I.

At least since the publication of Charles Taylor’s seminal 1992 essay, theoretical discussions of the politics of recognition have been marked by an often-unnoticed tension between two subtly but importantly different uses of the term “recognition,” and between two corresponding views of identity. On the one hand, “recognition” is sometimes used to name a distinctive kind of respect—respect grounded in the knowledge or understanding of some person’s or group’s identity in all its particularity. This sense of “recognition” resonates with the ordinary use of the word to refer to the re-cognition of something once known but lately hidden, forgotten, or absent. Correspondingly, if
recognition involves a sort of cognition, then the identities of people and groups are the objects of recognition’s knowledge. They are the hidden, forgotten, ignored, or suppressed truths that the politics of recognition struggles to bring into the light of publicity. And this implies that these identities in some sense precede the political dynamics of recognition and misrecognition: as Anthony Appiah has put it, the politics of recognition asserts that people have a right not just to be respected in their humanity but “to be acknowledged publicly as what they already really are.” Taylor’s essay famously expresses this notion of identities as pre-politically given facts about people and groups in the language of “authenticity.”

On the other hand, “recognition” is sometimes used to refer not to the successful cognition of an already-existing thing, but to the constructive act through which recognition’s very object is shaped or brought into being. This sense of “recognition” also corresponds to an ordinary, if less common, use of the word: when the chairperson of a meeting recognizes a speaker, for example, she is not acknowledging a status that already really exists; instead, the privilege of speaking is itself a product of the chairperson’s institutionally authorized act of recognition. And correspondingly, if recognition does not simply know its objects but makes them, then identities are not pre-political phenomena that can simply be rightly or wrongly cognized. Instead, identities are the sedimented effects of the recognitive dynamics of human interaction. Curiously, this second, constructive sense of recognition and identity is often employed right alongside the the first, cognitive sense, despite the apparent opposition between them. Taylor’s essay is a case in point. Even as he elaborates the idea of authenticity, Taylor also insists that identities are not cognized but constructed by recognition: this, Taylor says, is part of the “fundamentally dialogical character” of human life.

What are we to say about the relationship between these two senses of recognition and between the corresponding views of identity? Have discussions of the politics of recognition like Taylor’s carelessly lumped together two altogether different phenomena
under the same rubric? Is one of these perspectives on recognition and identity simply wrong? Or does recognition both cognize an already-existing identity and, somehow, also help produce it? These questions about the meaning of recognition and the nature of identities will serve as the backdrop for the following reflections on Carolin Emcke’s and James Tully’s rich, insightful essays. As I will explain, I am largely sympathetic to Emcke’s and Tully’s arguments. Each highlights some of the deeply political dimensions of recognition and identity, dimensions that have too often been overlooked in theoretical discussions of these subjects. Emcke, for example, helps bring into view the underlying issues of power and domination that the language of recognition and misrecognition, with its cognitive overtones, often obscures. And Tully, by focusing on the complexity of political struggles over identity, makes a strong case for reconceiving these struggles as interminable democratic activities that cannot issue in a final and definitive arrangement of recognition. Nevertheless, I think Emcke’s and Tully’s own arguments may make more radical trouble for the normative discourse of recognition than either acknowledges. I think we can bring the strengths and limitations of their essays into view by asking how each would respond to the tension between the cognitive and constructive perspectives on identity I have outlined.

II.

Although she does not frame her argument in these terms, Emcke’s essay can be taken to represent one possible response to the tension I’ve described. Emcke’s strategy for managing this tension is to *categorize*: her account suggests that the cognitive and constructive senses of recognition actually correspond to two different kinds of political struggle over identity and difference, undertaken by different types of social group, which political theorists so far have failed to distinguish. Typically, Emcke suggests, we think of a struggle for recognition as the effort of a group, bound together by some shared
set of practices or horizon of meaning, to secure either toleration or some more substantial public expression of acknowledgment and respect for its collective identity. On Emcke’s account, however, this description fits only certain forms of struggle over identity and difference—for example, controversies over whether and how to accommodate the distinctive cultural practices of immigrant groups within broader public institutions. By contrast, some groups—Emcke names African-Americans as an example—seek not to affirm collective identities that have been ignored or misjudged by a larger society, but precisely to free themselves from perjorative identities that have been imposed upon them from the outside. Indeed, Emcke argues, some groups are only groups at all because of the binding force of these externally imposed identifications; in such situations, the appropriate remedy is not the extension of toleration or affirmative recognition, but the elimination of the external and compulsory character of such collective identities. Depending upon the decisions of a group’s members, this remedy may lead not simply to the transvaluation of its identity, but to the transformation or even the dissolution of the group itself.

This is an appealing and productive argument. As I have indicated, I think Emcke is right that theorists of recognition have too often simply treated identities as pre-politically given, neglecting the significance of politics and power in the constitution of relations of identity and difference. And I also think Emcke is right that when the cognitive view becomes hegemonic, we lose sight of some of the important risks that attend political strategies devoted to securing recognition. If identities are not pre-politically given but constituted in and through politics, then an act of recognition, by endorsing the terms of a certain articulation of identity and enshrining those terms in legal or political institutions, may do much more than simply acknowledge people as what they “already really are.” An act of affirmative recognition might also unwittingly strengthen the underlying relations of power and domination that have helped to make people who they are, binding people ever more tightly to the identities that have
historically been the instruments of their subjection, even while (at least superficially) according those identities newfound respect. Finally, I am sympathetic to Emcke’s call to imagine ways of countering injustice at the level of identity and difference that reach beyond the mere transvaluation of identities to confront the underlying relations of domination that give rise to perjorative or constraining forms of identification in the first place.

What I find questionable, however, is Emcke’s move to confine the applicability of such insights to one discrete subset of identities, groups, and/or struggles. Emcke urges us to understand recognition in constructive terms with respect to certain groups (those whose identities are externally imposed), yet she seems content to continue to think about recognition in cognitive terms with respect to another category of groups (those whose identities are internally generated). Of course, the appeal of this move is understandable, for it promises to dissolve what would otherwise seem to be a political double bind: rather than being at once an site of emancipation and an instrument of new or renewed subjection, on Emcke’s analysis the politics of recognition becomes unambivalently emancipatory for some and equally unambivalently dangerous for others. Without denying that the terms of this double bind, and indeed its severity, vary from one political situation to the next, I nevertheless want to suggest that Emcke’s sharp distinction between types of groups may be more problematic than she acknowledges.

These problems demonstrate the difficulty of negotiating the tension between the cognitive and constructive senses of recognition via a strategy of categorization.

The first and simplest problem is that the question of whether a group’s identity is internally generated or externally imposed is not just a matter of social-scientific classification; instead, it is often the subject of ongoing political argument among the members of the group themselves. Should Native Americans work for self-government rights through the categories of tribal organization that arose in part out of practices of domination and administration by whites? Are those authentic units of identity, or
foreign impositions? Does African-American identity consist only of a shared experience of discrimination and injury, or have those experiences (though not only those) also contributed to the reproduction of ways of being worthy of affirmation? These questions are the objects of serious and irreducibly political controversy within the communities in question, and this fact significantly complicates efforts to identify a priori a subset of groups to which Emcke’s own critical insights into the constructive, political character of recognition (and its attendant dangers) do not apply.

The point, however, is not merely that Emcke’s distinction may be hard to apply to particular cases. The phenomenon I have just mentioned—disagreement and controversy within a group over the question of whether its identity ought to be understood as internally generated or externally imposed—also hints at a second, deeper problem. Even if the application of Emcke’s distinction were unproblematic, such a distinction might still obscure important political dimensions of recognition and identity. Emcke rightly draws our attention to the role of power in the construction of identity—but the only modality of power she acknowledges here is the imposition of an unwanted identity upon one group by another. Yet the reproduction of identity inevitably involves the play of power and politics not only among but also within groups, and the phenomenon of disagreement within a group over the question of whether its identity is internally generated or externally imposed ought to remind us of this fact—as should recent controversies over the relationship between cultural identity and women’s rights. Moreover, insofar as the boundaries of groups themselves are in part effects of power, politics may also be said to precede and underlie the very distinction between internal and external on which Emcke’s categories rest. To take one of Emcke’s own examples: the question of German-Jewish identity in the nineteenth century cannot be understood simply in terms of the external imposition of an unwanted identity upon one group by another, at least not without giving undue analytic weight to the very distinction between German and Jewish that she quite rightly wants to historicize and politicize—for, on
Emcke’s own characterization, this case involved a struggle precisely over the boundaries of Germanness itself. Such instances of power, irreducible to acts of external imposition, suggest that recognition may *never* simply acknowledge already-existing identities, but rather *always* participates in the ongoing dynamics of through which group identities, and indeed groups themselves, are reproduced and transformed. And if this is right, then Emcke’s own well-founded diagnosis of the political risks involved in the politics of recognition may be more generally applicable than she acknowledges.

Finally, and most fundamentally, I want to suggest that the very distinction between the internal and external dimensions of collective identity may be less secure than Emcke allows. To see why this is so, we need to turn to the question of how conflicts over identity and recognition arise in the first place, especially with respect to relations among those groups that possess what Emcke would classify as internally generated identities. Like many other theorists, Emcke explains these conflicts by appealing to the sheer fact of pluralism: conflicts over identity and recognition arise out of the circumstances of life in modern, pluralistic societies, which increasingly involves the coexistence of people and groups with different and incompatible convictions and practices. This is certainly part of the story, but it glosses over the question of how *mere difference* gets converted into *incompatibility*. Consider Emcke’s discussion of controversies over the accommodation of cultural practices in immigrant societies, such as the so-called “headscarves affair” in France (and its analogues elsewhere). To say that this controversy exemplifies the tendency for the simple fact of pluralism to generate “normative or practical contradictions” seems question-begging: how, exactly, does what a Muslim girl wears on her head in school come to represent a threat to the survival of French secularism? Does this signification somehow inhere in the practice *as such*, prior to and independently of its encounter and interaction with its “external” context? To the contrary, I would suggest that this sort of incompatibility is an inherently relational characteristic. The sheer diversity of cultural practices becomes a locus of conflict...
because cultural practices are also points of identification, and because the process of identity-formation never occurs wholly affirmatively and from the inside, but always via differentiation, disavowal, and/or repudiation—that is, always with reference and in relation to some other.

What this means, however, is that understanding any sort of conflict over identity—even conflict that does not obviously involve the simple imposition of an entirely unwanted identity upon one group by another—will require attention to the specific histories of interaction and relations of power within and among and, as it were, behind groups, and to the ways in which group identities have been reciprocally and often asymmetrically formed. For example, in the case of the controversy over the Muslim headscarf in French schools, it will require attention to the history and legacy of French colonialism in North Africa, to contemporary discourses of French national identity, and to the legacy of patriarchy in past and present constructions of gender identity in Islam. These are, of course, phenomena of just the sort to which Emcke wants us to attend in cases of external imposition. My point is that Emcke’s own welcome refusal to analyze cases of external imposition in terms of a simple lapse of cognition, as though members of one group just failed to understand the real meaning and worth of another group’s identity, ought to be extended to the politics of recognition in general. Efforts to secure recognition of the supposedly pre-existing identity of some group will inevitably turn out to have been consequential interventions into the ongoing recognitive activity through which identities are made and transformed. These interventions may reinforce old structures of domination or inaugurate new ones; and in any case they may leave undone the challenging but essential task of identifying and criticizing the deep relations of power that generate and sustain misrecognition in the first place. That does not mean that the pursuit of recognition is never justified. It does mean that the justification will never be simple, and that the consequences even of the best-justified struggle for recognition may be complicated and ambivalent.
III.

I have suggested that Emcke’s response to the tension between the cognitive and constructive senses of recognition was to categorize, and I’ve tried to draw out some problems with this strategy. By contrast, James Tully’s response to this tension seems like a more sweeping decision against the cognitive perspective on recognition, and in favor of its constructive alternative. Tully, we might say, puts the politics back into the “politics of recognition” even more thoroughly than Emcke, because he does not limit his account of the political character of recognition to a single subset of struggles. Indeed, I think one of Tully’s most important contributions is his distinctive characterization of the politics of identity and difference as an ongoing activity, whose always-tentative results are forever subject to renegotiation as the identities of citizens change over time. For Tully, the importance of the politics of recognition doesn’t lie in an anticipated end-state of successful recognition that political struggles might one day produce; such an outcome is impossible, he says, because identities just aren’t the sort of fixed and stable things that could be recognized definitively. Instead, Tully argues that the politics of recognition is valuable simply as an activity in which all the members of a political society ought to be able to participate on free and equal terms: it’s the doing, not the results, that matter. Tully’s account thus seems to leave behind, once and for, all what I have called the cognitivist understanding of the politics of recognition.

Or does it? At the level of social theory, Tully displays an unwavering appreciation of the deeply political and constructive character of recognition, the provisionality of identity, and the impossibility of definitively successful arrangements of recognition. Still, it is less clear to what extent Tully thinks the participants in the ongoing and open-ended political negotiations he describes share this understanding of their own activity. On the one hand, Tully does sometimes characterize the motivations
and attitudes of these political agents in ways that seem consistent with his meta-level description of the their activity. He stresses, for example, that such actors might derive their sense of belonging to the broader political community simply from the experience of active participation in ongoing political contestation, and not necessarily from the experience of having some particular identity formally recognized. On the other hand, on Tully’s account, the political activity in which these citizens participate seems still to be largely and explicitly about identity and recognition: Tully’s citizens are forever considering and criticizing institutionalized forms of recognition, proposing new arrangements that are supposed to reflect their identities more adequately, negotiating with others who make analogous claims, and putting supposedly better structures of recognition into practice. And it is at this point, I think, that something like the cognitive understanding of recognition creeps back into Tully’s account: the idea of “recognition” as a successful and respectful cognition of people as what they “already really are” seems implicit in the practical attitude of the political agents Tully describes, even though this idea is at odds with his own theoretical understanding of the nature of their activity.

Let me be clear: I am not arguing that this return of the cognitive perspective on recognition and identity is evidence of some sort of failure on Tully’s part to follow through completely on his own commitment to understanding identities as political and constructed. Instead, I suggest we understand this persistence of the cognitive perspective, even within theoretical accounts that try to resist it, as a feature of what we might call the “grammar” of recognition itself. Consider again, for example, the coexistence of the cognitive and constructive senses of recognition in such central texts as Taylor’s essay. What is especially illuminating about Taylor’s “The Politics of Recognition” is not that it somehow resolves the tension between these perspectives on recognition and identity, but that it brilliantly condenses and represents the grammar of recognition without masking the contradictions that inhabit it. On the one hand, the cognitive view of recognition and identity is an absolutely necessary component of the
normative discourse of recognition because it sustains the crucial distinction between successful and failed recognition: if identities were not in some sense independent of the political play of recognition and misrecognition, they could not serve as reliable benchmarks by which to judge the adequacy of particular recognitive acts or structures. Hence the prominence, in Taylor’s essay, of the language of “authenticity.” On the other hand, the constructive view of recognition and identity is no less crucial to the grammar of recognition. If the cognitive use of recognition renders intelligible the distinction between successful and failed recognition, the constructive use helps us understand why recognition matters: it is precisely because identities are formed intersubjectively that we are vulnerable to the perceptions and characterizations of other people. Taylor makes the point explicitly: it is because “my own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others” that “nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.”

This tension within the grammar of recognition renders the politics of recognition a more thoroughly ambivalent enterprise than I think Tully allows. Sensitive to the political character of recognition, and hence to the probability that any structure of recognition will contain elements of domination within it, Tully asks us to treat the politics of recognition as a continuous political negotiation. At the same time, to the extent that the internal logic of that negotiation—the grammar of recognition—continues to suggest a cognitivist view of recognition and identity, our participation in the politics of recognition may blind us to the very characteristics of our activity that Tully rightly wants us to keep in view. Recognition, in other words, has a self-masking or self-obscuring character: the act of recognition does construct identity, but it does so precisely by seeming only to cognize what it constructs; it is a performative whose conditions of felicity include that it seem only to be a constative. In this way, the pursuit of recognition comes to be bound up with a certain sort of misrecognition—not the
misrecognition of identity (for that remains within a cognitive framework, in which misrecognition is just a matter of getting someone’s identity wrong), but an even more fundamental ontological misrecognition of the nature and circumstances of our own activity. And this misrecognition is not simply a mistake that can be corrected by good social theory: it responds to a desire or practical imperative that cannot be defused merely by the production of a more accurate account of the nature of the social world.

Of course, Tully might well respond that the pursuit of recognition is an inevitable feature of political life, as well as a useful if imperfect weapon in struggles against injustice on the terrain of identity, and so the best we can do is to try to negotiate, as gracefully as possible, this tension between the imperative of recognizing identities and the need to resist the forms of blindness and constraint that recognition brings with it. (Indeed, the affirmation of the necessity of doing two apparently incompatible things at once, or of alternating perpetually between them, has become a familiar trope in critical discussions of identity politics.) There is an element of truth to this, although more needs to be said about how that tension can be negotiated practically and institutionally: how do different political strategies and forms open or close down possibilities for citizens to acknowledge and contest the injustices that otherwise emancipatory forms of recognition also bring with them? One promising strategy, which has affinities with Tully’s observation about the “multilateral” character of contemporary struggles for recognition, might be to multiply the sites at which struggles for recognition are carried out, resisting the sovereign state’s implicit claim to hold a monopoly on the distribution of recognition and to be the ultimate arbiter of contests over identity. The point of such a pluralization would not be to enable a more accurate regime of recognition—as though the multiplication of sites of recognition (like the multiplication of pixels on a screen) could produce reflections of our identities that had finer resolution and crisper definition. Instead, such a pluralization might enable resistance to recognition’s injustices by weakening the hold of any single exchange of recognition on our being: it may be safer
and more conceivable to contest the terms of one exchange of recognition, or indeed to refuse that exchange altogether, if doing so does not amount to a kind of social death.\textsuperscript{14}

Still, I suspect that the supposed necessity of pursuing recognition can also be subjected to a more radical critique. It may well be that, as long as we act in public, we will be implicated in the intersubjective dynamics of recognition and identity-formation, and that these dynamics will often produce structures of domination that call for resistance. We cannot but recognize and identify ourselves and others. But that is not to say that our interaction must be about recognition and identity, nor that we are bound to pursue recognition as a deliberate political project.\textsuperscript{15} (Analogously: the use of language may be an inescapable feature of human interaction, but this is not to say that our conversations must be about language, nor that our utterances will typically aim at getting the definitions of words right.) Instead of asking only how we can negotiate the dilemmas that the grammar of recognition imposes, we should also ask how the grammar of recognition itself comes to be imposed as the vocabulary in which redress for injuries on the terrain of identity and difference must be pursued. For example: does the conversion of questions of power and domination into the vocabulary of recognition and identity serve the interest of contemporary administrative states in rendering their populations cognizable and manageable by tying them to regular, discernable, and predictable identities?\textsuperscript{16} Does the relationship between citizens and the state come to be figured as a relationship of recognition—a relatively passive relationship, after all, in which we hope to see our identities mirrored in our political institutions—precisely in response to the felt difficulty of locating spaces for meaningful democratic action and participation in contemporary public spheres? Finally, if the imperative of pursuing recognition is not ontologically necessary but historically and contextually contingent, what transformations in the background conditions of contemporary political life would make it possible for us to respond more lucidly than the grammar of recognition permits
to problems of inequality and domination, and to our democratic desire to feel that the institutions that claim and act upon us are meaningfully ours?

NOTES

AUTHOR’S NOTE: These comments are based on my remarks on an earlier version of Carolin Emcke’s essay, delivered at a conference on “Multiculturalism and Struggles for Recognition” at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University, March 1999. Thanks to Seyla Benhabib for the invitation to participate in the conference, to Nancy Fraser for inviting me to expand these remarks for publication, to Carolin Emcke for her thoughtful responses to my original comments, and to James Tully for sharing with me the manuscripts on which his essay in this issue is based.


4. Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition,” 32. The seam between these two components of the discourse of recognition becomes momentarily visible at one point in Taylor’s text, where he somewhat abruptly shifts from an exposition of the idea of authenticity to an
exposition of the dialogical character of identity-formation: “By definition, this [authentic] way of being cannot be socially derived, but must be inwardly generated. But in the nature of the case, there is no such thing as inward generation, monologically understood” (32). He does not comment further on the implications of this tension.


7. Interestingly, after introducing this distinction, Emcke concedes that it is only “analytical” and that the boundary between “chosen and constructed” identities is “porous and passable.” But it seems to me that this caveat works against the purposes to which Emcke had originally put her distinction. On the one hand, if we take Emcke’s caveat to mean that in real cases, the two dynamics of identity-formation she describes are typically intertwined, then her distinction gains in phenomenological subtlety but loses its power as a criterion for deciding between competing political strategies for actually existing people and groups. On the other hand, Emcke’s caveat might mean that a group can move from one category to another over time; this reading preserves the criterial power of the distinction by suggesting that in a given historical situation, actually existing groups can still be unambiguously categorized—but it does so precisely
by sacrificing phenomenological subtlety. This second reading of the caveat, to use Emcke’s example, has enough flexibility to comprehend African-Americans as “self-confident and proud blacks, or as victims of racist constructions and repression” (emphasis added); does it have enough flexibility to comprehend African-Americans as both at once, or to register possible connections between self-confidence and pride on the one hand, and past and present experiences of domination on the other?


11. Garcia-Düttmann also notes the simultaneous performative and constative aspects of recognition, though he does not characterize the relation between those aspects in this way: Between Cultures, 4.

12. Indeed, just this sort of connection between the pursuit of recognition and ontological misrecognition is a central theme of one of the foundational, though often-misunderstood, texts of the discourse of recognition: Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. Hegel’s account of the struggle for recognition and the relation of master and slave is
centrally concerned with demonstrating the contradiction acted out by self-consciousness in attempting to secure recognition from another of its own independence: the very act of appealing to another testifies to a dependence and finitude that the substance of the demand for recognition (with its fixation on independence) simultaneously disavows. Thus, the critical “misrecognition” enacted by the master in Hegel’s text is not (as is usually supposed) a misrecognition of another’s identity but of one’s own situation: it consists not in a failure to recognize the independence of the other, but in the failure to acknowledge his own finitude and, in so doing, to abandon the aspiration to independence and sovereignty, as the other had done at the moment of surrender. I develop this reading, and its implications for the politics of recognition, at greater length in Bound by Recognition: The Politics of Identity after Hegel (in preparation).

13. As Craig Calhoun has put it, “simply showing a process of construction…may fail to grapple with the real, present-day political and other reasons why essentialist identities continue to be invoked and often deeply felt.” Critical Social Theory: Culture, History, and the Challenge of Difference (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 198–99.


15. Thanks to Lisa Wedeen for helping me think through this point.

16. On the managerial tendencies of the modern administrative state see James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998). For an example of the use of multiculturalism by contemporary states as an instrument of management, see Elizabeth