From Recognition to Acknowledgment

IN HER CLASSIC STUDY OF MACHIAVELLI, Hanna Pitkin describes the political theorist's "special problem of communication" this way: "In order to be understood, he must speak in terms familiar to his audience, from within a conceptual framework and an understanding of the world that they share. Yet he wants not to convey new information to them, but rather to change the terms, the conceptual framework through which they presently organize their information."[1] Any attempt to overcome the misrecognitions that afflict the politics of recognition as it is conventionally understood faces a version of the same problem. These misrecognitions are not easy to grasp, because they are not simply errors, like false empirical propositions or fallacious arguments. They are more like blind spots built into the "grammar" of a theory or a practice; and as such, they are not immediately visible from within the terms in which the theory operates, or from the perspective made available by the practice.[2] This is why talking, as I do, about the pursuit of recognition as itself an example of misrecognition, or about the difference between recognition and acknowledgment, can sound senseless at first.

The problem is not intractable, however. One way to get a hold upon misrecognitions like these is to focus on their symptoms: unresolved tensions in the operation of a theory, or unexpected disruptions in the course of a practical undertaking. As we shall see, this is an important part of the argumentative strategy of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which exposes the limitations of various accounts of knowledge by tracing the internal contradictions that emerge when those accounts are put to work. And if there is one way in which this book remains resolutely Hegelian even when Hegel is absent from the page, it is in its diagnostic approach: I proceed by taking up exemplary theories and projects of recognition, listening for the metal-on-metal sound of a theory working against itself, looking for the surprising reversals that signify counterproductive or self-defeating courses of action, and using the leverage generated by these moments of contradiction to create space for a new approach to the politics of identity and difference.

This approach has its limitations. An argument of this sort is most persuasive when it proceeds through an extended and sympathetic engagement with another's perspective. But all of the dense work of exegesis and reconstruction that this requires can tax a reader's patience, and

the larger thread of the argument can get lost in the details. In response to these dangers, I begin in this chapter by surveying some of the central concepts and lines of argument that structure this book, and which cut across the individual essays that follow. This will help to explain how each of the later studies fits into the whole; and it will also help situate this book more precisely on the terrain of contemporary political thought. But it is important to stress that this synoptic treatment cannot substitute for the subsequent close readings and case studies, which is where the full sense of my alternative vocabulary, and the evidence of its usefulness, will emerge.

It is worth noting, before diving in, that this methodological problem—the problem of wishing to be able to speak in advance in a language that will only become intelligible retrospectively—foreshadows one of the central substantive ideas that will appear repeatedly in this chapter, and throughout the book: the idea that the key to recognition lies in its *temporality*. By temporality, I do not mean the mere fact that recognition occurs in time, nor do I refer to its pace or speed. Rather, I mean that recognition links an agent's past and present to her future; and that the *politics* of recognition involves a distinctive kind of practical relation to these different horizons of temporality. Attention to this theme, I believe, can help us escape some of the deadlocks into which debates about identity and difference have frequently fallen over the last couple of decades—deadlocks which have their origin in part in a privileging of spatial concepts and metaphors in our thinking about identity and difference. In fact, as I shall argue, social relations of subordination can themselves be understood in terms of the displacement of problems of temporality and their conversion into problems of spatial organization.[3] Put differently, justice and injustice in relations of identity and difference, properly understood, have much to do with the ways in which our relations to each other are shaped by postures we assume in, and toward, time.

Sovereignty, Identity, and Action

One of the central arguments of this book is that the politics of recognition is characterized by certain important misrecognitions of its own—not misrecognitions of identity, but failures to acknowledge one's own basic ontological conditions—and that these arise from the fact that the pursuit of recognition expresses an aspiration to *sovereignty*. But what could this mean? Sovereignty, after all, is usually understood as a property of states: a state is said to be sovereign when it represents the "final and absolute authority in the political community," able to govern its

own territory independently, without the interference of competing powers either inside or outside its boundaries.[4]

In fact, this specific notion of state sovereignty often does play an important role in the politics of recognition, and I shall say more about it later. But the idea of state sovereignty is also only one manifestation of a broader idea of sovereign agency, which can be attributed as easily to persons as to institutions. In this broader sense, sovereignty refers to the condition of being an independent, self-determining agent, characterized by what Hannah Arendt calls "uncompromising self-sufficiency and mastership."[5] The idea is well-captured in Isaiah Berlin's famous account of "positive" liberty, which refers not just to the absence of external obstructions, but to a stronger condition of independence, of something like full ownership of one's life and doings:

> The 'positive' sense of the word 'liberty' derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from the outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer—deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them.[6]

It may seem counterintuitive to suggest that the ideal of recognition is tied to the aspiration to sovereignty thus understood. After all, interest in the theme of recognition arose precisely out of influential late-twentieth-century *critiques* of the so-called "sovereign self." Some of these critiques focused on the widespread image of the human being as paradigmatically an owner of private property, with an exclusive right to use and dispose of things under his *dominium*, which seemed to underwrite mainstream contractarian approaches to political thought; others focused on models of the self as "unencumbered" or "atomistic," which seemed to treat human beings as somehow existing above and acting independently of their social and historical contexts and bodily matrices.[7] The politics of recognition, by contrast, deals with socially and historically situated subjects, with human beings understood as members of communities and as bearers of particular identities, and with distinctive forms of injustice that operate not merely by systematically depriving already-constituted subjects of resources, but by shaping subjects themselves in ways that produce and perpetuate systematic inequality.

This genealogy is correct, but it misses the point, for the image of the person as an isolated property owner, and the related image of subjectiv-

ity as unencumbered, are not the only manifestations of the desire for
sovereignty; indeed, one aim of this book is to cultivate an appreciation
of the unexpectedly wide range of ways in which that desire can find
expression. Contractarian political theories and voluntarist conceptions
of the self anchor sovereignty in the notion of *choice*—the former, in
the possibility of being subject only to those forms of authority to which
you have yourself consented, and whose purpose is to protect your do-
main of independence; the latter, in the context-transcending power to
choose your ends and purposes. The ideal of recognition, by contrast,
anchors sovereignty in *knowledge*; that is, in the prospect of arriving at
a clear understanding of who you are and of the nature of the larger
groups and communities to which you belong, and of securing the re-
spectful recognition of these same facts by others.[8] The idea is that
mutual recognition of this sort would eliminate the obstacles of misun-
derstanding, ignorance, and prejudice that alienate us from each other
and ourselves, making it possible for us to act in accordance with who
we really are, and to do so with the support rather than the resistance
of our fellows. In this way, even as the ideal of recognition brings agents
back from the solitude of ownership or the thin air of choice and into
the thick of social life, it also preserves, in transfigured form, the basic
aspiration behind those images of agency: the aspiration to be able to
act independently, without experiencing life among others as a source
of vulnerability, or as a site of possible alienation or self-loss.

The same point can be made even more clearly in terms of temporal-
ity, for the strategy of choice and the strategy of recognition represent
different ways of establishing links among an agent's past, present, and
future, which nevertheless overlap in one crucial respect. The idea of the
unencumbered self, at least according to its critics, enables agents to
assume a posture of confident mastery in the face of the future by grant-
ing them the power to break deliberately with the legacy of the past;
to slough off its weight, repeatedly, in an ongoing sequence of present
choices. This prioritization of the present, its critics charge, is problem-
atically ahistorical: it leaves us unable to account for the moral weight
either of unchosen attachments and memberships, or of the historical
injustices that continue to structure our present situation, notwithstand-
ing efforts to will them away. The politics of recognition, by contrast,
takes account of the weight of the past—but it does so in a very specific
way. In this picture, history takes the form of identity, and identity is
understood specifically as an antecedently given set of facts about who
we are, and indeed as a set of facts which both precedes and *governs*
our action, telling us what acting "authentically" means for us.[9] If the
assumption that identity precedes action makes it possible to treat iden-
tity as the benchmark by which to distinguish successful recognition

from misrecognition, the assumption that identity governs action tells us, in turn, why knowing who we are, and being recognized by others, matters. Together, these assumptions about the nature of identity and its relation to action make it possible to imagine successful recognition as a source of profound empowerment, as a social arrangement that would still make it possible for us to face the future with a confident mastery, albeit one that has been achieved by knowing and respecting the past, not by breaking with it.

But is this picture of the relationship between identity and action persuasive, or even coherent? Does the project of anchoring sovereign agency in the knowledge of antecedently given identities make sense? Does the weight of history always come tidily packaged in rules and prescriptions for action? In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt offers a different account of the relationship of action to identity. Rather than treating identities as antecedent facts about people that govern their action, Arendt conceives of identities as the *results* of action and speech in public, through which people appear to others and thereby disclose who they are.[10] Of course, the language of "disclosure"—like the terms "display" and "reveal," which Arendt also uses in this context—might seem to suggest that action merely renders a pre-existing identity visible to others, but Arendt makes it clear that identity itself comes into being through the public words and deeds through which actors "make their appearance" in the world.[11] One important consequence of this is that identity, for Arendt, is not something over which agents themselves have control. Because we do not act in isolation but interact with others, who we become through action is not up to us; instead, it is the outcome of many intersecting and unpredictable sequences of action and response, such that "nobody is the author or producer of his own life story."[12] A second and closely related consequence is that identity is only ever available to be recognized in retrospect, by the storyteller or historian who gives a narrative account of someone's activities, and therefore of who that person has shown himself or herself to be. "This unchangeable identity of the person," Arendt writes, "though disclosing itself intangibly in act and speech, becomes tangible only in the story of the actor's and speaker's life; but as such it can be known, that is, grasped as a palpable entity only after it has come to its end."[13]

This alternative view of the relationship of action and identity is closely tied to Arendt's broader rejection of the aspiration to achieve sovereign agency, which she calls "contradictory to the very condition of plurality" and to the unpredictability to which that condition gives rise.[14] For Arendt, the history of Western philosophy is shot through with misguided efforts to escape the condition of non-sovereignty, sometimes by recommending the "abstention from the whole realm of human

affairs" and sometimes by recasting human affairs as matters of making rather than acting, relatively more rule-bound and therefore more easily subject to sovereign governance.[15] From this perspective, it would seem, the pursuit of sovereignty through recognition is yet another expression of the same impulse. If identity can only be reliably known in retrospect, then to wish for recognition is tantamount to wishing for the security of death: "Only a man who does not survive his one supreme act remains the indisputable master of his identity and possible greatness," she says, "because he withdraws into death from the possible consequences and continuation of what he began";[16] and even he is not *really* master of his identity, since he relies upon the "storyteller, poet, or historian" to narrate his life.[17] Indeed, it is striking to note that Arendt herself had a habit of reflecting publicly on the theme of recognition whenever she was invited to speak on the occasion of receiving an award or an honor, and that she expressed increasing discomfort with recognition as she approached the end of her life, almost as if to defy premature eulogy.[18] In the concluding lines of her 1975 Sonning Prize address, given less than a year before her death, she warned against being "seduced by the great temptation of recognition which, in no matter what form, can only recognize us *as* such and such, that is, as something which we fundamentally are *not*."[19]

The point of this brief detour through Arendt is not simply to contrast her ontological assumptions with the ones that underlie the politics of recognition, as if to suggest that theorists like Taylor had simply made philosophical mistakes about the relationship between identity and action, the possibility of sovereignty, and the temporality of recognition. My claim is more radical: that something like this alternative view of action, identity, sovereignty, and recognition is already implicit, but half-buried and disavowed, in the politics of recognition itself. That politics, after all, is in part a response to the experience of vulnerability, to the fact that our identities are shaped in part through the unpredictable responses of other people: this is what makes being recognized by others seem so acutely important in the first place. The trouble is that the politics of recognition responds to this fact by demanding that others recognize us as who we *already* really are. Invoking "identity" as a *fait accompli* precisely in the course of the ongoing and risky interactions through which we become who we are (or, more precisely, who we will turn out to have been), it at once acknowledges and refuses to acknowledge our basic condition of intersubjective vulnerability.[20] This is what I mean in suggesting that the ontological assumptions behind the politics of recognition are not simply unpersuasive but incoherent; and it is also what I mean in claiming that, in its pursuit of sovereignty, the politics

of recognition is rooted in a deeper misrecognition, or failure of acknowledgment, of its own.[21]

This is, importantly, *not* a criticism of the politics of recognition in the name of individualism or universalism. Such a criticism would be beside the point anyway, since many of the most influential articulations of the ideal of recognition are, at least in part, both individualist and universalist.[22] In fact, approaching the politics of recognition through the lens of sovereignty may help us understand how unhelpful it is to organize debates about recognition and identity around distinctions between the individual and the collective, or the universal and the particular.[23] Such distinctions lead us to approach recognition in essentially *spatial* terms, as though justice in relations of identity and difference were a matter of getting our normative maps of the world right, of working out the relative weight of claims issuing from different social locations, or from different dimensions of the self—an effort that often enough ends with a rather unsatisfactory affirmation of the need to find some "elusive middle term" that would bridge these boundaries.[24] Here, by contrast, I cast the problem with the ideal of recognition as in the first instance a problem with its temporality—that is, with the way in which it expresses the aspiration to a sort of sovereign invulnerability to the open-endedness and contingency of the future we share with others—and that aspiration cuts across distinctions between individual and collective, universal and particular.[25] Individualism can be as peremptory as some forms of collectivism—for example, if it reduces "individuals" to discrete but more or less uniform creatures, each possessed of a set of preferences or a plan of life which he or she attempts to pursue or enact, but with no place for, say, the experience of being a mystery or a surprise to oneself and others.[26] Likewise, universalism can be as problematic as some forms of particularism, if it conceives of itself merely as the logical application of a rule whose meaning is thought to be known wholly in advance.[27] And, conversely, one can attend to the enormous social and political weight of collectivity and particularity—to the ways in which the conditions of our lives, including the distribution of risk and uncertainty across society, depend on far more than just what we, as individuals, share with everybody else—without thereby treating our identities as practical authorities to which we must defer.[28]

In a similar way, this argument also reaches beyond now-familiar claims about the socially constructed character of identity, which—while largely correct, in my view—also have less critical bite than is sometimes believed. In the constellation of ideas that make up social constructionism, for example, two of the brightest stars are the notions

of multiplicity and change: identities are now frequently characterized as "multiple," "complex," "fragmented," or "overlapping"; and as "unstable," "in flux," "contingent," or "shifting."[29] Yet the modifiers that emphasize multiplicity are, once again, all basically spatial, and so do little to challenge the basic structure of the ideal of recognition: on its own, the idea that identities are multiple and complex is perfectly compatible with the thought that identities, in all their complexity, are nevertheless independent and antecedent facts about us that ought to be cognized properly and accorded due respect. The modifiers that emphasize change and instability are a bit more radical. They suggest that all exchanges of recognition will tend to become obsolete as our identities shift over time, and this would seem to deny the possibility of a *finally* satisfactory regime of recognition. But this claim, too, is relatively easily incorporated into the discourse of recognition, and has been by some of its most sophisticated defenders. Axel Honneth, for example, acknowledges that the struggles for recognition he describes are to be understood as "permanent";[30] and James Tully argues eloquently that the politics of recognition should be reconceived as an ongoing activity rather than as a project with a fixed goal.[31] These qualifications are useful, but they do not go far enough, for they leave the notion of successful recognition in place as a regulative idea, a constantly receding horizon toward which our politics nevertheless ought to strive, interminably. They treat recognition as necessarily provisional, but not as necessarily *retrospective*, and so they do not force us to consider the more challenging possibility that the pursuit of recognition, even when recognition is understood in this way as a regulative idea, might be an incoherent and therefore potentially costly enterprise.

I spell out this argument about sovereignty, action, identity, and recognition over the next three chapters. In chapter 2, I begin to explore the contradictions internal to the politics of recognition through a sympathetic but critical engagement with the work of Charles Taylor. While Taylor is one of the most insightful philosophical critics of certain versions of the idea of sovereignty, he also fails to acknowledge the ways in which his own work on recognition reproduces, in a new form, the very aspiration to sovereignty he rightly criticizes—a claim I defend in part by reading Taylor alongside one of his own most important philosophical sources, Johann Gottfried Herder. The following two chapters continue to develop this immanent critique of the politics of recognition while simultaneously spelling out the alternative ontology which that politics both presupposes and denies. In doing this, I make relatively little extended use of Hannah Arendt's work, since her comments about recognition are rare and tantalizingly brief. However, her references and allusions to classical authors, both in *The Human Condition* and else-

where, suggest a way to elaborate the connections among action, identity, sovereignty, and recognition at which she hints. As I show in chapter 3, the foundations of an alternative perspective on recognition can already be found in Greek tragedy and in Aristotelian poetics and ethics, which were themselves important sources for Arendt.[32] And, as I argue in chapter 4, Arendt was not the only inheritor of this line of thought: read against the background of tragedy, Hegel's often-misunderstood account of the struggle for recognition in the *Phenomenology* can be seen as an incisive critique of the politics of recognition, rather than its founding document.

THE NATURE AND SOURCES OF INJUSTICE

At its best, the politics of recognition is driven by the admirable desire to combat deep-seated forms of injustice in relations of identity and difference. What, if anything, do the foregoing ontological reflections about sovereignty, identity, and action tell us about that political agenda? While it might be tempting to conclude that the problematic ontological assumptions behind the politics of recognition simply render it impotent, this is too simple. The politics of recognition is *not* impotent: its logic, while internally contradictory, is also powerfully appealing, and for this reason, demands for recognition are among the most important mechanisms through which relations of identity and difference are shaped, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse—and, frequently enough, both. Instead, I suggest that the politics of recognition may both misunderstand and in a certain sense be congruent with the injustices it purports to combat. If the assumptions about sovereignty, action, and identity that underwrite the ideal of recognition constitute a misrecognition of a deeper sort—a failure to acknowledge certain fundamental conditions of human activity—the irony is that many instances of injustice in relations of identity and difference can themselves be understood as expressions of a misrecognition of the same kind. This common blind spot does not make the pursuit of recognition unjust per se, nor does it mean that the politics of recognition cannot sometimes produce concrete improvements in the conditions of life of the people it aims to benefit. But it does render even the best-intentioned versions of the politics of recognition ill-equipped to diagnose and respond effectively to the underlying relations of subordination that give rise to systematic, identity-based social and political inequality. And it also makes this politics especially prone to become complicit with injustice, either reinforcing the very problems it hopes to combat, or helping to create new relations of social and political subordination.

But how, exactly, is injustice an expression of this deeper sort of mis-

recognition? And how does this conception of injustice differ from those expressed or implied by other theorists of recognition? It will be easiest to begin with the latter question. Consider, first, the conventional approach to recognition. On this view, the distinctive injustice of misrecognition involves the failure to extend to people the respect or esteem they deserve in virtue of who they really are. This conception of injustice lends itself especially well to analogies to the maldistribution of wealth; hence, recognition theorists sometimes, though not always, write as though misrecognition were a matter of systematically failing to give some people a good—"recognition"—to which they are entitled.[33] And the reason misrecognition of this sort is thought to be unjust is that it damages the psychic integrity of those who are subject to it, interfering with the development of the forms of self-respect and self-esteem on which healthy human agency depends. Thus Taylor says that misrecognition can "wound" and "cripple" its victims; likewise, Honneth uses the language of "scars" and "injuries" when speaking of the "cultural denigration of forms of life."[34]

This conception of injustice is problematic for several interrelated reasons. First, as I have already suggested, in making the *fait accompli* of identity into the criterion of due or proper recognition, this approach misunderstands the nature of identity and its relation to action. Indeed, it also tends to misrecognize recognition itself: insofar as it conceives of injustice as the unequal distribution of a good called "recognition," it obscures the relational character of acts and practices of recognition, treating recognition as a thing of which one has more or less, rather than as a social interaction that can go well or poorly in various ways.[35] And this, ironically, diverts attention from the role of the powerful, of the *misrecognizers*, in these interactions, focusing on the consequences of suffering misrecognition rather than on the more fundamental question of what it means to commit it. Second, as Nancy Fraser has suggested, there is also something troubling about making psychic deformation into a constituent feature of injustice, for this seems to deny that people may experience severe forms of social and political injustice without finding themselves "crippled" or "scarred" by the experience.[36] And, third, at a deeper level, this emphasis on psychic harm is also an exemplary manifestation of the incoherence of the conventional approach to recognition: even as it invokes an antecedently given identity as the criterion of proper or improper recognition, it also invokes the power of intersubjective recognition to shape and form identity in order to explain why misrecognition is harmful.[37]

Fraser's recent work on recognition and redistribution presents a different and in many respects superior conception of injustice in relations of identity and difference. Against the view that misrecognition involves

failing to respect people in virtue of who they are, Fraser argues that misrecognition occurs when "institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction."[38] And this, in turn, involves a different understanding of what's unjust about misrecognition, focused less on the integrity of the person than on the shape of social relations. For Fraser, the trouble with misrecognition is not that it necessarily inflicts psychic injuries upon its victims—although she does not deny that it *may* do so—but rather that it creates "externally manifest and publicly verifiable impediments to some people's standing as full members of society."[39] One advantage of this approach, Fraser argues, is that it lets us see the analogy between injustice in relations of identity and difference and economic injustice: both are forms of social subordination, and both violate, in slightly different ways, a single norm of "participatory parity."[40]

Fraser's recasting of injustice as a matter of the patterning or structure of social and political relations is compelling, as is her critique of the claim that misrecognition necessarily involves psychic distortion. At times, however, it becomes unclear how far Fraser's critique really departs from the politics of recognition as it is conventionally understood. On the one hand, Fraser's characterization of misrecognition as a matter of being prevented from participating as a peer in social life sometimes seems merely to *subsume* much of what theorists like Taylor and Honneth mean by misrecognition. On the terrain of identity and difference, she says, what the standard of participatory parity prohibits are "institutionalized value patterns that deny some people the status of full partners in interaction—whether by burdening them with excessive ascribed 'difference' or by failing to acknowledge their distinctiveness."[41] Correspondingly, participatory parity will demand—depending on the case—either the recognition of people's "common humanity" or the recognition of their "specificity."[42] True, on this view we no longer need to appeal to the harm of psychic disruption in order to explain why misrecognition is unjust; at the same time, however, an appeal to the criterion of identity—whether universal or particular—still seems to be required in order to identify instances of misrecognition, and in order to imagine how they might be overcome. What, if not the benchmark of identity, tells us whether an ascribed difference is "excessive," or whether we have failed to acknowledge someone's distinctiveness?

On the other hand, Fraser sometimes seems to press further beyond the politics of recognition. In addition to the recognition of people's common humanity or the recognition of people's specificity, Fraser also entertains the possibility that justice will be well served by the "outing" of the false universality of dominant groups, or by "deconstruct[ing] the

very terms in which attributed differences are currently elaborated."[43] These are strategies she has discussed under the rubric of "transformative" as opposed to "affirmative" recognition—although this name is potentially misleading, since it is not clear that transformative strategies involve any kind of *recognition* at all. They are, she says, guided by a "utopian image of a culture in which ever-new constructions of identity and difference are freely elaborated and then swiftly deconstructed," and on her account they are exemplified by queer politics, which—unlike gay and lesbian identity politics—aims to "destabilize all fixed sexual identities" and "to sustain a sexual field of multiple, debinarized, fluid, ever-shifting differences."[44] (I shall bracket the question of the adequacy of these descriptions until later.) At times, Fraser has even expressed a preference for this way of responding to misrecognition, both because transformative remedies seem to avoid the danger of reifying and imposing group identity, and because they interact especially productively with radical remedies for economic injustice.[45]

Fraser's effort to bring these two very different approaches under a single theoretical umbrella is admirably inclusive—but I do not think the attempted reconciliation works. To overcome the apparent opposition between affirmative and transformative remedies, Fraser treats them as alternative practical responses to the *same* larger problem, between which we are to choose on wholly strategic grounds.[46] For example, as she explains, her approach is neutral in principle as between two competing approaches to the "same-sex marriage" debate—the legalization of same-sex marriage and the deinstitutionalization of heterosexual marriage.[47] On this reading of the issue, the problem of exclusively heterosexual marriage is a straightforward problem of patterned inequality: some people are being denied social and political benefits that others enjoy. Correspondingly, the choice between affirmative and transformative remedies is a choice between two ways of reintroducing parity into this situation: advocates of gay and lesbian marriage wish to reconstruct our schemes of sexual identity such that same-sex partnerships are treated on a par with straight ones; queer critics of this turn to marriage—so Fraser seems to suggest—wish to deconstruct our schemes of sexual identity, achieving parity in mutual destabilization.

But in casting the issue this way, Fraser does not so much reconcile these two approaches as sidestep the underlying conflict between them. Often, the queer critique of the embrace of same-sex marriage has less to do with a distaste for stability and change—as if queerness demanded a perpetual flight from continuity—than with queer theorists' radically different understanding of the problem they take themselves to be combatting.[48] As Michael Warner puts it, for example, advocates of same-sex marriage take the injustice of present arrangements to lie in the legal

restriction of access to an essentially private, intimate, and nonexclusive good called marriage; queer critics of marriage, by contrast, charge that this representation is a "mystification," which obscures the fact that marriage itself is a "public institution, not a private relation," and that it is an institution of privilege that seeks to secure relative sexual autonomy for some people while—indeed, precisely *by*—legitimating the regulation of the sexual lives of others.[49] Fraser's approach brackets this antagonism by focusing exclusively on the *symptoms* of injustice, where these two approaches are likely to converge: whatever else queer theorists and defenders of gay and lesbian identity politics think about marriage, they agree that the institution as it is currently formed represents an inegalitarian patterning of cultural value. This, however, merely defers the fundamental question of why and how social relations come to be patterned in inegalitarian ways in the first place.

Ultimately, then, Fraser does not supply the very thing that is also missing from the conventional approach to recognition that she criticizes: an extended engagement with the deeper question of the *sources* of misrecognition, including the meaning of misrecognition for those who commit or benefit from it. In the standard approach, the existence of misrecognition is largely treated as an unfortunate fact, due perhaps to the persistence of outdated hierarchical belief systems; perhaps to the ignorance of members of majority groups about the worthy features of other cultures; or perhaps simply to some sort of baseline unreasonableness in the pursuit of self-interest.[50] Indeed, it is striking that even a theorist like Honneth, who devotes a great deal of effort to reconstructing the experience of suffering misrecognition and to showing how that experience can become the motivational ground of progressive ethical and political struggle, says so little about the complementary question of the motives, investments, and experiences that sustain misrecognition. This omission is, in one sense, understandable: we might think that what matters is identifying, denouncing, and overcoming misrecognition, not understanding where it comes from or what it means for its beneficiaries. But the issues are not so easily separated: understanding the meaning and sources of injustice is part and parcel of understanding what injustice itself is and why it is objectionable; and it has important implications for the question of how best to respond to it.

The alternative tradition of thought about recognition that I recover in this book has been centrally concerned with this question. The dramas of Sophocles repeatedly track the ways in which certain human aspirations—for self-sufficiency or security, for example—lead people to act tyrannically, and to treat others viciously.[51] Similarly, Hegel himself was, perhaps for obvious reasons, at least as keen an analyst of the motivational structure behind systems of domination as of the first-personal

experience of being subordinated. As I argue at length in chapter 4, rather than reducing such systems to matters of sheer malice, unreasonableness, or ignorance, Hegel understands them as expressions of the desire for sovereign agency. That is not to say that such structures actually provide their beneficiaries with the sovereignty they seek, nor that they really consign the victims of subordination to complete abjection or powerlessness: the desire for sovereignty is impossible to fulfill, because it is itself rooted in a misrecognition of the basic conditions of human activity. Rather, subordination insulates some people from the force of the contradiction between the desire for sovereignty and the ineliminable fact of finitude, enabling them to live within that contradiction at other people's expense.[52] Recalling W. E. B. Du Bois's influential analysis of the psychological wage paid by whiteness, we might say that such structures pay an *ontological* wage: they organize the human world in ways that make it possible for certain people to enjoy an imperfect simulation of the invulnerability they desire, leaving others to bear a disproportionate share of the costs and burdens involved in social life.[53]

Once again, the point can be made even more clearly through the notion of temporality, and in this respect Hannah Arendt's work is both a help and a hindrance. While *The Human Condition* is not known for its attention to structures of social subordination, at times Arendt does suggest a link between the desire for sovereignty and the phenomenon of domination: even if our efforts to overcome the human condition of plurality were successful, she says—and for Arendt, recall, plurality is inseparable from finitude and vulnerability in the face of an unpredictable future—"the result would be not so much sovereign domination of one's self as arbitrary domination of all others, or, as in Stoicism, the exchange of the real world for an imaginary one where these others would simply not exist."[54] Here, of course, one of Arendt's characteristic habits of thought shows itself. Just as she often preferred to analyze phenomena that she believed threatened to sweep away the conditions that make public life possible *as such* and for *everyone*—such as totalitarianism or the "rise of the social"—in this passage she considers only the most extreme and unstable versions of the fantasy of sovereignty.[55] But the ways in which people seek to overcome the "weakness" of the human condition are more varied than this: the subordination of *some* others may be a more durable project than the effort to dominate everybody, precisely because it produces and exploits rather than dissolves axes of differentiation in the social world. Indeed, we might say that social subordination can be understood as a means of avoiding or disavowing the open-ended temporality of human action by converting that existential problem of time into the technical problem of the organization of social space.

This approach to injustice has several advantages. First and most obviously, unlike conventional accounts of recognition (and, intermittently, Fraser's), it does not need to appeal to identity, understood as a *fait accompli*, in order to discern injustice. Social subordination, on this view, involves closing off some people's practical possibilities for the sake of other people's sense of mastery or invulnerability; and it is the exploitative character of this relationship, rather than some lack of correspondence between how people are regarded and who they really are, that makes it unjust. Second, even as it follows Fraser's salutary turn from psychic injury to social structure, this conception of injustice also deepens her approach by giving an account of the sources of the patterned inequalities of outcome in social life to which she rightly objects. Third, and perhaps less obviously, it is also important that this account traces injustice back specifically to the pursuit of sovereignty, understood in temporal terms, rather than associating injustice with identity per se.

There is, after all, an extremely familiar story about the sources of injustice in relations of identity and difference—so familiar that it has practically become a reflex. As one version has it: "Persons or objects acquire identities only in contrast to what they are not. The affirmation of an identity entails the production and exclusion of that which is different or the creation of otherness."[56] This story has become familiar because it is truthful: it does capture something about the shape of many relations of identity and difference, past and present; and my own account of injustice is, in a certain sense, an elaboration of it. But this story, at least in this form, has two problematic features. First, it encourages us to worry that the very invocation of identity carries with it the prospect of violence or domination; and this, in turn, often inclines us to think of the constant destabilization of identity as a necessary component of any just politics—even if, as we also often acknowledge, identity remains something we cannot do without. This dilemma (a trace of which can be seen in Fraser's attempt to combine "affirmative" and "transformative" remedies for misrecognition) sometimes generates political theories with distinctly Penelopean rhythms, which assert the necessity of perpetually undoing the identities one is nevertheless bound to construct.[57]

Yet what if the trouble were not exactly with identity, but rather with a specific way of bringing identity to bear upon action; a specific way of using identity to establish connections among an agent's past, present, and future? On the account I develop here, the root of injustice in relations of identity and difference is not identity as such but rather the effort to make identity—the as-yet-unfinished and unpredictable story of one's life—into the ground of an impossible sovereignty over one's

own future. Consequently, justice in relations of identity and difference demands neither the recognition of identity nor its fervent dissolution, but rather the reconceptualization of its relation to action, and therefore also of its temporality. After all, retrospective accounts of who we are, and of how we have come to be who we are, can serve a wide range of political purposes beyond anchoring sovereign agency. They can enrich political deliberation by helping agents understand each other's perspectives, or by revealing how little they understand each other; they can be used to startle others (or oneself) into confronting an unseen problem, or reconceiving the stakes of an issue; they can remind people of their own practical finitude by recalling the unexpected twists and turns through which their lives, or the larger stories in which they are enmeshed, have developed. Justice in relations of identity and difference, on this view, depends not on pursuing the greatest possible degree of fluidity or instability in one's identity, nor on trying (vainly) to do away with it altogether, but on acknowledging identity's incompleteness, on being willing to "risk its fate" (to borrow Michael Warner's felicitous phrase) in a field of human interaction that can bring surprising continuities as easily as unexpected disruptions.[58]

The second problem with the aforementioned story about identity and injustice lies in its use of the language of exclusion and otherness. Again, I do not mean to downplay the power of that language to illuminate social and political life. At times, however, this language—which is, once again, basically spatial—can lead us to overlook some of the forms that injustice in relations of identity and difference can take. For instance, when we assume that such injustice is invariably a matter either of the exclusion of otherness or the assimilation of the other to the same, we can only criticize social arrangements that seem on their face to incorporate and respect difference by claiming that such respect is a sham, that it *really* amounts either to the assimilation of difference to sameness or to exclusion masquerading as inclusion.[59] Sometimes that will be true; but not always; and even when it is, focusing on the exclusion or assimilation of difference does not quite get at the heart of the issue.

By contrast, understanding injustice as rooted in a certain kind of temporal posture can help us appreciate the rich variety of spatial strategies through which sovereignty can be pursued, and consequently also the rich variety of spatial manifestations injustice can take. Sometimes agents pursue sovereignty by seeking to assure themselves of the unity of their own identities, and by excluding or assimilating difference. At other times, however, agents may pursue sovereignty by seeking to include difference within an internally articulated totality *without* reducing it to sameness—for example, through the establishment of separate and rank-ordered spheres or positions within society; or through the

notion of a functional differentiation of labor; or through the establishment of an official pluralism that at once affirms differences and governs them, reducing a threateningly open field of social plurality to a relatively orderly catalog of identities.[60] These are important distinctions: sometimes the move from an exclusionary to an inclusionary strategy of sovereignty will produce substantial improvements in the conditions of life of members of subordinated groups. In such a case, it would be wrong to say that the change merely reproduces an existing injustice—yet it might also be equally wrong to conclude that the change simply does away with injustice. I discuss two examples of such equivocal changes—Jewish emancipation in nineteenth-century Prussia and mainstream contemporary multiculturalism—in chapters 5 and 6, respectively. As these examples should make clear, conceiving of injustice through the lens of sovereignty makes it possible to take account of the important differences among these social structures without losing sight of what they share—which is not that they exclude otherness, nor that they assimilate the different to the same, but that they privilege some people and subordinate others in the pursuit of an impossible vision of masterful agency, thereby distributing the burdens of our common condition of finitude unequally.

Recognition and the State

The examples I have just mentioned—Jewish emancipation and mainstream multiculturalism—share an important feature: far from being simple, face-to-face encounters between subjects, *à la* Hegel's stylized story in the *Phenomenology*, both are large-scale exchanges of recognition in which states typically play a crucial role.[61] This is true of many of the political controversies that have been treated under the rubric of recognition over the last dozen years: the dispute about same-sex marriage, for example, is in part a dispute about the forms of partnership that will be officially recognized in law and by state institutions; likewise, debates about the rights of cultural minorities are in part debates about the official distribution of rights and entitlements and the constitutional arrangement of political authority. And it has probably been true about the politics of recognition for as long as there have been such things as states, not least because states, as what Jacqueline Stevens has called "membership organizations," are always in the business of recognizing the difference between insiders and outsiders.[62] But what role, exactly, do states play in the politics of recognition? And what is the relationship between the state's part in the politics of recognition and the notion of state sovereignty?

Generally, treatments of the politics of recognition occupy one of two

positions on the question of the state.[63] On the one hand, many theorists don't explicitly discuss the state at all; instead, they implicitly treat institutionalized forms of recognition as expressions of, and ultimately reducible to, more elementary and unmediated exchanges of recognition among persons. (This is manifest in the common, shorthand way of talking about the acts of a state as though they were straightforwardly also the acts of each and all of its citizens, a mode of expression that takes the representative function of political institutions for granted.) By letting the state fade into the background in this way, these accounts treat the state as something like the transparent medium through which people exchange recognition. On the other hand, some Hegelian theorists of recognition, taking their cue not from the *Phenomenology* but from the *Philosophy of Right*, have cast the state in a far more important role, depicting it as a mediating institution that has the capacity to *resolve* struggles for recognition, transcending the conflictual dynamics that characterize social life in the absence of the state by letting us all come to see ourselves as parts of a larger whole. As one Hegel scholar puts it, "what distinguishes the mediation of self and otherness provided in the state [for Hegel] is the ultimate harmonization of social life in which the struggle for recognition is finally overcome."[64]

Neither of these views of the role of the state in the politics of recognition is plausible. The first view of the state as a transparent medium through which elementary exchanges of recognition occur problematically assumes that the people involved in these exchanges are already constituted as a stably bounded group. However, this assumption overlooks the ways in which the state itself gives shape to "the people," not least by establishing rules of membership, and also by actively shaping patterns of affect and identification among its members.[65] In other words, it overlooks the work of recognition that must already have been performed if the state's claim to represent society or the people is to be plausible, much less taken for granted. At the same time, the view of the state as the site of the final overcoming of struggles for recognition is equally problematic. If the first view of the state as a transparent medium assumes the existence of an already-constituted people, this second view of the state likewise treats the state itself as always already sovereign, as independent of the particularity and conflict of social life.[66] The state *must* already possess that sort of privileged position if it is to be able to transcend, rather than simply participate in and perpetuate, political contests over recognition. But the transformative work performed by the institutions of the state in the course of making a "people" is at the same time the work by which the state itself is established and sustained *as* sovereign (however incompletely or imperfectly), creating new relations of political identification and allegiance and displacing or de-

moting competing ones. To the limited extent that the state "resolves" struggles for recognition, it does so not as a *deus ex machina* that appears from outside the social, miraculously transcending its conflicts once and for all, but by acquiring and maintaining a hegemonic position in the midst of the social.

Each of these views of the state, we might say, misrecognizes a desire or a project as an already-established condition. (Indeed, while neither view is persuasive on its own, when they are taken together each tends to distract attention from the other's inadequacies, in the same sort of shell game that makes the idea of the "nation-state" such a compelling equivocation. The notion that the people is already constituted as a coherent whole that speaks through the institutions of the state imbues the state with the aura of sovereignty it needs if it is to plausibly claim to be an instrument of reconciliation and harmony; conversely, the notion that state sovereignty is a given fact makes it easier for the state's members to identify themselves unproblematically as a coherent people.) In this sense, political invocations of state sovereignty are no different from other recognition claims, which represent identity as an authoritative fact, a *fait accompli*, precisely in the course of the ongoing and open-ended activity through which identities are formed. Indeed, the very idea of the state simply as an object with a certain status or set of properties at a given time—that is, as a state of affairs—is already caught up in a misrecognition of this sort.[67] As Timothy Mitchell has suggested, state and society themselves are not always already "discrete entities"; rather, the distinction between state and society is "a line drawn internally" within a single network of institutions and practices.[68] On this view, the state is a "structural effect" of this internal differentiation of collective life; but that does not mean that the state is an illusion, for this structural effect has real consequences—among other things, it organizes power in a certain way, concentrating certain capacities in specific places, groups, and institutions—which is why the notion of the state as a fundamentally distinct, always-already-sovereign thing appeals to us in the first place.[69]

Thinking clearly about the state and sovereignty therefore requires a kind of dual vision. On the one hand, we need to be able to do justice to the reality and consequences of the state-effect, which will often involve talking about the state as if it were simply a thing or an agent. That, after all, is how many people experience interactions with the state, including people who identify intensely with the state and are therefore heavily invested in its thingness, as well as people who run up against (or are run over by) the power concentrated in state institutions. On the other hand, we also need to be able to understand these effects *as* effects, which requires attending to the activities through which the

state is brought into being and reproduced, and particularly to the desires, projects, and aspirations that animate those activities. Here, then, rather than assuming that the state is a transparent medium through which an already-established people relates to itself, or that it is an already-sovereign actor that can transcend struggles for recognition once and for all, I treat the state as a set of social institutions that is also among the central objects of identification onto which people displace, and through which they pursue, the desire for independent and masterful agency. It is, in short, both a participant in and an artifact of the politics of recognition.[70]

One virtue of this approach is that it helps illustrate the limits of certain well-known claims about the obsolescence of the idea of "sovereignty." For example, many analysts of globalization now suggest that, for better or worse, sovereignty has been eroded by the growing power of multinational capitalism, the proliferation of international organizations, the acceleration of transnational flows of people and information, and the weight of ecological problems that transcend the territorial boundaries of modern nation-states.[71] And, in a different vein, many social and political theorists are heeding Foucault's call to "cut off the King's head"—that is, to set aside the concept of sovereignty (which misleadingly portrays power as a repressive force possessed by a privileged person or institution) in favor of the study of the multiple, local, and daily "techniques and tactics" of power that productively order and govern human activity.[72] If states neither are nor ever were sovereign, one might ask, why focus on that outmoded concept now?

These arguments are important, yet neither is quite germane to the way I treat state sovereignty here. The argument from globalization makes a straightforward sociological claim about the extent and limits of the contemporary territorial state's capacity to govern. But this sort of argument has little bearing on the salience of sovereignty as a component of the contemporary political imaginary: the *claim* of states to be sovereign can still have powerful political effects even in the face of its increasing implausibility. Indeed, the very fact that the concept of sovereignty has become an object of intense and normatively loaded debate, provoking everything from celebrations of sovereignty's demise to rearguard actions in its defense, testifies to its continuing power as a category through which our experience of politics is organized. And it is at this level of political culture and identification that I use the concept of sovereignty here: what matters for my purposes is less the actual extent of state power than the fact that, for the moment, sovereignty remains a crucial part of the meaning of statehood, crucial enough that the prospect of the loss of sovereignty can provoke talk of a "crisis of the nation-state."[73]

The Foucauldian objection is more complicated, but ultimately invites a similar response. Importantly, Foucault's argument is intended first and foremost to introduce a shift in our thinking about the operation of power. For him, juridical theories or doctrines of sovereignty are problematic because they imply an incomplete understanding of how power works: by locating power in the king, they suggest that power is something possessed by a "single will" and applied, repressively, to others.[74] On Foucault's account, "escap[ing] from the limited field of juridical sovereignty and State institutions" is thus a condition of the possibility of attending to the other face of power—power as a matter of the ongoing and productive constitution of subjects through mundane and small-scale techniques of governance.[75]

Not all of Foucault's readers have entirely agreed. Some, inspired by his late work on governmentality, have resisted at least part of his injunction to turn away from sovereignty and the state. In *States of Injury*, for example, Wendy Brown charges that Foucault too quickly equates the state with the idea of sovereignty, concluding that "this identification precludes Foucault from including the state as a critical site in the nonsovereign, nonrepressive or 'productive,' microphysical, and capillary workings of power to which he directs our attention." Like Foucault, Brown will have no truck with the notion of sovereignty; unlike him, she thinks that "when we set aside the problem of sovereignty . . . the state comes into view as a complex problem of power, as part of the 'study of the techniques and tactics of domination'" Foucault wishes to promote.[76]

Brown's transformation of Foucault here is tremendously productive. It sets the stage for her subsequent argument, to which my own is deeply indebted, that a politics of identity that looks to law and the state to redress social injuries may depoliticize rather than transform relations of domination, while also "unwittingly increas[ing] the power of the state and its various regulatory discourses at the expense of political freedom."[77] Yet in my view, Brown does not go far enough: the move she elegantly performs with respect to the *state* can and should be reproduced with respect to *sovereignty*. While the juridical doctrine of sovereignty, taken as a description of the nature of power, may well be a false or incomplete representation, it is nevertheless a potent representation within the modern political imaginary—one which, whatever its truth-value, affects the formation of political subjects through exactly those productive mechanisms of power to which Foucault so effectively draws our attention. Indeed, as I shall suggest, it is difficult to grasp the role of the state in the politics of identity and difference *without* taking sovereignty, in this specific sense, into account: as one of the defining projects of the modern state-form, the aspiration to sovereignty is part

of what animates the state, helping determine exactly *how* its powers—or, more precisely, the powers that it channels, and out of which it is organized—are deployed.[78] The "king's head" is, we might say, a phantom limb—a nonentity, but a consequential one.

But what are those consequences? What picture of the state's role in the politics of recognition arises from this approach to sovereignty? As I have already indicated, the foregoing argument suggests that characterizations of the state as sovereign are implicated in the same underlying misrecognition—in the sense of a failure of acknowledgment—that I have ascribed to the politics of recognition more generally. However, states' claims to sovereignty are also typically different from other moves made within the politics of recognition in two respects, both of which suggest that these state claims may demand special critical attention. First, they are less often perceived *as* demands for recognition than are, say, the claims of subordinated people and groups, which are already socially marked as "particular" and therefore do not enjoy the privilege of appearing pre- or extrapolitical in the way the idea of state sovereignty, among others, so frequently does. Second, and relatedly, the political encounter between a state and an emergent political constituency demanding an end to some injustice in relations of identity and difference is, typically, highly asymmetrical. This is in large part because the state, while not necessarily truly sovereign in the way it purports to be, nevertheless does command extensive social and political resources; and it does so partly by virtue of the fact that it can usually draw upon a history of relatively stabilized relations of recognition—relations from which it derives authority and power—with other, often much larger and more powerful constituencies. For this reason, it will often be able to set the terms of exchanges of recognition, creating incentives for people to frame their claims about justice in ways that abet rather than undermine the project of state sovereignty.

What this means will depend upon how sovereignty is imagined and pursued at any particular time, and, as I have emphasized before, this may vary. Individual agents can anchor the project of sovereign agency in the idea of context-transcending choice, but they need not do so: they may also anchor that project in the ideal of the reciprocal knowledge of and respect for one's own and others' identities. Similarly, a state can anchor its claim to sovereignty in the thought that it embodies or represents the will of a unified and homogeneous people, but it need not do so: it may also anchor that claim in a picture of the state as an agency that effectively renders "legible," administers, and controls a field of potentially unruly social differences.[79] The first strategy is a familiar part of the ideology of the modern nation-state, and it has many variations, depending upon where the relevant sort of homogeneity is located: in

race, ethnicity, culture, religion, language, history, ideas, or some seductive mixture of these; typically, it creates incentives for constituencies protesting injustice to frame their claims in terms that emphasize their fundamental similarity to, or identity with, dominant groups. (The politics of Jewish emancipation, in chapter 5, will provide us with an extended example of this dynamic.) The second strategy, though not a recent innovation, has nevertheless become an increasingly prominent part of the legitimating ideology of contemporary multicultural states, which, often precisely in response to criticisms of the assimilationist tendencies of modern nationalism, has made the recognition of difference into an instrument of, rather than a threat to, sovereignty. And if the nationalist version of the project of sovereignty creates incentives toward assimilation, the multicultural version—as we shall see in chapter 6—creates incentives for people to frame claims about justice *as* claims for recognition on behalf of identifiable groups. That mode of address, after all, furthers the state's project of rendering the social world "legible" and governable: to appeal to the state *for* the recognition of one's own identity—to present oneself as knowable—is already to offer the state the reciprocal recognition of its sovereignty that it demands.

But there is a complication: as I have indicated, while states may be disproportionately powerful actors in many respects, they can no more achieve the sovereignty they seek, and that others seek through them, than can individuals. (This impossibility is already manifest in the fact that states depend upon their subjects, as well as other states, to recognize their sovereignty—a dependence that ironically undercuts the very condition of *in*dependence it is supposed to sustain.[80]) And this contradiction within the project of state sovereignty troubles efforts to secure emancipation from structures of social subordination by appealing to states for recognition, for, as I have suggested, such relations of subordination can themselves be understood as ways of finessing such contradictions, of insulating some agents from the experience of finitude by distributing the consequences of that shared condition unevenly over social space. Thus, even those exchanges of recognition that express a spirit of inclusion—such as Jewish emancipation or contemporary multiculturalism—deal, at best, with the symptoms and effects of subordination, while simultaneously working to reproduce the problematic aspiration to sovereign agency in which those effects are rooted. At times, this may mean that existing relations of injustice will be preserved or even reinforced, albeit cloaked in a superficial layer of reform. Alternatively, even when these exchanges substantially transform relations of identity and difference, improving the conditions of life for at least some members of subordinated groups, such improvements may nevertheless be conditioned on other, sometimes novel ways of stratifying the social

world, which still distribute vulnerability and dependence unequally—although, just as the course of a river usually changes slowly, even new relations of subordination will frequently follow the rough contours of old ones, precisely because existing patterns of power influence but do not determine the trajectory of social and political transformation.

Still, it is not only socially subordinate groups who have cause for concern about exchanges of recognition with the state. *Everyone* risks something in such an encounter, though under present circumstances some risk much more than others. To understand why, consider the hypothetical limit-case of a state that recognizes and is recognized as sovereign by all of its citizens equally—an inclusive and egalitarian state that manages and administers identity in such a way that race, sex, nationality, and other familiar axes of social difference no longer underwrite systematic inequalities in the distribution of resources and respect. There is one line of social differentiation, and one form of subordination, that such a hypothetical state could *not* overcome while retaining its claim to sovereignty—and that is the distinction between state and society itself, the founding cut through which one set of institutions is carved out of the web of human interaction and elevated to a position of supposed independence from, and superiority over, the rest. In the end, the putatively sovereign state cannot help us escape the difficulties that plague the politics of recognition, not just because *its* desire for sovereignty feeds relations of subordination that are external to it, but even more soberingly because such a state is itself a relation of subordination, fed by our own desire to find a kind of agency we cannot possess on our own in the experience of belonging to a larger whole. To exchange the uncertain risks and pleasures of activity for the satisfactions of identification with those who rule us: as Tocqueville knew, this is a tempting bargain, and a deadening one.[81]

The Politics of Acknowledgment

What could justice in relations of identity and difference mean, if not the equal recognition of the identities of all? The alternative tradition of thought I reconstruct in this book points us toward a politics oriented toward what I call *acknowledgment* rather than recognition.[82] Yet this distinction requires some explanation, since in ordinary language the words "acknowledge" and "recognize" are used nearly, if not completely, interchangeably. To conclude this chapter, then, I shall spell out four important features of the conception of acknowledgment that emerges over the course of this book, and which distinguish it from conventional understandings of recognition. And I shall do so in conversation with a few other contemporary political theorists and philoso-

phers who are also trying to open up alternatives to the politics of recognition, or who are using the term "acknowledgment" in distinctive ways, or both.

As I noted earlier, James Tully has recently suggested that we reconceive the politics of recognition as an ongoing process, the value of which lies in the fact that it enables citizens to engage in shared political activity, quite apart from the political "end-states" this activity might produce.[83] This shift, he says, also requires us to reconceive the stakes of this activity. While the end-state model focuses exclusively on the good of recognition, which involves having one's specific identity claims affirmed by others, the activity model highlights the distinctive good he calls "acknowledgment," which consists simply in being treated as a co-participant in an ongoing political process, in being heard and responded to, even when the response to one's claims is partly or wholly negative. While acknowledgment without victory may not seem like much, Tully argues that mere participation in the "game of reciprocal disclosure and acknowledgment" can dispel potentially dangerous *ressentiment*, generate "self-respect and self-esteem," and produce a "sense of belonging to and identification with the larger political society" in the same way that players of a sport, even through their losses, become attached to the game itself.[84]

Tully's effort to recast the politics of recognition as an ongoing activity is welcome and in many respects persuasive. At the same time, it remains unclear whether acknowledgment in his sense is really much different from recognition. The distinction between them is most plausible as long as we stay with the image of political activity as a game, for in the context of games, we are accustomed to distinguishing sharply between activity and outcome, procedure and substance, participation and success. But the maxim "it's not whether you win or lose" only goes so far, especially in politics. It is easiest to suck up a loss when one's very status as a player is not at stake in the game itself; yet because *political* belonging is ultimately worked out precisely on the field of politics, winning or losing—what Tully calls recognition—may sometimes make all the difference to the supposedly prior, procedural question of participation—what Tully calls acknowledgment.[85] Similarly, losing at politics once may leave an actor disappointed but unshaken in his sense of belonging to the community of participants, but after months, years, or decades of *persistent* loss at the game of politics, people may rightly wonder whether they're really being allowed to play in any meaningful way.[86] And the politics of recognition as we have come to know it often operates precisely at these intersections between activity and outcome. Recognition claims are commonly claims about what forms of respect for people's identities are needed if they are to be meaningfully included

as participants in the game of politics at all; that is, they are claims about what counts as acknowledgment in Tully's sense. But if being acknowledged turns out to *mean* being recognized—that is, being known and respected in virtue of who one is, so that one can feel oneself fully included in the game of politics—then we are squarely back in the end-state, identity-oriented version of the politics of recognition that Tully—rightly—wants to challenge.[87]

Part of the reason for acknowledgment's semantic slide back into recognition, I think, is that in Tully's use of the word, acknowledgment is still fundamentally about, and oriented toward, others. Against this background, Stanley Cavell's different use of the word "acknowledgment" is especially useful. His conception of acknowledgment is elaborated in the context of the problem of skepticism in our relations to the world and, especially, to other people; and for him, the important contrast is not between recognition and acknowledgment, but between *knowledge* and acknowledgement.[88] For Cavell, we are badly mistaken if we treat practical failures in our relations to others as failures of knowledge, for to cast the issue in epistemological terms in this way is to stake justice itself on an impossibly conclusive resolution of the perpetual problem of skepticism about our knowledge of "other minds."[89] What matters in our relation to another, Cavell suggests, is not knowing something special about him, or knowing him (his pain, pleasure, humanity, character, or very being) in a way that could evade doubt once and for all. What matters, instead, is *what we do* in the presence of the other, how we respond to or act in the light of what we *do* know.[90] *That* is acknowledgment, or its failure: as Cavell says, characterizing Othello's refusal to acknowledge Desdemona, "he knew everything, but could not yield to what he knew, be commanded by it."[91]

Of course, the notion of recognition itself, as developed by Taylor, Tully, and others, already incorporates part of what Cavell means by "acknowledgment." For Cavell, acknowledgment is different from but not opposed to knowledge, for it involves acting on and responding to what we know. And that intersection between the order of knowledge and the order of practice is exactly what political theorists have captured by treating "recognition" as at once a kind of cognition *and* a kind of respect: Axel Honneth's recent argument that recognition involves something "added to the perception of a person"—namely, an "affirmation"—makes this point clearly.[92] But Cavell's move from knowledge to acknowledgment involves more than this. It is not just a move of supplementation, in which something belonging to a different order— the order of normativity—is added to, and articulated onto, knowledge. It is also a move that aims to change our understanding of the relevant "knowledge" itself: of what it means to know, and of what kind of

knowledge we need to have in order to take the further step of acknowledging others.[93] And one important part of this change is expressed in Cavell's work by a shift in his characterization of the object and, if you will, the *direction* of that knowledge. At least in some of his formulations, to acknowledge another is in the first instance to respond to, to act in the light of, something about *oneself*; and conversely, the failure of acknowledgment, the "avoidance" of the other, is crucially a distortion of one's own self-relation, an avoidance of something unbearable about oneself.[94] Thus, on Cavell's reading of *King Lear*, what eventually enables acknowledgment is not the discovery of something about the other—about Cordelia or Edgar—but self-insight on the part of Lear and Gloucester.[95]

I have tried to capture this thought—that what draws us to or bars us from a just relation to others is, in many instances at least, not the state of our knowledge of them, but the state of our understanding of ourselves—in the first feature of my use of "acknowledgment": although the presence or absence of acknowledgment may have important implications for others, the direct object of acknowledgment is not the other, as in the case of recognition; it is, instead, something about the *self*.[96] (This change of direction is analogous to the shift I have already described from a conception of injustice that focuses on its significance for those who suffer it, to one that focuses on its meaning for those who commit it.) But this, on its own, is not enough: it is equally important to make clear that acknowledgment is not fundamentally the acknowledgment of one's own *identity*. And here, Cavell's language and examples sometimes invite misunderstanding.

In *The Claim of Reason*, for example, Cavell illustrates the notion of acknowledgment with reference to relationally defined social roles: "if one is to acknowledge another as one's neighbor, one must acknowledge oneself as his or her neighbor"; "one acknowledges one's teacher by acknowledging oneself as his or her student."[97] In these examples, however, acknowledging oneself becomes a matter of recognizing oneself under a certain description, as the bearer of a certain social identity, as if acknowledging yourself as a neighbor sufficed to tell you what to do, how to respond to this other person, who has herself now been fixed in your social imagination as a neighbor (or, in a slightly different example, as a stranger, or an enemy . . .). Yet this slide back into the register of recognition overlooks the possibility that such exchanges of recognition, such cartographic imaginings of the identities of self and other, may *themselves* be strategies of avoidance—that is, that they may manifest a refusal to acknowledge not one's own identity, exactly, but one's own ontological situation.[98] The second feature of my conception of acknowledgment responds to this problem. On my view, what's acknowl-

edged in an act of acknowledgment is not one's own identity—at least not as the politics of recognition conceives of identity: a coherent self-description that can serve as the ground of agency, guiding or determining what we are to do. Rather, acknowledgment is directed at the basic conditions of one's own existence and activity, including, crucially, the *limits* of "identity" as a ground of action, limits which arise out of our constitutive vulnerability to the unpredictable reactions and responses of others.[99] As an avowal of one's own finitude, acknowledgment in this sense is (as Cavell says and as Hegel will dramatically demonstrate) a sort of abdication.[100]

This mention of finitude brings us to the third important feature of my conception of acknowledgment, which can be explained somewhat more briefly. To speak of acknowledging one's own limits rather than recognizing the identity of the other may seem to imply a retreat into the self, a refusal to engage with others out of the conviction that one cannot know anything about them, or that to aspire toward knowledge would inevitably involve domination or distortion.[101] The point here, however, is *not* to insist upon the unknowability of others: to conceive of finitude in these fundamentally epistemological terms would simply return us to the dialectic of skepticism and antiskepticism from which Cavell and others have been trying to detach questions of ethics.[102] Finitude as I conceive it is not epistemological but practical: it is not a matter of knowledge per se, but of what we can expect our knowledge of others to do for us—that is, of whether knowledge of others (or of ourselves, for that matter) can be expected to serve as the ground of sovereign agency, of a posture of mastery and invulnerability in the face of the future. And, importantly, acknowledging this sort of finitude can easily be a matter of having *more* knowledge, not less. While utter strangers can remind us of the unpredictability and contingency of social interaction, so can the people we know best—the people whom we know not as character-types, but as deep, rich, tense, and messy lives in progress. Of course, this does not mean knowing others is always easy, or that trying is always appropriate, or that knowledge can never be placed in the service of, or even constitute, power. Sometimes acknowledgment *might* best be expressed in the admission that you don't know, or in the withdrawal from interaction, or in the acceptance of another's refusal to respond to a curious inquiry. But these are possibilities, not necessities; they demand judgment in particular ethical and political contexts, rather than a priori declarations about the impossibility or injustice of knowledge (or, conversely, about its inevitability or goodness).[103]

Fourth and finally, just as it is important not to treat acknowledgment as an expression of skepticism or as requiring the refusal of interaction, it is equally important not to invest the concept with more ambitious

hopes for the redemption of human relations from the full range of experiences that can make social life unpleasant or difficult to bear. To take one instructive example: in a recent critique of the paradigm of recognition, Kelly Oliver has argued in favor of an alternative model of ethics and politics that she calls "witnessing," which overlaps in some respects with what I am calling acknowledgment. For Oliver, witnessing is neither a matter of recognizing the identity of the other, nor of recognizing the identity of the self; instead, it is a matter of experiencing and responding to one's connection to and dependence upon others—including, crucially, bearing witness to, and acting responsibly in the face of, the ways in which one's relation to others has been shaped by injustice.[104] This is a compelling argument; at the same time, Oliver's image of a social world characterized by mutual witnessing is ambitious in ways that undermine her own best insights. In the course of drawing her distinction between recognition and witnessing, for example, Oliver suggests that in a world structured by recognition, relations among people are characterized by, among other things, hostility, conflict, alienation, opposition, domination, oppression, trauma, threat, objectification, the "harsh or accusing stare," war, and sacrifice. By contrast, in a world structured by witnessing, relations among people are characterized by love, compassion, connection, responsiveness, positive attention, the "caress," psychic wholeness, generosity, joy, peacefulness, and democraticness.[105] But do all of the terms in each of these chains of association belong together? And is the first chain straightforwardly opposed to the second?

There is good reason to doubt, for example, that conflict is necessarily a sign of domination or oppression, even if domination or oppression is one way in which people try to resolve conflicts to their own advantage. Indeed, conflict itself may be an important feature of democratic politics, both a byproduct of the flourishing of individuality within a political community and a useful tool of public deliberation. By the same token, sacrifice may be an unavoidable feature of political life in a world characterized by limited resources or simply by substantial disagreement; hostility may be part and parcel of loving relationships, testimony to the intensity of the connection between (or among) people; and alienation may be a healthy attitude and a source of critical insight and leverage for people living—as we all do—under laws that are, at best, only partly of our own making.[106] If Oliver's wager is that all of these supposedly negative features of social life go together, and that they all can be eliminated through witnessing, my wager is that the risk or possibility of *some* of these experiences is not only a permanent feature of social life but also one worth affirming; and that the desire to overcome that risk has itself helped to sustain many serious forms of social and political

injustice. So while the cultivation of acknowledgment may be a valuable part of struggles against injustice and subordination in social relations, I do not expect acknowledgment to replace hostility with love or alienation with connection; indeed, I think the modesty of acknowledgment in this regard is also its strength.

So acknowledgment is in the first instance self- rather than other-directed; its object is not one's own identity but one's own basic ontological condition or circumstances, particularly one's own finitude; this finitude is to be understood as a matter of one's practical limits in the face of an unpredictable and contingent future, not as a matter of the impossibility or injustice of knowing others; and, finally, acknowledgment involves coming to terms with, rather than vainly attempting to overcome, the risk of conflict, hostility, misunderstanding, opacity, and alienation that characterizes life among others. These four features of acknowledgment are, of course, very abstract, and they do not tell us what acknowledgment looks like—but, importantly, there is no general answer to this question, in the same way that there is no general answer to the question of what moderation or justice looks like. Acknowledgment *can* be expressed in a wide range of acts and practices—taking a risk, withdrawing, speaking, listening, welcoming, polemicizing, claiming a right, refusing to claim a right, mourning, celebrating, forgiving, punishing—yet it is reducible to none of these, and none of these is, as such, an instance or mark of acknowledgment: everything depends on how and why they are done, and in what contexts.[107] I shall return to the question of acknowledgment, and its conditions of possibility, in the conclusion; for now, it is time to bring this synopsis to a close and to get the argument under way.