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## Of acknowledgement, manners and multicultural democratic society

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### ABSTRACT

Clayton Chin and Geoffrey Brahm Levey's article "Recognition as acknowledgment" offers a timely proposal to address a dimension of multicultural democracy – symbolic politics – that they take to have been neglected by liberal theorists of multicultural rights as well as theorists of recognition. I approach this argument, first, by taking up Chin and Levey's argument in relation to an argument advanced by Jacob Levy in his essay "Multicultural manners" which also aims to address issues that are not well-captured by the rights or recognition approaches in order to bring into focus the issue of social belonging. This discussion will serve to provide a basis for a second focus on the salience of the politics of the border and of citizenship for symbolic politics in order to raise some questions about how a concern with forms of symbolic exclusion necessarily engages issues of territorial and civic inclusion and exclusion.

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Clayton Chin and Geoffrey Brahm Levey's article "Recognition as acknowledgment" offers a timely proposal to address a dimension of multicultural democracy – symbolic politics – that they take to have been neglected by liberal theorists of multicultural rights as well as theorists of recognition. Their focus on symbolic politics is driven by their concern with the conditions of a first personal plural sense of political belonging in democratic contexts of post-immigration difference. The salience of the category of "acknowledgment" for their purposes is that they take it, following Tully, to refer to a mode of recognition that does not presuppose "a 'fixed, authentic, or autonomous' identity as the object of recognition" (15) and, following Markell (drawing on Cavell), as a mode of responsiveness to the other that is not

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tied to evaluation of the content of their identity. This leads them to “propose an understanding of acknowledgement as a *posture or act towards others that symbolically includes them as equal members in the political community.*” (17) On this view, acknowledgment is, first, politicizing in that it discloses forms of existing symbolic exclusion and, second, acts as a “legitimation lever” that asserts the legitimate presence of others in the political community and hence affirms the political community as an internally diverse community.

In what follows, I want to approach this argument, first, by taking up Chin and Levey’s argument in relation to an argument advanced by Jacob Levy in his essay “Multicultural manners” which also aims to address issues that are not well-captured by the rights or recognition approaches. My interest here is partly driven by the fact that Chin and Levey distinguish vertical (state-individual/group) and horizontal (group-group) dimensions of political belonging but seem to focus largely on the former, and partly by an interest in how political belonging is related to social belonging and political equality to social equality. This discussion will serve to provide a basis for a second focus on the salience of the politics of the border and of citizenship for symbolic politics in order to raise some questions about how a concern with forms of symbolic exclusion necessarily engages issues of territorial and civic inclusion and exclusion.

### **Multicultural manners and/as social acknowledgment**

Levy’s essay “Multicultural manners” (2010) focuses on a range of everyday social issues in a post-immigration democratic society that arise from the proximity and interaction of diverse groups, but which recourse to theories of multicultural rights or theories of recognition do not help us to navigate. So, for example:

- (1) A group of Orthodox Jewish men in Montreal ask a gym near their neighborhood to cover its windows – so that they do not risk seeing women exercising in skimpy workout clothes.
- (2) A Muslim businessman seeks to lead his professional life without meeting alone with women other than his wife. An Orthodox Jewish businessman seeks to lead his professional life without shaking hands with women other than his wife.
- (3) A group of Muslim women request the regular provision of some dedicated single-sex women’s hours in a public swimming pool, so that they can swim without violating religious norms about exposing themselves to male view.
- (4) A majority- but not universally-Jewish neighborhood seeks to erect a symbolic *eruv* [or *erub*] – a string marking a boundary within which Jews are allowed to carry children or items outdoors on the Sabbath,

when such carrying is not ordinarily permitted. These traditionally marked a set of adjoining properties, all owned by Jews, that would be construed by Rabbinic law as jointly owned one day out of seven, analogously to a common courtyard. But in a modern urban neighborhood, it almost inevitably includes, and may even run a string across, property owned by non-Jews. (Levy 2010, 61)

To address these kinds of cases, Levy proposes we adopt the concepts of manners and civility that were central to eighteenth century political thought. The concept of manners, like the concept of culture, has both a broad descriptive sense (the manners of a group as their customary forms of social interaction) and an evaluative sense (“good” versus “bad” manners) and using the concept allows us to address the relationship between the two:

The manners (the customs and norms and mores) of some societies discourage conversation between an unaccompanied man and an unaccompanied woman if they are not married to each other; what should a professional woman with manners (politeness) do when coming into contact with a man from such a society? The question means, in part: what are *our* manners, for a suitably modern, complex, and diverse sense of *ours*, governing such a situation? And that lens allows us to see that what’s at stake isn’t any simple opposition: their religion against our reason, their customs against our progress. What’s at stake is manners on all sides—including manners about the interactions among groups with different manners. (Levy 2010, 66)

None of this is to deny that forms of multicultural rights and recognition are important (on the contrary), it is rather to draw attention to the fact that conditions of living together with our diverse manners requires the cultivation of multicultural manners that acknowledge our common presence. As Levy notes, this is closely linked to another classic eighteenth century concept – civility – whose development was bound up with the diversity that characterized urbanization in Europe:

... at least two salient features seem common to all the things we call cities. First, they are prone to considerable heterogeneity. Travelers and traders and ambassadors go to cities. Refugees and ambitious youth from all sorts of regions go to and live in cities. Stereotypically, each rural area or village is relatively homogenous, while the city they surround has a relatively mixed population. Second (and this seems trivial but isn’t) they involve people living in close physical proximity. City-dwellers unavoidably coexist with each other in relatively narrow spaces. They bump into each other; they smell each other; they see and are seen by each other. Both of these features make *civility* a crucial aspiration of city life. (Levy 2010, 67)

Referring back to the cases with which he began, Levy highlights their relationship to the concepts of manners and civility:

It seems to me the cases under consideration all sit at the point where all these concerns and ideas meet: manners-as-customs, civility as the norms governing

the awkwardly up-close coexistence of too many people who have different sets of manners, and both manners and civility as (in the modern sense) politeness. Several of them arise because traditional manners about who can see and be seen by whom are difficult to sustain when up-close with too many people with differing manners. They are, in a real sense, urban problems. (Levy 2010, 68)

Civility is to be understood here as the process of working out, typically in highly context-dependent ways, ways of navigating differences in order to enjoy social lives in which groups inevitably interact and rub up against each other. This does not require that a group value the content of the manners of another group, only that they acknowledge that those others do so, and they all live their social lives in proximity with each other.

Let me now bring Levy's argument into dialogue with Chin and Levey's argument. The first point to note here is that this focus on manners and civility is consonant with Chin and Levey's sociological realism (which they draw from Modood's focus on "the fact of negative difference" and the dialectic of negative difference and ethno-cultural assertiveness). Second, multicultural manners or civility is not predicated on evaluating the content of identities but on working out how to respond to the fact and fate of living together socially in conditions of diversity. Third, and consequently, civility in this normative sense can be appropriately conceptualized as a form of acknowledgment but, in contrast to Chin and Levey's understanding of acknowledgment in political terms, civility-as-acknowledgment may be seen as *a posture or act towards others that symbolically includes them as equal members of society*.

This last point matters for three reasons. The first is that it makes clear that the category of acknowledgment is a broader category than Chin and Levey's specific political use of it. The second is that it draws attention to the point that the category of acknowledgment can address issues of social belonging as well as political belonging. The third is that civility-as-acknowledgement in addressing people as common participants in social life is not predicated on their political membership status, whether they are citizens, permanent residents, lawful immigrants (currently without permanent resident status), or undocumented migrants. To explore the salience of these points, let us turn to the relationship of arguments concerning acknowledgment to the politics of the border.

### **Acknowledgment and the politics of the border**

Chin and Levey's argument, if I understand it correctly, in focusing on "acknowledgment as a posture or act towards others that symbolically includes them as equal members in the political community" primarily addresses those members of a democracy characterized by post-immigration difference who are, formally, citizens of the state. They note that:

official apologies for past wrongs, official condemnation of racism or exclusion, recognition of significant cultural events, alterations to offensive symbols, and histories of immigration can be important state-led acts that assert the equality and membership of a particular group as co-belonging (2022, 20)

But it is, of course, the case that the symbolic inclusion of immigrant groups who have become citizens is not independent of the continuing operation of immigration, naturalization, and denationalization policies by the state. So, for example, Amy Reed-Sandoval (2020) writing in the US context has coined the term “socially undocumented” to refer to those members of society who, regardless of whether they are legally undocumented, lawful immigrants, permanent residents or citizens, are exposed to domination in virtue of that the fact that they are seen as belonging to a particular social group: to be *socially undocumented* is to possess a real, visible, and embodied social identity that does not always track one’s actual legal status. In the UK, we can point to the “hostile environment” and one of its effects, the Windrush Scandal, but also to the development of “liberal” denationalization policies exhibited, for example, in the case of Shamima Begum and the ongoing use of non-entry measures to block access to asylum for people from Africa and Asia. The obvious point here is that what we may call “internal acts of acknowledgment” directed at symbolically including those persons of immigrant descent who have formal citizenship status cannot be easily separated from ongoing policies of the state in treating those who are seen by post-immigration minorities as relevantly similar or analogous to them.

Acknowledgment in the specific political sense that Chin and Levey propose is seen as having two features: politicization and legitimation. Thus, acts of acknowledgment both “politicize something that would otherwise be considered non-political” (2022, 18), hence raising the issue of symbolic inclusion as a political issue, and are “legitimation levers intended to impact on the wider symbolic community” (2022, 19). The first question raised by the recognition that the acknowledgment of post-immigration difference cannot be separated from policies concerning territorial borders (immigration and asylum) and civil boundaries (nationality law) thus concerns what we might call “the felicity conditions of (political) acknowledgment”. There is, I think, at least a coherence constraint here in that acknowledgment of citizens of immigrant descent requires that the policies of the state in relation to territorial border and civil boundaries do not communicate a directly contrary message in the way that, for example, the Windrush Scandal did to British citizens of West Indian descent or the Begum case does to British citizens who are Muslim or how the “hostile environment” policy does to British citizens of immigrant descent in general. One way that Chin and Levey might try to accommodate this point is through their focus on “legitimation levers” and their stress that acknowledgement can

be “deeply transformative”. Something like this may be in play when they write:

Acknowledging the presence and validity of others not only transforms the way in which one can symbolize the political community, it also gives post-immigration communities the encouragement to “influence the attitudes, mores and practice of the rest of society.” (2022, 18)

The thought here might be that post-immigration communities would be able to leverage internal acts of acknowledgment to point to the ways in which immigration and nationality policies do not cohere with these acts and thereby to initiate transformation. But the dynamic can also work in the other direction with immigration and nationality policies reinforcing the experience of internal exclusion, of political non-belonging. The point that we should take from this, I think, is that the scope of acts of (political) acknowledgment is wider than acknowledgment of citizens of immigrant descent or, put another way, acknowledgement of citizens of immigrant descent requires more than internal acts of acknowledgment.

These considerations also return us to the point highlighted in the preceding section concerning civility-as-acknowledgment. Consider a recent case from Glasgow in May 2021 in which UK immigration officers sought to remove two migrants from a Muslim community during Eid. They were blocked from doing so by a large multicultural crowd of protestors and, as the BBC reports: “Some of the protesters were heard shouting ‘let our neighbours go’.” (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-57100259>, accessed 15th August 2022). The suggestion which I want to advance is that this kind of case highlights the significance of social acknowledgment, not because civility is a form of solidarity but because civility creates the conditions under which members of culturally diverse groups acknowledge each other as common members of society in ways that can support the thicker bonds represented by the ethical concept of “neighbour”. Civility enables culturally diverse people to see each other as neighbours rather than people who are merely situated in contingent relations of proximity and, to the extent to which this thicker relationship is formed, re-shapes the sense of obligations that are owed to each other.

This is perhaps a somewhat extreme example, but the more general point that civility as social acknowledgement shifts the symbolic imagination of society has significance for the imagination of political community. It does so because social membership and of political membership are mutually interactive in democracies – social membership is both a ground on which claims to political membership can be advanced and political membership can be seen as securing social membership and providing social members with (joint) authority over their conditions of social life. Moreover, modern democracy (in contrast to its ancient modes) is a political form in which it

is important that social membership and political membership do not fall widely out of alignment – hence the deep democratic worry about a permanent class of (“temporary” or undocumented) migrants effectively excluded from citizenship (Carens 2013). In this respect, it matters that the category of acknowledgment has social as well as political forms, and the question of their mutual interaction becomes an important locus for empirical research.

## Conclusion

The considerations that I have offered in this reflection on Chin and Levey’s proposal for introducing the category of acknowledgment into our reflections on the conditions of multicultural democracy in order to address issues of symbolic politics and political belonging are not offered as a critique of their argument, but rather as an encouragement to develop it further by recognizing that the category of acknowledgment has wider salience than a focus on political community. What I have tried to do in this short piece is to motivate this broadening of focus to encompass social membership and social belonging, and to suggest that doing so provides an important agenda for addressing the relationship of acts of acknowledgment directed at post-immigration communities to the politics of borders and of citizenship, on the one hand, and of political membership to social membership. The relationship between the symbolic politics of society and of political community and the role of acknowledgment in relation to each of these, and their interaction, is one way to taking up and extending the research agenda that Chin and Levey have offered to us.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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