On **March 5, 2017, the IRCECP** – International Research Centre for European Culture and Politics of the University Vita-Salute San Raffaele of Milan has organized a research workshop on "**Social Freedom and European Values**". On that occasion, many distinguished scholars have presented important contributions to the understanding of the values and roots of Europe and participated in debates supporting the idea that there is more need for Europe today than ever before. In this article, a summary of the very first part of the event focused on the idea of recognition, is presented. Thus, the article represents an illustration and discussion of the talk provided by Professor **Axel Honneth** (University of Frankfurt and Columbia University) and the reply to it offered by Professor **Maurizio Ferrera** (University of Milan).

The idea of recognition from Rousseau to Hegel

The aim of Honneth's presentation was that of providing a reconstruction of the modern history of **the idea of recognition, intended not only as a social practice but also a basic psychological need of human beings**. Starting from the idea that persons fundamentally and constitutively depend on the feedbacks of other subjects and of society as a whole, the goal was that of diving into the roots and history of the concept of recognition, in order to better understand and more accurately capture not only its meaning, but also how it shapes and models our political and social world. Indeed, it is common sense within Western democracies to think that citizens are to respect each other and treat each other on reciprocal terms for they are to recognize each other as members of the same political community, characterized by social interaction and cooperation. **Moreover, recognition is particularly important when it comes to minorities struggling for social respect and, in the EU context, to understand the present and future of European integration**. Recognition is, in this sense, crucial for our social and political relations, but cannot help to be problematic in displaying both positive and negative aspects. On one hand, it is positive because recognition enables the recognized person to use her first-person standpoint. Indeed, recognizing another person as free and equal, for example, implies having certain obligations not to interfere with her capacity to act, and granting her the possibility to have beneficial social relations. On the other, it is negative for it signals the dependence of human beings on others. **But what is recognition?**

Honneth answered this questions by elucidating **three different developments and conceptions of recognition in the European history of ideas**. First, he dwelled upon

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's conception of *amour propre*, which represents a concern for how one compares to others. According to Honneth, the French idea of recognition is directly linked with the idea of "vanity" and the modern obsession, masterfully exemplified by Molière's comedy *Le Misanthrope*, of the problem of appearance. **Recognition in the French sense captures the idea that human beings may feign characteristics they do not truly possess, so that the craving for recognition may directly obstruct the authentic unveiling of oneself**. Rousseau does not deny that recognition may morally ground the opportunity for individuals to respect each other as equals, but he nonetheless understands it as a risky and mainly negative practice, corresponding to the search for societal approval and affirmation.

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The British conception of recognition greatly differs – Honneth argued – from the one offered by the French tradition. If the latter is based on the idea of authenticity, **the heart of the former lies in the notion of** *sympathy*. According to **David Hume** following the empiricist tradition, moral judgments and evaluations arise from sentiments: virtues and vices, which produce moral emotions of approval and disapproval, can be detected through a process of disinterested contemplation. This is the idea of the impartial spectator, which allows us to occupy an appropriate point of view of recognition towards others, cleared of possible bias and malign preferences one may have. **Adam Smith develops Hume's account by shaping a conception of sympathy that is intertwined with that of empathy**. Thanks to the human capacity of imagination, it is possible to identify with others and have a proper interpersonal recognition.

Finally, **the third conception of recognition discussed by Honneth is the German one**, originated from **Immanuel Kant's idea of** *respect*. Indeed, central to Kant's moral theory is the claim that all persons are owed respect qua persons, as free rational beings. Being a person means being an end in itself and showing respect amounts to recognizing such a status. Differently, from the British perspective, the German idea of recognition is not

grounded in sentiments. Rather, **it is determined by reason and rationality**. Starting from Kant's idea, **Fichte** and **Hegel** proposed a different understanding of recognition, in which individuals must acknowledge each other's claims in order to understand themselves as agents able to act freely and autonomously. In this sense, **mutual recognition is seen as a condition of possibility for human beings to understand themselves as free individuals**. Freedom can be realized only if interpersonal recognition is warranted, namely with the possibility of entering a community of equal social beings.

All three conceptions of recognition are central in our social and political understanding and represent, without a doubt, fundamental ideas of the European social and cultural tradition. **But what role does recognition play and can play when it comes to the EU and its crisis?**

The European project as a project of recognition

In his reply to Honneth, Ferrera showed how **the European project can be seen as a project of recognition, which unfortunately has been put under threat by the economic and political crisis of the last years**.

Firstly, the EU has been defended as an intellectual project designed to create a new community based on respect and recognition for a sincere collaboration among states and based on forgiveness for the evils of the Second World War. Secondly, the intellectual project has turned into a political one by proposing **the idea of European citizenship and, thus,** according **equal political recognition to all citizens living within different member states**. Finally, the political project of the EU has been strengthened by the Lisbon Treaty in its attempt to enhance democratic legitimacy across the Union.

Effectively responding to the existing negative emotions (fear, resentment, etc.) directed towards European institutions and essential to the rise of the populist movements requires a new commitment on new premises, a renewed regime of equal respect, equal dignity and political equality.

However, Ferrera argued, the last years have represented a stalemate for the project of

European integration based on respect and recognition. In particular, **the economic crisis has brought about a politics of blame, disrespect and humiliation, enacted through the subjection of certain member states to the conditionality of financial assistance infringing their independence**; the blaming of such states for the crisis they were experiencing (consider, for example, the German depict of Greeks as dishonest and feckless people); the exclusion of such states from the space of recognition, denying them equal partnership in the management of the crisis.

A new politics of recognition

Ferrera asked: "**How do we get out of this politics of humiliation we have been experiencing in the past years?**" The answer lies in the reconstruction of a politics of recognition. Effectively responding to the existing negative emotions (fear, resentment, etc.) directed towards European institutions and essential to the rise of the populist movements requires a new commitment on new premises, a renewed regime of equal respect, equal dignity and political equality. Following Honneth, **only through mutual recognition, it is possible to grant equality, avoid the social pathologies of exclusion and injustice, and build a stronger European Union**.

It is possible to argue that this new project of recognition for the EU may benefit from all the three conceptions presented by Honneth. **It is not difficult to see how the German idea of recognition, based on equal respect and reciprocity, is fundamental for securing a political society of equal partners** and in which political decisions are acceptable from the point of view of all its members because they are grounded in values that are shared. The British conception of recognition can be seen as a nice antidote to the politics of humiliation in its demands for objective evaluation of others. Relations among member states are to be cleared from biases and interests, in order to allow a "fellow feeling" to emerge across the Union. Finally, although the idea of *amor propre* seems unsuited for the task under scrutiny because of its negative connotation, the French tradition may contribute to the European project with the Rousseauian idea of *pitié* (compassion), which corresponds to the natural attitude directing individuals to attend and relieve the suffering of others. If compassion is a necessary element of solidarity and a moral sentiment central to politics, it may constitute a key element for the project of European integration, especially in the face and after the crisis.

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