Recognition in Global Politics: The Challenge of Images and Technology

In July 2018, US President Donald Trump further undermined already shaky relations with Iran by tweeting to Iranian President Rouhani that the US would 'no longer stand for your demented words of violence and death. Be cautious!'. This all-caps threat quickly became a meme, with many Twitter users – including Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif – parodying Trump's tweet. Political pundits debated whether, contrary to the violence inherent in Trump's tweet, this statement might in fact signal US moves towards reinvigorating the nuclear deal. For instance, previous pejorative tweets about Kim Jong-Un had eventually unfolded into the first summit meeting between the US and Democratic People's Republic of Korea in Singapore the previous month. Others have highlighted how such communication has undermined the strength of the liberal world order, which may also provide new opportunities for ordering of a different kind. What is often overlooked in such accounts, however, is how the interplay of representation and recognition continues to undermine positive moves towards rapprochement, and not just within Iran-US relations. This is not to imply that there is a correct process of recognition, nor that representing ourselves and others in different, more optimistic ways will result in decreasing conflict. Yet we must pay attention to processes of recognition precisely because their dynamics are so powerful. Recognition requires greater consideration than is often given in International Relations.

Recognition is fundamental to global politics: it provides a positive affirmation of identity that maintains an actor's self-esteem. Such affirmation suggests that an actor's identity has worth and value, providing a sense of security in its interactions with others (Nel, 2010; Ringmar, 2012: 7; Wolf, 2011). Representation plays a crucial yet underexplored role in these identity politics dynamics (Doty, 1996: 164; see also Campbell, 1998: 169–170). We all think about ourselves in a particular way, and when we think of others we do so in a similar fashion. We use representations – the production of meaning through language, symbols or signs, a conveyance of something – to imagine who we are and how we want to be recognised. States are also subject to the challenges of representation: they use representation to understand not only themselves and others, but to respond to externally constructed images of who they are. Recognition is therefore not an inevitable outcome of state interaction; rather, it relies on one actor granting it to another (Duncombe 2016).

Representation and recognition are ultimately about power. How Iran and the US, or any other states for that matter, represent themselves and each other influence the ways in which they relate and the foreign policy options each believe are possible. As a result, positive steps towards compromise or reconciliation can be undermined by mistrust fostered by such entrenched representations.

More and more scholars are examining recognition in world politics (Ringmar 2002; Haacke 2005; Murray 2010; Lindemann 2011). From work on Sino-Japanese relations (Gustafsson 2015), to humour and Israeli public diplomacy (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2018), to critical pedagogy (Schick 2016), emerging literature reaffirms the importance of recognition to the development of empathy and love, the normalization of foreign relations or, alternatively, how misrecognition is frequently at the centre of acrimonious interstate relationships (Aggestam 2015; Brincat 2017; Greve 2017). Even Francis Fukuyama (2018), it seems, believes recognition to be the 'master concept' for explaining current world politics. Yet greater attention needs to be paid to two key areas: firstly, the new technology facilitating the dynamics of representation and recognition, and secondly, the visual politics inherent in how processes of

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recognition, and misrecognition, unfold.

My aim in this brief piece is to outline the importance of these two key areas – technology and images – to recognition studies, illustrating how further questions about recognition in International Relations are emerging, and what we might do to best address them.

Technology and Recognition

Social media is central to our daily interactions with each other. We use platforms like Facebook and Twitter to communicate, as news sources, or as sites of civil activism. States also operate within this technologically saturated environment. For instance, the latest Twiplomacy report shows 97 percent of UN member states have Twitter handles, with Twitter by far the most popular platform for digital diplomacy, in the practice of change management through social media and other technological tools. While this enhances the communicative outreach of states, enabling governments and political leaders to engage directly with foreign publics and their individual political counterparts, there is nonetheless an important aspect of interstate relations that remains fundamentally unchanged: much like official policy statements, tweets and Facebook posts are an extended part of the intersubjective policy-identity process.

The increasing use of social media, particularly Twitter, as a diplomatic tool allows further insight into patterns of representations of state identity. Statements made on social media can reflect 'us and them' demarcations, framing identity and difference and potentially indicate how a political figure (or a state) desires recognition from others (Duncombe 2017). Examining these representations illuminates the narratives states draw on to recognise their others, the identity frameworks they themselves desire to be recognised, and how these are deployed to justify particular foreign policies. How a state represents itself and recognizes the identity of others, often through boundaries of 'us and them', is thus accessible through examining how policymakers and political leaders tweet about events, experiences and key policies. Twitter can provide a new space for diplomatic interaction when interpersonal contact – one of the most powerful foundations of diplomatic practice – is not always possible.

Although Twitter is often dismissed as the online version of 'cheap talk', facilitating homophily and negative, often aggressive, communication (Ott 2017), I argue it can nonetheless shape the struggle for recognition and thereby legitimize political possibilities for change. Consider Iran-US relations surrounding the nuclear issue: despite limited high-level diplomatic engagement since the severing of official ties during the 1979-1981 Hostage Crisis, and deeply ingrained historical grievances that frame pejorative representations of identity on both sides, in 2015 Iran and the US became signatories to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). After many years of oscillation between military threats and sanctions, the successful implementation of the deal was surprising to many. Yet examining US and Iranian tweets from the first positive opening – the 2013 phone call between US President Barack Obama and Iranian president Hassan Rouhani – to the official launch of the JCPOA in July 2015 reveals slight shifts in representational dynamics that subtly altered recognition dynamics between the two states. Both Iran and the US used Twitter to represent themselves and each other through the communication of positive aspects of their identities and the deal itself. Posts by state representatives reflect and frame state identity and how a state wishes to be recognized by others. This is not to deny the importance of offline diplomatic engagement. However, if we are attuned to these dynamics, shifts in representational patterns communicated through social media during high-level negotiations allow us to ascertain political possibilities for change.

Images and Recognition

When we talk about recognition, we are referring to images we hold of ourselves, and our others. These images are not just verbal, but visual representations of identity (Hansen 2011). Visual representations are necessarily a powerful component of how we recognise and understand our world and those in it. As Brent Steele (2012, 5) argues, actors in global politics pay great attention to how they are represented. An 'aesthetic insecurity' (Steele 2012, 5) emerges when our image of ourselves is challenged or disrupted by disagreeable visions projected by others. States are prey to the same dynamics. These images are constructed fundamentally through visual artefacts that play an important role in demonstrating recognition or its denial.

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Recognition of a particular identity can be reaffirmed or denied through visual representations, which are in turn implicated in shifting power relations between states. Consider the 2018 Singapore summit, when Trump and North Korean Chairman Kim Jong-Un shook hands after signing an historic joint statement regarding denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. The image of this handshake, foregrounded to the paired US and DPRK flags, signified recognition of North Korea as an important state in the region. Consider by comparison the images of Trump seemingly refusing to shake German Chancellor Angela Merkel's hand during their first Oval Office meeting in 2017. This lack of a handshake, and the visualisation of such a moment, represented not only growing animosity between the two leaders but also a shift in US recognition of Germany as an important ally.

Explorations of identity and difference have continued to illustrate how important images are to representations of Self and Other. Consider the Israeli public diplomacy campaign 'Presenting Israel', which utilised videos parodying common misrepresentations of Israel as a mobilization strategy for public diplomacy by ordinary citizens travelling abroad (Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2018). As Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Alexei Tsinovoi demonstrate (2018), this campaign used videos and associated social media platforms to exaggerate and poke fun at stereotypes of Israel and Israelis, using humour to represent certain aspects of Israeli identity and challenge criticism of Israel. Consider as well pop culture as a site for exploring the construction of Self and Other. Priya Dixit (2012) uses the long-running and popular television series *Doctor Who* to illustrate how identity is structured through relations of similarity and difference, and how this, too, may offer a re-imagination of difference represented as 'threat' or 'danger'.

A question arises here, then, of how the visual shapes the political. Kyle Grayson and Jocelyn Mawdsley (2018) have called for the IR discipline to better engage with different ways of seeing. This is especially important because, as Roland Bleiker suggests, we live in a visual age. With the visual and aesthetic turns, scholars have continued to demonstrate how images are increasingly shaping politics. Even more so, the speed at which images circulate has influenced how we perceive and comprehend information, further altering the ways in which we see the world. If images – and their changing circulation – have fundamentally transformed how we view reality and 'truth', recognition, too, is shaped by these visualities.

I return here to @realDonaldTrump. When an image of German Chancellor Angela Merkel leaning over a desk towards Trump, himself seated with arms folded looking disagreeably back at Merkel, was tweeted from the 2018 G7 summit, it went ultra-viral. Heavily circulated both online and offline, the image became a centrepiece in ongoing debates about how the US currently represents itself and wishes to be recognised: either as hostile and isolationist, or commanding and powerful world leader. Following this tweet, Trump announced via Twitter that the US would not support the official G7 communiqué, to the great dismay and alarm of the international community. This photo was especially powerful because it visually represented a pivotal moment of intense crisis before it unfolded: the undermining of the relationships between some of the key powers upholding the international political order. Indeed, US-EU and US-UK relations are strained more than ever, which continues to fuel debates about the breakdown or transformation of the liberal global order. Yet the image was also powerful in the way it was reimagined, or challenged, by other images taken a few seconds before and after that pivotal shot. Photographs of the same scene by different official state photographers also circulated by way of comparison and were used to support or disprove the different identity narratives in play. Trump himself tweeted a series of photos purporting to show his "great relationship with Angela Merkel of Germany". Trump claimed the other images were a deliberate Fake News strategy to only show "the bad photos (implying anger) of negotiating an agreement – where I am asking for things that no other American President would ask for!" Regardless of the 'truth' of the matter, what this example demonstrates is the deep connection of technology, images and the politics of recognition that remain under-examined in International Relations.

The Visual Politics of Recognition

In the current era we are witnessing the intersection of three powerful elements in global politics: social media, images and recognition. While the role of recognition in world politics is ever more acknowledged, the technological and visual aspect of this process requires much greater consideration. Given the increasing use of social media images – including memes – to claim the 'truth' of recognition, or its denial, this will likely become the site of growing theoretical and methodological challenges for the study of International Relations.

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