

Modernity's Wager

AUTHORITY, THE SELF,
AND TRANSCENDENCE

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INTRODUCTION

FROM ANCIENT Babylon to contemporary Indonesia, from China to Canada, and from the Inuit to the Parisian, all peoples and societies have experienced power and its differential distribution. Defined by Max Weber as "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance," power has been a fact of social life from time out of mind.¹

Like people everywhere and in all ages, most members of modern societies readily understand the workings of power. Power and power differentials are everywhere. We are schooled in its uses and abuses. We ascertain its trappings. We know who wields it and who does not. We are, in this country anyway, concerned about spreading it around more fairly, as can be seen by the pervasive rhetoric of empowerment.

One thing that sets modern society apart from most other peoples and places, however, is the difficulty its members have in appreciating and fully understanding one of power's cognate terms: *authority*. This book is about authority and the need to sensitize ourselves to its resonances despite our impulses to the contrary. It sets out and develops four major claims about authority and its relation to self-identities, as follows:

1. Modernity, whether in the form of liberal politics, capitalist exchange, or the epistemologies of the social sciences, is inherently hostile to the idea and experience of authority and as a result has difficulty understanding its persistence.
2. Despite this aversion of modern politics and society to authority, any account of the self that does not include an account of authority will ultimately fail to explain human action and experience in the world.
3. We ignore the phenomenon of authority at our peril, for by so doing we fail to recognize the import of the reemergence of ethnic, religious, and primordial identities in today's global culture.
4. By establishing the necessary connection of authority to ideas of selfhood through such phenomena as community and the sacred, this book hopes to resensitize us to this ineliminable aspect of our existence while at the same time maintaining commitments to democracy, pluralism, and tolerance.

The remainder of the introduction is devoted to a preliminary clarification of the above points.

The idea of authority is traditionally defined as legitimate power, that is, as power which is seen as fairly exercised or justly wielded. Authority, then, with its attendant association of legitimacy, stands in contradistinction to power *simpliciter*. It was Max Weber who offered a succinct and powerful formulation of the two possible foundations of legitimacy.

The first he terms *subjective* and the second *external*. Weber posits the three possible bases of the *subjective* as follows: "1) affectual: resulting from emotional surrender; or 2) value-rational: determined by the belief in the absolute validity of the order as the expression of ultimate values of an ethical or esthetic or of any other type; or 3) religious: determined by the belief that salvation depends upon obedience to the order." The *external* bases of legitimacy he defines as "guaranteed by the expectation of specific external effects, that is, by interest situations."²

To a great extent, modern, liberal societies have come to base their legitimacy on the second, *external* source, upon a politics of interest, as delineated in the writings of Hobbes and Hume. As a result, people living in these societies find it difficult to understand and empathize with the motives and motivations of people for whom the other set of justifying practices—those rooted in ultimate and more usually in sacred values—provides the foundations of legitimacy and hence of authority.

Motives and motivations are central here. For authority to exist, as opposed to power, the legitimacy of its actions must be registered in the subjective experience and consciousness of the actors. Whereas power rests solely on the coercion of the will, authority rests on what Weber has called the "inner justification" of dominion.³ This inner, subjective experience is at the heart of the phenomenon of authority. In fact, if we can grasp the relevance of Weber's two modes of legitimacy in terms of this subjective experience, we are at least on the way to understanding why most secular liberal members of modern societies have such difficulty understanding authority in other social settings.

We in modern societies accept the existence of power differentials, accept the need to coerce our will, in order to fulfill certain needs or attain certain goals. In the language of social choice theory, we rein in our wills in order to maximize certain utilities. Hence, we obey the doctor's exhortations to refrain from smoking and limit our drinking; we abide the boring professor in order to complete the course and get a high grade; we do not tell our customer what we really think of her because we want her business; and we vote for a candidate whose behavior appalls us, because we believe our interests will be best served by this politician rather than that one. In the specific settings of "authority" rela-

tions then—with teachers, politicians, and even business colleagues—we bend our will to theirs not out of belief in the salvation of our souls or in a set of *ultimate values*. Nor do we accept their dictates out of the "disinterested motives" to which Weber referred in his first "affectual" category of subjective legitimacy.⁴

Quite the opposite. We accept the authority of those wielding power because over the long run it is in our interest to do so. Specific instances of such relations may be defined by the workings of pure power. But even when it is not power that is at play but rather some form of the legitimate nature of the exchange, the legitimacy is rooted in interests. Moreover, as Ralf Dahrendorf observed more than a generation ago, most people in modern societies are differentially distributed into different power groupings (what he termed "Imperatively Coordinated Associations," based on Weber's *Herrschaftsverbund*) so that in some groups we may be near the top of the power pyramid and in others near the bottom.⁵ No cosmological significance is attributed to these differences, no weight in terms of ultimate and sacred values. The categories represent only competencies and their social valuation. We are better at some things that society rewards more or less highly, less successful at others, and the differences are mediated by different forms of exchange. Distinctions are, that is, about nothing more than utility functions. And such for most of us is the basis of the social order: not God's will, not the salvation of our souls, not the realization of ultimate values, but simply the satisfaction of interests.

This has been the traditional *economistic* reading of society and the social order, one that has made quite some headway in the social sciences in the form of social choice and rational choice theory. It is, as Brian Barry put it some thirty years ago, an essentially "Benthamite" understanding of society.

Its most important assumptions are: that men tend to act rationally in the pursuit of their ends; that most men in all societies want power, status and economic goods; and that internalized restraints on the pursuit of these are less significant than sanctions which make use of them (public disapproval, legal punishments etc.). Its characteristic method of proceeding is to work out how men rationally pursuing power, status and economic goods would behave in a certain set-up, and then to suggest that men in the real world behave sufficiently similarly to make the conclusions applicable.⁶

In this understanding we are dealing therefore not with inner restraints but with external coercion of our will, either by the threat of sanctions or the need to fulfill interests. Its opposite number is that other, "innerly justified" disinterested acceptance of authority predicated not

on external concerns but on internal ones. This is not a will coerced (from without) but a will subjugated (from within). One would hardly say of the observant Orthodox Jew who refused to eat pork and the observant Muslim who refused to drink wine that they were coerced from without. Rather one would say that they accepted the law's authority and subjugated themselves to it from within. It would in fact be difficult to describe their actions in terms of maximizing utilities or obtaining a set of discrete goods. They were simply being what they are, being themselves. An observant Jew or Muslim could not remain such and at the same time become an eater of pork. If they did, they would become something different. Now moving from being an observant Jew or Muslim to being a nonobservant one is something quite different from changing one's profession from electrician to tennis pro. What makes it different is precisely the acceptance of a certain authority as a critical component of self-identity.

The point here is simple, that ideas of authority and of self are inseparable, as certain understandings of self imply certain understandings of authority. The opposite is of course also the case. Hence when moderns adhere to certain Benthamite ideas of the self, implied as well are certain ideas about authority, as essentially predicated on the fulfillment of interests. Similarly, when we advance or advocate values and beliefs in a more equal distribution of power and eschew any idea of a more innerly justified authority, we also signal certain ideas of the self and of relations between selves. Most broadly put, this modern idea of the self is an autonomous, atomistic, and self-regulating moral agent endowed with rights. And relations between selves are seen in terms of an exchange based on the mutual interests of the contracting parties. These views are held so absolutely that they shackle our imagination and understanding of other notions of selves or of authority, specifically such as are innerly justified.

This state of affairs is unfortunate for at least two reasons. On the purely intellectual side, it makes it difficult for the social sciences and indeed for important parts of philosophy to explain human action in terms of anything but purely calculative, power-oriented acts of utility maximization and corresponding notions of negotiation and exchange. But what of such powerful motivations as shame and pride or collective guilt and responsibility, or even the attempt to rationalize and "tame" luck or *fortuna*? These, unfortunately, are left under-problematized and misunderstood.

On the more substantive level, the rational choice position leaves us without an explanation for a key cultural component of globalization—the reemergence of salient religious identities and commitments in many parts of the world. Indeed, we find in contemporary India, Israel, Algeria, Turkey, Egypt, the Balkans, Latin America, and Eastern Europe

a renewed vigor in many different forms of (mostly) revealed religion that no one would have imagined a generation ago. Moreover, the areas where this revival occurs are also the sites of great conflict and often of war and terrorism. These contemporary developments force us to retreat from the "secularization thesis" of the 1960s, which held that modernization went hand in hand with secularization. Not surprisingly, too, this resurgence of religious identities has been noted in much scholarly literature—from the Fundamentalism Project at the University of Chicago to David Martin's work on evangelical Christianity in Latin America, to the influential works of Samuel Huntington and of Benjamin Barber.⁷ These are but some of the more popular and widely disseminated works on the new religious consciousness. What is unquestionable is that one aspect of globalization is the rise of a new religious consciousness that cuts across existing modes of identity, commitment, and senses of national community.

At the same time increasing attention is being paid to issues of collective responsibility as we see in the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa, the War Crimes Tribunal in the Hague, the *lustration* process in the former Czechoslovakia, the ongoing concern with responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust, even the struggle to extradite Pinochet to Spain to stand trial for events of the 1970s in Chile. This is perhaps the defining issue of life in Bosnia and Herzegovina today, though it is equally important in France in the myriad discussions and debates over French responsibility for both Vichy and Algeria. The current academic interest in the problem of evil captures aspects of this problem of individual and collective responsibility as well.

The confluence of all these issues undermines the liberal vision of community founded on the radical autonomy of the individual. Even in the United States the idea of the liberal self is under attack by a host of forces, from the Christian Coalition to the communitarian movement. What is the attraction of these forces in a world that, after all, is more and more identified with pluralistic societal structures, equalitarian ideas of individual rights, and market economies oriented to the choice and actions of individual economic actors? A more nuanced and sophisticated inquiry into the reemergent religious consciousness must thus be offered. Any simple equating of religion with fundamentalism just won't do. Such an inquiry can most usefully be achieved by analyzing the connection between authority and self-identity so commonly found in religion. However, this connection is so inimicable to our modernist, often social scientific understanding that we must begin by addressing the objections raised by that perspective. We must, as it were, clear the way before we can come to appreciate a mode of being and understanding ourselves that has become foreign to many of us.

Let us begin with those ideas of self that lie at the basis of social scientific inquiry, a mode of thought that developed together with modernist (and generally democratic) sensibilities in many parts of the world, for example, in the France of the Third Republic, the Chicago of the Progressive Era, or the Turkey of Ataturk. The debates that today define and shape the disciplines of the social sciences—over structure and agency, rational action, social choice models, and the structure/agency debate—all are refractions of the politics of democratic practice. They inform struggles over entitlements, affirmative action, distributive justice, and the state, as well as over local communities, identities, and commitments.

The assumptions of modern, democratic, and liberal political practice are integral to the social sciences. This is true of the more agent-orientated theoretical assumptions of Mancur Olson or Kenneth Arrow, as well as of the more collectivist and culturalist orientation rooted in the sociologies of Emile Durkheim and Talcott Parsons. In fact, in chapter one I argue that this congruence of political ideology and scientific practice can be found most saliently in the concept of social role. And that once social scientists make use of the concept of *social role*, which they must, to discuss *social structure* in any meaningful way, they become locked into a particular epistemology that prejudices their ability to understand the place of authority in constituting individual selves. Even differences between rational choice and more culturalist approaches pale in significance before their more fundamentally shared assumptions on personal identity and selfhood.

This is not to say that such approaches are inherently false. But their assumptions about the nature of the self and its relation with others, rooted as they are in the political assumptions of modernity, are seriously circumscribed and of only limited value when analyzing the “revolt against modernity” characterized by nonmodern modes of action and existence, including those motivated by religious commitments and ethnic, primordial identities. To fathom such identities we need to develop an empathy with a kind of self that is in its essence foreign to us, as citizens and as scholars.

Arising out of a skepticism toward the ethical systems of Aristotelian and neo-Thomistic thought, the modern idea of the self was given its best expression by Bernard de Mandeville at the beginning of the eighteenth century. He wrote:

man centers every thing in himself, and neither loves nor hates, but for his own Sake. . . . Every individual is a little World by itself, and all Creatures, as far as their Understanding and Abilities will let them, endeavor to make that Self happy: This in all of them is the continual Labour, and seems to be the whole Design of Life. Hence it follows, that in the Choice of Things Men

must be determined by the Perception they have of Happiness; and no Person can commit or set about an Action, which at that then present time seems not [to] be the best to him.⁸

The social bonds existing between such agents were characterized not long afterward by Hume in this now famous quote:

Your corn is ripe today; mine will be so to-morrow. 'Tis profitable for us both, that I shou'd labour with you today, and that you shou'd aid me to-morrow. I have no kindness for you, and know you have as little for me. . . . Hence I learn to do a service to another, without bearing him any real kindness; because I foresee, that he will return my service, in expectation of another of the same kind, and in order to maintain the same correspondence of good offices with me or with others.⁹

This is a vision of a society regulated, not by any shared moral commitments nor by any Thomistic hierarchy of natural and divine law, but simply by the workings and pursuit of interest.

Finally, the adjudication of disputes between such self-regulating and autonomous agents was, in Adam Smith's words, achieved through appeal “to the eyes of the third party, that impartial spectator, the great inmate of the breast who judges impartially between conflicting interests.” In Smith's terms:

We endeavor to examine our own conduct as we imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it. If, upon placing ourselves in his situation, we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives which influenced it, we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation and condemn it.¹⁰

Before we can make any proper comparison of opposing interests, we must change our position. We must view them from neither our own place nor yet from his, neither with our own eyes nor yet with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third person, who has no particular connection with either, and who judges impartially between us.¹¹

Mandeville, Hume, and Smith, taken together, allow us to “triangulate” the terms of modern politics as well as of the social sciences. Their perspective defines an orientation based on the autonomous, contracting individual engaged in exchange with other such individuals. They adjudicate their differences on the basis of negotiation.

We are so embedded in this world that a world of authority and a sacred locus beyond the realms of negotiation and exchange—the world of increasing numbers of our contemporaries—is one that many of us can grasp only with difficulty. Some idea of a self as constituted by goods

internal to it, rather than simply as a maximizer of utility functions (i.e., goods) external to it, is therefore presented here as a necessary corrective to the prevalent overemphasis on the idea of the individual as morally autonomous and self-regulated. The hope is to get beyond the conventional dichotomies of authority and autonomy that have become the touchstones of a secular, Enlightenment conscience.

Authoritative, sacred values are, of course, linked to modes of communal identity, boundaries, commitments, and desiderata. In the broadest of terms, different forms of community can be parsed into those resting on *primordial*, *civic*, and *transcendent* identities and principles, respectively.¹² Different ideas of the sacred and of communal membership are represented as well in different principles of generalized exchange, which mediate the workings of market and negotiation.¹³ Thus the principles of kinship solidarity “trump” the workings of market rationality in very different ways than do those of liberal individualism, which are, in turn, of a very different order from those predicated on transcendent values and Godly dictates. In slightly altered terms, potlatch is as different from child labor laws as both are from prohibitions against usury.

Matthew Arnold once defined righteousness as the “not ourselves.” Although that “not ourselves” can take many forms, the most “not ourselves” that we can conceive is the transcendent. For transcendence is the most radical form of heteronomy, with heteronomy understood as subject to the authority of another, to an external law. Not surprisingly, then, the discovery of transcendence in the period that the philosopher Karl Jaspers termed the “Axial Age” (roughly between 500 B.C.E. and 600 C.E.) played a critical role in reframing and constituting our ideas of authority as well as of the self.¹⁴ The contemporary return to modes of self-identity predicated on such a basis, as well as on more primordially defined forms of collectivity, is to be understood in terms of a reaction or revolt against modernity and those forms of liberal individualist community most associated with the project of modernity. In fact, one of the arguments presented here is that it is the very spread of modern principles of self and of community (that triangulated vision noted above) in the social and political realms that calls forth its own antithesis. Civic community, that is, engenders its own ghosts in the form of renewed ethnic and religious allegiances.

To understand just why this is so we must explore aspects of existence not given their due in modern, liberal visions of self and community. These are aspects that turn on emotions such as shame, pride, collective guilt, and collective responsibility—ideas that cannot be comfortably understood in terms of autonomy and self-regulation. It is an idea of ethical being at odds with the regnant Mandevillian and Humean assumptions, an idea of a constituted self that ties one to others in a way that is beyond

the calculations of pure exchange. It is this vision of self that is at the core of the very contemporary “politics of identity,” that is, of mutual recognition, which fully autonomous and self-regulating selves would, presumably, be able to do well without.

As children in the United States, we grew up with the phrase “sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me.” In the Middle East, just the opposite saying holds: “Wounds heal, but words hurt forever.” Different ideas of the self and of the self’s relation with others are contained in these sayings. The one is autonomous, where all that can be hurt by others is the physical ‘shell’. The core, what is inside and internal, remains forever inviolable. The other is open to the interlocutor. The ‘inside’ is in endless and often dangerous dialogue and confrontation with the external world. However, as we know from the often vociferous contemporary debates around multiculturalism and identity politics, it is not only in the Middle East that these modes of community and of selfhood hold sway, but, increasingly, in our own society as well. Just how different our attempts to ban certain forms of speech as hateful, disrespectful, and hurtful to groups in the polity are from the Maldives Islands’ banning of the animated movie *The Prince of Egypt* as disrespectful of Moses (and hence of Muslims), I am not sure. Both, however, have everything to do with “names” rather than “sticks and stones.” Ultimately, the inability of liberal models of self to adequately account for central components of social and individual life is an issue not only in explaining social action in the Indian Ocean, but in the Rocky Mountains as well.

One aspect of the dichotomy between the different orientations of the self lies in how they variously privilege the internal and the external in understanding moral action. The modernist Kantian privileging of intent over action was challenged some twenty years ago in the accounts of Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel of “moral luck.” In these justly famous philosophical essays they critique that account of morality turning on the internal state of the agent—on intent rather than on the action itself and the environments of action. And Williams has continued to criticize the more modernist reading of moral action, with its slighting of the act and indeed of those other forces beyond our own control that nevertheless influence our action. He gives primacy to the workings of *fortuna* and *tyche* as constitutive components of ethical action. His is an understanding of the human agent much closer to the view offered here. Indeed, the issues of shame and honor and their dependence on action over which we exert no control or only minimal control are at the core of those contingent phenomena that play such a role in framing issues of moral luck. Shame, then, relates both to control and *fortuna* and to relations between selves who are not defined as autonomous. Put other-

wise, the politics of recognition and identity is not far from the calculus of shame and honor.

Our own concepts of self and society are deeply tied to an idea of the self as interior, as tied up with intent, control of our actions, moral autonomy, and individual states of conscience. To no small extent, this modern, secular, and Enlightenment view is rooted in the Christian salvational drama and the progressive institutionalization of Christianity as a major world religion. As much as Hobbes feared and despised the Puritan sectaries, his own vision of the individual owed much to a reading of the self developed by Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and their seventeenth century followers. The moral autonomy of the rights-bearing modern citizen derives from the two-thousand-year-old transformation of the Jewish redemptive vision and the interiorization of its soteriological drama: from the community to the individual, from the realm of external acts to that of internal states. Paul on the law is as good a guide to our contemporary understanding and sensibility as are the writings of most social scientists and psychologists. And the road to the prisoner's dilemma and social choice theory passes through the internalized conscience and introspective self of Augustine, Luther, and the pietistic sects of the Protestant Reformation.

Marcel Mauss, Louis Dumont, and Charles Taylor have all recognized this theme and developed it in suggestive ways.¹⁵ The autonomous (internalized) self and ultimately the rights-bearing citizen was the unintended, unplanned, and somewhat ironic consequence of Reformed religiosity. But so was the secular, disenchanted, transcendentless world, a world without sacrality and, to return to the theme with which we began, without authority.

The centerless world of radical secularization—this fundamentalist doctrine of enlightened reason—has called into being its own nemesis in the form of an often fundamentalist religiosity. Both are in a sense the outcomes of what I term *modernity's wager*. Pascal's wager of the seventeenth century, of reason for faith, was replaced in the eighteenth century by a wager over the terms of sacrality. Modern culture and politics, I argue, staked its all on the ability to construct an authoritative locus of sacrality on a foundation of transcendental rather than transcendent dictates. We have eschewed any idea of the revealed truth of a transcendent Being in favor of "self-evident" truths, thought to be as amenable to reason as the principles of Euclidian geometry. Emile Durkheim recognized this well when he noted that "since each of us incarnates something of humanity, each individual consciousness contains something divine and thus finds itself marked with a character which renders it sacred and inviolable to others."¹⁶ We have wagered our idea of the sacred on beliefs in individual rights, rooted in reason and serving as the "touch-

stone of [our] morality," partaking in "transcendental majesty."¹⁷ This appeal to reason as the sacred remains at the base of contemporary democratic and liberal ideas of citizenship, political order, and individual identities.

Whether such as this can support the armature of the sacred has been for some time open to question (think of Max Weber's critique of modern positive law doctrine).¹⁸ Indeed it is increasingly uncertain that it is a wager that we shall win. For as religious dictates are coming increasingly to reshape the personal, social, and public behavior of men and women in many parts of the world, so is there increasing concern that these newly emerging (or reemerging) religious identities will erect barriers to tolerance, understanding, and the ability to coexist in mutual respect and recognition.

After all, the development of pluralism, democracy, and toleration in the West has been marked by a retreat of religion from the public arena, its privatization, and the general growth of secularization as the defining context of public life. Pluralism as a value implies the ability to exist together with other, competing visions of society and of the cosmos. It implies tolerance, not solely of error (what can perhaps be termed tolerance with a small *t*) but also of alternative and competing civilizational worldviews (tolerance with a capital *T*), with their own claims to the public sphere and the organization of communal life.

As society secularized, religion retreated from the public domain, reduced its claims on the public sphere, and became more and more a matter of the congregant's internal value disposition—with the result of a concomitant growth in tolerance of other faiths. But pluralism and tolerance seem to hold only as long as religion is privatized. To us, any other accommodation seems almost inconceivable.

However, this is only one historical path, the path taken by Western Christianity as it secularized. But is this model necessarily the only one? We have no reason to believe that the path of privatization in Judaism or Islam would be similar to that of Christianity, because the very terms of communal membership and individual identity are so different in these religions from what they are in a secularized Christian polity. Realizing this situation, what is presented here are the beginnings of a very different type of argument for tolerance and for pluralism, based not on a privatized conscience but on a skeptical one, on arguments of an epistemological modesty and a sense of humility as providing a foundation for mutual recognition, sympathy, and what the moralists of the Scottish Enlightenment termed benevolence.

These, then, are the major contours of the argument. It begins with a discussion of how different social scientific approaches view the individual and the nature of individual action (or agency in the parlance of the

social sciences). The first chapter explores the assumptions that underlie the different approaches of rational actor models of self. These are then compared with more Durkheimian and culturalist constructions of the world of acting human selves.

Chapter two argues for a fundamentally expressive and constituted understanding of selves as humans constitute themselves and their world over against the contingencies of chance or *fortuna*. It charts out the three major terms of such constitutive identities—primordial, transcendent, and civic—each entailing its own idea of authority and so of community as well as of self.

Chapter three continues this argument and uses the themes of “moral luck,” collective responsibility, and the experience of shame to argue for an extended, not fully autonomous understanding of self. This provides a deeper comprehension of personhood than more liberal-individualistic and autonomous readings. Derived from all of this is the idea of authority as that through which (and only through which) the self can come to exist.

Chapter four traces a history of our particular Western (and perforce Christian) notions of self from their origins in Pauline messianism (and the critical ways in which Saul of Tarsus transformed Judaism) through Augustine, Luther, and the traditions of sectarian Protestantism to the establishment of what are essentially secularized liberal “Protestant” ideas of selfhood. These are embodied within an idea of the sacred that is internalized and ultimately voided of the transcendent referent. Here as elsewhere, the argument is that such autonomous views are inadequate; that the loss of heteronomy and the interiorization of the sacred (and hence of authority) within the self leads ultimately to the demise of all ideas of authority and thus of the particular view of the self which attends on it.

Chapter five concludes by taking up the challenge inherent in all previous chapters, that is, of how to return to an appreciation of authority without at the same time returning to those absolutist and repressive modes of action that have been the hallmarks of societies paying at least lip service to authority. A position of tolerance is hence posited, one predicated on a certain idea of epistemological modesty and rational skepticism, a hesitant faith in the claims of an authority that is nevertheless recognized as such.