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Media, recognition and constitution of subjectivities

Recognition is one of the most important *neglected* concepts in the social sciences and political theory. Developed by German critical theorist Axel Honneth from the thinking of G. W. F. Hegel, the concept without question carries a heavy philosophical baggage. But, through its practical development of Hegel's pathbreaking and profound insights into the *relational* nature of human life, the concept of 'recognition' – that is, human beings' need for, and necessary commitment to, *mutual* recognition of each other as entities that can be free – provides a crucial building-block for a richer account of what democracy can, indeed must, involve, if it is to be worthy of the name.

Honneth has been developing the theory of recognition for more than a quarter of a century, but it is clear that it is a theory with a deeply practical import at the end of the century's second decade, a time of intense anxiety about whether democracy is even possible any more and, if so, where and under what conditions. Honneth himself has in the past decade attempted to expand the concept of recognition into a broader theory of 'the social foundations of democracy life' (Honneth 2014). Honneth's fully developed account includes, for the first time, discussion of the role of media in a theory of recognition (Honneth 2014: 281-303). Until then, with the exception of the pioneering book by Rousley Maia and her fellow Brazilian researchers (Maia 2014), little work had been done on the links between media and recognition, even though in contemporary societies media institutions are surely a key means whereby society recognises individuals and their lived realities and, through social media, individuals come to recognise each other in certain ways.

By another route, when investigating the concept of voice, I had argued that recognition, alongside Amartya Sen's notion of capabilities, was a crucial tool in developing the philosophical underpinnings of the concept of *voice* (Couldry 2010: 103-107). As it happens, Chapter Five of *Why Voice Matters,* where I develop this discussion, has already been translated into Portuguese by Marcus Antonio Assis Lima and Caleb Pereira Lima (Couldry 2015). For me, the value of voice, though it has many philosophical foundations, can usefully be deepened via the concept of recognition.

There are many reasons already, therefore, to believe that the concept of recognition – and in particular, recognition as actualized through media in their various forms – is a promising line of theoretical and empirical enquiry for social theory and for media and communications research. For this reason alone, this wide-ranging special issue of *Contracampo* on 'Media and Recognition' is to be welcomed.

But there is another and even more pressing reason to welcome it. This relates to the convergent crises in democratic practice today, which have three elements. First, there are the acute practical and ideological challenges to democracy as a way of doing politics. Second, and emerging within the first crisis, there are widespread conservative attempts across all continents to reverse half a century or more of social, cultural and political reform, with gender being an important, but of course not the only, faultline. Third, and subtly linked to the first two, there is the corporate drive, through an emerging transformation of the social fabric by processes of datafication, to directly annex to capital the very spaces of the social and the production of meaning.

It should be clear why the concept of recognition has something valuable to contribute to attempts to address each component of this contemporary crisis of democracy. Let me however say a little more about the least obviously relevant component of the three: data. Datafication – the almost compulsory transformation of the stuff and fabric of social life into data and, through that, into a factor of capitalist production – is transforming what we understand by the social and social knowledge. That is already transformation enough. But there is another transformation under way which derives from the means on which datafication relies, which is the continuous and multi-scalar tracking of individual and group lives, the very flow and texture of experience.

The concept of recognition sensitizes us to this violence. For at the core of Honneth's concept of recognition is, as I already noted, Hegel's relational understanding of freedom (*freiheit*). For Hegel, freedom is the 'freedom to be *with oneself* in the other'. As I argue in a new book with Mexican theorist Ulises Ali Mejías, the material practices of datafied surveillance (their constant surveillance of human subjects) breach this possibility of freedom, intruding on the very space of the self on which that possibility is founded (Couldry and Mejías 2019: chapter 5). A concept of recognition, pursued through empirical and theoretical research, can help us register and scandalize this breach.

There could hardly therefore be more at stake in the exciting new work that this special issue edited by my friends and colleagues Bruno Campanella and João Magalhães gathers together. I urge you to read it and debate it closely.

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Debates about how identities are constituted through intersubjective recognition processes are central to the current critical theory. Generally founded on the Hegelian theory of "self-awareness", the concept of recognition resurfaces as of the 1990s as an attempt to theorize the demand for identity policies in multicultural societies (Taylor, 1994) and a socio-ethical philosophy that deepens the practical dimensions of recognition from the analysis of social conflicts (Honneth, 2003). Although updated to account for developments in the fields of sociology and psychology, these recent theorizations preserve the core of Hegel's formulation, according to which there is an intrinsic articulation between being and must being. Individuals both *need to be* recognized by others in order to understand who they are (to constitute self-understanding) and *must be* recognized in a certain way so that such self-understanding can be qualified as an autonomous one. The Hegelian "great idea" is that freedom lies in the formation of the "I", and that this formation can only be realized with the presence of the other - and not with their absence (Brandom, 2007). Disputes about what kind of recognition is due to who configures, from this perspective, the very engine of social history. Although several authors have demonstrated their contradictions and shortcomings (a good example is McNay, 2008), the idea of recognition continues to wield enormous influence, even if implicitly and indirectly. Hence, many of the debates on the realization of human rights, democratization and "empowerment" usually address the concept of recognition.

If recognition processes depend on the possibility of communication (Honneth, 2001), it is curious that its participants ignore almost completely the media's role[1] - and that media scholars rarely study recognition processes. The few studies that propose this type of analysis (such as Maia, 2018; Couldry, 2010; Hjarvard, 2013, p. 149-151) tend to think the processes of "mediated recognition" as eminently positive. In this context, the means of communication are treated as important artifacts in the formation of self-fulfilling subjectivities. These analyses do not necessarily take into account, however, some contemporary media practices, especially those related to social media: an environment crossed by economic logics that value an individualized and sometimes depoliticized search for recognition. This epistemological gap seems to be out of step with the way media structure visibilities and invisibilities, which affects the very possibility of recognition between the social actors. Considering the importance of the processes of mediatization and datafication of society (Couldry; Hepp, 2017), this subject is even more relevant.

This dossier is proposed as a step towards advancing this discussion. The sample brought in this dossier demonstrates the breadth and centrality of media institutions for contemporary relations of recognition (or disrespect).

Many of the articles in this dossier deal with traditional media formats - even if they circulate through digital means. In a careful empirical analysis of a sample of the *Jornal Nacional* in the article An Ocean of Silence: Gender Social Representations in broadcast journalism from Brazil through the analysis of 'Jornal Nacional', Iluska Coutinho (UFJF) and Caroline Marin (UFJF) show that female invisibilization goes far beyond the number of women who appear in the possibly most traditional Brazilian journalistic program. For, even when existing, these women (almost all white), appear as victims, tied to well-known stereotypes of submission and emotionalism. The work of Sônia Virgínia Moreira (UFJF), Monica Sousa (UERJ) and Vânia Fortuna (UERJ), Voiceless Immigrants: The lack of press coverage on anti-immigration demonstrations, points to a different and perhaps more direct form of disrespect. In news reports published by *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Globo* in 2017, migrants who allegedly entered into "conflict" with activists from the extreme right are reduced to their nationality: subjects without name, without voice, without individuality. The authors' analysis becomes particularly relevant in the face of the rise of a radical nationalist conservative movement in Brazil, which reinvents a dormant xenophobia to help justify a project of authoritarian power. In this context, the obligation of journalism to give humanity to the

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[1] See, however, Honneth (2014, p. 262-272)

"others" it portrays gains obvious urgency.

But not only of silences - more or less obvious - media representations are made. An excellent example is the article Representation, Identity and the Emergence of a New Political Discursivity: sexual and gender minorities in the Merlí series, written by Fernanda Elouise Budag (USP) and Nara Lya Cabral Scabin (USP) about Merlí, the Catalan Netflix series that portrays the life of a professor who teaches philosophy by non-traditional means. More than give voice to "queer" characters, the series does so without the use of typical narrative clichés. Instead of emphasizing binary "differences", the focus relies on "diversities", as fluid and difficult to label as they might be. In the text Representation of Blackness and Whiteness in the audiovisual production Dear White People: Tensions and Negotiations between Identity and Difference, Sátira Machado (UniPampa), Rosane Rosa (UFSM) and Liliane Brignol (UFSM) also find in a foreign series, the American Dear White People, a similar example of mediated forms of recognition. However, if Merlí appears in the work of Budag and Scabin as able to escape the pitfalls inherent in the idea of "giving voice" to social minorities, Dear White People is described by Machado, Rosa and Brignol as incurring a kind of essentialization of the idea of "race". Although the black identity appears as multiple, the white identity is portrayed as uniform, which can "end up reinforcing ideologies that racialize human beings", affirm the authors. On the other hand, in the Brazilian music video "Mandume", analyzed in the article Mandume: Rap's visuality as resistance against epistemic violence by Lucianna Furtado (UFMG), the agency possibility of the black person, or of the Brazilian peripheral actor in general, seems to be the topic. Through a bifocal analysis, concerned with the link between text and image, Furtado demonstrates how the music video unveils "oppositional looks" to contest a reality based on prejudice and the suppression of otherness, challenging the public to also participate in this unveiling and contestation. Race is also the subject of the article Theory of recognition and daily interactions: the case of the quilombola fights of Pará written by Janine Bargas (Unifesspa) and Rousiley Maia (UFMG) about the quilombola culture. However, instead of focusing on a media product, the authors underline the importance of daily relations in the transmutation of disrespect into concrete struggle for recognition. This kind of everyday intersubjective interaction is increasingly performed in digital environments. In social networks, historically invisible individuals can establish recognition relationships. This becomes clear in the article Autism and the seek for recognition: Connections that enunciate the struggles of the social- affective network in Facebook cases written by Igor Lucas Ries (UTP) and Angie Biondi (UTP), which analyzes messages and reactions posted on four Facebook pages that are used as means of communication by several social actors linked to autism. They conclude that, in these pages, it becomes possible to "re-signify" the autistic subject, his relatives and caregivers. And this occurs, the analysis demonstrates, in relation to the three dimensions of Honneth recognition - affective, legal and social. New media technologies can change not only the possibilities of interactions between users of social networks, but also change the very meaning of the idea of "recognition". This is one of the possible meanings of the article 14 fragments of a face: facial recognition and visibility negotiations in sociotechnical networks, written by Rafael Rodrigues da Costa (UFC) and Naiana Silva (USP) about how ordinary Facebook users understand and negotiate the platform's attempt to implement a "facial recognition" system. Through a qualitative analysis of a questionnaire's results - and in dialogue with Facebook documents and the recent "manifesto" from its founder, Mark Zuckerberg - da Costa e Silva argue that this form of computational recognition does not end in the algorithmic system that performs it. Such a system is, in practice, more a "decision-maker" than a "protagonist". Normatively, the results are ambiguous. Even if the users try to resist what can be perceived as a form of disrespect, they do not leave the platform, thus producing more data to be exploited.

By showing how different forms of mediation can erode, strengthen and transform the relations of recognition, the articles contained in this dossier demonstrate the importance of deepening the study of the nexus between media, communication, identity and justice.

In addition to the dossier, this issue of the Contracampo Magazine also brings two articles in

the section of free themes. They are: Digital technologies and multiple temporalities in the journalistic ecosystem, written by Carlos Eduardo Franciscato (UFS), develops a discussion about new forms of temporalities in the journalistic experience, within a context of expansion of technological mediations; and On Intermediality: Cinema, Maracatus, Tattoo and Post-Tropicalisms, written by Samuel Paiva (UFSCar), which proposes a debate about the meeting of the Pernambuco's cinema with other media, from the 1990s.

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