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## Agonism or identity? A response to Chin's and Levey's recognition as acknowledgement: symbolic politics in multicultural democracies

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### ABSTRACT

In their thoughtful and thought-provoking article, Clayton Chin and Geoffrey Brahm Levey argue that a distinctive conception of recognition as acknowledgement can and should be used in order to achieve the symbolic inclusion of all members of multicultural democracies. In this response, I offer a number of critical – but I hope also constructive – remarks on a number of aspects of their thesis. First, I discuss the forms of acknowledgement which they identify. Second, I question the alleged distinctiveness of their conception of recognition as acknowledgement. Third, I consider the status and role of democracy and democratic deliberation in their argument. Fourth, I analyse their claim that struggles for recognition can be additive processes.

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### Introduction

In their thoughtful and thought-provoking article, Clayton Chin and Geoffrey Brahm Levey argue that a distinctive conception of recognition as acknowledgement can and should be used in order to achieve the symbolic inclusion of all members of multicultural democracies. This proposal is intended to supplement theories of recognition and multicultural citizenship which, according to Chin and Levey, focus on providing cultural accommodation and securing cultural autonomy. Without denying that these goals are important, they argue that it is also necessary to ensure that all the constituent groups of a democratic state feel that they belong to that state. This happens, Chin and

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Levey believe, when those groups are acknowledged in ways that enable them to see themselves reflected in that state's political identity.

I begin my response with a brief and inevitably partial reconstruction of Chin's and Levey's complex and subtle argument. Unsurprisingly I focus on those elements to which I am most keen to respond. In what follows, I offer a number of critical – but I hope also constructive – remarks on a number of aspects of their thesis. First, I discuss the forms of acknowledgement which they identify. Second, I question the alleged distinctiveness of their conception of recognition as acknowledgement. Third, I consider the status and role of democracy and democratic deliberation in their argument. Fourth, I analyse their claim that struggles for recognition can be additive processes. Under each of these headings, I suggest in different ways that there is a tension in Chin's and Levey's argument between their claims to theoretical originality, on the one hand, and the practical details of their proposals, on the other.

### **Acknowledgement and symbolic inclusion**

So far as I can see, Chin's and Levey's claim to originality depends on them making good on two key propositions. The first is that it is necessary to develop a distinctive conception of recognition which they refer to as 'acknowledgement'. The second is that this conception can guide political practices which can solve the problem of 'symbolic exclusion'.

To begin with, it should be emphasized that Chin and Levey do not reject others' efforts to show that a society's constituent groups should enjoy recognition. The realization of Charles Taylor's form of nonprocedural liberalism (1994) or Will Kymlicka's multicultural citizenship (1995) or Alan Patten's equal recognition (2014) would enable what they call internal inclusion to be formally achieved. But, as we shall see, they think that these efforts need to be supplemented by a novel conception of recognition as acknowledgement.

With regard to the conception of recognition found in the work of Taylor et al, we may say for convenience that it is *identitarian* in character. As Chin and Levey say, 'the politics of recognition is defined by claims to have the distinctiveness of particular groups politically incorporated and accommodated' (7). They suggest, for example, that Taylor is concerned with 'the institutional accommodation of cultural identity and difference' (28), whilst Patten regards recognition 'as the accommodation of difference', which involves offering 'minorities the same institutional support for their cultures' (29). In both of these cases, the object of recognition is the distinctive culture of a particular group, and the objective of recognition is to ensure that this culture 'is not a barrier to the freedoms of minority citizens' (12).

Although Chin and Levey support this form of the politics of recognition as far as it goes, they think that there is something important missing. This is because, even if constituent groups' identities are accommodated, they

may still experience symbolic exclusion if they feel that the state is not their state, that their particular identity is not reflected in its political identity: 'When a group is constituted as marginal or outside the norm in some way, and this is tied to their identity, they endure a form of internal exclusion from the political community' (17). The solution lies in the development and application of a distinctive notion of recognition: 'Recognition as multicultural acknowledgement addresses this marginalization through the issues of symbolic exclusion, political belonging, and the democratic standing of minorities' (4).

So what is acknowledgement and in what ways is it distinctive from the identitarian conception of recognition? Again for convenience, we may say that acknowledgement is an *agonistic* conception of recognition, one which Chin and Levey derive in particular from the work of Patchen Markell (2003) and James Tully (2008). To begin with, acknowledgement is a performance rather than a condition, an ongoing activity rather than a prevailing state of affairs. This activity will never cease since no end-state can be achieved in which no further acknowledgement is required (22). More specifically, following Tully's account, this activity is a game of 'disclosure' and 'acknowledgement'. When a group makes a demand for recognition, it is disclosing itself; and when other groups respond, they are acknowledging that group's disclosure. Finally, Chin and Levey argue that when a group is thus acknowledged, it is accepted as a legitimate presence in the political community. In this way, acknowledgement leads to a sense of belonging, of being symbolically included in the community: 'By being heard and hearing others in turn, citizens come to identify with their political society without that being dependent on the actual success of their claims. The process rather than the outcome is what matters for belonging' (22).

### Forms of acknowledgement

In the first of my four critical remarks, I want to focus on the agonistic conception of recognition just described. Of course, since it is derived from the work of Markell and Tully, it is not entirely original. That notwithstanding, does Chin's and Levey's use of this conception ensure that they make a distinctive contribution to the ongoing debate about multiculturalism in democratic states?

One problem, I think, is that there is a gap between the claim to theoretical originality and the reality of the practical proposals which Chin and Levey identify. They distinguish between 'general' and 'specific' acknowledgement. The former occurs when the state publicly declares that it is multicultural or that it embraces plurality: 'By general acknowledgement we mean that diversity, pluralism, multiculturalism, and the like are publicly embraced as desirable national attributes and values' (4–5). Such diversity may even become

a central part of the state's political – perhaps national – identity (27). Specific acknowledgement is directed towards a particular constituent group, and may include measures such as 'official apologies for historical injustices, official condemnations of racist episodes, recognition of significant minority cultural events, alterations to offensive symbols, and histories of immigration that include the stories and experiences of particular groups' (5).

Looking at these practical examples of acknowledgement, I would argue that they appear to be a manifestation of identitarian rather than agonistic thinking. General acknowledgement, when plurality is embraced as part of political identity, assumes that states can have political identities. Of course, Chin and Levey recognise that such identities can change – and indeed their principal point is that they *should* change in order to become symbolically inclusive. Nevertheless, this emphasis on political identity moves us away from an account of politics as an activity which is nothing more than ongoing agonistic struggles between individuals and groups. If Chin and Levey were to stick more closely to Tully's agonistic approach, then the state's political identity would be regarded as something which is necessarily and continuously contested. On this account, the state has to keep performing actions and taking up postures in order to continually construct and express its ever-evolving identity. A one-off declaration by the state that it embraces ethnocultural diversity seems to come up well short of this.

With regard to specific acknowledgement, I would argue that several of the measures which Chin and Levey mention seem clearly identitarian in character, including, for instance, the 'recognition of significant minority cultural events' and the articulation of 'histories of immigration that include the stories and experiences of particular groups'. I would go further and argue that all such measures are identitarian in their logic. We can see this if we ask *who* is to be acknowledged. The answer to this question will always have to refer to the identity or culture of a particular group. In this context, it is odd that Chin and Levey say dismissively that '[e]ven where Kymlicka entertains "symbolic recognition" it is of a group's culturally distinct traditions, such as awarding larger religious minorities a public holiday for one of their festivals, as Christians enjoy with Easter and/or Christmas' (10). It appears to me that it is precisely this sort of measure which they offer too.

### **Distinctiveness of acknowledgement**

My second critical remark follows from my first, and concerns the distinctiveness of acknowledgement. If the general form of acknowledgement concerns the political identity of the state, and if specific forms concern the identity of constituent groups, then it appears that in practice Chin and Levey have failed to demonstrate that their conception of acknowledgement is

distinctively different from Taylor's, Kymlicka's and Patten's conception of recognition.

It could be argued, furthermore, that Taylor et al already have the resources by which to achieve the sort of symbolic inclusion with which Chin and Levey are concerned. In the first place, Taylor's argument that we should approach cultures with the presumption that they are of value (1994, 73) plays the same role in his theory as Chin's and Levey's argument for the acknowledgement of the groups that constitute democratic society does in theirs. So long as we acknowledge that our encounters with other cultures can take place within our own political community, then Taylor's presumption amounts to a recognition of the value of that community's constituent groups. In the second place, it is arguable that the sort of political practices that Taylor et al advocate may themselves have the effect of signalling to the state's constituent groups that they are members of that society. If a group is given a collective right, or its individual members are given a group-differentiated right, then they are being told that they are part of the political community granting this right. If this is correct, it diminishes the need for an additional layer of symbolic recognition.

If Chin and Levey wish to resist this argument, they could try to do so by staying closer to an agonistic account of recognition as acknowledgement, but, as a price for doing so, they should steer clear of the sorts of identitarian measures they propose. As Tully himself emphasizes, acknowledgement is not the same as recognition: 'this agonistic game of disclosure/acknowledgement falls short of formal recognition' (2008, 183). Later on: 'The "struggle" itself is an intersubjective, multilogical game of disclosure/acknowledgement ... it is not formal constitutional recognition and accommodation' (2008, 207). To put my point in these terms, the practical measures which Chin and Levey propose follow an identitarian logic in which it is precisely 'formal' or 'formal constitutional' recognition which is offered to the constituent groups of a democratic state.

### **Democratic standing**

Moving on to my third remark, I would argue that this slide between identitarian and agonistic logics also takes place when Chin and Levey discuss the status of democracy in their argument. They focus, to be sure, on 'democratic states' (1) and 'contemporary democratic politics' (2). But they explicitly declare that 'the kind of political acknowledgement we are advocating should not be confused with "difference-friendly" deliberative democrats or civic republicans' (5). The reason appears to be that the latter groups only care about acknowledgement insofar as it leads to political participation. By contrast, Chin and Levey contend that such participation should only be regarded as a fortuitous by-product of the sort of symbolic inclusion with

which they are concerned: 'our argument intersects with deliberative democracy and civic republicanism in that according cultural minorities this kind of multicultural recognition can result in enhanced political participation' (6).

This disavowal of a direct focus on democracy sits at odds, both with Chin's and Levey's references to 'the political belonging and democratic standing of immigrant communities' (1) and 'the democratic standing of minorities' (4), and also with their suggestion that the problem of internal exclusion 'has significant consequences for democratic political community' (17) and 'can significantly affect democratic inclusion' (17). The bigger problem is that, in making this distinction between themselves and deliberative democrats, Chin and Levey also move away from the context in which Tully in particular develops his notion of acknowledgement. For him, such acknowledgement always and necessarily occurs in 'an "agonistic" to-and-fro activity of mutual disclosure and mutual acknowledgement' (2008, 182–183). For Tully, it is precisely this agonistic activity which can enable people to develop a sense of belonging: 'This intersubjective and agonistic activity of demand and acknowledgement in itself, quite apart from the achievement of formal recognition, engenders a sense that one is acknowledged and respected by others, even those who disagree strongly, and so nurtures a sense of identification with the larger society' (2008, 180).

It must be said that Chin and Levey do explicitly distance themselves from Tully's argument at this point. They claim that his 'focus on participation overlooks how those who consistently lose struggles for recognition are unlikely to experience high levels of belonging despite their participation' (23). Going back to an earlier point in my discussion, presumably they believe that participants win struggles for recognition by gaining general and specific acknowledgement. This returns us to my previous claim that Chin and Levey slide back into identitarian thinking. I would also suggest that from Tully's perspective, Chin's and Levey's proposal that the state take measures to acknowledge its constituent groups amounts to attempts to close down the agonistic game of disclosure and acknowledgement. They implicitly envisage a final end-state in which all groups receive the recognition which is their due, and in which therefore further struggle will no longer be necessary. If I am right to think that Chin and Levey do take this position, then it moves them well away from Tully's agonistic approach, and it follows that their claim to add something distinctive to the identitarian account of recognition offered by Taylor et al is undermined.

### **Struggles for recognition**

My fourth and final critical remark focuses on struggles for recognition. Here my claim is that the tension between the identitarian and agonistic elements of Chin's and Levey's argument can also be seen in their account of the

character of such struggles. It surfaces in particular in their claim that struggles for recognition can be an additive process in which new forms of recognition may be layered up on existing forms in a harmonious way (perhaps leading to some form of final consensus). Thus they argue that: 'acknowledging the presence of others is a modest proposal'. It involves accepting 'the legitimate presence of others', and 'it achieves this by being fundamentally additive as a strategy rather than subtractive ... Acknowledging others does not require the non-recognition of the majority or established minority groups' (25).

Whilst I would not deny that this might be possible in particular circumstances, as a general proposition it seems rather naïve. Consider the familiar trope from identity politics, according to which 'to those accustomed to privilege, equality feels like oppression'. To take a banal example, in the opening scene of the first episode of the television series *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017), the Captain and First Officer of the USS *Shenzhou* are seen walking around on the surface of an alien planet. These characters are played by the Chinese-Malaysian and black American actors Michelle Yeoh and Sonequa Martin-Green. In an interview, the producer Jenny Lumet recalls the reaction to this scene: 'The hate mail! "There are no Black people or Asian people in space!" Yeah, I know. It's tricky. "There's the blue guy over there and a tentacle guy over there, but Michelle Yeoh? What the fuck is *she* doing there?"' (Miller 2022).

In the sort of cases of importance here, when members of an existing majority are invited to acknowledge the legitimate presence of minorities – and especially new minorities – in the political community, they often refuse to do so. They may then seek, more or less self-reflectively, to rationalize this refusal in various ways. Perhaps the minority which is demanding acknowledgement is unworthy, illegitimate or even dangerous. Consider, for instance, the reasons given by numerous French mayors for the introduction of burkini bans in 2016. According to Mariëtta Van der Tol (2018), their arguments often referred to the idea that the wearing of such garments was somehow a threat to public order or a risk to security. Whatever the rationalization, the point is that struggles for acknowledgement are often experienced as zero-sum games in which every successful claim for acknowledgement implies that there has been a loss of acknowledgement somewhere else in the system.

Chin and Levey could respond to this argument by pointing to various examples in which, in their terms, acknowledgement has been additive (25) or cumulative (18). For example, more than two decades ago, the police force in Northern Ireland was renamed and restructured. The Royal Ulster Constabulary's name had identified it with the Unionist community, and its membership had been nearly 100% Protestant. In 2001, it became the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). As of 1 February 2022, 67% of its



officers were Protestant and 32% Catholic. The PSNI's badge incorporates six symbols which, according to Northern Ireland's Policing Board, are intended to reflect 'diversity, inclusiveness and parity' (McDonnell 2001). Over the last twenty years or so, while there has been continuing unease in various quarters about the structure and symbols of the PSNI, there are good grounds for thinking that it is, amongst other things, a relatively successful example of symbolic inclusion.

However, to continue with the theme which I have been developing throughout this response, I would argue that this example exhibits what I am calling an identitarian logic in which recognition is given to a group defined by a particular cultural identity. To seek to fix identity in this way may be part of a successful project of symbolic inclusion. But it moves us away from the agonistic logic which Chin and Levey believe gives their argument its original character. On this latter logic, struggles for recognition are and should be inevitable and without end. From this perspective, attempts to resolve such struggles by granting groups recognition based on their identity would be to betray that agonistic project. In Tully's words, 'belonging is related to freedom and acknowledgment, more than to recognition' (2008, 184).

## Conclusion

If there is a single theme that unifies the various claims I have made in this response, it is this: Chin and Levey claim that their argument is distinctive because it is based on a conception of recognition as acknowledgement which is very different to conceptions of recognition that focus on identity. In practice, however, the measures they propose, and the way they frame them, are much less distinctive than they claim. I do not claim that this delivers a knock-out blow to Chin's and Levey's argument. But I do think that they have a choice to make. Either they can go further down the agonistic route, but, in order to do so, they need to drop at least some of their practical proposals. Or they can retain those practical proposals, but, if they do so, they should admit that their approach is less distinctively agonistic than they have suggested.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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