into social reality and the requirements of justice; public dialogue and participation are needed merely to add a patina of legitimacy through the democratic choice between the options pre-selected by superior moral insight.²⁴

I’m not sure that I have adequately portrayed Fraser’s position here, nor that I fully understand how she intends to finesse the tensions between theoretical perspicacity and the first and second-order requirements of democratic legitimacy. It appears to me that there is a real conflict between the desire to admit democratic deliberation “all the way up” into theory, as it were, and the critical aspirations of a theory that attempts to make substantive distinctions between warranted and unwarranted social justice claims and remedies.

Said another way, there appear to be significant conflicts between the various tasks required to critically clarify the struggles and wishes of the age: between the need for an empirically accurate assessment of those present struggles, the normative requirements for a defensible account of the evaluative standards employed both by theorists and activists, the methodological requirements for reflexive clarity of theory, and, the aspirations toward a perspicuous lens that can insightfully illuminate our present in a new, revealing, and practically effective way. Perhaps these are, ultimately irreconcilable tasks. It is to Nancy Fraser’s credit that she has provided us with an important and powerful conception of critical social theory that promises, nevertheless, to fulfill these tasks better than rival conceptions.

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ENDNOTES

1. Karl Marx, "For a Ruthless Criticism of Everything Existing [Letter to Arnold Ruge, September 1843]," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 15.
2. Max Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy," in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 253–72; "Traditional and Critical Theory," *ibid.*, 188–243.
3. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, trans. Joel Golb, James Ingram, and Christiane Wilke (New York: Verso, 2003).
4. Christopher F. Zurn, "Identity or Status? Struggles over "Recognition" in Fraser, Honneth, and Taylor," *Constellations* 10 (2003): 519–37; "Group Balkanization or Societal Homogenization: Is There a Dilemma between Recognition and Distribution Struggles?" *Public Affairs Quarterly* (forthcoming).
5. Her original construction of a bivalent social theory, in Nancy Fraser, "Recognition or Redistribution? A Critical Reading of Iris Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference*," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 166–8; and in *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), has been updated and somewhat modified in Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*
6. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995); Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism and "the Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 25–73; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).
7. See, *inter alia*, Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 67–69 and 101 n. 40.
8. An elegant argument for the need to extend Fraser's bivalent social theory in the direction of politics, along with a fascinating application of such a trivalent theory to homeless policy in the United States can be found in Leonard C. Feldman, "Redistribution, Recognition, and the State: The Irreducibly Political Dimension of Injustice," *Political Theory* 30 (2002): 410–40.
9. See especially Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Recognition," *New Left Review*, no. 3 (2000): 107–20; "Recognition without Ethics?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 2–3 (2001): 21–42.
10. Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Grethe B. Peterson (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998), 1–67; "Recognition without Ethics?"; Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*
11. Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 36.
12. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
13. The phrase is Rawls', and is illuminatingly introduced in the context of somewhat *ad hoc* discussions of "the several parts of nonideal theory" (*ibid.*, 216); see also sections 38, 39, and 53.
14. A sensitive account of the systematic problems of utopian forms of thinking as they plagued the development of Western or Hegelian Marxism, an account that, however, refuses to surrender the promise of utopia ideals, can be found in Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).
15. Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 40.
16. For Fraser's more detailed consideration of these issues see especially Fraser, "Recognition without Ethics?"; 33–38, and Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?*, 38–42.
17. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 74.
18. See, *inter alia*, Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) and Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.
19. Zurn, "Identity or Status?"
20. My example assumes that persons do not usually perceive a strong connection between their sense of self and being a mid-level manager. One might object here that one's personal identity is frequently tied to one's place in the division of labor. But in my example, the status subordination does not accrue to the person because she works in a corporation, or in a specific kind of business, or has a white collar job, or does particular kinds of labor.

Rather the subordination is caused by her membership in the class of mid-level managers, a membership I doubt is strongly connected to her sense of self.

21. My thanks to Jon Mandle for this example and discussion of it.
22. Fraser and Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition?* 43 (emphasis original).
23. *Ibid.*, 72.
24. In her response to this paper at the 42nd Annual SPEP conference, Boston, MA, November 6, 2003, Fraser indicated that she no longer supports what I have called the agenda-setting model of a

division of labor between theorists and citizens that she had suggested in *Redistribution or Recognition?* Indicating that both Jeremy Waldron and I had rightly taken her theory to task for the unacceptably elitist and expertocratic tendencies of this proposal, she reasserted her fundamental commitment to a fully democratic understanding of the norm of participatory parity, at both the first and second orders. While I welcome this clarification, I am still unclear about how the theory can remain sufficiently critical vis-à-vis various extant recognition claims to generate the advantages promised by the status model.

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