

# THE POLITICS OF RECOGNITION IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

**I**N THE DECADE after the fall of the Berlin Wall, critical theorists paid renewed attention to what Charles Taylor famously called ‘the politics of recognition’.<sup>1</sup> The demand for recognition, Taylor suggested, was linked to modern notions of identity—a person’s understanding of their fundamental defining characteristics, of who they are. Since our identity is partly shaped by others’ recognition, people can suffer real damage if society mirrors back a demeaning image of themselves. Thus, women in patriarchal societies may be induced to internalize a sexist self-image, to suffer the pain of low self-esteem. White rule has for generations projected a demeaning picture of black, indigenous and colonized peoples, saddling the oppressed with crippling forms of self-depreciation. In this respect, due recognition was a vital human need. Taylor saw the uncertain quest for recognition as linked to the 18th-century emergence of individualized identities, premised on a concept of inner authenticity. Meanwhile Axel Honneth’s *Kampf um Anerkennung* (1992) outlined a moral theory in which recognition, achieved via political struggle, was constitutive of personhood. Nancy Fraser developed a dualistic rejoinder, later in critical dialogue with Honneth, which balanced recognition with redistribution in the quest for equality.<sup>2</sup>

The timing of this turn towards recognition was significant. It coincided with the triumph of capitalist globalization, when the conceptual foundations of critical theory and emancipatory politics were deeply contestable and contested. Just as the collapse of state socialism undermined the confidence of Marxist critique, so the aggressive market universalism that followed produced some hesitancy with regard to Kantian critique.

For different reasons and in different ways, Taylor, Honneth and Fraser all attended to the critical link between the two traditions: Hegel. Recognition, in its concrete, cultural and historical varieties, was to be a constitutive part of justice. The dialogical dimensions of subjectivity, underplayed or ignored by both Marxism and liberalism, would become integrated within critical theory and radical politics.

A key reason for taking the politics of recognition seriously was that it had its own empirical and historical momentum. The demand for recognition had become integral to what Fraser termed ‘folk paradigms of justice’—the moral vernacular of the social movements that emerged after the 1960s. Multiculturalism was a sociological fact. Despite considerable differences between these theorists, one reason why they deemed recognition philosophically and politically important was that it palpably mattered to political and moral actors themselves. The renewed theorization of recognition was therefore a continuation of what Luc Boltanski had identified as a longstanding problematic: how to register the everyday suffering and demands of ‘lay’ actors with the meta-critique offered by theoretical scholarship.

### *Reactions*

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the protests that followed, the politics of recognition has become a mainstream preoccupation—and a matter of bitter controversy. Both centre-right intellectuals like Francis Fukuyama and neoconservatives such as Douglas Murray claim that the liberal-democratic order is being destabilized by demands for identitarian recognition. Right-wing ‘post-liberals’ and communitarian Catholics attack a left-liberal fixation on recognizing individual injuries and symbolic violence at the expense of traditional moral norms. Populists are also accused by liberals of indulging the politics of identity, racial or

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’ [1992], in Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism and ‘The Politics of Recognition’*, Princeton 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson, Cambridge 1995; Nancy Fraser, ‘From Redistribution to Recognition? Dilemmas of Justice in a “Post-Socialist” Age’, NLR 1/212, July–August 1995, and ‘Rethinking Recognition’, NLR 3, May–June 2000; Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, London and New York 2003. See also the 1997–98 exchanges between Fraser, Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler and Anne Phillips in NLRs 1/222, 1/223, 1/224, 1/227 and 1/228.

otherwise, producing a ‘post-truth’ politics.<sup>3</sup> And universities are routinely accused by mainstream media of sustaining a morally relativist ideology in which all claims to recognition are equally legitimate.

Much of the time, however, the new reaction against the politics of recognition is also framed in terms of recognition: ‘identity politics’ is denounced for depriving white men, the working class or the nation-state of the recognition that is rightly theirs. The struggle for recognition has turned into an arms race, in which majority cultural identities deploy the language of minority rights in their defence. In contexts such as Brexit, liberals have also engaged in demands for identity recognition, with street protests, flags and claims of cultural marginalization. Fraser’s warning that, in the absence of any counter-balancing theory of economics, recognition politics could lapse into vulgar culturalism, has been borne out across the ideological spectrum. The politics of recognition has acquired more momentum than anyone could have foreseen in the 1990s. In particular, the digital public sphere is seething with allegations of misrecognition, not all of them made in good faith, and some deliberately used as a tool of confusion.

Two immediate responses present themselves. The first is to remain loyal to subjective experiences of injustice and their modes of articulation, even at the price of escalating the culture war. This retains the advantage of allowing groups to articulate injuries and injustices in their own terms; but that process is now being used by the right as a way of satirizing and sabotaging all discourses of social justice, turning the politics of recognition into a trap for the left. A second response would be to write off the politics of recognition altogether, in favour of a wholly externalist mode of critique that brackets the discourse and demands of injured parties. This provides a welcome exit from cultural politics, but ducks the democratic questions of how to give voice to suffering and agency to the marginalized. Fraser anticipated these difficulties with remarkable acuity, noting that the inflation of recognition as a political category risked the displacement of material injustices, and the reification of simplistic identities, which could become increasingly insular. Her answer proposed a two-dimensional theory of justice, in which equality of political

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, London 2018; Douglas Murray, *The Madness of Crowds: Gender, Race and Identity*, London 2019; Daniel Luban, ‘Among the Post-Liberals’, *Dissent*, Winter 2020; Mark Lilla, ‘Two Roads for the New French Right’, *NYRB*, 20 December 2018.

participation is supported by recognition of status and material redistribution, both mutually interdependent. Recognition would not be an end in itself, but a necessary component of positive freedom.<sup>4</sup>

My intention here is to come at the current explosion of recognition demands from a different perspective: to consider how transformations in the public sphere have led to a mutation in how recognition is demanded and supplied. The key condition for this is the digital platform, which has ushered in a new era of public participation in which recognition of status is never adequately achieved by anyone, so injustice feels ubiquitous. In the attention economy of social media, public actors may long for recognition, but have to settle instead for varying quantities of ‘reputation’, or simply the ‘reaction’ of immediate feedback. The task, I suggest, is to retain some loyalty to how everyday critiques and expressions of suffering articulate themselves, but also to arm ourselves with critical resources against the latest tricks pulled by what Jodi Dean terms ‘communicative capitalism’. The rise of platform capitalism has occasioned a new phase which needs to be understood, if critique is not to be ensnared by a platform logic of rating and trolling.

### *Articulating injustice*

Critical theories of recognition start from the intuition that misrecognition is a form of moral harm that undermines self-esteem and the capacity for full personhood, but which also motivates the struggle for justice. Drawing on Hegel’s inter-subjective theory of moral agency, Taylor and Honneth both argue that individual selfhood develops through social relations, with respect to the family, civil society and the state. For Taylor, the problem became acute with the advent of modernity, because recognition could no longer be established through tradition or ritual alone. Individuals were expected to develop themselves in a distinctive and autonomous fashion, but then discovered that they depended on others to recognize their authentic self. There was a precarious dimension to modern subjectivity, in that truth must emerge from within, yet its validation must be granted socially. ‘What has come about with the modern age’, Taylor argued, ‘is not the need for recognition but the conditions in which the attempt to be recognized can fail’.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Fraser, ‘Rethinking Recognition’.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, p. 35.

For Taylor, this precarity was a symptom of the bourgeois public sphere, which usurped earlier valuation systems built upon honour. It was organized around two potentially conflicting ideals. On the one hand, individuals entered it as equals, without bringing any prior status with them. In the language of recognition, this involves respecting the equal dignity of all human beings (but in practice only property-owners). On the other hand, its great achievement was to establish new gradations of value on the basis of criticism, opinion and deliberation, rather than on the basis of honour. Under liberal democracy, much of the value of recognition—as an artist, politician or entrepreneur—derived precisely from the fact that it is *not* equally distributed but won on some principle of merit. Honneth referred to this approvingly as the individualist achievement principle, which ensured that recognition could not be taken for granted. Everybody received equal recognition for having cultural potential, but not for the use they make of it.

A key challenge lies in how this balance between recognition of equality and recognition of inequality is handled. Honneth's ambitious theory of justice-as-recognition offered one response. Honneth articulated three domains in which recognition is accorded in different forms: within the family as love, within the legal system as rights, and in civil society and the public sphere as esteem and solidarity. It is the task of the legal system to allocate equality of rights, but the task of civil society and the public sphere to differentiate cultures, merits and identities. Honneth's challenge to Marxism, and to Fraser in their exchange, is to suggest that even class conflict and demands for redistribution are fuelled originally by the injury of misrecognition, for example that the contribution of the worker to production is not adequately recognized by the labour market.

Honneth's main goal was to bridge the divide between 'a moral theory going back to Kant, on the one hand, and communitarian ethics, on the other'.<sup>6</sup> The constitutive psychological function of recognition supplied the universal-normative principle, while the conditions and struggles for recognition were historical and local. But they also had the effect of democratizing the articulation of injustice, such that moral and critical agency could stem from the person who experienced misrecognition, and not simply the one who observed it. By anchoring his understanding of misrecognition in social psychology, specifically the work of George Mead,

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<sup>6</sup> Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, p. 173.

Honneth hoped his theory was broad enough to encompass the manifold non-public and ‘non-political’ ways in which recognition is withheld, for instance within the home, at considerable cost to the person.

### *Critique and capital*

The opening up of critical theory to lived experiences of injustice has paid considerable empirical and theoretical dividends. At a time when the vehicles of political emancipation were in question, a degree of theoretical humility was in order that paid heed to the multiple ways in which individuals articulate feelings of injustice, and the forms of restoration and recognition that they seek. Confronted by a capitalist regime that was reducing all values to market measures, the task of critical theory was not to superimpose some rival monological standard of justice, but to defend and explore the conditions of competing normative claims. This pragmatist account of justice has since been expanded philosophically by Rainer Forst, for whom the right to justification is prior to all other rights. It also provided the premise for the ‘sociology of critique’ developed by Luc Boltanski and his co-authors, which—in reaction to the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu—began from the premise that the demand for justification is a constant feature of everyday disputes.<sup>7</sup> Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *New Spirit of Capitalism* (2018) showed how the critique of capitalism could be harnessed as a justification for profit-enhancing capitalist-managerial reforms. Their account was unsettling, for it posed the question of whether capitalism and critique were necessarily external and oppositional to one another. Post-Fordist capitalism appeared to draw energy and ideas from critical demands for authentic, uncommodified existence. The pessimistic reading of this was that modern critique was now finished, but the optimistic one was equally unsettling for the left: perhaps the quest for inclusion and respect in the market was just as authentic a struggle as any other.

This brings us to one of the most contentious features of the politics of recognition, and the nub of the argument between Honneth and Fraser. Is the market simply one of many spheres of justice where recognition is fought for, as Honneth and Boltanski have each suggested? Or is it an exceptional and parallel domain of injustice, that has a unique

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<sup>7</sup> Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter, Princeton 2006; and Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*, Cambridge 2011.

capacity to disempower and injure people, regardless of recognition, as Fraser argued in response? According to the former view, monetary prices (including wages) are one of many ways in which esteem can be expressed and felt, and one of the many areas where the struggle for recognition goes on. According to the latter view, the distributive injustices of the market exert an independent force on people, regardless of the cultural or moral esteem in which they are held.

What neither position quite grasps, or anticipates, is how neoliberal capitalism deploys markets in two senses at once, simultaneously enforcing them as the sole rational basis for material distribution *and* expanding the reach of market-based valuation into non-market spheres as a cultural norm. Outside of the market—in education, the arts, the media, healthcare and civil society—metrics, league tables, financial accounting and neo-classical economics are pushed as the *lingua franca* of public justification. This serves to impose a market-like discipline on spheres of social and cultural exchange, establishing fixed indices of how inequalities of merit and achievement are to be judged. As the public sphere becomes increasingly organized around numerical standards of judgement and justification—surveys, ratings, scoring systems—so the potential reach of the market grows. The struggle for recognition is channelled into the terrain of the calculable.

Fraser advocates a perspectival dualism, alert simultaneously to the interlocking cultural and economic dimensions of injustice. The critique of neoliberal capitalism requires something similar, though rather than examining how recognition and redistribution are withheld, we need to look at the establishment of quasi-market spaces in which moral and cultural esteem is bestowed upon self-reliance, innovation and the family.<sup>8</sup> The ultimate cultural judgement in such a context is whether an individual, organization or space is a worthy investment for the future; and the ultimate tool for determining that is the platform.

### *Marketized recognition*

In the 21st century, a new capitalist business model has emerged, designed to maximize the collection and exploitation of digital data. The platform is a type of digital infrastructure that allows users to interact

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<sup>8</sup> See Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, New York 2017.

with one another, whether in the form of market transactions, social exchange, or some combination of the two. In Nick Srnicek's compelling analysis, platforms have a number of distinguishing features. First, they provide a basic infrastructure, such as the Uber app, to mediate between very large numbers of people. Second, they benefit from network effects, whereby more users join because that's where the other users are. Third, they are cross-subsidized, offering 'free' services on the basis of revenue earned elsewhere. Finally, they take advantage of their data to constantly tweak their interfaces and rules to attract and retain as many users as possible.<sup>9</sup>

These features combine to produce a new type of monopoly capital that aligns with the interests of equity finance in an era awash with cheap credit. In all sorts of areas, from retail to searching to social networking, platform capitalists appeal to the speculative instincts of patient investors, focusing primarily on growth and asset-value appreciation, and only latterly on profit. Amazon, whose founder is now the richest man in the world, took fourteen years to become profitable. Uber expects to enter the black in 2021, twelve years after its launch. Profit, when it arrives, is a rent extracted on the basis that users, paying and non-paying, have a shortage of alternative resources available to them.

Even in the absence of profitability, platform capital extracts value and undermines the viability of other economic forms. The appreciating asset value of the platform occurs through deteriorating social prospects elsewhere: what Facebook does for journalism, Spotify does for musicians and Uber Eats for independent restaurants. In each case, the basic means of access to a market or a public is privatized, and becomes an opportunity for rent extraction. This represents a new phase of what David Harvey terms accumulation by dispossession, only it is the infrastructure of civil society that is being seized, and it is rapidly capitalized start-ups doing the dispossessing, without the direct intervention of the state. The most important contribution of states to platform capital is regulatory neglect, built on a Chicago School orthodoxy stating that so long as prices are not rising for consumers, all is well.<sup>10</sup> A turning point in the development of the platform economy was 2007, which witnessed the launch of the iPhone, allowing platforms to become more spatially

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<sup>9</sup> Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Sabeel Rahman and Kathleen Thelen, 'The Rise of the Platform Business Model and the Transformation of Twenty-First-Century Capitalism', *Politics & Society*, vol. 47, no. 2, June 2019.



integrated, and the sudden growth of Facebook users, but also the start of the credit crunch that signalled the coming financial crisis. As Srnicek details, the crisis triggered three developments that provided the conditions for platforms to prosper: exceptional monetary policies that pushed investors further towards high-risk and unprofitable tech start-ups in search of returns; widespread cash hoarding and tax evasion by firms such as Google; and a disempowered, under-employed labour force that was ready to accept the precarious, high-surveillance employment being offered by the platform economy.

A novelty of the platform business model is that it allows for market and non-market forms of valuation to be conducted via a single infrastructure. Thus, Uber provides the infrastructure on which the price system of municipal transport depends, but also a means for the moral evaluation of drivers. Facebook allows users to share content and bestow esteem upon one another, but also sells access to them for advertisers. For those rare individuals who earn income as Instagram or YouTube stars, the trick is the same: how to sustain a sufficiently appealing *uncommodified* persona that can be deftly commodified for product placement or sponsorship purposes when required. The individualist-achievement principle that Honneth identified is increasingly channelled via the platform economy, where cultural and moral worth are indicated via digital systems of rating, feedback and evaluation. The problem of authenticity, which Taylor viewed as a crucial aspect of the modern self, is increasingly mediated through digital interfaces.

### *Capture everything*

By their very nature, platform businesses collect more data than they know what to do with, for it might reveal something of value in the future. The data includes not just feedback—for example, customer-satisfaction reports—but ‘feedforward’: vast banks of behavioural traces, deposited by default, that may one day be mined for some as yet unknown purpose. This adds to the speculative futurity of the value proposition that profitless firms make to their investors. It also makes platform-based surveillance entirely unlike the modes of marketized evaluation that became such a feature of neoliberal governance from the late 1980s onwards. Where the latter sought to impose narrow metrics as a form of managerial discipline—targets, satisfaction surveys, league tables—the teleology of the platform is to take *everything* into account. The steady erosion of privacy is a function of a business model that refuses to specify what it is looking for, and must therefore capture everything.

Plenty of surveillance mechanisms are deployed in an aggressively market-oriented fashion, where the conditions of evaluation are all too clear. These are especially prominent in routinized work, such as driving, deliveries and warehouse inventories, where neo-Taylorist management of time and space grows ever more exploitative. Wearable technology adds to the possibilities, as grim reports from Amazon warehouses attest. But for the ‘user’ of the platform, there is no disciplinary injunction at all, other than to be as ‘authentically’ oneself as possible, in one’s social, cultural, political and moral expression. In order that the data they collect can be as rich and extensive as possible, platforms—especially social media—need to be spaces where people engage in something like a struggle for recognition.

This represents a historic transformation of the public sphere. The spaces where esteem and merit are distributed have been privatized, the better to be analysed for business and financial insight. Habermas’s complaint that the bourgeois public sphere was destroyed by routinization and industrialization from the 1870s on no longer applies to this new reality, where chaos, hilarity, fragmentation and unpredictable surges of cultural ‘influence’ are now the norm. In the absence of any spectrum limitations or editorial bottlenecks, the range of political opinions aired in this media space is limitless, granting fresh opportunities for niche movements to mobilize. The routinization and industrialization is all at the back-end, where data analytics takes place away from the user’s gaze.

Where market ideology continues to exert a diffuse influence over the platform public is through the lurking economic and existential anxieties of the self in the age of surveillance capital. As Michel Feher argues, while neoliberal intellectuals promised a society of dynamic innovation and entrepreneurial creativity, neoliberal capitalism has in practice produced infrastructures that exist as all-encompassing credit-rating systems, which mediate investor-investee relations at numerous scales, from the nation state down to the individual credit-card holder. Platforms can now serve as credit-rating devices in a literal sense, allowing credit-worthiness to be evaluated on the basis of a wide range of behaviour, not just limited to the economic sphere, but potentially including social connections and the credit scores of one’s friends. It has become a motto of the credit-analytics industry that ‘all data is credit data’. But Feher’s point is more far-reaching than that. There is a generalized moral injunction at work under neoliberal capitalism to communicate

one's value as human capital to potential investors—literal creditors, but also those investing their time, attention or emotional energy for some future 'return'. The logic of human-capital appreciation sees moral and financial judgement converge: every individual must aim to be rated as engaging, positive, responsible and innovative.<sup>11</sup> The key moral-financial uncertainty is where to invest—what qualifications to acquire, who to marry, where to live, *who to be*. The corollary is that everyone needs to be rated as highly as possible, to be worthy of incoming investment.

What this implies is that, while liberal democracy witnessed a struggle for recognition, neoliberalism converts this into a struggle for reputation. The cultural achievement of commercial society, according to Honneth, drawing on Hegel, was that it enabled individuals to confront one another on the principle of equality via exchange. The rise of criticism in the bourgeois public sphere saw artworks judged on a principle of aesthetic autonomy—that is, independent of status. The ideal critic resembled the ideal consumer in the spot market, determining the value of each product on its intrinsic merits. But if, as Feher argues, neoliberal capitalism reconfigures social relations around the template of financial investment, the public sphere becomes governed by a very different temporality. Value becomes established not in exchange, but as a speculation on the future, calculated on the basis of data from the past—that is, in terms of reputation. Every artefact, identity, moral action and political demand becomes viewed as an addition to an archive of prior behaviour, revealing a pattern to be projected into the future. The present is only ever a new data point.

### *Economies of reputation*

The public sphere under platform capitalism differs from that of print capitalism in a number of ways. Habermas argued that the latter emerged slowly from networks of private letter-writing, until the exchange of opinion gradually took on the public character of discursive exchange between strangers; eventually, 'public opinion' became a disembodied, autonomous phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> The rise of platforms has reversed this

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<sup>11</sup> See Michel Feher, *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age*, trans. Gregory Elliott, New York 2018; Michel Feher, 'Self-Appreciation; Or, The Aspirations of Human Capital', *Public Culture*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge 1989.

process, in that public discourse is never divorced from the identity and status of the participants, save where identity is deliberately disguised as a political tactic, for trolling. An exchange on a platform leaves a trace, which remains attached to the digital identity of both parties, and serves as a type of investment (positive or negative) in their reputations. Opinion, judgement and critique no longer exist in any autonomous form, but become mediators of social relations and investments.

On a cultural and psychological level, this has the effect of making all users of platforms conscious of what impression they are making, and how this might benefit them in future. As Richard Seymour observes, the social industry ensures that we are all celebrities.<sup>13</sup> To engage in potentially ‘unlikeable’ behaviour becomes a reputational risk. The template for public statements is that of financial PR: selling oneself and one’s content as a ‘buy’ that will pay off over time. Criticism loses the autonomy that it won in the bourgeois public sphere and instead becomes a type of recommendation, like a stock tip. This in turn drastically delimits the autonomy of the writer, critic or public intellectual, unless they can somehow disregard the data archive in which they and their followers are leaving their deposits.<sup>14</sup> But even that disregard is a deposit of sorts.

If reputation is a form of capital that accumulates over time, then reaction is the currency of investment. Liking, buying, sharing, following and, above all, attending are the ways in which a reputation accumulates positively. But unlike critique, which makes an appeal to some kind of external normative standard, the ideal of reaction is of an autonomic response that bypasses consciousness or deliberation. Like the focus on attention, manifest in eye movements, that was an early feature of modern psychology, reaction—a synonym for the behaviourist category of response—provides a means of bracketing out normative questions of choice and judgement.<sup>15</sup> The surveillance infrastructure of platform capitalism has privileged access to the reactions through which reputations are made or unmade. If everything can be turned into an interface—from domestic technology to the human body and the built

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Seymour, *The Twittering Machine*, London 2019.

<sup>14</sup> See Christian Lorentzen, ‘Like This or Die: The Fate of the Book Review in the Age of the Algorithm’, *Harper’s*, April 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, Cambridge MA 1999.

environment—then all behaviours can be tracked as reactions of one kind or another, as in the behaviourist fantasies of B. F. Skinner. At the frontline of platform capitalism is not just facial recognition but ‘facial analytics’, which seeks to detect how moods and feelings are changing in response to given stimuli.

If a reputation can be invested in and grown over time, it is equally possible to be ‘shorted’ by this quasi-financial market—harmed by trolling or concerted online attacks. Social-media platforms such as Twitter serve as a human-capital market, where reputations rise and fall in response to mass sentiment. Bubbles can develop in which a rising reputation results in more followers, wider reactions and still more followers. Part of the sadistic thrill of this gamified public sphere lies in the risk that people with high reputations face of being dramatically exposed in a negative way. As Emily Rosamond has argued, these high levels of ‘reputational volatility’ open the way for ‘reputational warfare’, in which capital value get attacked and destroyed.<sup>16</sup> This generates the threat known colloquially as being ‘cancelled’, in which an individual reputation is simply annihilated, like a bankruptcy—but it also scales up to affect national politics. See the interventions of Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi et al.

In the analogue public sphere, recognition of achievement (ideally) required some act of representation: the critic represented the artwork, while celebrating or denouncing it, just as the spokesperson represented a political identity in the act of affirming it. Misrepresentation was often a cause of misrecognition. In the reputational economy of platforms, however, processes of representation are replaced by those of curation: a piece of ‘content’ is extracted from the vast archive of data and shared, as a type of investment—or divestment—in a reputation. Removing or toying with the context of the quoted material becomes a key way of acting upon reputations. In the digital public sphere, everything is a type of misrepresentation, the only question being whether it adds value to the misrepresented or subtracts it.

The normative idea of bourgeois civil society is that of the liberal marketplace, where strangers encounter one another as equals. The normative idea of the reputation economy is a capitalist one of rivalry and

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<sup>16</sup> Emily Rosamond, ‘From Reputation Capital to Reputation Warfare: Online Ratings, Trolling and the Logic of Volatility’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 37, no. 2, March 2020.

inequality.<sup>17</sup> Each participant arrives with a different quantity of reputational capital and is immediately confronted by the dominance of those with more. Network effects famously produce power-law distributions, in which a few nodes receive an abundance of connectivity and engagement, while the vast majority receive very little. Culturally, this translates into a politically potent emotion: resentment. The virtuous and vicious spirals of reputation mean that merit and esteem never seem fairly distributed. Someone else has always had a head-start, which is why they must be brought down. The Trump Presidency was a powerful exhibition of the normative logic of platform capitalism: the most powerful man in the world, also a celebrity with 73 million Twitter followers, fixating constantly on how unfairly he was being treated, and how he deserved greater recognition—then extinguished by the platform’s CEO with an algorithmic tweak, displaying for a moment the old-fashioned political machinations of American capitalism behind the digital curtain.

This is the trap that platform capitalism sets for its users: it holds out the possibility of a recognition that it will never, can never, fulfil. If, as Taylor argued, modernity’s ideal of ‘inwardly generated identity’ gave a new importance to recognition, the digital public sphere sees an ongoing exposure of the inner self in the struggle to be recognized, but never achieves its goal.<sup>18</sup> Rather than recognition, the self receives mere reaction, and hopefully appreciating reputation. For many users of social media, this produces an escalating exposure of pain, injustice and misrecognition, which meet with varying forms of reaction, some supportive, others less so. Emotion, which behaviourists traditionally studied in wholly observable terms, becomes *exclusively* observable, a type of public performance that splits off from the part of the self which, for Honneth, needs to be recognized to be fulfilled as personhood.

### *Generalized misrecognition*

The reputation economy undergirded by platform capitalism has played an important role in the growth and mutation of the politics of

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault makes the important observation that the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism is seen in a shifting defence of the market, from one that emphasises equality-via-exchange to inequality-via-competition: *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell, London 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, p. 34.

recognition since the financial crisis. This is not simply to blame ‘the internet’ for identity politics, but to highlight how a new type of rationality has penetrated the social and cultural sphere, turning the distribution of esteem into a type of inter-capitalist competition. Controversies about the supposed threat to the liberal public sphere emanating from universities and the left often ignore a more structural transformation driven by Silicon Valley.

Cultural-political arguments in the Anglosphere frequently turn upon the question of free speech, and the need to rescue it from ‘identitarians’. In the UK, the Johnson government is intent on legislating to force universities to uphold ‘free-speech’ norms. While these allegations are often made in bad faith and on slim evidence—not to mention the accompanying crackdown on any free expression of Islamist views—the task should be to provide a more accurate diagnosis of the decline of liberal norms, not to deny that anything has changed. This requires paying close attention to the capitalist business model and the interfaces on which civil society and the public sphere increasingly depend. Arguments about censorship and ‘no-platforming’ of speakers are often driven by the quest for reputational advantage—on the part of institutions, individuals and social movements—and a need to avoid reputational damage. This is how the politics of recognition is now structured.

As Gramscian scholars have long argued, a capitalist business model does not only determine relations of production, but is mirrored in the mode of political and cultural activity that accompanies it—potentially providing a foothold for critique and resistance. Debates around Fordism and post-Fordism posed questions of what cultural and political analogues they facilitated, and of what new modes of organization and collectivism might emerge. For Jeremy Gilbert, similar questions need to be asked about the type of political-party mobilizations that might or might not be available through the template of the digital platform.<sup>19</sup> New technologies and economic relations also reconfigure the processes of political and cultural life, beyond their own immediate application.

This perspective tends to emphasize positive opportunities for new political strategies, but the negative outcomes also need to be identified.

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Gilbert, ‘An Epochal Election: Welcome to the Era of Platform Politics’, *openDemocracy*, 1 August 2017.

Platforms represent a watershed in the moral and cultural contests of modernity. They not only transform relations of production, but re-format how status and esteem are socially distributed. They are refashioning struggles for recognition no less decisively than the birth of print media did. At the same time, their logic is such that their principal effect is to generalize a feeling of misrecognition—heightening the urgency with which people seek recognition, but never satisfying this need. One effect of this process is the rise of groups who *feel* relatively deprived, to the point of political insurrection. In terms of Fraser's perspectival dualism, one of the main questions raised by contemporary politics is how and why many people who are both economically privileged and culturally included can end up feeling like they are neither of those things.

Two paths of critique have opened up in this context, an internalist and an externalist one. The internalist path follows the example of pragmatist sociology in urging political movements to work with the grain of the speculative reputation economy, so as to sabotage centres of power. On a small scale, this might simply mean the mobilization of memes and trolls to build the capital value of a political insurgent or to undermine that of an incumbent power. This type of reputation warfare was notoriously used by the Trump campaign but is widely deployed on the left. Organizations like Greenpeace have worked to attack brand value through graphically disrupting the art galleries and museums that receive oil-industry sponsorship, for instance. Feher advocates a kind of 'investee activism', which posits the principal class conflict within neoliberal capitalism as a financial one, between investor and investee. In this perspective, resistance should take aim at the market value of company stocks and operate via debtor strikes that threaten the interests of finance capital and banks. Optimistically, Feher calls for the left to mobilize its own quasi-financial vision of a good society for investment: 'Creditworthiness is worth vying for, lest we leave it to investors to determine who deserves to be appreciated and for what motives'.<sup>20</sup> The very volatility of the moral-economic marketplace offers an opportunity to compete politically over the future.

The externalist critique focuses on the platform itself and its inherent injustices, both for its exploited workers and its users. Srnicek's

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<sup>20</sup> Feher, *Rated Agency*, p. 226.



approach shows how Marxian political economy can identify the underlying structural conditions of this extractive business form and the variations that it can take. A materialist assessment and critique of the platform business model is a necessary starting point for rethinking the position of organized labour within the gig economy, in which employees are legally reconfigured as ‘contractors’. It is also the starting point for the real-utopian analysis and activism envisaged by Erik Olin Wright, which seeks to establish platform cooperatives and other forms of digital civic infrastructure.<sup>21</sup> Resistance to Amazon and Uber could involve inventing alternative means of mediating civic life that would not be dedicated to the extraction of rents. And yet, as Seymour’s critique of the ‘social industry’ reminds us, there are other aspects of platform technologies—their addictive, gamified qualities, which exploit and perpetuate our anxieties—whose very function is to suck the life out of social existence.

The challenge for social movements is how to update Fraser’s perspectival dualism for an age in which the platform is becoming a dominant distributor of both reward and mutated forms of recognition. Few movements can afford to abstain entirely from the reputation economy. A lesson from Black Lives Matter is that social media’s accumulation of reputational capital can be harnessed towards longer-standing goals of social and economic justice, as long as it remains a tactic or an instrument, and not a goal in its own right. Campaigns may trigger or seize reputational bubbles that spread at great speed—#MeToo is an example—and potentially burst soon after, making a political virtue of the ability to shift movements into other spaces, including the street. The quest for recognition is more exacting and slower than that for reputation, and appreciating this distinction is a first step to seeing beyond the cultural limits of the platform, towards the broader political and economic obstacles that currently stand in the way of full and equal participation.

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<sup>21</sup> See Callum Cant, *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy*, Cambridge 2020; and Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham, *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction*. Cambridge 2020; Erik Olin Wright, *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century*, London and New York 2019.