



Alexander Kiossev

Gaze and Acknowledgement

Writing in an issue of *Critique & Humanism* on social philosopher Axel Honneth, Alexander Kiossev argues that Honneth omits an analysis of social stigmatization at a pre-discursive level — that of the gaze and perception. Minimal recognition of distinction is a premise of interaction; its failure represents an elementary cause of moral injury.

I will start with a personal story that I have [told](#) several times before. In 1993, I taught in Germany as a lecturer in Bulgarian language and literature at the university of Göttingen. One day, I was invited to a German student party together with a friend of mine, a Yugoslavian PhD student, who during the siege of Sarajevo realized that she is Bosnian and Moslem and became an anti-war activist. We decided to have a bite to eat before the party. Faced with the difficult choice between Italian, German, Chinese, and French restaurants, we chose — with a slight hint of shame — to go to a Greek tavern and enjoy the native culinary pleasures. Eating *moussaka* and *souvlaki* (not at all different from the Bulgarian–Serbian–Macedonian–Turkish *shish kebab*), we watched the weather forecast for Europe on the restaurant's TV. The borders of the separate countries were delineated with white contours. For no apparent reason, Romania and Bulgaria appeared as one country with Bucharest as the capital. At the end of our dinner, we asked the Greek waiter for Turkish coffee — he said, however, that in this restaurant they only offered Greek coffee. We ordered it — it was the same "Ottoman" type: sweet and thick, unsuited to the German taste for filtered coffee, nevertheless known in Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, Bosnia, and Turkey as Turkish coffee.

Later on, at the party, I was introduced to a nice German girl who, noticing my accent, immediately asked me: *Woher sind Sie?* (Where are you from?) *Aus Bulgarien* (from Bulgaria), I replied, worried about my Bosnian friend, who meanwhile had got involved in another verbal war with a bunch of Serbs, Slovenians, and Albanians. I observed the arguing group, their energetic gestures, loud voices, the way they patted their shoulders and felt a strange feeling of closeness and intimacy: I now realized what a German student had in mind, insisting that I demonstrated eine balkanesische Motorik (Balkan movements).¹

The party went on, some Germans asked a Turkish girl to do a belly dance — which she refused. Fifteen minutes later, the German girl, wanting to be sure, asked: *Sie sind also ein Rumäner?* (So, you are Rumanian, aren't you?). *Nein, ich bin ein Bulgare, aber es ist egal* (No, I'm Bulgarian, but it doesn't matter) I replied. She looked embarrassed.

Why is the confusion of nationalities so insulting? I am by no means the typical Bulgarian patriot, neither do I think the Romanian nation is inferior to my own, so I do not take offence at that. Yet there is a pre-analytical moral feeling of lesion experienced by many Balkan nationals: the inability of the impersonal Western eye to distinguish between them, an inability that can be interpreted as ignorance, arrogance, laziness, and so on. This experience is certainly neither specifically Bulgarian, nor specifically Balkan, as I saw clearly when I happened to be the one with the "undiscerning gaze" for a group of people from Chad, Mauritania, Sudan, and Eritrea, whom I was regrettably unable to distinguish between among the multitude of "the Africans".

So where is the offence? The problem is neither patriotic nor Balkan, but far more abstract and general. To formulate it in everyday, non-theoretical speech — I am insulted by the haughtiness and negligence of a gaze that fails to notice (or simply disregards) existing differences. I take offence at the "indiscernibility", which by contrast means that I have the right to expect to be recognized in some of my characteristics — in this case, as a Bulgarian or Eritrean — but in other cases people would expect to be recognized as men or women of a certain age, as children, equal citizens, and so on.

Such moral lesion could be called "atomic". The expectation of "discernibility rights" (discernibility being an elementary, logical condition of identity), despite being one of the normative premises of social interaction (comparable with offended exclamations such as "He/she did not even notice me!" or, "He/she took me for X"), is somehow more elementary and hardly deducible from the complex forms of acknowledgement systematically studied by Axel Honneth. When I expect to be distinguished, recognized as definite and different from the others, I do not expect the recognition of any particular virtue, any particular honour, any respectability, or any special quality achieved through my efforts at socialization. Neither do I expect to be liked or necessarily equal, or recognized for my contribution to a certain field; in other words, I do not expect any recognition in the three spheres described by Honneth after Hegel and Mead.

The acknowledgement I need is minimal — I only want the others to acknowledge through their looks and actions that I am different enough to be differentiated. If we put aside "love at first sight", which is more an everyday miracle than a form of acknowledgement, the complex spheres of acknowledgement require a minimum of concomitance, a minimal period of reciprocal interaction and shared social experience. This cannot be said about the act of recognition we discuss here, which seems to be a spontaneous act of perception. The "fair expectations" of discernibility are part of a sphere we could rather call "civility": we somehow expect that any civil person would recognize the others and will respect their separateness and discernibility — otherwise he would be rude and impolite. We could thus say that the "failure to distinguish" is a primary structural form of disregard, a pre-scientific fact that belongs to an elementary, atomic form of interaction — the interchange of gazes and signs of recognition. As such, it should be part of the theory of social perception in its relationship to social philosophy. Because the confusing, confounding, disregarding gaze, the gaze that does not distinguish the Other in his difference and specificity, is undoubtedly part of the social pathologies and creates a specific hurtful moral experience. But if we said that the "exchange of gazes" is an exchange of signs of recognition, it is also the point where the theory of social perception would merge into a broader normative theory of communication. It is no chance that recognition is always related to the elementary communicative gesture of "greeting" that is also an

elementary form of acknowledgement — the refusal to greet somebody is an eternal insult in all epochs and cultures.

How can a broad communicative notion of justice include a "theory of social gaze"? We think that this would principally be an endeavour in the spirit of Honneth, who strives precisely to broaden the notion of justice (he does this with a double conceptual move — first, when he replaces distributive justice with the communicative one, and second, when he broadens the notion of communicative action beyond the sphere of language, including the mutual relationships of "acknowledgement" in the notion of communication).

Is "the gaze" a specific sphere of acknowledgement like the other spheres; how is it related to love, law, solidarity (the recognition of labour contributions). How are "the gaze" and "communication" related? What is the relationship between justice and the categorizing social gaze?

The immediate moral experience of everyday situations gives us plenty of food for thought. Every day on the street we meet strangers and acquaintances, ascertaining this with a momentary and habitual act of recognition; our trained eyes immediately separate our acquaintances from the silhouettes of strangers (just as — on an even more elementary level — we distinguish human from non-human silhouettes, vehicles, moving objects, animals, etc.) Moral lesion is possible even here: not recognizing or failing to greet an acquaintance is a kind of insult; that's why language has such traditional expressions such as "Can you imagine: he did not recognize me!" or even "He pretended he didn't know me!" Recognition is a certain type of basic human experience and a condition of identification: we could name both very elementary forms of recognition and very sophisticated ones. A good example of the former is the moment when the infant recognizes himself (or herself) in the mirror: as we know from Jacques Lacan, this mirror phase is a fundamental condition for self-identification, where the child, through the mother's gaze and help, recognizes the complete and finite image in the mirror as himself; which helps him to experience his boundaries and his wholeness and to regulate his hitherto unmastered bodily impulses and coordination.

Quite different is the complex "biographical" recognition where one finally fathoms "who is who": it is no accident that since antiquity the classic form of tragedy is based on anagnorisis — the final recognition when the hero tragically or comically learns the truth about himself and others; it is sufficient to quote the self-discovery of Oedipus or the recognition of brothers, twins, parents and children: from Euripides, Plautus, and Terence through Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* to *Homo Faber* by Max Frisch. Between the polarities of the elementary "mirror phase" and the final super-complex anagnorisis there are countless everyday situations of recognition and self-recognition, of meeting the other's gaze and "seeing yourself" through the eyes of another person. Each one of these forms can be deformed in its hidden normative premises and can lead to a traumatic moral experience: the famous biblical "they didn't know their own" is just a generalized sign of this moral expectation that "your own" will recognize you, will know you for who you really are, that the external perception and your self-perception will coincide or at least enter into a dialogue with each other. If this does not happen, if "your own" would not know you — this is an extreme form of moral lesion and hurt. And this holds true for both individual and collective forms of identity. In their drive towards emancipation and sovereignty (based on certain models of nineteenth century nationalism), the Balkan nations want to present themselves to the "Big Other" (i.e. the phantasm construction called "Europe"

or "the West") as sufficiently differentiated and (mutually) emancipated, different and discernible sovereign political subjects — and they expect that this "Western" eye will respond with an acknowledgement of their difference and discernibility, that it will be "civil" enough. In turn, in many of its mass media and public manifestations, the West responds with an inability to distinguish and articulate them, stereotypically merging them in an undifferentiated dark mass, stigmatizing them as "the Balkans", "the incomplete, internal, and repulsive Other of Europe", as Maria Todorova has said. Outside its Balkan specificity this problem is known in the studies of representational policies as the communication between the "colonial" and the "self-colonizing" perceptions.

After all of the above, I think we can accept that the act of cognition and recognition — the flashing categorizing lightning of socialized perception — incorporates a super-elementary form of acknowledgement. This acknowledgement seems to be a precursor and premise of far more complex forms such as love, legal recognition, and solidarity, as they all bear upon and incorporate in their complex practices the elementary acts of categorizing perception. This raises a number of questions — are we capable of expanding the notion of justice to include the injustices and the moral lesions caused by the "wrong" social gaze? How can we incorporate a theory of social perception and the moral damages it can do, into moral philosophy and the socio-political programmes dealing with the forms and spheres of acknowledgement? If the philosophy of acknowledgement is interpreted as an extended and improved theory of communicative action, what is then the relationship between communication, acknowledgement and perception?

I will try to sum up by giving not answers but merely directions for possible answers. To this end I will take the liberty to comment on an old racist joke. A middle-aged woman was travelling on the Soviet underground next to a student from the friendly African countries. All of a sudden she noticed him and screamed: "A monkey! A black monkey!" The student, accustomed to such everyday racism, explained calmly in pure Russian: "Dear lady, I am not a monkey. I am a student from Sudan, I study philosophy at the University of Moscow..." The woman continued shrieking: "A monkey! A talking monkey!"

The point of this joke is that any discussion or negotiation of moral problems is blocked: the struggle for acknowledgement is cancelled from the very beginning. Irreversibly recognized as a monkey, the African student is denied any access to communication and ensuing reciprocal positions — the very mutuality and intersubjectivity of human existence has been denied by the joke's racism. Could we describe this type of moral lesion as one of the types described by Axel Honneth — the lesion of the needs for love, legal recognition, and the refusal to acknowledge one's contribution or to express solidarity? Although the dignity of the African can be protected by a certain types of law or moral codices, I think that the problem here is another type of lesion — one that takes place through the stigmatization within the recognizing gaze itself. The act of recognition is of course a cultural act (there is no single atomic perception that is not a part of complex communicative interaction chains). I will shortly discuss the concomitant stereotypes. What is important here is that in the moment of its occurrence it seems natural, integral, and spontaneous: the woman is scared by the "monkey" just as anyone would be scared by the appearance of an unexpected animal on the underground, just as Ionesco's characters are scared by the unexpected appearance of a rhinoceros on the streets of the French city. In other words, the gaze and its casting seem elementary, indivisible, unchangeable — even the

fact that the "monkey" speaks fluent Russian, studies philosophy and has maybe read Hegel's Jena manuscripts, cannot "reverse the *Gestalt*" of that gaze. This problem is well known, since it is related to the education of the eye by certain "politics of representation". We know this issue is integrated in the curricula of the mass American and Canadian multiculturalism to a greater extent than it is in the programme of Honneth,² which, if interpreted correctly, could also include in its range of issues the injustices deposited in language as obstacles to personal self-realization.

In any case, the linguistically objectified human dialogical relationships precipitate not only the reactions of the positive Others, but also those who in one way or another have hurt the moral feelings of the individuals, filling the cultural space with stigmatizing clichés called hate-speech in English and *Feindbilder* in German. In this sense, the univocally public representations are a sphere where the struggle for recognition is possible and valid. Thus, an expansion of Honneth's notion of justice (which could connect the German philosophical agenda to the American and Canadian ones) can be performed in this direction: if the universal pragmatics is reformed by Honneth to include the "struggles for acknowledgement" into the concept of communication, then they could be expanded to include the "policies of public representation" as their independent form of struggle, different from love, law, and solidarity.

This is undoubtedly a reasonable perspective, but it must take into account an important detail. I mean the social process of interiorizing whereby the hostile clichés, the anonymous public hate speech or *Feindbilder* become the interior, intimate and quasi-natural categories of the personal gaze — as they are in the joke I quoted earlier. This gaze is probably the result of social communication and long-term, sometimes centennial struggles for recognition. To the onlooker, it seems like the most natural and spontaneous thing in the world; the lesion of the Other is interiorized into a second nature, while any direct interference would be experienced again as "lesion" — as a violation of this second, unconsciously racist nature and would meet "justified" resistance. For example, the Russian woman from the joke could be forced through legal measures to talk to the African student in a certain, sufficiently polite manner — but this would not stop her from seeing him as a "monkey". This is a form of modern racism hidden behind civilized public regulations and will constitute a double lesion — the woman will feel that she has been denied freedom of speech, while the African student will feel that her civility is insincere. In other words, these are forms of lesion that do not lend themselves directly or quickly to enlightened debate, argumentation, public struggles, renegotiations or legal regulations. They are rather the result of something that we can call, after Elias, a "process of civilization", although this notion is laden with colonial meanings. The state can hardly guarantee the forms of access to recognition, because it is actually a matter of ethno-cultural stereotypes, which are often realized in inter-cultural and often inter-national spaces that cannot be successfully regulated by international laws. The political programs against this type of injustice are also practically impeded: we need a long-term cultural program but we do not know its social and cultural-political subject.

In any case, searching for the most general normative framework, we can say that a communicatively expanded concept of justice must include the analysis of some quasi-pre-communicative structures: the exchange of gazes, the momentary recognitions, the respect or disrespect to the others, integrated into the automatics of the eye and the secret of the other person's Face. (I will not yet go as far as Levinas to claim that the face of the Other is perhaps one of those transcendences of the inside world that can give vital or even existential

roots to a new social–critical theory.)

It is important to bear in mind the anti–communicative potential of these (ostensibly) pre–communicative forms of perception. The joke demonstrated how they are capable of blocking any argumentation and any access of the other to a really communicative position, i.e. one that is reciprocal and requires mutual acknowledgement. And this is a blockage of the moral attitude itself.

¹ Several years later I read the following in an Internet journal: "People here talk with their whole bodies. They lean forward and touch their colleagues. When they meet or depart, they kiss each other on the cheeks and hug passionately." Sam Vaknin, "The Phlegm and the Anima", *Central Europe Review*, vol. 1 no. 4, July 1999.

² Although it contains passages such as "The concrete other of the child's interaction is dissolved in the process of growing up into an inter–subjective shared linguistic system where the dialogical principle acquires the objective form of always open, linguistically represented meanings through which I am learning to express myself and my environment: consequently, my awareness of reality does not ensue from any individual meaning–construction but from active participation in an transcendent language happening." Axel Honneth, *Sprachgeschehen*, 266–67.

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