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The Exhaustion of Recognition: Why Modern Societies Are Entering an Age of Identity Scarcity

Dr. Derek Barker-Ciganik

University of Vienna, Austria

Abstract

Since the late twentieth century, questions of recognition have occupied a central place within social and political theory. Influential scholars such as Charles Taylor, Axel Honneth, and Nancy Fraser have demonstrated that recognition constitutes a fundamental dimension of justice and social inclusion. Simultaneously, democratic societies have witnessed a substantial expansion of recognition claims as an increasing number of social groups seek visibility, legitimacy, representation, and symbolic inclusion within public life.

This paper argues that contemporary theories of recognition have largely neglected an important structural constraint: recognition resources are finite. Public attention, institutional legitimacy, media visibility, political representation, and symbolic prestige cannot be expanded indefinitely. As recognition claims proliferate, competition for these resources intensifies. The paper introduces the concept of recognition scarcity to describe this condition and argues that many contemporary social conflicts are more accurately understood as struggles over scarce recognition resources than as simple disagreements over values or interests.

Drawing upon recognition theory, social identity research, and Identity Group Theory, the paper develops a conceptual framework for analysing recognition scarcity and its consequences. It suggests that contemporary polarisation, identity conflicts, and increasing contestation over public narratives emerge not merely from competing beliefs but from intensified competition within recognition economies. The paper concludes by considering the implications of recognition scarcity for democratic governance, social cohesion, and future theories of justice.

Keywords: Identity; Identity Economics; Identity Politics; Identity Scarcity; Social Justice; Recognition Theory