Tom Sawyer and the Struggle for Recognition
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What I offer here is a sketch of an idea, with some implications.

At the end of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*—about two boys, the pauper from the streets of London, Tom Canty, and the young Prince Edward, son of Henry VIII, who in boyish playfulness exchange identities and then get stuck in these identities and live through the course of the narrative in their different alien social contexts—the king has died and a new king must be presented to the country in ceremonies of "recognition." There is first the "procession of recognition" as Tom, still mistaken as the prince, floats down the Thames river to be crowned, followed by "the ceremony of recognition," the moment of coronation, as the boys again exchange back into their original identities. These rituals are explicit, but also rather abstract, a monarchical culture's way of acknowledging the consent of ordinary people to the new political leader in the boy monarch. The nation of a people acknowledges allegiance to the new monarch, recognizes the new monarch as he recognizes his subjects, in a ceremony of recognition, a ritual of mutual recognition. We are not, I think, supposed to ponder too hard about how nearly the pauper became recognized as the king, if Tom had not ceded his role to the real prince in the recognition cycle. Perhaps, in Mark Twain's view, a figure from the lowest dregs of society and a figure from the highest echelon of society are interchangeable, basically, equal, if not one and the same.

This reference to recognition got me thinking about the implications of the theory of recognition that has come down to a number of contemporary thinkers from the early 19th-century German philosopher/political theorist Hegel. The idea has been reworked and updated by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and more recently by the German philosopher Axel Honneth, as well as by some American thinkers. And it seemed to me that

such a conceptual apparatus could make sense of a lot of Mark Twain's figures in various novels and even trail off into political/ideological implications. First and foremost within the theory is the premise that human identity, human individuality, even human freedom are all generated by mutual recognition, not by nature or God. The concept of recognition decenters the subject that has been historically understood in American political traditions; the subject takes on a social and ethical dimension prior to any psychologizing or theologizing or theorizing. A great number of the important studies of Mark Twain remind us that Mark Twain is an obvious figure for some kind of psychological or quasi-psychological analysis about unstable identities. But since the idea of mutual recognition implies that the creation of the human subject and individuality is profoundly, utterly social, a psychological interpretation would be epiphenomenal. A theory of recognition brings us back to the social/historical/political.

Anyone who has read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* understands that Tom is a show off, demanding attention—as Becky Thatcher says, "always showing off" (91). It is so common to note this feature of the character that we take it for granted. Instead of claiming with Forrest Robinson that this showing off is a mark of bad faith (even as he notes that Twain claims the whole community of St. Petersburg shows off), I take this showing off as a demand for recognition, a "vital human need," to use Charles Taylor's expression. And so I want to claim that the idea of recognition operates in Mark Twain's most popular and respected work. But what does it mean for Tom that there is no end to showing off, no satisfaction that any kind of social acknowledgement of Tom's noble sacrifices or acts of imagination can lead to a definitive satisfaction that one has been properly acknowledged? Think of all of the amazing events in the history of Tom's adventures when he would seem to have achieved a satisfying, perhaps even a definitive, recognition. There is, of course, the

Sunday school debacle, with Tom's scheme to be awarded a Bible by trading for Bible tickets with his peers. Tom is "elevated to a place with the Judge and the other elect"; he is a "new hero" covered with the "splendor" of his position (38). There is the amazing plan of Tom and his friends Joe Harper and Huckleberry, who have been presumed drowned, to return from Jackson's Island and attend their funeral where they hear laudatory praise for their "noble and beautiful" deeds in their young lives (122). In breaking his blood oath with his friend Huck that they never tell what they witnessed in the murder of Dr. Robinson, Tom testifies in court and becomes "a glittering hero once more—the pet of the old, and the envy of the young" (156). We shouldn't forget Becky Thatcher's reaction to Tom taking the blame for her after she accidentally tore a picture in their teacher's anatomy book: "'Tom, how *could* you be so noble!'" (139). Tom gets himself into these positions in his struggle for recognition, and he succeeds again and again, but the struggle goes on. It seems that the struggle is necessary but always ultimately inadequate.

It could be claimed that such inability to reach satisfaction of recognition and put an end to the struggle belongs to the deep traditions of Anglo/American political/social liberalism. This theory maintains that the struggle for recognition is actually a drama of an atomistically isolated individual, that it creates the identity of Tom as a unique subject who is an egotist, a figure of a social greediness which cannot be fulfilled so that, in good liberal terms, the individual can never rest on his or her laurels. Since laurels are bound to be temporary, fleeting, one must keep on struggling, keep on demanding. After all, Mark Twain claims that even Judge Thatcher, the pinnacle of a community's recognition of a superior position within the community, is showing off.

Also, take for instance the case of the three boys who run away to Jackson's Island. They offer an example of a thrust at a liberal version of freedom, what Isaiah Berlin

referred to as negative freedom, the kind of freedom that seems to be perpetually invoked by Americans, freedom from almost any kind of restraint, freedom that is God-given, so to speak. The fact that they see themselves as pirates (mediated by their reading in popular culture) as they romp, swim, learn to smoke in the pure natural environment qualifies the purity of their bolt into negative freedom. And they become self-conscious that their real loyalty is to the community, which is prior to this pure nature, to their wish to be free in the negative sense. Learning to smoke, Tom and Joe Harper keep wishing that the boys back in the village could see them, and they imagine how they will demonstrate their ability to smoke before the boys who are imagined to be amazed at Tom's and Joe's feat. Their experience points to the community as prior, suggests that the community, other people including mothers and peer group, lie within the heart of the boys' sense of themselves and the world. Their adventure ends, really as it began, in the acknowledgement that they cannot run away for very long from the community that has recognized them in one way and another, actually formed their individual identities, even formed a notion of freedom that cannot fully work for them.

An important aspect of my position is the Tom Sawyer in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, that is, the Tom Sawyer within Huck's psyche, the residue of Tom's and Huck's mutual recognition of each other. On the one hand, the depiction of Tom Sawyer is a perfect example of a boy who finds recognition in adventure stories, as Winfried Fluck has recently argued. "The story of adventure usually follows the trajectory of a common man [boy] who is not yet sufficiently recognized in his worth at the start of the narrative, goes on a perilous journey, survives great hardships, overcomes many obstacles, triumphs over stronger enemies, kills the tyrant, rescues the damsel in distress, and finds the hidden treasure, exhibiting

great courage and fortitude and thereby transforming initial inferiority into a hard-won sense of superiority, apparent weakness into strength, and powerlessness into power. Adventure, by definition, exceeds ordinary life and thus provides an ideal chance to solve the "Tocqueville problem" of how to distinguish oneself from other ordinary mortals. The hero has to undergo a series of challenging tests of his courage, skill, and strength; he has to face hardships and terrible dangers, and he has to defend himself successfully, although all the odds are against him. The adventure story can thus also be seen as an exemplary narrative dramatization of a search for recognition.

And so now, in Huck's narrative, Tom constructs a complicated plan of freeing Jim, based on his reading of romances of adventure and captivity; he constructs Jim as a figure of ancient and European nobility who has been imprisoned rather than as a Negro runaway slave who has been caught and is about to be re-enslaved. In effect, Tom improvises, with the help of Alexandre Dumas and other romance writers, a ceremony of recognition for Jim. He conceives of his plan to free Jim as more "noble" than just working with Huck's simple ideas of getting Jim away from the Phelpses and back on the river.

As soon as Huck informs the arriving Tom about the events and issues of his life with Jim, Tom sets to work elaborating rituals or ceremonies of recognition for Jim, in effect, forces these rituals upon Jim and Huck. We eventually learn that Miss Watson has already freed Jim. We might ask, what takes priority here, Tom's ceremony of recognition or Miss Watson's freeing, her release of ownership of Jim? Tom takes advantage of his knowledge of Jim's freedom to create a game of recognition as if he is establishing or "enhancing another's right to recognition" (Smith, *Hegel's Critique of*

Liberalism, xi). The question is whether or not Tom's efforts are viable in constructing this improvisatory ritual of recognition of Jim, not only as a person who has a right to be recognized, but as a person of nobility whereby the ceremonies of recognition would establish Jim to be a figure that is impossible in the U.S., someone beyond and above the merely democratic citizen. The cruelty and bad faith of Tom's ritual might point to Mark Twain's own frustration in trying to seek recognition of ordinary human status and right for the former slaves as freed men and women, as the implications of the politics of post-Reconstruction America become evident to him.

For the last 30 years or so, a number of historians of the post–Civil War era have tried to define what is going on in American politics in the aftermath of the war and the creation of monopolistic capitalism. What kind of political theories were available to thinkers? What kind of theories did they compose? What kind of critiques could be generated by the economic, social-political life and practices of the era? What happened is that the Louis Hartz view that the U.S. was or had been a liberal society came into question. It's possible that the Lincoln presidency, not to mention the Civil War itself, threw political ideologies into disarray. If the belief in the traditions of liberal theory were to continue to be accepted, it had to be re-invented or revised, as, for instance, demonstrated by Nancy Cohen or Steven Mexal (most recently and for the American West) and a host of others. Nancy Cohen, for instance, reminds us that the whole postwar period was called the "Great Depression," so there was economic upheaval throughout the period (144). And it generated, according to many accounts of the period, "a boisterous and contentious national discussion of the political economy of democracy" (146). Despite the urge to hold onto antebellum views of the natural order of things, the economic, political, and social developments after the war created a reality that the older theories could not comprehend.

It might simply be the case that Mark Twain is a political philosopher without a politics, without any specific politics in a partisan sense. As Louis Budd argued, he was always valued for the political references within his writings. He was not a serious political philosopher but a kind of common sense thinker about the way human beings relate to each other. Tom is generally struggling for recognition, but this struggle also entails his bullying Huck and others, as we see especially in the entrance of Tom in the controversial ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Mark Twain always keeps in mind that human beings in one-on-one encounters vie for superiority, try to impose their power to subjugate another, as we see in the opening of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.* We cannot compose a general political position or theory from such actions, I think, except to note that such a view of his favorite subjects conforms to a kind of elementary Hobbesian sense of the world of human relations. Anyone who reads, studies, and teaches Mark Twain's writings knows that his works touch, often deeply as well as comically, truly basic issues of American culture and society. He touches the substratum of our culture, an aspect that keeps his writings still important to us today.

In reading Honneth's *Freedom's Right* (Chapter 1 on "Negative Freedom"), I would suggest that the Turner thesis about the frontier was an attempt to hold onto remnants of the concept of negative freedom as derived from Hobbes and Locke. The frontier works as a kind of "state of nature" or a pre-political, pre-state condition whereby human beings are able to act out their unfettered egoistic desires of self-aggrandizing individualism without interference from external sources. Mark Twain's Hannibal is on the cusp of both negative freedom (as projected on Huck) and positive freedom for Tom. Once we see the world from Huck's point of view, we see that he is not the model of negative freedom at all. His imagination is infused with Tom Sawyer, even with his Pap and the widow Douglas. He

often reflects on his actions by noting that they are Tom Sawyer-like or widow Douglas-like or Pap-like. Besides, his outsider status is not exactly due to Huck's will to stay outside of the community. The community has defined him as an outsider no doubt because of his outrageous father. He is relegated to the outside by the contagion of the father. Huck seems never to struggle for recognition. He lives in the community in a pre-struggle mode or perhaps in a post-struggle mode. He always identifies himself as "lowdown and mean and ornery." He has been defined in his recognition by Tom Sawyer, to such an extent that it is almost inevitable that he will eventually be actually identified, at the Phelps plantation, as Tom Sawyer.

Since Tom and Huck seem to have limited resistance from outside, we might say that Mark Twain sees boyhood (childhood) as the real frontier of American life after the Civil War. It's not that they live in a state of nature exactly, but they live in a state of abandonment by adults, except for some moments in school, Sunday school, certain restrictions of propriety (clothing). But whatever social and political institutions are present in their worlds have such a minimal impact on their thinking and actions that they exist in a near state of nature, on the fringes of their community, abandoned.

It is not that a theory of recognition entails an actual different political background from the American traditions of liberal theory as derived from Hobbes and Locke. Rather, according to Honneth, Hegel "sought to provide liberalism with a conceptually broader and deeper foundation [than contract theory] by demonstrating its dependency on institutions that guarantee freedom" (*Freedom's Right,* 51). And as Honneth argues elsewhere (*Disrespect*, chap. 3), sources for a critique of the present society, if they are to have any relevance, must arise out of the actual society; a critique has to deal with the actual institutions of the place and time. In the end, we might be tempted to claim that it is the

novelist who probes the substratum of an actual society and culture, who generates the truths of the human subject, with implications for social and political critique, even revision.

The main thrust of Honneth's work is that individual identity, the very creation of the individual as an individual, is profoundly and thoroughly social, an ethical/moral construction by a community. Here is a revision of the traditions of liberal contract political and social theory that emphasizes the individual atom as the primary figure and the social/political as built around this atom. It is a tradition of negative freedom reaching back to Hobbes and Locke whereby the individual is born free and has to spend a life dealing with interference to this natural freedom and also striving to ward off all such encroachments. The idea of recognition, on the other hand, implies social or positive (posited or socially created) freedom, implies that one's individuality, derived from mutual recognition, is the product of this social dynamic of recognition.

In such a brief sketch of a political/social/moral theory from a more or less updated Hegelian perspective, I would love to be able to say that Mark Twain might have been acquainted with the St. Louis Hegelian group of thinkers and college teachers after the Civil War. To my knowledge, he knew nothing of this group, nor of the English Hegelians writing later in the century. But I love the image of the Prussian immigrant, Henry Conrad Brokmeyer, arriving in St. Louis in 1856 and going off to the Missouri wilderness with a gun, a dog, and a copy of Hegel's "Science of Logic," which he translated for the group back in St. Louis. After serving in the Northern Army during the Civil War and returning to St. Louis, he thought that if American intellectuals and politicians had read Hegel, the U.S. could have avoided the Civil War. Hegel's dialectic would have reconciled ("integrated" or "sublated"—*aufheben*) capitalist industrialism and an economy of slavery, or perhaps the

capitalism of slavery would have simply disappeared or been transformed. He saw Hegel as the prophet of American progress in the movement westward, the idea behind his arrival in St. Louis in the first place.

What interests me are the political implications in the idea of recognition. I have been warned by friends that a theory of recognition will not necessarily yield any kind of obvious or identifiable politics. Think, for instance, if we could unpack a political theory behind a Jon Stewart or a Stephen Colbert. As for Mark Twain, I can see that he kept obsessing about recognition and about the fact that it cannot hold (think of the Connecticut Yankee). We could say that he found a deep flaw within American culture so that we have to live our lives without, in effect, ever knowing who we are, since recognition is what defines identity. But then, Mark Twain could say that such a failure is the essence of American culture, democratic at its core, in a perpetual quest for identity, for constantly rearranging the voices within our conscience and consciousness as we improvise our lives.

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