Abstract: In this paper I analyze recognition as a kind of power. I analyze the notion of power in the general sense as some sort of causal capacity, and introduce the distinction between the active power of doing something and the passive power of undergoing something. Such a distinction is needed in order to capture some central features of the phenomenon of recognition, and in particular the way that ‘being recognized’ and ‘recognizing’ are intertwined. I then argue in favor of both the conceptual and genetic priority of the passive power of being recognized over the active power of recognizing. Furthermore, I introduce the notion of ‘attractor’ of recognition as a way to analyze some relevant features of the phenomenon of ‘being-recognized’.

In this paper I would like to analyze recognition as a kind of power. By way of introduction, in section 1 I consider four possible options on how to understand the relation between recognition and power, before opting for the strategy that considers recognition as a power both in the general sense of the term and in the restricted sense of social power. In section 2 I will analyze the notion of power in the general sense as some sort of causal capacity, and I will introduce the distinction between the active power of doing something and the passive power of undergoing something. I will then argue that such a distinction is needed in order to capture some central features of the phenomenon of recognition, and in particular the way that ‘being recognized’ and ‘recognizing’ are intertwined both in intentional and non-intentional, and in deliberate and non deliberate processes of recognition. I will then argue in favor of both the conceptual and genetic priority of the passive power of being recognized over the active power of recognizing, and I will give a short historical reconstruction of some portions of Hegel’s Jena manuscripts in order to show that such a priority of Anerkanntsein (being recognized) is also the rationale of the Hegelian model of recognitive constitution of Self-consciousness and of Spirit. Furthermore, I will introduce the notion of ‘attractor’ of recognition as a way to analyze some relevant features of the phenomenon of ‘being-recognized’, and in particular of the power to attract recognition from others that is universally, even if asymmetrically distributed between individual bearers of our specific life-form. Such an
understanding of being recognized as a kind of biopower, realized also through a sketchy reading of the notion of ‘desire’ for recognition as it appears in Hegel’s account of Self-consciousness in the Phenomenology of Spirit, will be the main step in order to obtain a characterization of recognitive capacity not only as a power in the general sense, but also in the more restricted sense of power as a relational and social power: that is as a power to induce some effects on other agents, whether they want it or not.

In the third section the power to attract recognition will be then analyzed as a specific form of social power, based on what I will call ‘recognitional authority’, which can be characterized in non-normative terms, and held also in a non-deliberate way, and which basically consists in letting others recognize or be recognized, whether they want it or not. In the fourth section I will try to use such a notion of social recognitive bio-power in order to grasp within recognition theory some aspects of bio-power that normally fall within the ambit of bio-political theories. In particular, I will argue that by the notion of recognitive attractors we can grasp the power of socialization that is the background power of our social practices in a way that captures both its recognitive and its biopolitical structure. In this sense I will try to extend the domain of the notions of ‘recognitive power’ and ‘attractors of recognition’ to power relations that subsist not only at the inter-individual level but also between individuals and institutions.

1 Four Ways to Understand the Relation between Recognition and Power

In their introduction to the collection Recognition and Power, Bert van der Brink and David Owen identify two species of the relation between recognition and power:

1. according to the first one, forms of power may “guide and circumscribe the interpretation of principles of recognition”.1
2. according to the second one, “the emergence and the demarcation of the principles of recognition […] may themselves be the product of power relations”.2

2 Recognition and Power, 21.