Identity Formation and Intersubjectivity: What Can Hegel Tell Us About the 'Croatian Character'?

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Abstract

In this paper the author suggests that we can employ the Hegelian theory of intersubjectivity, which is based on the idea of mutual recognition, to gain an insight into identity formation in general, and the formation of the Croatian identity in particular. Part of the presentation includes a summary account of how Hegel formulates this theory and the way it should influence the structure of the state community. Against this backdrop the author sets up a thought experiment to show how a non-Croat could potentially become a Croat, and thereby participate in the Croatian identity.

1.

In this paper I want to propose that we can arrive at a better understanding of what it means to call oneself a Croat by reflecting on some fundamental themes from the philosophy of Georg W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) who, in many respects, is representative of the culmination of that fertile philosophical movement commonly known as classical German idealism. In particular, I hope to indicate how the underlying premise of the Hegelian theory of intersubjectivity, as articulated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and elsewhere, could shed some light on determining the boundaries of the Croatian identity. I should state from the outset, however, that what I intend to say about the 'Croatian character' – and that from a Hegelian perspective – is in principle applicable to any other national group which is conscious of itself as participating in a specific cultural tradition. I therefore do not contend that there is anything especially unique in Hegel which can tell us something about the uniqueness of the Croatian identity (whatever that may be and regardless of its defining characteristics).

As for Hegel himself, any careful reader will testify to the fact that his philosophical views, as well as his manner of expression

and argumentation, are far from easy to grasp. They are, on occasion, almost incomprehensible and continue to be the source of much consternation amongst philosophers, political scientists and cultural theorists. For that reason alone, I will refrain from making excessive references to Hegel and will try to keep my presentation as simple as possible. I will also employ, for the purposes of illustration, a thought experiment to convey the basic thesis of this paper concerning the notion of identity formation and its intersubjective framework.

2.

A convenient starting-point in establishing whether it is possible to make use of Hegelian ideas when tackling the issue of the 'Croatian character' is to draw attention to that which is frequently taken for granted as being a positive marker of identity formation: the phenomenon of language. In this regard, it is often argued, by scholars and non-scholars alike, that we can affirm the existence of a Croatian identity only if we are willing to acknowledge the existence of the Croatian language, and that the preservation of the former is intimately linked to safeguarding the integrity of the latter. The Croatian language, namely, is thought to be a necessary condition for ascribing to a distinctly Croatian identity. So if I were to deny the existence of the Croatian language, then I must also deny the legitimacy of any claim which purports to substantiate the existence of a Croatian identity. Problems emerge, however, if we reverse the logic of the argument, thereby implying that the Croatian language suffices as a prerequisite for maintaining that there is such a thing as a Croatian identity. A reversal of this kind does not follow.

To further explicate what I mean by this, consider the following two examples. First, a great many second and third generation Australians of Croatian ancestry may not have, for whatever reason, a proficient knowledge of the Croatian language, and may not even know a single Croatian word; yet this does not automatically discount the validity of their belief that they share, at least partially, in the Croatian identity and its various manifestations. Secondly, Australians of non-Croatian descent do not immediately become Croatian by virtue of mastering the grammatical

intricacies of the Croatian language and their expert knowledge of the history of the Croatian people. They may, of course, be in a much better position than some Australians of Croatian ancestry to comment on a number of features of what is involved in being a Croat; but this still does not permit us to unequivocally conclude that they themselves should be called Croats. What these examples demonstrate is that we should avoid falling into the temptation of assuming that linguistic know-how, irrespective of how fine-tuned and exhaustive it may be, is the privileged determinant of identity formation. This is not to suggest, however, that language does not have a significant role to play in the self-consciousness of a national group. Rather, it would seem that it is more profitable to account for the mechanics of identity formation by focusing on factors other than language (or perhaps in unison with it).

3.

In contrast to the two examples mentioned in the above, the situation becomes somewhat more complicated when taking into consideration a third example. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that an African-American male by birth and upbringing – we will call him Harry – has a thorough-going knowledge of the Croatian language, is married to a Croatian woman, lives and works in Croatia, is acquainted with the customs of the Croatian people, and eventually accepts Croatian citizenship, including all the obligations and duties which this entails. On face value, there are no legal barriers that would prevent us from calling Harry a Croat, and many of us would probably not hesitate in avowing that he participates fully in the Croatian identity. Now, if we are justified in stating that Harry is a Croat, owing to the 'formal' conditions which he obviously satisfies, then it follows that being born into the cultural and social traditions of one national group does not necessarily exclude the possibility of someone becoming a member of another group. Indeed, an experience of this type is not unusual in the modern world in which individuals emigrate and settle permanently in foreign lands.

But that which is of real interest for us is not simply imagining that Harry is capable of voluntarily transferring his allegiances

from his country of origins to his adopted country. Upon closer examination, it turns out that what is at stake here is the need to establish a minimum set of guidelines for delineating how we ought to go about understanding the term 'Croatian identity'. Or to put the matter more precisely, in order to presuppose that there is a Croatian identity in which Harry can potentially participate, we must be able to give some sort of explanatory account, if only at the most rudimentary level, of identity formation in general. And it is on this score that Hegel could prove to be of some assistance to us. Before turning to Hegel himself, however, it would be prudent to comment a little more on the vexing and at times extremely ambivalent notion of identity, especially since it has many different connotations in different contexts.

To continue with the hypothetical case of Harry, we can say that the manner in which he defines his own identity depends on a whole series of variables. These might include the football club he follows, the types of books he reads, the music he listens to, his political and religious convictions (or lack thereof), and his philosophical outlook on the issues which he deems important. In short, the preferences and beliefs Harry has go a long way in determining who he is; and changes in his preferences and beliefs are expressive of changes in the subjective perspectives which he adopts when engaging with the world around him. Insofar as he adopts these perspectives or builds upon them, they can be interpreted as the specific embodiments of his self-identity. By the same token, since it is possible to argue that we should call Harry a Croat, on the basis of the reasons briefly indicated already, the Croatian identity also amounts to a specific embodiment of his self-identity. But unlike the musical and literary tastes he may have, he cannot choose willy-nilly not to be a Croat (so long, of course, as he continues to satisfy certain conditions). In other words, we could say that the Croatian identity represents an 'objective' form of life to which Harry knowingly gives his consent. We now need to take stock of how the Croatian identity can mimic the fluidity and open-ended nature of the preferences and beliefs Harry espouses; otherwise the prospects of him becoming a Croat in the first place would be very slim.

4.

At this stage we can finally introduce Hegel into the discussion in order to postulate how identity formation might take place. Here I will allude primarily to what is probably Hegel's most famous work, the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, and especially the first four chapters. The narrative proper begins with a lone figure named 'consciousness', and we are invited to take on the role of phenomenological observers who chart the progress of its ability to cope adequately with the world. At the outset consciousness is confident that it can gain immediate access to an object which it encounters; but when attempting to pinpoint what that object is, we soon realise that it employs categories such as 'this', 'here' and 'now' to demarcate the spatial and temporal conditions of its knowledge claims.[1] So even at the most fundamental level of sensory experience, an as-yet-unspecified conceptual apparatus mediates our judgements about what we take to be factual states of affairs in the world.

Upon acknowledging that its preliminary assertions are founded on deficient presuppositions about what it can achieve, consciousness persists in its search for a more adequate criterion in its endeavour to overcome the epistemic chasm that separates it from that about which it makes knowledge claims. In this sense, the internal logic of the *Phenomenology* is governed by a self-imposed method of self-critique, the purpose of which is to determine how successfully consciousness can think concretely about the world as it advances in its capacity to think abstractly; and it is in this interplay between the concrete and the abstract that the over-arching dialectical tension of the narrative consists. As we continue to observe how consciousness comes to know what it alleges to know, we notice that it employs an array of categories and rules that serve as descriptions of the natural properties of objects, the generic concepts under which it can subsume representations of them into unified entities, and the physical laws and forces of nature. Hegel portrays the progression as entailing the developmental movement of consciousness from sense certainty and perception, on the one hand, to a process of understanding and rational intellection, on the other.[2]

Now, insofar as it recognises that it traverses the path from sensory experience to more complex forms of cognition, consciousness

eventually becomes aware of the fact that it itself is the author of what it asserts. Consciousness, namely, makes the dramatic transition to self-consciousness, and the latter reveals itself as the indispensable prerequisite of the possibility of the former. Or as Hegel writes, "[t]he *necessary advance* from the previous shapes of consciousness for which their truth was a Thing, an 'other' than themselves, expresses just this, that not only is consciousness of a thing possible only for a self-consciousness, but that self-consciousness alone is the truth of those shapes."[3] Expressed otherwise, any conscious act by which I intentionally refer to an object is 'mine' because it is founded on my self-awareness as a thinking subject. Without at least this much I could not be sure of myself as signifying that a certain state of affairs is actually the case.

With this Hegel has brought us to the threshold of the genesis of the self-conscious I. Its ultimate task will become one of realising that it makes a concerted effort to know something about the structure of the world because it hopes to obtain particular ends therein. Seen from a slightly different angle, what transpires is that the appearance of self-consciousness on the phenomenological stage brings into sharp focus a teleological drive that permeates all intentional thought. It would seem, then, that the manifold experiences that the self-conscious I has of the world become meaningful by virtue of the purposes which guide its cognitive processes and their self-referential quality. Thus, for Hegel, there is no knowledge for its own sake alone, nor is there knowledge 'in itself' in isolation from what we ourselves bring to experience.

5.

So long as we remain in the domain of cognition and consciousness of objects, we have only the mere concept of self-consciousness: it is an epistemic condition which provides us with a platform for gauging the possibility of knowledge and the self-corrective procedure that informs its scientific character. Moreover, that there may be a self-conscious I which purveys its surroundings according to the dialectical momentum Hegel describes does not tell us much about its identity, nor does it tell us anything about the existential status of any possible self-conscious I. But once we take heed of the practical (or ethical) dimension of

human activity, self-consciousness becomes more than just a mere concept that functions as a regulative principle of knowledge. On this point, Hegel holds that, once it is fully aware of itself as being in the world, "self-consciousness is *Desire* in general."[4] The rationale for such a view is, in a nutshell, this: as a desiring self-consciousness, I stake a practical claim to be in the world, and that claim is infinite insofar as I want to satisfy my desire to be free – and thus preserve my own life – by appropriating objects to my purposes; yet so long as my desiring remains infinite, my efforts go frustrated because there is a potentially endless series of desiring acts to come (owing to the potentially endless series of objects that are there for me to appropriate).

It is precisely against this setting, whereby the self-conscious I could become entangled in its own self-desiring, that Hegel seeks to firmly ground self-consciousness in the historical world of human relations. He advises us that we should see it as socially constituted and as the product of mutual recognition. As Hegel famously puts it, "[*s*]*elf-consciousness achieves its satisfaction only in another self-consciousness.*"[5] On the grounds that I can get a rough inkling of what I desire for myself only by readily identifying it in others, what this implies is that I require another self-consciousness to give determinate shape to my purposes. Of crucial significance here is the project of situating the 'lived experience' of freedom within an intersubjective framework that mediates not only our individual needs and wants, but also the sense of identity which we may have as human beings that are capable of acting of our own volition. It turns out, then, that none of us are justified in declaring that we are free agents unless we are recognised as such and, perhaps more importantly, unless we are prepared to reciprocate the same degree of recognition which we demand for ourselves. In the third part of the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Hegel calls this act of reciprocity 'universal self-consciousness', in which the freedom of each participant is given tangible expression and raised to the level of objectivity.

> *Universal self-consciousness is the affirmative awareness of self in an other self; each self as a free individuality has his own 'absolute' independence, yet in virtue of the negation of its immediacy or appetite without distinguishing itself from that other. Each is*

> *thus universal self-consciousness and objective; each has 'real' universality in the shape of reciprocity, so far as each knows itself recognized in the other freeman, and is aware of this in so far as it recognizes the other and knows him to be free.*[6]

Bearing in mind Hegel's emphasis on mutual recognition as the cornerstone of 'actualised' self-consciousness, what this passage suggests is that I can attain the ends towards which my desiring acts are geared only if they are placed alongside, and not just in opposition to, the intersubjective bonds that define who I am. Conversely, not to acknowledge that a self-conscious I which juxtaposes itself to me has similar aspirations as myself is to forfeit the prospect of realising my own ends. Hence to obstinately insist on my absolute independence from another person could have the opposite effect of what I hope to accomplish: the cancellation of my freedom, wherein I become a slave to an incessant and potentially self-destructive pattern of self-desiring. For only when a "[s]elf-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness" can it "come *out of itself*,"[7] and therewith liberate itself from the strictures of self-desire. The contrary attitude would be symbolic of the 'original sin' of refusing to concede that I am 'for myself', in the substantial sense, by simultaneously being 'for another'. "Self-consciousness," announces Hegel, "exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged."[8] In this context, we may be able to entertain ideas of freedom and selfhood outside the parameters of mutual recognition; but they would be completely lacking in intentional content (because self-consciousness itself would be ungrounded). That is to say, they would be indeterminate, ephemeral and, even worse still, illusionary – just as self-desire, when viewed on its own, is an illusionary analogue of independence.

6.

At first glance, operative in the foregoing dialectic of mutual recognition is no more than a nominal conception of identity. It may provide us with some clues that could assist us in gaining an insight into how the self-conscious I can take on the identity of a free agent that acts in the world; but it still does not say much about the concrete particularity of that identity. And even if we are

agreed that mutual recognition supplies us with a communicative paradigm in which the position of each self-conscious I is both affirmed and upheld, we can infer from it the possibility of many different types of identities. In view of Hegel's epistemic concerns, for instance, we could interpret it as stipulating the minimum conditions that are necessary for participating in an identifiable community of scientists. Namely, that there is a group of mutually recognising scientists allows me to test the validity of the theories I or someone else defends; for only when I address another person about what I believe to be the case can I determine whether I am anywhere close to the mark. It is subsequently through the recognition of an interlocutor, with whom I am engaged in dialogue, that I can recognise – in the sense of 're-cognising' – the veracity or falsehood of what I intend to communicate.

Though certainly applicable in this way, the underlying rationale for the Hegelian theory of intersubjectivity must be sought elsewhere. Mutual recognition, as already noted, is illustrative of the most elemental practical relations between individuals that are faced with the dilemma of accommodating the purposes of others, whilst also simultaneously trying to endorse their own purposes. On Hegel's account, the give-and-take of this interaction crystallises the concrete motives for acting in a world in which each self-conscious I attempts to actualise its freedom and identity through the projects it undertakes. And it is when we realise that others share these motives in similar measure that we can construct the normative principles which govern how we relate to one another. Only thus does it make sense to talk about the emergence of any possible identity. For if only a self-conscious I can have an identity, then the way in which it adopts an identity is linked to the intersubjective bonds that constitute the determinate modes of self-consciousness; and if these intersubjective bonds are necessary for shaping the purposes which self-consciousness ascribes to itself, then they exert some formative influence on how we recognise a particular identity as having an objective character.

Mutual recognition, on this reading, could be understood as the foundational postulate of identity formation in general and, as such, allows us to determine the specificities of particular kinds of identities – including national and linguistic identities. Building on this further in the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel is of the opinion

that mutual recognition should be seen as the foundation of the objective system of rights which constitutes the fabric of the modern state. The reason for holding such a position is, broadly stated, twofold: first, mutual recognition ought to provide the social conditions in which we can pursue our collective and individual purposes; secondly, it ought to nurture and protect our identity (or identities) as the bearers of rights that belong to a community. The modern state, then, should be the supreme embodiment of mutual recognition. Likewise, the normative principles which underpin its ethical, legal and political structures should be expressive of those recognitive relations that foster all sorts of human activities (be they scientific, cultural, artistic, economic or whatever).

7.

Assuming that Hegel's depiction of the genesis of the self-conscious I has some merit, and that his theory of intersubjectivity achieves what it sets out to do, any national identity, including the Croatian identity, should be representative of a community of mutually recognising individuals. Now, insofar as the Croatian state exemplifies the Croatian identity to the highest degree, there ought to be a public form of linguistic communication through which mutual recognition can be given objective expression at the institutional level. For that reason, we can infer that the Croatian language does have a significant role to play in defining and articulating the Croatian identity. But this is not to suggest that the languages of minority groups should be either denied or devalued. Indeed, mutual recognition should, by its very logic, accommodate these languages and the identities which are attached to them.

At the same time, however, the Croatian language is the absolute minimum we can expect for groups of people to be able to enunciate their shared perspectives within a single state community, regardless of the cultural and other differences which distinguish them from one another. So though it may be exaggerated to think of language as being the privileged determinant of identity formation, it nonetheless could serve as a medium that unites people, on the one hand, and allows for the possibility of communicating diversity, on the other.

8.

Returning now to our African-American-cum-Croat, Harry. Recall that Harry has an excellent knowledge of the Croatian language, is married to a Croatian woman, lives and works in Croatia, is well-versed in the customs of the Croatian people, and has accepted Croatian citizenship. Taking all this on board, we can say that he is a Croat because he is a participant in, and actively contributes to, the process of mutual recognition which underscores the possibility of a Croatian identity. We need to be extremely cautious, however, when trying to unpack the implications of Harry's status as a Croat. By participating in the Croatian identity – and that principally as a member of the Croatian state – neither Harry nor anyone else should slavishly follow legal and social norms for their own sake; for norms, of themselves, do not mean anything whatsoever unless they are capable of coherently articulating the concrete rights and freedoms that mutual recognition is supposed to epitomise. Thus only when it is organised in such a manner as to recognise the most fundamental interests of its members can the individual 'will' the state as a manifestation of his or her own identity. Hegel depicts this act of willing in the *Philosophy of Right* as the convergence of the 'universal' and 'personal individuality', according to which the former ought to be an extension of the latter.

> *The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But concrete freedom consists in this, that personal individuality and its particular interests not only achieve their complete development and gain explicit recognition for their right... but, for one thing, they also pass over of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and, for another thing, they know and will the universal; they even recognize it as their substantive mind; they take it as their end and aim and are active in its pursuit. The result is that the universal does not prevail or achieve completion except along with particular interests and through the co-operation of particular knowing and willing; and individuals likewise do not live as private persons for their own ends alone, but in the very act of willing these they will the universal in the light of the universal, and their action is consciously aimed at none but the universal end.*[9]

A careless reader might conclude from this passage that the individual, by willing the universal, dissolves his or her own particularity within the superstructure that is the state, and thereby relinquishes that which determines his or her particularity. Notice, however, that Hegel explicitly maintains that there is no state (or national identity) which exists over and above the interests of its members. In short, the life-blood of the state community is the voluntary co-operation of its members, whose rights and freedoms are first brought to the fore through the prism of mutual recognition. Anything to the contrary would be ethically suspicious. In our specific case, the state community should be brought into question if it cannot provide sufficient room for Harry; for if his interests as a self-conscious person are not recognised, then it is likely that no one else's will be either. Also, to impose a socio-political order which shows little concern for the intersubjective bonds that personify a community is symptomatic of the retreat into the tyranny of self-desire. On this point, Hegel is quick to cast a critical glance at the possible excesses of what he calls 'civil society',[10] or what we might identify as the abuses of an amoral and overtly reckless model of 'liberalism' (of which Croatia, unfortunately, has had more than its fair share in recent years).

Mutual recognition, therefore, carries with it the obligation of addressing imbalances in those structures upon which the state community and its identity are based. In this sense, it can never be a finished product and, by definition, ought to prevent any national identity from being hermetically sealed. Ideally, then, mutual recognition provides the means for ensuring that a national identity, instead of enclosing itself within itself, will remain open to further possibilities which enhance the interests of each member of the state community. After all, the state should be the extension of these personal interests and their intersubjective correlates, and not the other way around. Seen in this light, the boundaries of a national identity evolve as the dynamics of mutual recognition evolve. They are inseparable from the standpoint of the state community and, taken together as practical categories, go some way in making up the composition of what Hegel terms 'ethical substance'. It is precisely owing to the fluidity and flexibility of this dynamic process that we can justifiably imagine Harry becoming a Croat, as well as contributing to the developing and

changing set of mores that is the Croatian identity. Accordingly, there are no reasons why the Croatian state, on the supposition that it is capable of promoting recognitive relations which are sensitive to the concrete rights and freedoms of its members, and its corresponding national identity could not have Harry as a worthy representative.

9.

I began this paper by drawing attention to the relation between language and identity, and by intimating that the origins of identity formation need not be of a purely linguistic nature. By setting up a thought experiment, in which an African-American by birth and upbringing could potentially become a Croat, I have argued that we can employ the Hegelian theory of intersubjectivity to account for the possibility of identity formation in general. Admittedly, my presentation of how we might apply this theory to the 'Croatian character' is at best sketchy, and I have omitted many important aspects of Hegel's philosophy (including the continuing drama of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* and the different nuances which his theory of intersubjectivity has in different texts). I have also deliberately avoided discussing other issues, such as the especially thorny issue of ethnicity, and whether they are in any way relevant. The main reason for this is that, depending on what sort of model of the state we are talking about, they require far more detailed reflection than is possible here. Notwithstanding, it is my hope that I have at least touched on some themes which are deserving of further consideration.

[1] Cf. Georg. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* §§ 90-110, tr. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 58-66.

[2] Cf. ibid., §§ 111-162, pp. 67-101.

[3] Ibid., § 164, p. 102.

[4] Ibid., § 167, p. 105.

[5] Ibid., § 175, p. 110.

[6] Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* § 436, tr. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 176.

[7] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* § 179, p. 111

[8] Ibid., § 178.

[9] Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* § 260, tr. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 160-161

[10] Cf., for example, ibid., §§ 242-245, pp. 149-150.