Ontology, Recognition, and Politics: A Reply

Patchen Markell
University of Chicago


I am delighted and honored that Bound by Recognition has provoked these three insightful responses. I will not be able, in the space of this reply, to do justice to the full range of comments that Antonio Vázquez Arroyo, Joan Cocks, and Falguni Sheth have offered, so I shall confine myself to a few of the most important points they raise.

Antonio Vázquez Arroyo argues that, in treating recognition at the level of “ontology” rather than “epistemology,” Bound by Recognition misses the opportunity to grasp the historically specific relations of power, privilege, and inequality that characterize the contemporary world. He sees promising possibilities in my treatment of the politics of Jewish emancipation; but, he says, I fail to extend that chapter’s line of argument to such phenomena as the “management of politicized identities” by contemporary liberal states, especially the United States, in which the official recognition of difference takes place against the background of, and often serves to reinforce, racial, imperial, and capitalist orders. This is a surprising objection, since that is just the sort of analysis I took myself to be performing—though by no means completing—in the last full chapter of the book. There, in light of what I had learned about the state in studying German-Jewish politics in the nineteenth century, I argued that the discourse of liberal multiculturalism in contemporary North America and Europe leverages gains for
excluded and marginalized groups by indulging the demands of states (and their normative citizens) for recognition of their sovereignty, now understood in terms of the capacity to observe, manage, and contain difference, rather than the capacity to secure cultural homogeneity; and that in so doing it reinforces rather than redresses deeper structures of privilege and subordination. If my use of the language of “ontology” has had the effect of obscuring this line of argument, and the book’s larger concern with the operation of structures of social and political power, from an attentive reader’s view, then that language is indeed misleading—but I think it can be clarified, and I’m grateful to Vázquez Arroyo for helping me see how to do so.

A political “ontology,” I wrote, is “an implicit or explicit interpretation of the fundamental conditions of life in the social and political world, the kinds of things that exist there, and the range of possibilities that it bears.” For Vázquez Arroyo, political “epistemology” involves “critically apprehending and interpreting one’s times and ideas” and, in particular, discerning the unrecognized relations of power that structure the present (7n.7, 11–13). We could probably argue about adequacy of these labels, but our real point of disagreement concerns the relationship between them, and between the kinds of inquiry they suggest. For Vázquez Arroyo, they seem to be mutually exclusive. He refers to my having taken up an ontological perspective as opposed to an epistemological one, and suggests that I am led to “disavow” what epistemological concerns by virtue of my commitment to an “ontological perspective” (8). By contrast, I think these modes of inquiry are not only compatible but interdependent. This disagreement is well-illustrated by our different ways of reading Hegel. For Vázquez Arroyo, the narrative of Hegel’s Phenomenology is “primarily epistemological” (7), while I regard that narrative as a vivid demonstration of the post-Kantian inseparability of the registers of “epistemology” and “ontology”: in the Phenomenology, each claim on the part of the
subject to know is simultaneously also an interpretation of what sorts of things there are to be known and a taking-up of a certain existential posture in relation to the world thus interpreted.²

Why does Vázquez Arroyo find these registers incompatible? His concern seems to be that ontological discourse, with its talk of the fundamental conditions of human existence, treats contingent historical formations as necessities, subordinating the analysis of historical particulars to the authority of a philosophical perspective whose validity is thought to be given in advance. But this need not be so: everything depends on the content of the ontological argument and the use to which it is put. In the conclusion to *Bound by Recognition*, for example, I resisted one kind of ontological argument—the kind that grounds the orientation toward or need for the recognition of identity in the very nature of social life—and I suggested instead that we understand the desire for recognition as the contingent product of, among other things, the shape of contemporary democratic political institutions, which tend to privilege identification over active involvement as the ground of citizens’ “sense of connection with the states that claim them” (*BbR* 187). Yet I did not see this as a departure from my own earlier engagements with ontological issues, because those had been of a very different kind. Rather than treat “ontology” as a free-standing set of philosophical considerations, whose truth is established *a priori* and which could be used to establish the necessity or universality of certain features of political life, I had interpreted and criticized, immanently, the ontological stances and perspectives expressed in a number of specific political discourses, claims, and courses of action. Focusing on the analogies among these cases, I had suggested that, when they exist, structures of social and political subordination could be understood to function for their beneficiaries as forms of self-insulation from the force of their own practical finitude—but this, importantly, is by no means the same as purporting to prove that such structures necessarily exist, or that they can be causally
or constitutively *explained* by direct appeal to an independently established ontological axiom.\(^1\)

This is an engaged, interpretive approach to ontological issues, which folds ontology back into history and practice rather than serving as its ground, and which stakes the persuasiveness of an ontological perspective on its capacity to illuminate a range of different concrete situations.\(^3\)

Finally, and even more strongly, I would insist that a certain kind of attention to ontological concerns is *necessary* component of what Vázquez Arroyo calls the “epistemological” project of discerning historically specific structures of power. Vázquez Arroyo helpfully describes this epistemological project by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s distinctive use of the language of recognition and misrecognition. For Bourdieu, agents who belong to a particular social field and participate in its practices have their pre-representational beliefs and bodily dispositions configured by those practices in ways that tend to produce “compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field,” including the recognition of the legitimacy or authority of the (often domimative) social order it establishes.\(^4\) At the same time, agents’ immersion in practice and its temporality necessarily leaves them ignorant of “the truth of their practice,” that is, of the ways in which their courses of action participate in a larger logic of the self-reproduction of objective social structures: their recognitions are thus also misrecognition.\(^5\) For Vázquez Arroyo, the epistemological project of “re-cognition” (he borrows the distinguishing hyphen from Sheldon Wolin\(^6\)) involves exposing this larger logic, “breaking with the misrecognition...of the structures of power and privilege” in which actors have hitherto participated unwittingly (13).

Yet by locating the misrecognition that sustains social domination at such a fundamental level—in the ineluctable gap between the perspective of a participant in a practice and the perspective of an objective observer—this approach makes it difficult to understand how such
“re-cognition” could be accomplished except from a position of radical disengagement, which poses the risk either of depriving “re-cognition” of its practical relevance and force, or of sustaining its relevance only at the cost of subordinating participants’ understandings of their own activity to the superior knowledge of a theoretical elite. Bourdieu himself was aware of this difficulty: although he sometimes celebrated the liberatory power of this sort of “critical unveiling,” performed by “professional practitioners of the work of making explicit,”7 at other times he cautioned against overestimating the efficacy of such critiques;8 and throughout The Logic of Practice he warned forcefully against reducing social relations to the “objective” truths that the social scientist discovers behind the misrecognitions of ordinary experience.9 Indeed, while Bourdieu did not put it quite this way, one might say that there are two kinds of misrecognition at play in The Logic of Practice: the constitutive blindness of actors to the logic of the field to which they belong, and the illusions of “objectivism,” which misreads practice as the mechanical unfolding of a logic that can be captured in a synchronic model or rule. My wager is that appeal to misrecognitions of the first sort, to the fact that “agents never know completely what they are doing,”10 is too blunt an instrument—it names too ubiquitous a phenomenon—to make sense of subordination and domination as kinds of social practice, and that these can better be understood as particular and contingent ways of responding to that generalized condition of practical opacity; that is, of responding to that condition through evasion, through the production of orders that distribute social vulnerability unequally and thereby insulate some actors, however imperfectly, from the force of their shared practical finitude. What this means, however—to put it in Bourdieu’s terms—that this second misrecognition, the one involved in objectivism and which I call a “failure of acknowledgment,” is not primarily the illusion of the disengaged social-scientific observer who fails to grasp the
conditions and perspective of practice, as *The Logic of Practice* sometimes seems to suggest. Instead, it is in the first instance a misrecognition enacted *within* practice *by* actors: the objectivist imagination of a social order governed by a mechanical, perfectly reliable rule was a fantasy of power and privilege before it was a conceit of the structuralist anthropology that preoccupied Bourdieu.

Joan Cocks’s stimulating comments extend the approach of *Bound by Recognition* to political contexts that the book does not directly address. This extension is driven by her sense that, at the present moment, “identity politics are not the only or even the most dramatic kind of politics” that command our attention (3). Many conflicts can still be parsed as struggles for recognition—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one—but others do not so easily fit this paradigm. The international confrontation between the Bush administration and radical Islam, for example, is a relatively brazen and unmediated struggle for power, not the struggle for the recognition of identity. Likewise, the radical Christian right is engaged in an ideological politics, not an identity politics, which aims to “impose its version of the truth on all those with whom it shares the world” (7). Interpreting popular support for the political agenda of the radical Christian right as, in part, fueled by the disproportionate exposure of some segments of the American population to the dislocations and shock waves of global capitalism, Cocks suggests that it is, at most, the recognition of a “situation and a plight” that is at stake here, rather than the recognition of anything like an ethnonational or cultural identity.

Cocks’s way of stretching the categories of *Bound by Recognition* is extremely illuminating, and I find myself largely in agreement with what she says. At first, I hesitated over the question of whether and to what extent issues of recognition and identity are present in
contemporary politics. To take one of Cocks’s examples: there is certainly a sense in which the Bush administration’s unilateralism, and its rhetoric of unlimited war against its enemies, looks like an indifference to the relatively genteel mediations of recognition. Yet the continuing presence of the dynamics of recognition and identification in this politics become evident if we consider not just the two poles of the Bush administration and radical Islam but also the third pole of the public, especially the American public, to whom the administration appeals for legitimation. The administration’s persistent (and Creonesque) public sorting of the world into friends and enemies, as well as its rhetorical equations of America with “freedom itself,” make the world into a mirror that lets Americans recognize themselves and their country in an unequivocally positive light—and, perhaps more importantly, they promise to guide action along a straight and unproblematic path, cutting through the uncertain tangle of disowned geopolitical legacies and emerging social formations that characterizes the contemporary international scene.

However, I do not think Cocks means to deny any of this. Her point is less about whether recognition and identity are at stake in contemporary political conflicts than about how they are at stake: as she puts it, political agents can be engaged in “acts of recognition” without necessarily undertaking “struggles for recognition” (3, emphasis added). This is a crucial distinction, which not only separates the cases Bound by Recognition did address from those it didn’t, but can also be used retroactively to shed light on the argument and structure of the book. As I have noted elsewhere, the authors who brought the theme of recognition to prominence in the discipline of political theory, including Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, and Nancy Fraser, have tended to treat recognition as a good; that is, as something claimed, pursued, requested, or demanded by political actors. Bound by Recognition grew out of this soil even as it worked to upturn it, and so it tended to focus on cases that fit the paradigm; that is, on political conflicts in
which the giving or receiving of some sort of recognition seemed explicitly to be at issue. In light of Cocks’s distinction, however, I would now say that the book aimed to break out of this—its own—frame. It sought to show that the dynamics of intersubjective identification and recognition could not be understood by treating “recognition” as a good and asking how it ought to be distributed; and that, even in those cases that could easily be analyzed as “struggles for recognition,” a different kind of recognitive work was also being performed that exceeded (and, often, frustrated) the explicit framing of the conflict by the participants, or by those theoretical observers who parsed these cases through more familiar models. This is why the book circles back around in the end to the politics of liberal multiculturalism, showing how multicultural discourse itself *enacts* an exchange of recognition that is different in its contours and significance from the one to which Taylor’s work gave classic expression, and with which the book began. And because doing all this required reframing such cases in terms of agency and its conditions—as efforts to achieve sovereignty, respond to dependence, and so on—the trajectory of the book already anticipates the direction Cocks takes it: toward a consideration of the wider spectrum of political formations that, as she puts it, “are also implicated in dangerous attempts to split off agency from vulnerability” (3).12

The formation to which Cocks devotes the most attention is the Christian right in the United States, and the phenomenon of “popular support for radical right-wing politics” both “at home and abroad” that it has helped to generate (9). Although, as Cocks notes, this formation could be read as engaged in a struggle *for* recognition in the narrower sense—the conservative “Backlash,” as Thomas Frank calls it, often trades explicitly on resentment at liberals’ marginalization of the authentic culture and values of “Red America”13—Cocks takes a different and, I think, more productive approach, interpreting this phenomenon instead as a response to the
“diminishing sense of agency over their own fates” that is felt disproportionately, though not exclusively, by insular white suburbanites, rural and agrarian populations, and those threatened by industrial decline (8). While this is only a hunch, it seems to me a promising one, and it is worth underlining a few things about it, if only as a prelude to further investigation. First, this hypothesis not only breaks with the “red state/blue state” way of framing contemporary American politics, as Cocks observes; it also lets us understand that frame as itself a political device, a simplifying interpretation of social and political vulnerability that ironically mobilizes political sentiment on behalf of some of the most invulnerable people in the world, relatively speaking. 14 Second, however, Cocks’s hypothesis also presses beyond the accounts of this phenomenon offered by critics like Frank. For all his insights, Frank’s characterization of the “Backlash” as a “panorama of madness and delusion,” in which significant numbers of Americans are led to vote decisively against their own interests, is doubly problematic: it has too little to say about how and why this mobilization of political sentiment works; and, relatedly, it encourages us to imagine that a major popular realignment could be provoked merely by exposing this derangement and refocusing the attention of the Democratic party on economic issues, since the “hallucinatory appeal” of “cultural wedge issues...would ordinarily be far overshadowed by material concerns.” 15 This is, I fear, an instance of the sort of objectivist critique of misrecognition that sometimes tempts Bourdieu, but whose limits he also discerns. Its simple distinction between cultural and economic issues is problematic enough, since it misses the opportunity to critique capitalism as a formation that is simultaneously cultural and economic (and which produces the appearance of a sharp separation between these domains as one of its symptoms). 16 Worse, it treats popular support for right-wing politics as the result of the habituation of a population in and to its own ignorance, a “stimulus-response melodrama” that
produces its results “almost mechanically,” as Frank puts it at one point. Cocks’s hypothesis, by contrast, stresses that experiences of vulnerability and resentment are not always already bound to a single political trajectory; and in so doing, it reminds us that critical gestures of exposure and unveiling need to be supplemented by a political imaginary that responds—though without promising redemption through sovereignty—to what people do already know about their “situation and [their] plight” (9).

Falguni Sheth is sympathetic to the effort of *Bound by Recognition* to shift the focus of our attention away from identity *per se* and toward questions of action and agency, a shift she sees expressed in part in the distinction between the idea of recognition and the idea of acknowledgment. Her central concern, however, is that a politics oriented around the idea of acknowledgment would fall into many of the same problematic dynamics that afflict the politics of recognition, because both of these sorts of politics are inevitably situated against the background of, and severely constrained by, what she calls the “dual agenda” of the state. On the one hand, the state operates as a mediating institution, seeking to adjudicate disputes and “promote justice” among its citizens; on the other hand, however, the state also acts as a corporate agent in its own right, concerned with preserving itself and its power and thereby also ensuring “the survival of the group that it represents” (9). This dual agenda colors the state’s interpretations of, and responses to, the actions of various people and groups in much the same way that it guides its responses to demands for the recognition of identity: for example, as Sheth suggests, the post-9/11 American security state’s often appalling treatment of Arab and Muslim men and women, though rationalized in terms of “the state’s avowed responsibility to protect its citizens,” also has to be understood as part of a strategy of “exploit[ing] a sense of emergency” to
generate political capital (10–11). For the people whose lives and freedom feed this political
machine, what possible difference could it make to appeal to such a state for the
acknowledgment of action rather than the recognition of identity?

Sheth’s emphasis on the constraints imposed by the complex agenda of the state is
welcome. Her distinction between the state as a mediating institution and the state as itself an
actor in the politics it purports to referee gets at the heart of the equivocal character of the idea of
the state in modernity, whose legitimacy trades in part on its capacity to represent itself now as
the expression of the interests and will of an antecedently given people, now as the supplement
that gives the people a wholeness it could not have on its own.19 I shall come back to this issue;
but first I need to address a fundamental misunderstanding between us concerning the idea of
acknowledgment and the meaning of the shift from identity to action that Bound by Recognition
undertook. On Sheth’s reading, the point of that shift is to make action rather than identity, and
in particular the actions of excluded or marginalized people and groups, the object of the
attention and evaluation of other people and of powerful institutions; and this difference is
marked by the adoption of the term “acknowledgment” in place of the term “recognition.” That
version of a “politics of acknowledgment” would indeed be vulnerable to the critique Sheth
advances, since, as she explains, it begs the question of which actions are to be acknowledged
and who is to do the acknowledging, leaving open the likely prospect that powerful people and
institutions will continue to engage the actions of most vulnerable in ways that sustain their
privilege. But I had meant the shift identity to action, and from recognition to acknowledgment,
to work much differently, and reach deeper, than that: what we acknowledge (or fail to) is not the
content or worth or validity of a particular course of action undertaken by someone else; it is, as I
put it in Bound by Recognition, the “conditions of [our] own existence and activity,” including
the finitude that arises out of our practical interdependence with, and vulnerability to, the acts and responses of others (BbR 36). Acknowledgment thus conceived does have implications for the shape of social and political relations among persons, and, relatedly, it does involve a kind of release of action from its subordination to identity; but it is not (like recognition) an object of exchange, something that agents or institutions give and receive to each other, and it does not turn on how one agent regards or judges the actions of another.

To make this point concrete, let me take up one of the examples Sheth discusses: the affaire du foulard, or “headscarves controversy,” that has rocked French politics on and off for a decade and a half; which has been echoed by similar controversies over Islamic dress in Germany and Turkey, among other places; and which came back into the spotlight in 2004 when the French Parliament, following the recommendation of President Chirac’s Stasi Commission on secularism, banned the “ostentatious” display of religious symbols in French schools. On Sheth’s reading, applying the idea of “acknowledgment” to this case would involve refusing to assume that we know what an act of wearing hijab means just on the basis of who we take someone to be; instead, as she puts it, “we need to focus on the action of wearing the hijab and neither to valorize it nor condemn it,” at least not “without an extensive consideration of the act itself and the context under which it occurs” (4–5). I agree with Sheth that such a formulation would not put us on substantially better footing; but that is because this approach still keeps the act of wearing hijab at the center of our attention, and is still oriented toward arriving at a judgment of its meaning and permissibility, albeit via careful consideration of all the relevant factors rather than via hasty assumptions. My concern, by contrast, was less with promoting a more nuanced interpretation or evaluation of these acts than with asking how the interpretation and evaluation of these acts has repeatedly come to bear all the weight of French public concern
about secularism, religious practice, feminism, and Islam. As Jane Kramer has reported, even
the Stasi Commission’s 2003 report included a far wider range of proposals than the one that was
followed in the subsequent ban on ostentatious religious display, “many addressing significant
social and economic inequities that Muslims in France face”; but—to the frustration of some
Commission members—Parliament chose to treat the issue of hijab in utter isolation from these
other matters.22 The failure of acknowledgment, here, lies less in a misinterpretation of the
meaning of hijab than in the very specification of l’affaire du foulard as the “case” that concerns
us, for this framing has operated to foreclose engagement with such matters as the ghettoization
of immigrants and the disproportionate prevalence of unemployment and other forms of
socioeconomic vulnerability among them, as well as the tensions internal to the idea of
secularism itself, which this frame converts into problems posed by Muslims to France.23

All this may begin to shed some light on one of Sheth’s most far-reaching questions: in
what sense is the concept of acknowledgment, understood in these terms, the basis for a
“politics”?24 Sheth discerns two competing senses of “politics” in Bound by Recognition: with a
small “p,” politics involves a combination of Arendtian self-display and the sincere exchange of
reasons among citizens, while with a large “P,” politics takes place in and through “the
legislation of a governing body” (7). Sheth’s concern, I take it, is that the idea of
acknowledgment belongs entirely to the register of “politics,” and so cannot do analytic justice to
the power of the state, nor provide the state with a “way of addressing larger issues about
culture,” since the state belongs to—indeed, it comprises—the domain of “Politics.” Yet it
seems to me that both of these understandings of “politics” are ideological distortions—indeed,
that they are themselves parallel to, and perhaps symptoms of, the “dual agenda” of the state that
Sheth incisively describes. The first fantasizes a space of mutual transparency among citizens, in
which powerful institutions and social forms (including, but not limited to, the state) cast no shadow; the second, reducing politics to state legislation, takes at face value the state’s claim to be the exclusive institutional expression of the general will. Both obscure the uncanniness that is an ordinary part of the relation between states and citizens: the state is an institution that enables people to do things they could not do on their own, and which by the same token is not wholly susceptible to popular control; as such, it is one of the avenues through which people are regularly both confronted by and implicated in doings and happenings they did not intend.25 And the idea of acknowledgment, it should now be clear, belongs neither to the domain of “politics” or to the domain of “Politics” as Sheth describes them: it is not meant to describe a way of regarding or treating others that responds to their reasons for action instead of reducing them to identity categories; nor is it means to serve as a conceptual aid to the practice of state governance. If there is a “politics” to the idea of acknowledgment, it takes place on the terrain that these definitions occlude. It involves criticizing the ways in which our conceptual frames, modes of identification, and animating political visions not only obscure the conditions of politics but do so in ways that reinforce inegalitarian distributions of power and vulnerability; it involves articulating different political imaginaries, ones that express (for example) the aspiration to political equality without having recourse to fantasies of mastery, either over the state or through its supplementary agency; and it involves reflexively examining, criticizing, and altering the institutional and practical forms through which our political imaginaries are reproduced—that is, which help orient us in political life.26

NOTES

AUTHOR’S NOTE: This reply is a revised and expanded version of my presentation at the roundtable on Bound by Recognition at the Annual Meeting of the Northeastern Political Science Association in Boston, November 13, 2004. I am grateful to Joan Cocks, Uday Mehta, Falguni
Sheth, and Antonio Vázquez Arroyo for their comments there; to Antonio again for proposing and organizing the roundtable; and to Nick Xenos for soliciting the results for publication in *Polity*.


2. While on the subject of Hegel: although Vázquez Arroyo is right to insist that the moment of the “abdication of independence” I identify at the end of the struggle for recognition is momentary, and that an orientation toward some more “concrete” form of independence survives in subsequent parts of Hegel’s story, including his account of the self-consciousness achieved through servile labor (not to mention his later account of the place of the idea of sovereignty in the structure of objective spirit), I had not intended to suggest anything to the contrary in *Bound by Recognition*: my focus on that moment, and on the way in which the master-slave relation survives in the face of its own inner contradictions, was presented precisely as a reading of Hegel against himself.


5. Ibid., 106.

6. See Sheldon S. Wolin, “Democracy, Difference, and Re-cognition, *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (August 1993): 464–83). It is not clear to me that Wolin uses the term “re-cognition” to mean something like the overcoming of “misrecognition” in Bourdieu’s sense. When Wolin finally comes close to defining the term near the end of the essay, he says that “re-cognition” involves “a radical revision in the culturally produced representations of a familiar being” (480); he sometimes seems to associate “re-cognition” with the form of recognition demanded by what he sees as recent, identitarian, and “exclusivist” forms of pluralism organized around “difference” as opposed to those organized around mere “diversity” (465, 467); and he concludes the essay by emphasizing that there is “a political paradox in the re-cognition of difference,” since demands for re-cognition both “presuppose a strong State” capable of protecting vulnerable citizens and tend to erode the political power on which they depend by “rendering suspect the language and possibilities of collectivity, common action, and shared purposes” (480).


8. Ibid., 172, 181.

10. Ibid., 69.

11. Patchen Markell, “Recognition and Redistribution,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, ed. John Dryzek, Bonnie Honig, and Anne Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). As I note there, things are somewhat different among Hegel specialists and in the tradition of twentieth-century French Hegelianism, where “recognition” is more often treated as a general medium of intersubjectivity through which social relations are constituted, maintained, and transformed.

12. Crucially, one of the effects of breaking out of this more conventional frame is that it lets us see that the “politics of recognition” in this broader sense is not something practiced “exclusively by those people and groups who are already socially marked as ‘particular’” (*BbR* 6). The book is thus not, per se, a critique of what Vázquez Arroyo calls “politicized identity”; it is a critique of one way of conceiving of the purpose, justification, and effects of the politicization of identity, whose power arises in substantial part from the recognitive imperatives of states and their normative citizens (*BbR* 6, 23–24, 185–86).


14. On the ironies fed by this frame see ibid.


18. I actually think Sheth’s account of the state’s “dual agenda” conflates two slightly different distinctions: first, between the state understood as a mediating institution among its citizens, and the state understood as concerned with its own survival (and thus as the institutional expression of national unity (see especially 8–9); and, second, between the state understood as guided by the realistic and responsible evaluation of its’ citizens needs and safety, and the state understood as guided by its (officials’) own search to preserve and expand its (their) power (see especially 10–11). Sheth is right, I think, to see these distinctions as roughly parallel, but they are not quite identical.

19. I discuss this dynamic in *BbR*, 25–32 and chap. 5. For an excellent account of the pattern of oscillation between these views of the state that characterizes the disciplinary history of political

20. It is important to emphasize that the point of this “release” is not necessarily to render action in general more fluid, contingent, or unpredictable: the theoretical subordination of action to identity is problematic not only because it abets normalization but also because it misunderstands the phenomena of continuity and stability, treating them as though they could only be produced through the enforcement of a rule given in advance.

21. I discuss this example briefly in *BbR*, 169, 172–73, focusing on the controversy over the wearing of headscarves by three schoolgirls in Creil, France in 1989, which became the focus of a national debate over laïcité, religious freedom, feminism, and Islam, and was often discussed in international scholarship on nationalism and multiculturalism through the 1990s. On the Stasi Commission’s report and the 2004 law, see Jane Kramer, “Taking the Veil,” *The New Yorker* (November 22, 2004): 58–71.


23. The tensions internal to secularism are not unrelated to what Sheth calls the “dual agenda” of the state: on the one hand, insofar as the state is understood as a mediating institution, its role is simply to facilitate the private liberty of conscience of its citizens; on the other hand, insofar as the state is understood as the (universal) supplement whose existence unifies an otherwise fragmented multitude into a people, the state is perpetually threatened by the very religious particularity it facilitates and secures. See Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd. ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 26–76.

24. Cocks broaches a similar question for different reasons; and I think she is right that the idea of “acknowledgment” does not generate a political ideology, since it describes something close to a “condition of practical wisdom” (3).


26. The conclusion to *Bound by Recognition* gestured briefly in these directions in its discussion of democracy; in my current work on the conceptions of rule, power, and activity that inform democratic theory and practice, I aim to deepen this gesture, asking, in effect, how the acknowledgment of practical finitude might be seen and experienced affirmatively, as an enabling condition of democratic political activity.