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## The *objet a* and Minorities' Struggle for Recognition: Jacques Lacan, Charles Taylor, and Axel Honneth

Sinkwan Cheng



The year 1992 witnessed the publication of Charles Taylor's "Politics of Recognition"<sup>1</sup> and Axel Honneth's *The Struggle for Recognition*<sup>2</sup>—two works which provide important alternatives to multiculturalism's strategies for defending minority or subaltern rights. Both Taylor and Honneth draw carefully from the history of ideas in the West—political philosophy in particular—to provide insightful diagnosis of the problems confronting new social movements in the late twentieth century. Their works provide useful means for counterpointing the rather one-dimensional discourse of identity politics long dominating the literary academy. Regrettably, even though Taylor and Honneth have already been quite widely discussed in Social Sciences, Literature departments seem by and large unwilling to confront, or even unaware of, the important challenges raised by their writings. Axel Honneth, especially, remains a rather unknown figure to literary scholars.

I cannot detail the groundbreaking insight of Taylor and Honneth here, but will concentrate on one important contribution made by each thinker to the discussion of the politics of diversity. I will then suggest how their contributions can be ameliorated by Lacan's notion of the *objet a*. I will focus on how Taylor and Honneth's political theory fall short of Lacan's insight.

Taylor's important divergence from multiculturalism can be seen in his insistence on how "real judgments of worth [of other cultures] supposed a fused horizon of standards ... ; they supposed that we have been transformed by the study of the other, so that we are not simply judging by our original familiar standards" (70). Taylor's stance arises from his astute discernment of the ethnocentrism underlying certain "politically correct" critics' premature affirmation of all cultures. To affirm blindly other cultures which one has not studied seriously means that one is merely imposing one's own standard in making such judgment. This practice amounts to homogenizing all cultures under the same "critical" standard. In Taylor's own words, "By implicitly invoking our standards to judge all civilizations and cultures, the politics of difference can end up making everyone the same" (71). In place of "peremptory and inauthentic judgments of equal values," Taylor advocates a "willingness to be open to comparative cultural study of the kind that must displace our horizons in the resulting fusions" (73).

An important contribution made by Axel Honneth to subaltern rights is his understanding of the demands of new social movements in terms of a moral claim rather than a claim for particular group interests. Honneth shifts the basis for revolt and resistance from the material to the moral. Instead of focusing on the conflict of interests between

the majority and minorities in society, Honneth upholds the moral dimension in social conflicts (hence the subtitle of his book, *The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*). In Honneth's reading, minorities ought to protest against unfair treatment, not so much in response to their injured interests, as in response to a sense of their "moral" expectations being violated—expectations which are based on a tacit understanding of what one deserves. It is because of Honneth's emphasis on moral rather than interest claims that he focuses on subalterns' struggle for recognition rather than for, say, equal distribution of wealth. Drawing from Hegel, Honneth locates the hallmark of humanity in human beings' willingness to sacrifice their lives and to give up on self-preservation for the sake of recognition. The struggle for recognition is for Honneth a moral struggle, because it raises a human being above his/her animalistic urge for self-preservation. What is at issue in the struggle for recognition is one's honor and humanity instead of "mere life." Self-realization through mutual recognition, rather than self-preservation, is what is at issue for Honneth in theorizing subaltern struggles. Joel Anderson describes Honneth's conceptual scheme this way: "the grammar of [the subalterns'] struggles is 'moral' in the sense that the feelings of outrage and indignation driving them are generated by the rejection of claims to recognition and thus imply normative judgements about the legitimacy of social arrangements" (xii).<sup>3</sup>

Taylor and Honneth's proposals look very interesting from a Lacanian perspective. One strong motivating force behind their emphasis on recognition is their dissatisfaction with "the overwhelmingly monological bent of mainstream modern philosophy" (Taylor 32). The two thinkers' strong critique of the atomistic self parallels Lacan's argument against the ego. Both, however, stop short of Lacan's insight at a deeper level. Neither comes up with the radical democratic politics for discussing minority rights which can be made possible by Lacan's *objet a*.

Both Taylor and Honneth argue strongly against the idea of a solipsistic self and favor instead the intersubjective thinking of Hegel and George Herbert Mead. For Taylor, the "crucial feature of human life is its fundamentally dialogical character. ... We define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us" (32-33).

Honneth founds his intersubjective program by using the young Hegel (the Hegel of the Jena writings) to get beyond the atomistic, egocentric self that dominates the political philosophy of Machiavelli and Hobbes. Modern (postmetaphysical) social theory starts, Honneth says, with Machiavelli and Hobbes, that is, with conflict resolved through a social contract based on isolated, atomistic individuals who act in terms of self-interest. These two self-interest oriented philosophers are then to be sublated by the young Hegel who is able to "modify the model of 'social struggle' introduced in the social philosophies of Machiavelli and Hobbes in such a way that conflict among humans could be traced back, not to a motive of self-preservation, but to moral impulses" (5). Social conflicts in Hegel's schema are motivated by a moral impetus, precisely because they are not self-oriented but are generated with reference to intersubjectivity. As such, "a struggle among subjects for the mutual recognition of their identity generated inner-societal pressure toward the practical, political establishment of institutions that would guarantee freedom":

It is individuals' claim to the intersubjective recognition of their identity that is built into social life from the very beginning as a moral tension, transcends the level of social progress institutionalized thus far, and so gradually leads—via the negative path of recurring stages of conflict—to a state of communicatively lived freedom. (Honneth 5)

So far, we have seen how at the center of the thoughts of both Taylor and Honneth exists not a monological self but a form of "inter-esse," a self which is vulnerable, coeval with and open

to the other. This idea is very much akin to Lacan's barring of both the subject and the big Other. Both Lacanian psychoanalysis and advocates of the politics of recognition go beyond many multiculturalists' one-dimensional analysis of social pathologies created by unfair treatments of minorities. By pointing out the co-implication of the self with the other, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Taylor, and Honneth draw attention to how society's misrecognition of minorities by "mirror[ing] back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves" (Taylor 25) deform the consciousness of not only the victims but also the victimizers. (One is reminded here of how Sartre—another proponent of the philosophy of recognition—observes in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* that colonialism dehumanizes not only the colonized but also the colonizers).<sup>4</sup>

Neither Lacanian psychoanalysis nor theorists of the politics of recognition, however, find a law of equal recognition of all to be sufficient for rendering justice to minorities. In Lacan's thought, the law cannot say it all ("*pas-tout*," in Lacan's term). There is always some-*Thing* which both exceeds and falls short of the symbolic order. Likewise, Taylor finds "the impersonality of the public sphere...a society that treats us all as equals" and "the neutrality of our public sphere" to be inadequate for the constitution of a good life (Gutmann 4),<sup>5</sup> for the reason that "most people need a secure cultural context to give meaning and guidance to their choices in life" (Gutmann 5). Recognition for Taylor thus does not refer so much to the recognition of minorities as abstractly "equal" members of society, as the recognition due to the uniqueness, the distinctness, and particular worth of individual cultures. Honneth is more willing than Taylor to discuss at length the "impersonal" law of "equality for all" as also a recognition-granting institution, even though he also pays special attention to the recognition of difference rather than the recognition of the same. To summarize Honneth's schema, he differentiates among three kinds of recognitions: the recognition through love, through law, and through solidarity. While recognition from loved ones gives one self-confidence, through legally institutionalized relations of universal respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons, individuals are recognized as autonomous moral actors. Like Taylor, Honneth finds love and law to be insufficient for the full flourishing of human existence. For Honneth, a truly healthy, non-pathological society must have networks of solidarity and shared values within which the particular worth of individual members of a community can be acknowledged.

This is to say, like Lacanian psychoanalysis, Taylor and Honneth find the law which treats all as equal to be inadequate for discussing justice for subaltern groups. What distinguishes Lacan from Taylor and Honneth, however, is that for Lacan, the residue left over from the symbolic order is an *objet a*—unknowable and unrecognizable. By contrast, the uniqueness of each individual culture for Taylor and Honneth is an *object* (in contrast to the *objet a*) that is recognizable and identifiable. Taylor, for example, promotes the fusion of horizons (70). Implied in this concept is the idea that the efforts made in learning and education will eventually allow us to recognize in an authentic manner (73) the true worth of other cultures. As for Honneth, his proposal of solidarity through shared values also amounts to saying that the values of individual cultures can be pinpointed.

In arguing for a fusion of horizons, Taylor adopts a hermeneutic approach that is known for its strong historical orientation. Ironically, in suggesting that that we will be able to learn through education the uniqueness of another culture, Taylor neglects considering that all cultures and their uniqueness are constantly changing and evolving through history. The radical singularity of another culture thus perpetually evades us, however "educated" we are about it. In fact, its uniqueness even evades its own members. To suggest that we can one day truly "recognize" another culture's worth amounts to saying either that the other culture has become a dead object for our scrutiny, or that the horizon of the other culture is totally closed and immune to any challenges of new

ideas and as such would completely constrict and stifle its own members. By contrast, using Lacan's notion of the *objet a* to think about the uniqueness of another culture prevents us from positivizing, fetishizing, and thus fossilizing, its distinctness.

Thus, Lacan's notion of the *objet a* could have prevented Taylor from ultimately falling back into the trap of essentializing cultural differences. Even though Taylor is successful in counterpointing the essentializing tendency of most multiculturalist arguments by speaking against a premature reification of other cultures' distinct worth, his notion of the fusing of horizon of standards (70) would eventually trap him in the essentialism that he is at pains to avoid. Let me clarify, however, that by using Lacan to read Taylor, I am by no means externally imposing the former's standard and "paradigms" on the latter. Rather, I am trying to point out how Lacan could further draw out the critical insight already in Taylor. In the same way, Lacan's *objet a* also provides a useful means for refining Honneth's theory of recognition. If one of Honneth's major contributions is to rethink minorities' struggle for recognition as a moral rather than an interest claim, then Lacanian psychoanalysis can reinforce and enrich that claim. Honneth's moral claim is made on the grounds that subaltern groups' struggle for rights is a struggle for the justice and recognition they rightfully deserve, and that the injury suffered by minorities is not so much a material as a moral injury. Lacan's notion of the *objet a* can make this moral claim much more powerful and convincing. By showing that there is a residue or an *objet a* left over from the symbolic order—in our case, that there is a justice due to minority cultures which cannot be rendered to them by the law of equality for all—Lacanian psychoanalysis clearly demonstrates that the justice due to minorities outside the limits of the law is not an outlaw in the sense of a crime or an injustice. Rather, minorities' struggle for justice beyond the law of equality for all is a continuation of, rather than an opposition to, law's striving for justice. This way, Lacanian psychoanalysis can readily invalidate certain conservatives' dismissal of new social movements as merely self-serving claims made by different subaltern groups.

The critical force of the *objet a* does not stop at strengthening the moral grammar of subaltern movements. More significantly, it provides a most powerful means for democratizing law by making law admit its own incompleteness, thereby forcing law to be more open to the justice outside the limits (in contrast to the notion of "boundary") of the law. Contrary to many multiculturalist scholars who see the law of equality and the law of difference as separated from each other, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Real does not exist beyond the symbolic order; rather, the Real inhabits the symbolic order and at the same time disrupts it. In other words, for Lacan, the law of difference does not have to be implemented at the expense of the law of equality. Rather, the law granting equal rights to all can be expanded, and further democratized, by the law attentive to cultural difference. The political significance of the *objet a*, which is both impossible and necessary to the symbolic order, thus gives a clear focus to Taylor's critical agenda in its attempt to make the politics of difference a challenge to, rather than a destruction of, the democratic impetus of the law of universal equality.

Unlike many multiculturalists, Taylor affirms repeatedly that "the demands of multiculturalism build on the already established principles of the politics of equal respect." For Taylor, the idea that subaltern groups' traditional cultures have values is a "logical extension" of the politics of equal dignity (68)—a politics based on the idea that all humans are equally worthy of respect (41): " ... underlying the demand [for recognition] is a principle of universal equality. ... [W]e give due acknowledgement only to what is universally present ... through recognizing what is peculiar to each" (Taylor 39).

In the same way, Lacan's idea of the *objet a* clarifies Honneth's "formal conception of ethical life"—a conception well described by Joel Anderson as "a critical normative standard that is intended to avoid both the overly 'thick' character of neo-Aristotelian ethics and the overly 'thin' character of neo-Kantian moral theory" (xi). Lacan's idea of the *objet a*, in other words, allows us to engage liberalism and communitarianism in a critical dialogue, thereby alerting us to both their shortcomings and their critical insight.

Finally, I wish to comment on how the *objet a* avoids a crucial problem in the politics of recognition. Despite Taylor and Honneth's emphasis on the dialogic instead of the monologic self, their valorization of recognition risks hypostatizing the symbolic order and turning the symbolic into yet another imaginary product. As I mentioned before, the valorization of recognition at the expense of the unconscious risks turning the distinctness of a culture into a positivized object, thereby making it into yet another imaginary fetish. Significantly, Taylor himself uses the images "mirror" and "picture" to describe the activities of recognition when he describes how "a person or 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 pictures of themselves" (25). Likewise, Honneth over-valorizes Hegel's ability to use conflict or the "struggle for recognition" as a means for Spirit to drive human life and civilization forward into "the practical, political establishment of institutions that would guarantee freedom" (5). True enough, one of Hegel's ingenuities, as Étienne Balibar points out, resides in his dialectical conversion of the negativity of historical violence into the positivity of civilization. The realization of the World Spirit, traced by Hegel in the form of a *Bildungsroman* in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, is the civilizing process whereby "violence becomes converted into non-violence, i.e. becomes sublimated or spiritualized and transformed into political institutions [and] legal state power."<sup>7</sup> However, what Honneth overlooks, and which Balibar draws attention to, is some-*Thing* left out of Hegel's negation of negation which is absolutely inconvertible, not negatable, and non-negotiable, a remainder leftover from the dialectics of violence and civilization, an excess, an ob-scene *jouissance* associated with the superego. This oversight on Honneth's part can be remedied by attending to Lacan's idea of the *objet a*—a lesson which Balibar himself has put to good use in his critique of Hegel.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, "Politics of Recognition," *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; first published in 1992. All subsequent references are to the 1994 edition.

<sup>2</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, tr. Joel Anderson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995. Translation of *Kampf um Anerkennung* Frankfurt am/Main: SuhrkampVerlag, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Joel Anderson, "Introduction," *The Struggle for Recognition*, Honneth, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface" to *Wretched of the Earth*, by Frantz Fanon, tr. Constance Farrington, New York: Grove Press, 1963, pp. 14-15:

... this imperious being [the colonizer], crazed by his absolute power and by the fear of losing it, no longer remembers clearly that he was once a man; he takes himself for a horsewhip or a gun; he has come to believe that the

domestication of the "inferior race" will come about by the conditioning of their reflexes. But in this he leaves out of account the human memory and the ineffaceable marks left upon it; and then, above all there is something which perhaps he has never known: we only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Gutmann, "Introduction," *op. cit.*, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Kant and Hegel differentiate between "limit" and "boundary." For details, please see Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Prolegomena*; see also Hegel's *Phenomenology and Logic*. In brief, "limit" could be described as a "reflection-into-itself" of the boundary.

<sup>7</sup> Étienne Balibar, "Specters of Violence," presented at the School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University, 14th July, 1998.