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## Introduction to Peter Gabel's *The Desire for Mutual Recognition*

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*Peter Gabel published his book *The Desire for Mutual Recognition* in 2018 with Routledge. He died in 2022. Diego Lopez Medina translated the book into Spanish and wrote an Introduction and I wrote a Prologo in English that Diego also translated. Siglo Editorial, the Bogota publishing house associated with the Universidad de los Andes, published *El Deseo de Reconocimiento Mutuo: Los movimientos sociales e il disolucion del falso yo* in 2024. This is the Spanish text of my Prologo followed by the English original. It places Peter's book in the context of the three developments of "60s generation rebellion," the "counterculture" within the rebellion and the rise of "social movements." Then it relates his work to the European critical traditions on which it relies and against which it asserts a very American embrace of aspects of popular culture typically ignored or disdained in Europe. I finish with a discussion of Peter's deliberately utopian and prophetic ideas about social transformation.*

### **STYLE**

First thing to notice is that Peter has a style, a striking, unfamiliar style that is part of the message. Most philosophers seem to aspire to write so that their "voice" disappears and the reader relates to the message as if written in a voice so familiar that it seems merely to "provide access" to the writer's message rather than being itself part of the message. There is another philosophical style belonging to many who have influenced Peter's idea who write in something close to a private language, in which the complexity of everything, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, abstruse allusions, seem to me as part of that very discursive community, to far exceed the complexity or obscurity of the subject matter. In Peter's book the style is part of the message. Striking unfamiliar style is everything in poetry or in short piece of fiction, but this is the much more impressive literary accomplishment of keeping the new style consistent from sentence to sentence for the whole length of the book.

Here is an example

When I speak of re-spiritualizing the world what I mean is simply that we human beings are bound together by spirit, that there is a vibrant life-force that unites us and that is social in nature, although invisible to the "naked" objectifying eye—and more, that the longings of this social spirit are at the core of our search for meaning in life and are at the core of all human motivation in the realm of politics, economics, psychology, personal life, everything. 10

This sentence illustrates a defining characteristic of the style which is the long line with many sometimes very many sub-clauses. This gives a feeling that Peter is talking rather than writing, speaking fairly slowly as he develops a thought in a continuous step by step way. You need to read slowly rather than racing along or you'll get lost.

Or beyond talking that Peter is singing. This helps understand another aspect of the writing which is the use of repetition of key phrases in the long line, reminding the reader that Peter is speaking in a language that might have been unfamiliar at first but is now becoming by repetition second nature to us

as well as to him. The long line sentence is not long because of its extremely complex internal logic, as it is say in Emmanuel Kant, and it is not Germanic with the line leading to a punchline at the very end. The long line is novelistic, conveying the story of the subject in Peter's vision.

This is more like say a philosopher's stream of consciousness. But as in the complex language of the philosophers in Peter's sentences, the repeated elements, the refrain or chorus, is composed of abstractions developed one by one through the long line of the book itself. This is philosophical ambition presented in what seems an anti-philosophical language and style. The abstractions are not metaphysical, they are not about space and time, and they are not abstractly ethical, like meditations on the meaning of freedom. The abstractions purport to be simply descriptive of the day to day truths of our existence. Truths meant to be shocking.

Thus the core of the double –message of the adult to the child in the very way the child is at first recognized into social existence is: "Desire me, but deny that you desire me on pain of the extinction of our connection. Instead, to be 'with me' you must become the artificial role that I claim I really am and that I claim that you really are." 30

### **HOW DO YOU KNOW ITS TRUE**

A first reaction to this kind of presentation of a big, even scary, complex abstraction might be how do you know that to be true. Peter has an interesting answer which is that he is not trying to prove anything in the sense of a statement backed up by evidence or argument or a larger logic of the situation. His idea is that he is putting a picture on the easel purporting to represent our common situation and then turning to me the reader to say "does this look right?"

This sounds too casual to be taken seriously but I would describe it as high stakes and not casual at all. Peter is betting that is intuitions and insights are widely maybe at some level universally shared. If he can only get the picture right it will strike a chord and we'll "know its right."

For me an important part of the experience of reading the book is that the first sentence I quoted above strikes me as right. Indeed it puts forward an idea that I know I can't prove but that is even the basis of a lot of the way I live my own life. So I reacted with relief not skepticism, a "yes, right on!," and wondering what he'd be able to make of this pretty grandiose opening.

But is this "real knowledge?" Of course not, if mean by knowledge the demonstrable according to the canons of rational demonstration starting from shared premises and shared "facts" to conclusions. But as Peter points out he is writing in another traditional understanding of what it is to understand the phenomena coming at us every instant.

Skeptics of that whole tradition don't demonstrate the "validity" of their (our) mode of intuitive precognitive "knowledge" any more than he has with his earnest affirmation in the quote. The point for me is that we realize meaning in everyday life this way from letting a landscape tap an emotion to catching the drift of a previously mysterious piece of music to "reading the room."

So the idea is to go along with the ride, testing what he says as against our own intuitive grasp of the familiar situations he/we care about denying him authorial authority (though that is never quite possible) while offering attention even as the book goes on loving attention.

### **THE FALL**

Going back to the first sentence in that spirit my reaction is that things aren't quite so rosy. And there follows Peter's version of **The Fall**, to repeat the quote:

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The sequence: infant experience that the adult to whom s/he appeals is unable to meet the desire for connection because having constructed already an adult false self motivated by the fear that to respond to or initiate connection will be met with rejection and humiliation. The false self is in charge even in the encounter with the infant. The infant imitates the adult so the circle is unbreakable.

In the society of false selves no one asks or gives recognition and everyone believes that the false selves presented by others are their true selves. The false self develops in support of its falseness the two illusory entities of ideology and authority, which explain the goodness and necessity of the false self world and impose obedience to its norms of mutual alienation. The false self develops an ideal for itself, of performance at the highest level in response to the demands of ideology enforced by authority, demands for perfection at work etc. The family, the economy and government are organizations of false selves structured in this way.

Not a pretty picture. But most definitely not the un-pretty picture of the canonical strands of critical theory. There is nothing like Marx's logic of the capitalist economy. Nothing like Weberian disenchantment as the iron cage of rationalization and bureaucratization slowly strangles everything except what one can get from the escape into esoteric spirituality, sexual and artistic ecstatic creativity. Nothing like the Frankfurt schools sense of the death of reason at the hands of critique leaving nothing to restrain barbarism on the one hand and culturally degraded routine on the other.

Against this, for Peter there are, for every assertion in the poetic mode of repetition of the story of vulnerability leading to the baroque defensive construction of the false self, two equally persistent counter-themes. The first is that even in the worst moments of seeming surrender to the requirements of role there is a part of each of us that is in rebellion, that doesn't surrender, that pushes back against its own fear and the constraints it has constructed onto itself against that fear. So there is not extinction of the yearning self, ever.

The Fall puts an enormous sometimes simply absolute obstacle between us and parts of the book are dystopian. But almost every time he singingly laments our withdrawal our abandonment of the project of reaching to touch the other because of the fear of rejection well founded on our first experiences of others who have already withdrawn before they meet us and so disappoint us at best and more likely wound us in our longing for connection—almost every time he affirms that we are never fully sealed off, and never give up and find authentic connection from time to time maybe often in the interstitial moments when something peeks out from behind the mask.

A second, equally dominant theme is that the baroque constructions of the false self in the family the economy and the polity are just that, constructions, and particularly the sense of the universality and so the inevitability of the self's situation is the product not of the overwhelming truth that everyone knows to be truth but quite the contrary. The stability of the system rests on the participants mirroring back to

each other the constructed falsities, so each feels compelled to believe it because everyone believes it when in fact no one believes it. The iron cage is a house of cards in which the wearer of each suit is an emperor without clothes.

### **COUNTER-CULTURAL SOCIAL MOVEMENT GENERATIONAL DOCUMENT**

This is a generational document in the sense that the theory critical theory is the development along original lines of the opening of the late sixties and seventies of a sub group of young philosophically inclined Americans to European theories that had been marginalized or repressed all through the 50s and early 60s. The emergence of this kind of theory in the us at that moment was closely linked to the emergence of the counterculture and of the social movements, anti-war, civil rights, environmental, feminist, each in forms varying from liberal reformist to radical to radically committed to violence. Critical theory, counterculture and social movement are all crucial parts of Peter's thing.

There were several violent contradictions between this learning in continental critical philosophy and the experiences of political activism and counterculture in the us in 1967-75 period. Peter's book is the most successful by far of the attempts of "left-over sixties people" such as myself to overcome the contradictions by a new fusion of the strands.

**Europeans and Americans** There were no American models of a fusion of this kind. Critical theory was European culturally, in all its subtexts, as well as in its formal textual content. This was true of each of the strands that we received. There was Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Adorno, Sartre. Marx, Lukacs, Gramsci, Althusser, Poulantsas, Habermas. Kohler, Saussure, Jacobson, Levi-Strauss. Only Freud and Weber by the fifties were already received into the pop culture of the intelligentsia.

In so much as there were American left critical theorists working at the time they were completely marginalized in the mainstream and elite academic culture we went to school in and of course invisible in the media serving the broader educated public.

As the Europeans conceptualized the "situation" they tended to be terminally pessimistic about the possibility of breaking out of the social, cultural, economic, political, iron cage of "late" but seemingly eternal capitalism. And they were culturally elitist to the nth degree.

We were experiencing a generational rebellion that seemed at the time exceptional (it was) and the softness or vulnerability so to speak of our elders made it seem anything but hopeless. We were passionately anti-elitist from our elite positions. And we were enamored of the explosion of a new pop culture that directly expressed us.

**The Americans** Everything about the European high cultural style was the antithesis of the hope of this hyper-educated American elite for a new way of being in the viciously hierarchical society where the only serious threat to us was the draft but "everyone else" from the lower middle class to the working class and underclass and blacks and gays and many women lived under multiple unbearable ones every day. The hope was to be able to have friendships, then collaborations, then communal life **then** political organizations in which people from anywhere could be together as equals on the basis love or its possibility in each encounter. Simple as that.

Art and music expressed it. It didn't feel marginal because Bob Dylan had actually made it into the pop charts, then the Beatles and millions more.

The culture of the sub-elite prior to the sixties moment corresponded to its longing to participate in the high critical tradition, so progressive jazz was the only American cultural thing that transcended American philistinism. And it prided itself on its self-contained aestheticism, turning your back on the audience or putting Jackson Pollack on the album cover to emphasize the avant garde alliance against bourgeois aesthetic conventions.

The culturally American things that fed this new equality/love subculture were quite different, the crucial reference was the beats and the iconic On the Road. And anarchists like Paul Goodman. Or Lenny Bruce. In music blues and folk music and then dramatically the arrival of rock and roll. Rock and roll counted and still counts as an Anglo-American-Black cultural achievement--for "us" it is on the same level as the arrival say of Beethoven in post-revolutionary Europe. Literally! But its content, the lyrics are far superior to the librettos of classical operas because they actually express often in different ways a highly sophisticated aestheticized version of ... INSIGHTS CLOSE TO THOSE OF THE ANTINOMIAN CRITICAL TRADITION. And this was popular music—every person in the US was in one way or another exposed to it as tunes you can't get out of your head.

Nothing could be further from the cultural style and implicit values of the writers in the critical traditions.

### **European critical theory deeply suits a sub-elite within the countercultural/movement milieu**

They played into the generational rebellion against the elders in several ways. This was stuff they didn't, and coming onto it so late, basically couldn't understand. So lots of perverse pleasure that not only were they in the wrong, they couldn't understand the discourse within which they were proved wrong.

The critical theories are and were critiques of the form of society, loosely post WWII North Atlantic welfare capitalist society that seemed to find its apogee in the US. These counterculture and the social movements presented themselves to this subset of intellectually inclined early boomers as justifying and explaining what we already knew we ought to be doing--rebellious against war racism sexism etc.

They also fulfill the desire for an antinomian ethics (paradox) in those of us who insist on the decision, on alienation as an existential rather than a situational condition. Who insist that the accurate/poetic representation of experience, phenomenology, is indispensable in theory construction. And that to know involves always "throwing" oneself, one's cognitive apparatus at an "essentially" unknowable something out there. The picture emerges through adjustment to the real as resistance. To our longing for an anti-dogmatic "truth" not in the sense of facts or dogmas or correct theories of something but the truth of the fluidity and contradictory character of thought and experience

### **AMBITION TO UNITE ALL SECTORS THROUGH A SINGLE ASPECT OF EXISTENCE**

Peters' models are Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger and early Sartre. They address a million aspects of contemporary life but they don't have the "structural" ambition to show how the domains that seem so radically different are the same with no dominant sector. The book fulfills the desire to juxtapose the sectors as all following from the same origin, which is in the human condition and

universal with the differences between sectors just representing the random contextualization of the structured initial encounter of mother and child as above.

The great question was something like could an American be a full on critical legal theorist making a claim to have found a single set of keys to unlock the hidden or just obscure malign patterns of all aspects of everyday life. That means family, economy and polity. There is a Marxist theory of everything with a key. Marcuse in *Eros and civilization* has a theory of everything and a key. Nancy Frazer in *Capitalism* has the “logic of capital” defining economic corps which exploits the family and the environment and the polity.

### **SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

To return to the theme of the generational nature of Peter’s vision, for him there is a single situation in which the house collapses, the nudity is exposed, and people spontaneously reach out to one another in mutual recognition. That situation is social movement, that is the experience of participating in an ongoing collective project of social transformation as in the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the environmental movement, and the labor movement and the movement for recognition of diverse gendered ways of being.

One of the greatest strength of the book for me is that Peter proposes no theory of why social movements that permit the sudden “breaking on through to the other side” moment arise, or what causes them. The only ones he discusses or even mentions is the collection we think of as “the sixties,” although a very large part of the whole occurred in the seventies including Peter’s own participation as he explains. This refusal is right for me because “we” have no powerful constructive social theory, a la Marxism, or a la the social democratic idea that worsening conditions due to misrule generate intensifying unrest, that predicts “crisis” and its outcome. Those theories seem to “us” not to have proved out. All we can say about crisis is that it will eventually arrive and its surprisingness is as crucial as its intensity.

A second great strength for me is that Peter’s version of the ‘60s/’70s social movements is triumph and tragedy and he is nostalgic only for the moments of ecstatic group formation, movement building, and momentum. But the social movements failed to sustain themselves. Rather than dwelling on all the ways in which they changed the world for the better, he is preoccupied with how they came apart. The point here is that that coming apart relegated us to the pre-movement world in which alienated false selves enact the world according to roles laid down by ideologies enforced by authorities whom we struggle to please by “perfecting” our selves as role performers. From this point of view the post-sixties is no better than the 50s.

Why they came apart and the lesson of that for our present post-movement world: They came apart because “we” lacked the enough confidence in the possibilities of the movements to avoid falling into disastrous traps. Confidence was needed because all participants brought/bring into movement their pre-movement selves, their false selves only temporarily in abeyance, and a million habits and internal structures designed to deal with the fear of humiliation in the alienated world of mutually reinforcing falsities. The two disasters were bureaucratization and crazy destructive rage against any and all kinds

of leadership.

The push to bureaucratize and the descent into anti-leadership wrecker-rage have the same origin in the scary quality of mutual recognition once it has a chance of changing things in real life, because more recognition always contains the possibility of more humiliation. The “leap” into it is a leap of faith that one won’t find oneself in the worst version of the nightmare the false self was designed to help us avoid. On the other hand, the energy behind movement is still there, pushing now in distorted form toward bureaucracy or anarchy.

And here is the most important lesson of the book for me: there is no formula for movement design or indeed for governance of any kind that will avoid those twin dangers. Everything depends on the leaders managing those tendencies by reassuring us through their gestures and their eye contact that they are sustaining the group’s collective longing against the group’s disintegrating fears. So Peter does have a theory of how the movement in general fails, which is, however, not of the sort that gives rise to clear maxims on how to avoid it. Because it is a question of the quality of intersubjective existence, never reducible to rules or formulae.

In light of this, the question of what is to be done has an answer, but an extremely modest and, to me, convincing one. The idea is roughly “capacity building” in the self and in the smaller proto-movements that survive into the present. Since there is no theory of what will bring the moment of crisis in which movement can happen, there is no theory of how to prepare in the Marxist sense of the party-building building group waiting for the revolutionary moment. The preparation is not for any particular political or cultural action, but preparation to participate as a person who can withstand the upward (bureaucratizing) and downward (anarchic rage) pushes within oneself and then be part of, or even a leader of, whoever is trying to keep movement moving, precariously afloat in rough weather and churning seas.