

THE MISSING DENOMINATOR

UNIVERSALISM AND PROGRESSIVE
CULTURAL POLITICS

EDITED BY JAN SOWA

ANA TEIXEIRA PINTO

KANT IN QATAR

OVIDIU ȚICHINDELEANU

ON THE TENSION BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM
AND THE SENSE OF THE WORLD

ANDRZEJ LEDER

THE OTHER COMES FROM THE FUTURE

ROBERT PFALLER

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ADULT

ROBIN VAN DEN AKKER
& JULIEN KLOEG

THE METAMODERN CONDITION, POPULISM,
AND THE NEW UNIVERSAL

ULRIKE GUÉROT

THE QUESTION OF UNIVERSALISM
IN THE 'POSTHUMOUS CONDITION'

ALEXANDRE LACROIX

DOES THE WEB PUSH FORWARD UNIVERSALISM
OR TRIBALISM?

ANNA CURCIO

A GAZE ON EUROPE FROM THE SOUTH

CLAUDIA CIOBANU
& TEODOR AJDER

WE, ITINERANTS

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Biennale Warszawa
EUNIC Cluster Warsaw
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Table of Contents

7	Jan Sowa	Introduction
17	Ana Teixeira Pinto	Kant in Qatar
25	Ovidiu Țichindeleanu	On the Tension Between Universalism and the Sense of the World
37	Andrzej Leder	The Other Comes from the Future
47	Robert Pfaller	The Importance of Being Adult. The Ethical Particular and the Political Universal
59	Robin van den Akker Julien Kloeg	The Metamodern Condition, Populism, and the New Universal, or, as if <i>an sich</i> and as if <i>für sich</i>
85	Ulrike Guérot	The Question of Universalism in the 'Posthumous Condition': On Democracy and (the Impossibility of) Statehoodness in a Digitalized Modernity
115	Alexandre Lacroix	Does the Web Push forward Universalism or Tribalism?
125	Anna Curcio	A Gaze on Europe from the South. Universalism and its Limits
141	Claudia Ciobanu Teodor Ajder	We, Itinerants
156		Authors

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INTRODUCTION

JAN SOWA

In January 2018 Biennale Warszawa was approached by Sabra Daici and Alin Ionescu of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Warsaw with an idea for a cooperative project dedicated to progressive cultural politics. This was supposed to be conducted under the umbrella of EUNIC – the European Union National Institutes of Culture – and to consist of a symposium and a book. My personal experience of collaboration with various national institutes of culture left me with mixed feelings about how progressive their programmes and their functioning might be. There should be no doubts that many of them present and promote critical culture and discourse of the highest intellectual standard. However, the very framework of their construction with the focus being on national culture, limits the scope of their progressive action in a very fundamental manner. It was for that reason that I thought a possible way to address the question of progressive cultural politics was to challenge that framework with a topic that went radically beyond and against the idea of nation and national cultures as such. Along

these lines I proposed to concentrate on the question of universalism as it is a notion and a practice that cannot be confined to national borders. Although the idea did not please all EUNIC members and several institutes actually expressed no interest in taking part in the endeavour, we did manage to assemble a brave team of institutions representing nine European countries: Austria, Holland, Germany, Italy, France, Moldova, Portugal and Romania with Biennale Warszawa playing the role of the Polish Cultural Institute here in Poland.

The very fact of there being so many institutional subjects engaged in a single project created a lot of practical problems that have attested to some of the very basic limitations that universalism faces when it comes to progressive cultural politics. Countries operate in different manners when it comes to the budgeting and accounting of cultural institutes, so it quickly became apparent that some institutions could not cover certain types of costs. Believing strongly in the importance of the material aspect of our social functioning, I thought that every participant from each country should be paid an equal fee for their contribution; however this was to prove to be far from simple in implementation given the institutional practices of our partners. We managed to finally resolve the matter, though other universalistic ideas proved impossible to implement – I also proposed, for instance, that in a gesture of rupture with the particularistic logic of repre-

senting national identity each and every institute would cover the costs of participation of someone from a country other than their own. This turned out to be out of the question for at least some parties. And that was just the first, very basic and practical limitation that appeared before we had even scratched the surface of the theoretical problem of universalism – a formidable challenge in itself.

Universalism seems to be one of the most ambivalent and contradictory, yet also valuable elements of the European cultural legacy. On the one hand, as it was put by the French philosopher Alain Badiou, it was Christianity that established the foundation of a universalism that does not distinguish between ethnic, national or cultural identities, but rather treats every human person as equal and essentially the same as ‘there is no partiality with God’ (The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, 2. 10).¹ On the other hand, an ideology of universalism was an important element of the colonial project and a means of keeping the subalterns in check: white conquerors claimed the supremacy of European values and norms – religious, cultural or social – and declared them universally valid in order to force the subjected populations into obedience and destroy their ways of life. It has remained one of the prime reasons of mistrust that many societies and ethnic groups express towards Western claims at universalism.

¹ See Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.

These doubts and problems are well articulated and analysed in the articles assembled in this volume. The reader shall find them addressed by Ana Pinto, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Anna Curcio and others. It seems to be something that all the contributors have agreed upon: any new universalism has to face the wrongdoings of the old with its violent colonial legacy, as any future universalistic project would have to include those who were victims of European universalism that remained largely blind to its own unjust and oppressive nature. Some authors, like Ana Pinto, go even as far as negating the very need for any universalism as such while others, like Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, see a possible solution in a form of pluriversalism. However, no one seems to think that the past history of universalistic endeavours offers any readymade solutions to the obstacles that a new universalism would face today.

The predicaments surrounding universalism are far from solely the subject of investigation for historians, philosophers or sociologists. It is my strong belief that the global and thus universal nature of the challenges that we are facing – such as climate change, mass migrations, the unchecked influences of financial institutions, right-wing terrorism etc. – make the foundation of any kind of new progressive universalism a task of the utmost importance. At least some contributors to this volume – such as Andrzej Leder, Robert Pfaller, Robin van den Akker, Julien Kloeg or Ulrike Guérot – seem

to share that belief with me even if they vary in their hopes and doubts regarding how close we are to the realization of such a project. If we agree that these are the threats that humanity can successfully counter only as a unified subject, we are in an urgent need to establish some kind of common denominator – a universal perspective that would allow us to look beyond particular attachments to race, ethnicity, gender or nation and to define all women and men as just equal members of the human race. Unfortunately, no such project seems to be anywhere on the horizon. The practice-based approach to the question of universalism presented in this book by Claudia Ciobanu and Teodor Ajder proves how far we are from anything of the like even within the framework of the European Union: the most advanced attempt to shape existing political reality beyond the confines of nation states.

More than two years have passed since the original conception of the project that this book is the effect of. And so to what extent has it brought us anywhere closer to resolving the problems linked with the notion and practice of universalism? I believe both the book itself as well as the symposium that preceded it in May 2019 have helped in clarifying two issues. The first one relates to the metaphor of the denominator used in the very project title itself. This is based on the mathematical procedure of finding the common denominator that is a necessary precondition for adding fractions. I believe

it to be quite a pertinent figure expressing the fractured situation we are in. It was pointed out, however, during the symposium that a denominator is just another name for the element that divides – or a divisor in mathematical terms. It was argued that as such it cannot be the base even for any commonality, much less anything universal. That argument remains true only for a very specific understanding of universalism as unification, homogenization or synchronization. We can, however, conceptualize the universal as precisely the common element that divides us all equally in the same way thus allowing also for differentiation and not requiring any form of uniformization – neither forced from above nor enacted voluntarily from below. Such a common denominator remains, of course, an empty signifier and I have to admit I have no idea what concrete meaning could be attached to it. To put it in different terms – universalism certainly implies some form of harmonization, however it does not necessarily mean we would all have to sing the same tune or even its various imitations. Counterpoint does not preclude harmony.

The second important general conclusion regarding the universalism that stems from the deliberations and analysis presented in this book is the necessity to split the question of the universal away from the realm of cultural identity where it tends to be automatically placed. This becomes clear when we pin down the abstract question of

the universal to the very concrete challenges we are facing today. Take the Middle East, for example – there has been a lot of talk about the alleged clash of the irreconcilable particularities of Western and Islamic ‘civilizations’, however the major and truly existential threat that emanates from the Middle East is by no means Islam – no matter how dangerous and terrifying Islamic fundamentalism may be – but the oil industry that is not religious, but capitalistic in its character. The only really dangerous and problematic minority within Western / Northern countries are not Muslims nor any other group of refugees, but the rich. The fact that the elites do whatever they can to avoid taxation is much more harmful to general society than the teachings of radical imams. So instead of debating on how to force Muslim women to stop wearing headscarves we should be attempting to make the rich – be they Muslim or Christian – to pay taxes and contribute to social welfare in the same way all others do. Or, to take the same issue to a more global level, take the fashionable notion of Anthropocene that seems to include a universalistic element – after all it is defined by the collective influence of human beings on the planet. Yet the poorest billion people could disappear right now and nothing would change in terms of climate processes – they just consume and produce so little that their ecological footprint is negligible. So aren’t they human? The challenge is not how to

make these people accept Western rationality, but how to stop the affluent Northern classes from ruining the planet and thus making it uninhabitable for everyone, including themselves. So I'd say we should struggle for the universal as it is in 'universal suffrage', 'universal taxation', 'universal biological needs', or 'universal dependence on the ecosystem' and not as in 'universal religion', 'universal language', or a 'universal rationality'. With the political name for this universal being 'equality'.

Shifting the focus away from the symbolic and towards the material could also help us in pulling progressive politics out of the pitfall it finds itself in as a result of the recent identitarian turn. There should be no doubt that all around the world people are discriminated against and persecuted because of their identity, be this gender, race or ethnicity. Undeniably this requires urgent political action. However, identity politics with its focus on the particular and the differential has made such political action much more difficult and problematic. Where is the place for solidarity if everyone is supposed to speak uniquely in her, his or their own name? Without solidarity there is no politics,

because politics is, as it was pertinently argued by Jacques Rancière, identification with 'the cause of the other'.² There is little place here to elaborate upon that

problem in more detail, but let me point out one concrete example: there are about 1500 fatal victims of

² See Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron, London: Verso, 2006.

police brutality per year in the United States. We have all heard about this problem as a result of the Black Lives Matter movement. Its activists have done a brave and fundamental job in turning public attention towards the problem, however what remains largely under the radar is the fact that only about 25% of those victims are black; white people constitute about a half of them. It is clear that Blacks are largely overrepresented in the group of police violence victims in the us, but it is also equally obvious that race is not the only factor at play here. Benjamin Mateus has shown through a detailed analysis that ‘what whites and blacks who are killed by police have in common is poverty’.³ We will never solve the problem of police brutality towards Black people if we focus on race alone. We need a materialist class perspective allowing us to construct some kind of universalist framework that goes beyond identity and difference to fully articulate the problem and to mount a solidary political front against police brutality.

The predicament of identity politics has recently taken on a new, surprising form with the global rise of right-wing populism. It may sound paradoxical or even absurd to place these two political articulations alongside one another, yet I believe they are intimately linked in a dialectical manner – right-wing populism is white identity politics with

³ See Benjamin Mateus, ‘Behind the epidemic of police killings in America: Class, poverty and race’, *World Socialist Web Site*, 20 December 2018 <www.wsws.org/en/articles/2018/12/20/kil1-d20.html> [accessed 25.12.2019]. For more on the same topic see Cedric Johnson, ‘The Panthers Can’t Save Us Now’, *Catalyst*, vol. 1, issue 1 (2017).

all the crucial traits of that particular mode of doing politics: emphasis on one's grievances, focus on one's cultural traditions treated as a kind of symbolic capital to be guarded from any form of outside influence, struggle for recognition and disdain for any form of universalism. It is a part of a larger and even more problematic tendency of the right-wing capture of left-wing political ideas and tools and it clearly demonstrates that any stubborn insistence on affirming uniquely the particular would eventually backfire. Thus it comes as no surprise that the issue of right-wing populism comes back every now and then throughout this book; with the article by Robin van den Akker and Julien Kloeg taking it as the main reference point for their project of 'counter-populist' – or alter-populist – political action.

As this collection of essays marks rather the beginning of a long drawn out investigation it is difficult to derive any strong conclusions from its course. Those who seek ready-made recipes for progressive cultural politics will be more than disappointed with the work's content for it raises more questions than it provides answers to. As any future universalism can only be one of actual practice, a book can merely furnish a vague sketch of any possible course – or courses – that this practice may take. So let the quest begin!

KANT IN QATAR

ANA TEIXEIRA PINTO

In October 2012 I accepted an invitation from the Qatari Museum Authority to visit the Qatari capital, Doha. Our press-trip itinerary started with a walk around the pier, which culminates in Richard Serra's 7. 7 is a colossal sculpture made of seven massive steel plates arranged in a Heptagonal shape, and the greatest public art commission ever made by the Qatari Museum Authority. The sculpture was installed at the tip of the man-made pier adjacent to the Museum of Islamic Art, built by star architect Ieoh Ming Pei.

As we approached the towering colossus, a journalist walking by my side confided: 'I was here last year while they were building it, you should have seen the Indian workers, those poor folk, toiling under the blazing sun.' As I looked into her eyes, she became apologetic. 'I know it's an amazing art-work, but I am only human...' she muttered. Her expression betrayed genuine concern, yet she could not bring herself to disavow the sculpture. While circling around the sculpture's metal edifice, I came face to face with another journalist who whispered, 'After the HRW (Human Rights Watch) released a report condemning their labor policies, the Qatari authorities issued a ban on outdoor work when the temperature rises above 50 degrees Celsius. But ever since it's never officially over 50 degrees Celsius!' After a brief silence, he shrugged and kept snapping pictures. For all their qualms about labor rights, there were two things that my fellow travelers did not seem to question: that Richard Serra's 7 is an art-work; and that art-work is a good, valuable, thing.

Their views are not an anomaly. Ethical qualms are hard to reconcile with what became known as the Western canon. The term 'aesthetics', which was introduced into the philosophical lexicon during the eighteenth century, is predicated on a discontinuity;

the aesthetic experience is in some way severed from sensory experience. From Kant onwards, here I am mostly paraphrasing Jacques Rancière, detachment becomes the hallmark of the aes-

thetic. This entails a double negation: its object is neither an object of knowledge nor an object of desire.¹

It is this sleight of hand that allows one to think about an aesthetic value as a universal value. But by introducing the notion of disinterest, Kant also brought the concept of taste into opposition with

the concept of morality. At the beginning of his *Critique of Judgment*, he illustrates his reasoning with the example of a palace, in which the aesthetic judgement isolates the form alone, disinterested in knowing whether a mass of the working poor had toiled under the harshest of conditions in order to build it. The human toll, Kant says, must be ignored in order to aesthetically appreciate an artwork. This assertion would later come to intersect with Clement Greenberg's now-canonical text for *Partisan Review* 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', (1939) in which the author aligns social

realism with formulaic repetition and debased automatism. Arguing against the US congress,² Alfred Barr's (MOMA's first director) would expand Greenberg's argument in a 1952 piece penned for the *New York Times Magazine*, entitled 'Is Modern Art Communist?'. In his essay, Barr argues that abstraction is a form of anti-totalitarianism, a bulwark against illiberal tendencies, paving the way for the notion of artistic autonomy to become strategically recast as an expression of individual freedom in perfect alignment with the free market. The muralist Diego

Rivera famously criticized the paintings of Rufino Tamayo as 'selling silence': once the 'revolutionary power of abstraction' is cut off from revolutionary yearning, in the social and economic sense, art loses any political traction, its content becoming (high-brow) taste, now pitted against the low-brow masses.

Hence my question: which subjectivities are extinguished in order that universal values might assert their autonomy? And which subjectivities are reinforced once they have?

I was not familiar with the work of the American novelist Richard Wright at the time I visited Qatar – and I must thank Kodwo Eshun for bringing his writings to my attention – but after

1 See Jacques Rancière, 'Thinking between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge', *Parrhesia*, 1 (2006), pp. 1–12

2 The US congress was not fond of modern art, describing it as a foreign (communist) plot against American fine art. See for instance, a speech delivered by the Michigan Republican congressman George Donderos, on August 16, 1949 titled *Modern Art Shackled To Communism*.

reading his essay about *Native Son*,³ I was finally able to articulate the questions the trip to Doha raised in my mind: what does 'art' or 'culture' mean when those who build the artwork bear a force of un-belonging that corrodes art's self-representation as the locus of universality?⁴ Where those who were born into the de-civilizing void produced by the expansionary trajectory of the Western Empires and their proxies look on a world they did not make or own, on a culture, which cannot claim their allegiance, on a society that left them stranded. The deep sense of exclusion, the feeling of looking at things with a painful nakedness, Richard Wright describes, is compounded by the difficulty of finding a vocabulary able to articulate a shared investment. As a British theorist once told me by the water-cooler: 'while taking part in the demonstrations (against police violence and institutional racism in London) I realized I had more in common with the police than with the young Bangladeshi men standing by my side.' Which brings me to my response to the question posed by this volume, which I understood as 'how to decolonize universalism by decoupling it from narratives of white modernity?'

I am unsure whether universalism can be decoupled from narratives of white modernity because the question of the universal is by definition tied to a need for synchronization. In other words, the universal is always anchored in a chronopolitical matrix.

If anything defined the modern era, it was the belief that the future would be different from the past. Modernity entails a forward-looking and unidirectional temporality, predicated on the differentiation of time into two separate moments, that which has been and that which will be. The notion of 'The Future' as an object of economical and emotional investment is a function of this linear representation of time. But this articulation of difference hinges on, and intersects with, another articulation of difference: racial difference.

The matrix for the synchronization of the global times axis, as Yuk Hui has argued, is – ever since the dawn of global trade – predicated on technological development.⁵ A process, which, globalization greatly intensified. From the Renaissance

3 See Richard Wright, *Native Son*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940.

4 Kodwo Eshun commenting on Richard Wright's *How 'Bigger' Was Born*, a lecture delivered at Columbia University in New York City, March 1940 <xroads.virginia.edu/~mao1/white/anthology/bigger.html> [accessed 21.01.2020].

5 See Yuk Hui, 'What Begins After the End of the Enlightenment?', *e-flux*, 96 (2019) <www.e-flux.com/journal/96/245507/what-begins-after-the-end-of-the-enlightenment/> [accessed 21.01.2020].

onwards, culture, traditionally seen as static or blighted, became increasingly coded temporally: a unilineal panorama within which different cultures could be measured one against another according to a single metric of civilizational 'progress'. This preoccupation with linearity and forward-moving processes, turned temporality into a biopolitical, and by extension necropolitical, instrument. Aligned in a classificatory schema that moves from the most primitive to the most civilized, different populations came to acquire a different chronological ranking, separating ostensibly 'advanced' societies from 'underdeveloped' ones. This 'denial of

6 See Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

7 See Kodwo Eshun, 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism', *New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2003), p 289.

coevalness', anthropologist Johannes Fabian argues,⁶ exonerates and rationalizes ever-increasing power asymmetries, by ascribing different populations to different temporalities, and, ultimately, as Kodwo Eshun put it, condemns 'the disempowered to live in the past'.⁷ From this perspective, geopolitics is a form of chronopolitics. All the markers of modernity – progress, development, modernization, industrialization, urbanization – suggest a comparative chronology. And because the non-Europeans are hopelessly 'behind the times' successive waves of colonial

and neo-colonial depredation are, to this day, justified by the necessity to assimilate to modernity, to develop, or to 'catch up' if you will. Theft, or that which is taken – via enslavement, land-grabs, depredation or plunder – can be thus codified as a gift or offering, as the dispensation of contemporaneity. To quote Naoki Sakai:

Either as a set of socioeconomic conditions or as an adherence of a society to selected values, the term 'modernity' can never be understood without reference to the pairing of the premodern and the modern. Historically, modernity has primarily been opposed to its historical precedent; geopolitically it has been contrasted to the non-modern, or, more specifically, to the non-West. Thus the pairing has served as a discursive scheme according to which historical predicate is translated into a geopolitical one and *vice versa*. A subject is posited through the attribution of these predicates, and thanks to the function of this discursive apparatus, two kinds of areas are diacritically discerned; the modern West and the premodern

non-West. As a matter of course, this does not mean either that the West was never at premodern stages or that the non-West can never be modernized: it simply forbids the possibility of a simultaneous coexistence of the premodern West and the modern non-West.

Already a cursory examination of this sort about modernity amply suggests a certain polarity or warp among the possible ways to conceive of the world historically and geopolitically. There is no inherent reason why the West/non-West opposition should determine the geographic perspective of modernity except for the fact that it definitely serves to establish the putative unity of the West.⁸

In most East Asian countries, where the process of rapid urbanization and modernization was perceived as synonymous with Westernization, technology could be seen as the site of a double alienation, via the introduction of the new and of the foreign. In spite of, or precisely because of this *décalage*, industry undertook a process of acceleration in order to 'synchronize' these countries with the West. Technological development, as Yuk Hui notes, came to constitute 'a past the Chinese never lived' but whose unfettered power has nonetheless progressed at a much more tremendous pace than in the US or Europe.⁹

The future is a function of this imperial relation. This is the reason why, I believe, the present moment, which could be defined as a process of de-Westernization – the West is rapidly losing its position of dominance and there is an ongoing dispute over the geopolitical control of the colonial extraction matrix – gave rise to an intense preoccupation with the future, or with the lack thereof, and to a great many reformist or reactionary forms of progressivism claiming the future as been 'stolen, stalled, or otherwise evacuated'¹⁰ – and hence must be reclaimed. From this perspective the crucial modality of power is the power to seek or shape the 'future' one would wish to obtain. This relation of temporality to political decision-making leads to a view of the present as a 'time of transition'

⁸ Naoki Sakai, 'Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism', *Multitudes*, 6 (2001), <www.multitudes.net/Modernity-and-Its-Critique-The/> [accessed 16.12.2019].

⁹ See Yuk Hui, *The Quuestion Concerning technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*, Falmouth: Urbanomic Media Ltd, 2016.

¹⁰ See Marina Vishmidt, 'Accumulating Futures' in *Futures Reader*, ed. by Sven Lütticken and Eric de Bruyn, New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018.

during which epochal choices could be made, and, as a result, alternate futures could be attained. But this concept of 'future', insofar as it hinges on an ill-disguised desire for synchronicity – on an appeal to make the world safe, i.e., Western again – also implies a totalizing dimension.¹¹

11 At the same time the defense of Universal values seem to – paradoxically – call for the closure of borders, as the new wave of anti-migrant sentiment in Europe has so amply demonstrated. But it goes without saying that when our political leaders speak about universalism, at the moment, what they have in mind is a chauvinist utopia. Then again, as a rule, the term universalism facilitates the primacy of a specifically modern form of chronopolitics, which I feel is worth examining, because this volume establishes a nexus between universalism and the question of the future by stating that only a universalist project can function as a bulwark against the threats posed by the current crisis.

The term Anthropocene, for instance – as the historical epoch in which humans became geological agents – imposes a certain logic of periodization, which highlights the technological reach of mankind, obscuring geopolitical differences and racial antagonisms within the lofty category of the 'Human'. The Anthropocene is, one could argue, an antipolitical term: it diffuses responsibility rather than focusing it on the entities and agents structurally responsible for climate change. On the same note, I would add that there is a clear tension between the environmentalist movement, which, as a rule, focuses on wilderness protection and wildlife preservation – goals that reflect the interests of its supporters, primarily white middle and upper middle class – and the movements fighting for environmental justice. In a more or less similar fashion, appeals to scale up or 'universalize' struggles, and similar means and modes of discussing the 'universal' dimension of the current crisis tend to mirror neoliberal investments in 'the global' as a cipher for planetary integration.

I would go so far as to say that, at present, the political spectrum seems to be in the process of reconfiguring itself around this desire for synchronicity – and I cannot help thinking there is some irony to this fact, because, it introduces an element of confusion in the wars of position of the political left and right.

According to Ernst Bloch, the appeal of fascism in the early twentieth century was tied to its embrace of the asynchronous, of those who were out of step with the pace of modern development and their anachronistic and outmoded ways. Rural populations, attached to their traditional lifestyles, and recently proletarianized peasants, nostalgic and homesick, saw in fascism a response to and a validation of, their yearning for yesteryears. This attachment to the past stood in stark contrast to the modernizing energies of the left, whose desire for the synchronization of the

world's proletariat sought to mirror, as well as match, the synchronization of life worlds imposed by capital. At present the opposite seems to be the case. As Alberto Toscano argues, 'the fascistic tendencies finding expression in the election of Trump, but also in coeval nativist projects across the "West", are seemingly driven by a thirst for synchronicity: "No archaic pasts, or invented traditions here, but the nostalgia for the image of a moment, that of the post-war affluence of the *trente glorieuses*, for a racialized and gendered image of the socially-recognised patriotic industrial worker."¹² This restorative impulse finds its centre-left correlate in the insistence on the question of scale, on the constant appeal to a 'planetary' dimension, or in the view that, as Roberto Mangabeira Unger put it, 'all changes short of total revolution must amount to mere conservative tinkering.'¹³ In a similar fashion, for accelerationist eschatology the opposite of survival is not annihilation but survivals: the myriad ways in which people manage to somehow make it, to survive, in what constitutes a form of endurance without redemption, without resurrection, and without the promise of renewal.

Apocalyptic projects, to paraphrase Georges Didi-Huberman, tend to dramatize salvation as the great survival, the epic moment, which will put to death all the lesser, minor survivals, made of pure contingency and devoid of revelatory value.¹⁴ As a result any form of engagement with situated struggles or localized dissent is berated as a betrayal or foreclosure of this future-qua-revival, a project which, became nonetheless wholly identified with the forward-moving time of global development, technological progress, and middle-class reproduction. Forms of collective mobilization that decline to 'scale up' or to take on a politically recognizable form are said to lack maturation and the ability to conjure a prospective 'future', hence derided as folk politics or, when those involved come from minority backgrounds, decried as rioting mobs, and described as irrational, aimless, and disturbingly violent. This alignment of gendered and racial epistemes (domesticity, refusal to 'man-up', a lack of resolve on the one hand; bestiality and irrational lashing out on the other) with the idiom of 'the future' totalizes the 'global' as

12 Alberto Toscano, 'Notes on Late Fascism', *Historical Materialism*, April 2, 2017, <www.historicalmaterialism.org/blog/notes-late-fascism> [accessed 21.01.2020].

13 Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 158.

14 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Survival of the Fireflies*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pp. 40-42.

a place of frictionless connectivity, ultimately tied to that which purports to counter, namely, social homogenization, imperial expansion, and economic globalization. Or to return to Sakai's argument: 'the West must represent the moment of the universal under which particulars are subsumed. Indeed, the West is particular in itself, but it also constitutes the universal point of reference in relation to which others recognize themselves as particularities. And, in this regard, the West thinks itself to be ubiquitous.'¹⁵

¹⁵ Naoki Sakai, *op. cit.*

In 2003, Fredric Jameson famously said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.¹⁶ As Lauren Berlant has argued, the same attachments that help reproduce what is damaging in the world, are at the same time

¹⁶ Fredric Jameson, 'Future City', *New Left Review*, 21 (2003).

that which holds the world together as coherent representation. Capitalism is not just a form of political economy, it is an affective structure, a way of ordering daily life. Giving up one's attachments, however cruel or toxic, would mean giving up the world and one's position in it.¹⁷ This is the reason, I believe, why it remains so difficult to divest from terms like 'universal', 'global' or 'future', even as increasing numbers of people fall out of the social, classified as bad investment, or are not worth investing in because there is no future to extract from their lives or labour-time.

¹⁷ See: Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

To return to the question this volume poses, in the guise of a conclusion: the term universalism is in my view difficult because, on the one hand, it does too much: it implies 'the refusal of its self-delimitation; it claims that it is capable of sustaining, if not actually transcending, an impulse to transcend all the particularizations', insisting on that which is not relative, or that which is not disputable, while disputing everything else.¹⁸

¹⁸ See Naoki Sakai, *op. cit.*

On the other, it does too little: it leaves us bereft of resources and ill-equipped to address the weight of empire or the timescales of oppression. To the question: Can one decolonize universalism? I would answer that rather than express disenchantment with the declining valence of universality, I would find it worth exploring how synchronicity functions as a proxy for hegemony, whiteness and empire. In other words, the question I would like to pose is, how to theorize heterogeneity, rather than – universalist oriented – ontology.

ON THE TENSION BETWEEN UNIVERSALISM AND THE SENSE OF THE WORLD

OVIDIU ȚICHINDELEANU

THE VISUAL FOUNDATION OF MODERN/COLONIAL UNIVERSALISM

At the beginnings of the modern/colonial world, arguably the most influential *new* expression of *universalism* was visual, and it was decisive for the epochal redefinition of a new sense of the world which was unquestionable. This visual universalism also introduced a narrator in the first-person, who was able to see this world from a position seemingly without ground, as if from the heavens or else falling into the universe. Namely, the Western European cartography from the so-called 'age of discovery' provided by itself the grounding of a representational totality that remains functional to our day. This totality still influences significantly the fall of the 'world' we are talking about into universality, and the way universalism is able or not to bend the limiting forces from our contemporary world.

Thus, while it is true that the Catholic concept of the 'universal Church' – opposed to the Greek-Orthodox Church (the East European, North-African and Middle-Eastern Church) – was furthered into such political notions as the universal power of the Church, and then the universal power of the Monarchy, one can distinguish a different genealogy that connects 16th century cartography to the lavishly illustrated first universal geographies, universal histories, even the illustrated universal vocabularies of the 17th centuries, breaching by the end of the 18th century into the graphics-laden Encyclopedia in all branches of human knowledge, as well as into a parallel explosion of optical devices playing with perspective and projections of the world, all the way

to the visual deliriums of the universal expositions of the 19th century and their 'universe of a phantasmagoria' representing the cultures and civilizations of the world.¹ For all of its unmovable Classics and universal categories, philosophy had to adapt to these advancing currents, and not the other way around – even though it fought back with its own 'monstrous will of incorporation'.

1 See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 14.

At the dawns of modernity, in 1507, the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller, a scholar at the court of the influential René II de Anjou, Duke of Lorraine, King of Naples and of Jerusalem, published *Universalis Cosmographia*, the first European map that represented the 'fourth part of the world'. It was a sensational addition that seemingly completed man's possible representational sense of the world. The map added to the viewer's perspective what the great Ptolemy had never seen and had never known existed. With the addition of 'America', the representation of the world in twelve panels seemed complete, or at least claimed completion, even while marking down *terra incognita* for areas constituting present-day Canada and Alaska.

That is to say: for all of Derrida's meticulous deconstruction of phonocentrism in Western written culture and of its eternal promise and incompleteness of full meaning, 'America' actually delivered full meaning and the pretense of full representation in visual discourse. The image situated its viewers within an ontology of non-absence. For the fourth part of the world, the one which produced the effect of full representation, Waldseemüller proposed the name 'America', paying homage to his source of information, which was translated in the accompanying book *Cosmographiae Introductio*. The source were the sensational letters written by one Florentine adventurer named Amerigo Vespucci, about four expeditions that he apparently made along the Atlantic coast of South America sometime between 1497 and 1502. The letters had been smartly addressed to influential European figures like Lorenzo de Medici and René de Anjou. The epoch-making letters are peculiar in their own way: they are written in the first person, unabashedly playing up their author, and this first person occupies the entirety of the field of experience and observation. The author never mentions the name of any other person or co-expeditionary, not even the name of the captain of the ship. Also, the author confidently puts in the titles of the letters the

expression *mundus novus*, sustaining that the New World is not the East of Asia, as the Genovese Columbus thought until his death, but an entirely separate continent, full with its own fantastical animals, giants and savages, and abundant resources.²

And it worked. The letters were republished in a sensational anthology, *Paesi novamente ritrovati* in Vicenza in 1507, and in 1508 King Ferdinand named Vespucci the Spanish Crown's 'first navigator' – a highly paid position in what was arguably the first global capitalist corporation, the colonial company of the Spanish Empire, Casa de la Contratación de las Indias, established in Sevilla in 1503, and which was to be disestablished almost three centuries later in 1790. Some years after Vespucci's meteoric claim to fame, friar Bartolomé de las Casas analyzed with a characteristically discerning eye Vespucci's letters, drawing the conclusion that the first expedition was entirely the product of the author's imagination, while the other three were combinations of fiction and reality based on Vespucci's likely participation in the expedition of Alonso de Ojeda in 1499. Notably, Vespucci had written his famous letters between 1503 and 1504 from Lisbon, while Ojeda was on another expedition to the New World. Yet none of Vespucci's lies and exaggerations, omissions, errors and appropriations mattered too much in this irresistible combination between the apparent truth-telling power of his first-hand account in printed form, and the amazingly detailed and beautifully drawn representation of the totality of the world.

Waldseemüller's map was different not only from the portolan charts that were actually used in navigation, but also from the *mappae mundi*, the medieval 'maps of the world'. The former gave no representational sense of the world whatsoever, indicating only directions and angles of navigation between given points, while the latter did not depict necessarily the whole world, and were not even necessarily in a graphic form, moreover often being designed with a primarily narrative or symbolic function consecrating a local event or significant place.³ In comparison, Waldseemüller's map claimed to enact a reduction of meaning, or a reduction of the possibilities of interpretation. The 'universal' here

² See Clements Robert Markham, *The Letters of Amerigo Vespucci and Other Documents Illustrative of His Career*, London: Routledge, 2016.

³ See David Woodward, 'Medieval Mappaemundi' in *History of Cartography*, ed. by John Brian Harley, David Woodward, vol. 1: *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe and the Mediterranean*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 287 ff.

actually removed particular meaning from the represented world. Thus, no previous knowledge about the locality was needed in order to read the map of the entire world, and no particular history was evoked (as was the case in the *mappae mundi*). Waldseemüller's map claimed to be universal in so far as it showed the totality of the world, stripped of local histories. The detailed map was spread on twelve panels and the claim of total representation was enforced in two of the panels by a second representation of the whole world in miniature, this time like two facets of a coin: one bearing Ptolemy and the classical world of Asia, Mesopotamia, Africa and Europe, the other showing Amerigo Vespucci and the continent of America. The new sense of the world was to become currency, a universal equivalent exchanged between peoples sharing visions of the world, just as money was about to become the general equivalent of exchange within this new world – like the Spanish silver coin of 8 reals (*peso de a ocho*), the Spanish dollar, which quickly became the first global currency, and featured at the apogee of the pillage and slave trade two similar hemispheres of the world map on one of its facets.

The conceptual gesture of Waldseemüller's map – i.e., the meaning of *universalis* in *Universalis Cosmographia* – was to claim the complete representation of the world, even while admitting blank spots within this frame, reducing simultaneously the meaning of map visualization to pure territorial representation, without local histories. As we know, in the history of modernity, this accomplished sense of the world, ever more detailed and refined within the same frame, was accompanied by the colonialist drive to claim control over the entire real world through violence and dispossession. This particular meaning of universalism stayed in place for the *longue durée* of modernity/coloniality, representing until the end of the 19th century areas that remained outside coloniality and outside modernity, like those controlled by indigenous people or by *maroons* or *quilombos*, as if they were inside territories controlled by the Western powers.

The power of Waldseemüller's conceptual gesture was contagious. Replica maps of the world exploded in the first half of the 16th century. Across Europe in Transylvania, in the city of Brașov (Kronstadt), local scholar Johannes Honterus published in 1542 his own *Universalis Cosmographia*, representing the updated new world this time as a group of islands, with 'Parias' for

the northern part (the name used by Vespucci), an oversized 'Isabella' (Cuba) and 'Spagnolla' (Haiti) at the centre, while keeping the name 'America' only for the Southern part of the continent.

In other words, from the very beginnings of the major transformation of the world, five hundred years ago, that is generally considered to have given birth to the colonial and capitalist world-system, one can trace a consistent appropriation of the sense of the world, and a reduction or erasure of the local histories and realities. According to this part of the logic of coloniality, every corner of the modern world had to partake and play a part in the complete representation of the world, which replaced any other sense of the world. To our days, the globe and the projection of the world map are more than educational tools – they are symbols of modern education.

With the establishment in the 20th century of the United States as the uncontested global hegemon of the whole world, the completeness of representation was accompanied yet again with the claim of total control – as it had been in their respective periods of hegemony for the Spanish crown of Charles V, and for the British Empire 'on which the sun never sets'. The moment was marked with another fundamental visual expression of the world: the 'Blue Marble' photography taken in 1972 by NASA from space, from an entirely groundless position and showing the world itself as a groundless reality, as if falling into the universe. Once again, the visual discourse claimed fullness of meaning. It was as if it was saying out loud: this is the Earth – our only world. And at this point, the discourse of coloniality arguably changes: the point is not to conquer the eventual parts of the world that remained outside Western control, to push them inside the frame, but to decide who comes in and who gets accepted into the Western definition and representation of the world. And here, the erosion of the completeness changes direction too. For many Central and East Europeans, the maps of EU enlargement are the epochal expression of this process of becoming accepted after 1989 into the colonial Western universalism; and now they are left to wrestle with the inherited fullness of meaning. In the same time, for the many refugees created by the most recent waves of Western wars of invasion, the newly erected razor sharp border fences of 'fortress Europe' are the expression of the worldly limits of the same universalism. The necessity of claiming the representation of

the world arises ultimately from the division and fragmentation left in its wake by the vortex of modernity: 'In its global expansion, capitalism revealed the contradiction between its universalist pretensions and the polarizations it produces in material reality.'⁴

4 Samir Amin, 'Imperialism and Culturalism Complement Each Other', *Monthly Review*, 48 (1996), p. 8.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE RISE OF PERIPHERIES

In our age, as dominated by screens and optical devices as it may be, the philosophical content of the concept of universalism is expressed perhaps most prominently in the written language of human rights. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted in 1948 as a 'a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations', is very careful to attach the adjective 'universal' to nouns that define three types of action and a 360° of implied personal pronouns: declaration, recognition and observance.⁵ We declare, you recognize, they observe. Since the accent is put on collective subjects (people) and their actions – following especially in the footsteps of the *United States Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the French Revolution's *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789), the 'world' is not the subject of discussion in any of its articles, appearing only in the preamble of the declaration itself.

5 The preamble announces: 'The General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.' Cf. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, <www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> [accessed 21.01.2020].

Although a projection of the world appears on the flag of the United Nations (created in 1946), nothing more than a vague cloud of assumptions links the sense of the universal from the *Declaration* to the sense of world, likely driven by the common-sense presupposition of a common sense of the world existing among all human beings. Yet this presupposition does not go much further than affirming the bare existence of one Earth for all human beings, which means stripping off many layers of historical and geographical meaning, not to mention entire cosmologies that sustain the epistemic field of different ethnicities and peoples. It also ignores the centuries-long appropriation of the representational sense of the world.

The UN flag itself perpetuates the logic of coloniality by raising the authority of the Global North to a transcendent position, showing a God's eye view of the globe from above, in a Northern projection of the North itself. However, as it was made clear in the immediate aftermath of the *Universal Declaration*, in the movements of independence during the UN's declared 'decade of decolonization', as well as during the Cold War, with its own world division, the sense of the world was not something simply shared by the different collective and individual subjects. The Global South protested that, far from being something common and universal that is recognized and observed, the Western self-implied sense of the world was carrying and perpetuating a violence and tunnel vision that was forbidding even declarations, let alone recognition and observance. Samir Amin observed that the way the North American model imposes its universality (developing it to its logical limit) is by way of overlapping the economic model, the culture industry and the formal political sphere.⁶ Within this full frame, even in the North-to-South aid and development initiatives, universal human rights are taking on a civilizational hue, as if the *longue durée* frameworks of coloniality and racism that have given birth to such abhorrent notions as 'manifest destiny' or *mission civilisatrice* proved to be much of the same cloth as the Declaration of Human Rights itself. In other words, in the Northern projection, the universal becomes just a monologue. In this sense, even if the *Declaration* was much-welcomed and appreciated, it appeared that its 'universal' covered less than a 'world's' declaration. In fact, discovering how much less it covered became a principled purpose in itself. The peripheries were vital for the survival of the legitimacy of 'universal human rights'.

6 Samir Amin, 'Universality and Cultural Spheres' in *Imperialism and Unequal Development*, London & New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977.

The Haitian historian and thinker Jean Casimir put it this way in his *La cultura oprimida*:

The local capacity of theoretical invention remains an obstacle able to change the thought systems of the capitalist totality. The center perceives the universe in a certain way, and without parochial divergences this logic will be repeated incessantly, reinterpreting without variation the local situations. Changes in the periphery are

7 Jean Casimir, *La cultura oprimida*, México: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1981.

provoking modifications within the central system and are challenging its postulates. At stake remains the awakening of the periphery through its own elements of expression.⁷

Thus, the 'peripheral' Haitian Revolution was 'more universal' than the French, for the French revolutionaries restricted universal human rights to French citizens, and tried to maintain the enslaved in the legislature of colonial *Code Noir*; eventually, the Haitian revolutionaries prevailed not only over Sonthonax and the other French revolutionaries sent to repress them, but also over Napoleon's reactionary attempt to re-establish the slave society, with world-shaking consequences (such as the Louisiana

8 See *Meanings of Bandung. Postcolonial Orders and Decolonial Visions*, ed. by Quynh N. Phạm, Robbie Shilliam, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016.

9 See *The Bandung+60 Declaration: Rethinking Emerging Forces: Building Sovereignty, Preventing Hegemony. Challenges for Emerging Forces in the Globalized World*, October 27–31, 2015.

purchase). And the Bandung Conference of 1955 addressed precisely such elements of expression of the Global South and created another sense of the world, by bringing together non-Western sensibilities and perceptions of the world.⁸ The Bandung Conference pleaded for the liberation of the world from any global hegemony, peaceful coexistence between nations, equality of all races and nations across the world, and solidarity with the poor, oppressed and colonized.⁹

Since then, literature and visual works from real-socialist experiences, postcolonial and decolonial movements have given more substance not only to critiques of Eurocentric universalism, but to the democratic understanding of different senses of the world. But this does not mean that the universal map of the world is being filled now with the particular content that was missing. On the contrary, the peripheries are claiming universality but within a different sense of the world. The universal sense of the world of modernity/coloniality is now subject to contestation. The movements involved in the World Social Forum have insisted from 2001 that 'another world is possible'. For his part, Argentinian scholar Walter D'Alaio proposed in 2000 the concept of the 'pluriverse' in a paper on the Zapatista revolution in Chiapas, Mexico, opposing the imperial and war-driven logic of universality to the dialogical, pluri-logical and convivial logic

of pluri-versality. The latter was an opening, as the Zapatistas proposed, to a world in which many worlds could coexist.¹⁰ After having used extensively the concept of pluritopic hermeneutics already in *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (1995), inspired by Raimon Panikkar's proposal of diatopic hermeneutics in 1975,¹¹ in the context of inter-religious dialogue, Walter Mignolothen made clear in *Local Histories / Global Designs*,¹² than far from bringing 'postmodern relativism', pluriversality would be the democratic answer for the actual situation of the entanglement of different cosmologies that are connected today in a relation of power, which never has a neutral differential.¹³ For instance, whereas universalism would tend to translate the concept of human rights within the social reality of the indigenous people, as if setting anchor in a world devoid of thought, a pluriversal approach would recognize first the equivalent concept of dignity, and eventually notice that it applies not only to humans but also to the surrounding nature, changing discourse and programs accordingly; or: whereas universalism would bring the latest Western interpretation of the rights of women to non-Western social realities, thus likely pursuing the agenda of white bourgeois secular women, a pluriversal approach would learn first the local histories of women

¹⁰ See Walter Mignolo, 'On Pluriversality', 20 October 2013 <walmernignolo.com/on-pluriversality/> [accessed 27.11.2019].

¹¹ See Raimundo Panikkar, 'Cross-Cultural Studies: The Need for a New Science of Interpretation', *Monchanin* 8: 3-5 (1975), 12-15.

¹² See Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories / Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

¹³ Mignolo and Tlostanova offered a summary of the argument in a separate article: 'Under diatopic hermeneutics, we do not assume that the other has the same self-understanding as we do. Panikkar rethinks the mechanics of mono-topic Western hermeneutics, according to which we can know something only if we acquire a certain degree of pre-understanding (Gadamer's "horizon") and anticipation of meaning. But in intercultural and inter-philosophical contexts, such an anticipation, as a basis for a hermeneutic circle, is not possible. Hence, the necessity of diatopic hermeneutics, which helps us understand something that does not belong to our horizon. Diatopic hermeneutics begins with the realization of pain arising from alienation and radical difference. It becomes an answer to the challenge of an interpretation traversing the cultural and religious boundaries in case the hermeneutic circle has not been created yet. It refuses to colonize the other by its set of pre-existing categories and values. In contrast to postmodernists, Panikkar does not think that it is impossible to understand the other, an understanding for him is inevitable and necessary. Hence, his method of im-parative (not com-parative) philosophy (from Latin *imparare*, to learn in the atmosphere of plurality), which is a way of dialogic and experiential (not interpretative as in Western hermeneutics) learning from the other, thus enriching our thinking by the other's intuitions and revelations.' Cf. Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo, 'On Pluritopic Hermeneutics, Trans-modern Thinking and Decolonial Philosophy', *Encounters. An international journal for the study of culture and society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2009), 9-12.

and of the socialization of gender and then it would address issues of equality in reciprocal contexts.

COMMUNIZING THE SENSE OF THE WORLD

In other words, one needs to make a distinction between the rejection of the completeness of representation, and the insertion of the particular into the universal. The first is necessary for developing and affirming a localized sense of the world, which is the sense of an open world, i.e., the sense of an incomplete, even unmapped world, that may still be open to the work of communization. By communization I understand here the realistic affirmation and application of the social principles of anti- and non-capitalist thought, undergeneralized conditions of capitalism, with a view to a world able to move beyond extractivism, neoliberalism, and the unprecedented levels of inequality that are characterizing our epoch. The Socialist Bloc – especially Romania and Albania – tried during the last decades of the experience of real socialism to develop a localized sense of the world through enforced isolation, but ended up doing the opposite of communization in so far as it punished its own peoples and preserved the drive for modernization, pushing for the completeness of representation within the borders of the nation-state, in the delirious displays of the cult of personality and the tendency of the Party to substitute itself for the people. And yet, the sense of the

world of Eastern Europe does not pretend to overlap with the sense of the world of the Caribbean, but the sense of the world of the European Union, with all its outer territories and the 34 colonies of its Western member-states, does.¹⁴ For, as Enrique Dussel put it once, 'the side of the oppressed does not have the privilege of the universal.' On the contrary, one is confronted with a Totality.

Differently from proposing 'cultural relativism', or 'coming from the particular to the universal', the coming into voice and visibility of the peripheries and semi-peripheries of the world-system is changing the frames of conversation, while rejecting the completeness of representation and contesting the Western sense of the world, which has meant oppression and negation for the long durée of modernity.

¹⁴ See Manuela Boatcă, 'Forgotten Europes. Rethinking Regional Entanglements From The Caribbean', in *Critical Geopolitics and Regional (Re)Configurations: Interregionalism and Transnationalism Between Latin America and Europe*, ed. by Breno Bringel, Heriberto Cairo, London: Routledge 2019.

The peripheral claims to universality can be either expressed within the Western sense of the world (as up-and-coming particulars), or within historical positionalities, i.e., with a defined and incomplete sense of the world, as ways of transcending the condition of the oppressed. The latter was the 'option' taken and articulated by Toussaint-Louverture and the Haitian revolutionaries, who sure did express universalist ideals.¹⁵ In this sense, the necessary contemporary rise of the Global South and of trans-peripheral relations is tantamount to undoing the Occidentalism of the 'standpoint of totality'. The loss of totality is a loss of privilege that is strongly resisted from Occidental positionalities (Western and non-Western), but it is necessary in order to claim different forms of mediation between the immediate interests of a particular group and the social totality, devoid of the pretense of full sense and full representation, and thus at its turn, re-opened for the potential of communization and social recomposition. In this sense, Central and Eastern Europe is faced with yet another transition: from the post-socialist efforts of 'integration', of trying to add their particulars to the idea of Europe, while adopting wholesale the latter's sense of the world, to affirming their own localized sense of the world, their own positionalities, which can only be realized through trans-statal and trans-peripheral conversations and relations in a pluriversal world, and by building also from the previous learnings of the socialist experience.

¹⁵ See Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World. The Story of the Haitian Revolution*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

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THE OTHER COMES FROM THE FUTURE

ANDRZEJ LEDER

Denominator, according to etymological dictionaries, means more than merely the lower part of a fraction. The Latin origins of the word point to the intuition of what names – *nominator* – and which does so in a complete, definitive manner (*de*). If something is to be a common denominator, it has to denominate all, each and every one.

Who denominates us all, each and every one, is the Other. Not just the other that we are for one another, but the Other – or Otherness – that we all, our entire human community, face as coming from future. Only there, in a future that is indefinite, is the Other really a universal Other. This is what this text is about. But before we turn to that Other, we need to pause and consider melancholia. To talk of the future, of a future universalism today, one has to take melancholia as a starting point. It has been so present at the end of the 20th century, that we are constantly caught up in its sweep. It is striking how often progressive, so in fact future-oriented, reflection tries to escape or deny this fact. One excellent example is Jacques Rancière's passion as he, while recognizing the mournful nature of postmodern thinking – something already apparent in the works of the Frankfurt School, and continued by postmodernists, such as Lyotard – talks about a need to abandon melancholia if we are to start thinking about the future once again.

Rancière is obviously right. But the problem is that to abandon melancholia is itself essentially a way of practicing it. Just take Freud's classic *Mourning and Melancholia*, where this gesture is exposed. Or, if you don't trust Freud, on suspicion that, a melancholic himself, he would entwine us within the web of his affliction – it suffices to recall all those conversations where the question 'Why

are you so sad?' is met with 'I'm not sad at all. Everything's fine, I am just going to...' This '*just going to...*' is an indelible sign of a melancholic mood, where a speech instrument tries to play out an optimistic tune. The indefinite future of 'I am going to...', suggesting the beginning of something new, but one deferred to infinity, since it is always rooted in... the past. This has been the lot of the left-wing alternative for the last thirty years or so; every subsequent Porto Allegre making another world seem at hand, for it only to – a while later – revert to just more of the same – the only effective universalism that exists: the one named global economy.

So the question is, what do we need to do or experience given we derive from our present-day collective condition as the people of the global North – to reach into a shared future?

*

Let's go fifty years back. The turn away from the past that took place then was itself a result of a grief, or mourning, entering into the collective consciousness. A mourning of vast extension, a mourning after the 20th century with its great hopes and mass casualties. It all began sometime in the 1960s, induced by the Eichmann trial in Israel and the Frankfurt trials in Germany. It was building up in France under the impact of the shocking awareness of the reality of a colonial war; and in the USA, as a result of increasingly serious departure from racism, forced by the Civil Rights movement.

However, the 1960s were still trying to defend the past. As the 'pursuit of the Real' – of an ultimate and genuine form of society, characteristic of the first half of the century – revealed its ever more horrific face, the decade's consciousness was all the more rapidly escaping into the future. When Mao Zedong announced in 1966 that the key to the future would be to obliterate all traces of what was transmitted by the past, he touched on the essence of many young people's yearnings. A slogan of the 1968 Paris revolt, *Cours camarade, le vieux monde est derrière toi* [Run, comrade, the old world is behind you] summarizes this push towards any future whatsoever that would provide an escape from the horrible past infesting the present time. That was the moment which lent currency to Freud's idea that the act of escaping melancholia is a way of practicing it.

This run – as much as it is fueled by a denial of the past which was already right before our eyes, compelling us to look – could be successful for a while, so long as hope was still valid, a left-wing vision of the future where people are free and equal, unfettered by the past. Or, differently put, while the current remained mediated by the future.

Around the 1980s, this was gone. Recognition of the Stalinist Communism crimes in the mid-1970s, following the Western publication and the enormously wide-sweeping impact of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, alongside the increasing public awareness of the outrages and follies of China's Cultural Revolution, and then the echoes that resounded with the 1979 revelation of the Khmer Rouge's *killing fields*, resulted in a discrediting of the future. At the very least, it made the ideal of a future brotherhood of equal and free men and women sound somewhat suspect, if not outright dangerous. The more room occupied in the social imaginary by past crimes, the less room was left for future visions. Indeed, the very act of professing utopian visions became a moral anathema. Visions of the future have no place where the ashes of the dead are not yet cold.

This mood determined the well-known *memory turn*, which dominated the humanities in the 1980s. One of its key thinkers, Pierre Nora, warned that remembering can turn into a static topography of mutual resentments: 'Reclamation of the past has been, in essence, a call for justice. In its effects, it often became an incitement to murder.'¹ Identities, though based in genealogies, are suspended in a timeless present, and cannot escape it by any developmental movement. Devoid of a future, their only reference is to other identities, positioned in equally static ways.

Time does not flow in melancholia. That is why any beginning always has the future indefinite form of 'in a moment...'

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It can be said that the identity politics which flourished more or less since the late 1970s, was a desperate attempt to articulate a justicial response from the heart of the melancholic mood. When I say justicial, what I mean is expressing the grievances of those

¹ Pierre Nora, 'Czas pamięci' [The Time of Memory], trans. into Polish Wiktor Dłuski, *Res Publica Nowa*, 7(2001), p. 43.

groups, communities and individuals which previously had been condemned to silence. But, along the lines of Pierre Nora's ideas, the call for justice inevitably started to morph into a call to murder. Or, if not exactly murder, then certainly to doing away with those who were identified as the hegemonic power, those blamed for the existing injustices.

It happened so because justice, when deprived of any hope for a future that would really make a difference, wants it 'all at once', and if it does not get it, it turns into fury. And the fury is quite often effective. Sometimes the effectiveness took the form of inflicting civil death, sometimes – physical violence, as seen in the European terrorism of the 1970s. Either way, it was annihilating. Helplessness and violence would replace justicial social practice premised on having a future to look towards.

Thus, identity politics turned out to be the worst enemy of universalism. Soon enough, a great part of such policies lost all their focus on justice. As they invoked tribal specters – the 'blood of past heroes' – they allowed people to fall into a dream of past heroic deeds, shielding them from the sense of loneliness that inseparably followed the universality of a global economy. The dream, however, as dreams are, was feverish, it was ruled by dream (ir)rationality, easily sliding into nightmare. Ghastly and violent *retrotopias* became a defence against the only universalism that was effective – the one of economic processes.

The universalism of economic language was founded in an amalgam of ideas combining, in the spirit of Friedrich von Hayek – through the idea of human rights and the advocacy of individual liberty – a narrative of the moral responsibility of communities and the economic rationality of societies. This seemed to sound very well. But when it was imposed by the Washington Consensus on the ever more rapidly exploited societies of a globalizing world, it was met with a rising murmur of discontent.

The universalism of the global economy has an important link to the melancholia and the condition of being rooted in the past, namely an overwhelming weight of being thrown out of time. Melancholia, as we know, is located outside of time. What about economics? The same, because, while economic processes are of a temporary nature, the laws of economics, as formulated by its classical theorist, appear to be unchangeable, everlasting and almost 'nature-given'. Hence, easy alliances between a sort of

economic libertarianism on the one hand, and political and cultural conservatism on the other.

Both in economics and in the melancholic mood, the same rituals will always end in the same disillusionment – a shopping spree, a moment of elation, and then more unneeded stuff to place in the wardrobe.

The condition of being thrown out-of-time-as-change was also deeply related to the weight of identity politics. Why? Only a world which evolves into some future allows us to escape being overwhelmed by the now and once. This is so, because a subject that is surfing on time does not have to be something definite, defined by everlasting attributes. It is becoming, change itself; its every move is a response to a world which is a changeable and changing Other. But when the subject is immersed in immobility, it collapses once again into the necessity of increasingly specific definition of its identity – ethnic, gender, religious, political. Constructed by a hostile positioning in opposition to all other identities, and one equally immobilized.

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It is remarkably interesting that the peak of memory politics was the time when diverse mourning moods were re-validated. This seemingly specific question proves symptomatic for an inquiry into the 'spirit of time'.

One of Freud's major achievements, as he investigated the ways we react to a loss, was to discern between mourning and melancholia. It allowed him to study the matter of *working through*, or whether the past loss – of a human being, or of an idea – can or cannot be left behind. Debates develop around the questions as to whether, on the one hand, the working through is possible at all, and on the other, if it is ethically acceptable.

According to Freud's argument, what is unworked-through becomes a root of disease leading to the progressive annihilation of the subject. The mourning process, working through grief, allows one to leave behind the illusion of contact with the lost object, to gradually become detached from the ideas that seemed to evoke it, and to open up to what is upcoming. Dominick La Capra transferred this argument to the area of social and political action – he wrote that the act of working through loss is necessary

for the present development of conditions and standards that support desired forms of social ties.

At the end of the 20th century that argument became paradoxically – or, you might say, perversely – reversed; as Slavoj Žižek has it, from an ethical point of view, mourning was understood as a sort of ‘betrayal, a double killing of the (lost) object, while the melancholic subject remains faithful to it’,² thus remaining ‘morally pure’.

² Slavoj Žižek, ‘Melancholy and the Act’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2000), p. 658.

The perverse nature of the melancholic faithfulness, its bad faith, lies exactly in this demand for moral purity. This is actually a risk of any identity politics. In fact, it is not about any benefit derived from the object of one’s faithfulness – after all, that’s gone! – it is about the excitement of one’s own nobleness. Melancholia is a mirror for the self to see itself in the splendour of its own moral eternity. Or, we might add, of the melancholic timelessness – one is very close to the other. The slogan *Meine Ehre heißt Treue* – Faithfulness is my virtue³ – clearly reveals the perverted core of this kind of faithfulness.

³ *Meine Ehre heißt Treue* literally translates into English as ‘My honour is called loyalty’ [editor’s note].

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Therefore, a question can be asked as to what can make, or already makes us turn towards a universal future. My answer is: a call of the Other. The call which comes through unfamiliar signs, sowing seeds of mental confusion and anxiety. An irresistible call. However, my answer requires the consideration of three objections.

The first one can be framed as follows: Is it not true that the discovery of a universalism should be a matter of autonomic choice, of subjective work, freely defining the route we are to travel? Should it not be a Promethean act, that sets up a new world, in defiance of all the Others – divine or human circumstances and determinants?

The second is this: Is the Other not a front for another melancholic figure that would have us attached to it instead of allowing us to understand the material foundations for a future, its physical and practical nature? Are we, by talking about the Other, not returning to sterile moralizing, alike the one that is a symptom of melancholia’s characteristic bad faith? Are we not forgetting about a practice that would create a future, with all its

associated theoretic deliberations that can only stem from the practice?

The third objection has to do with a diagnosis of our existing condition. What about the melancholia? Are we not so weakened by it that we are about to perish, fall apart, die? As a subject of history, are we not already condemned to a demise; to death which we are not yet facing only because we are shielded by melancholic rituals which are like the last sounds of the orchestra playing aboard the Titanic?

Let's consider these doubts one by one.

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As for the first one, the kind of freedom that would supposedly allow us a fully autonomic choice, involves a necessary arbitrariness. For what could be the criteria of decision, what kind of practice do I declare to be a universal route towards the future? Coincidence? The arbitrariness would then pose a threat of *Cesarenwanze* – the madness of the Caesars. Maybe, then, our impulsive drives? Including the death drive? The delight of murder? Kant as read by De Sade?

As a matter of fact the subject of waywardness refuses any relationship. Not just relationship with the Other. Not even with one's own self, understood as a being in time. Why? The condition of being in time presumes an ability to meet in the present those consequences of past acts which come from the future. This involves a subtle balancing. The subject of waywardness loses this balance, thus losing a sense of proportion. Thus, it forfeits the human status and – as epitomized by the myth of Narcissus – falls into a vegetative type of existence. This realization can be disquieting to all of us: of an us living at a time of rampant self-will and arbitrariness.

So, maybe natural law? A human being does not have to succumb to nature: neither its instincts, nor its laws. Human beings can – indeed, I believe they should – establish ethical and political justice. Otherwise, would it not be fine to settle for the law of the strong eating the weak, the universal law of economic *quasi* nature?

Back to Prometheus, the Promethean gesture was in fact the most unexpected one of meeting the Other. In a world of gods

and titans – from whence Prometheus came – there were no humans. The divine world existed outside of time, and so it had no scope for temporary beings, burdened with the prospect of death. Prometheus was the first one who relinquished his Olympic attributes to stand before men naked enough for them to become his Others. Vengeful gods made sure that he would wait, naked and tormented, for the name that humans would bestow on him.

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When it comes to the second objection, the Other who comes from the future is never the Other to whom our identity refers. Therefore, he is the Otherness itself. It is because of the indefinite nature of the future – perhaps its most characteristic trait – that the Other coming from the future lacks any ‘familiarized’ qualities, cannot be contained in a familiar tin of concepts, cannot be seen. The future is pure possibility, which means that the Other coming from the future can potentially be anyone and anything. Usually, he/she is the most remote and the most surprising. They appear as the significant, as the signifiers – exactly those who will bestow names on us, each and every one: our *denominators*.

Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands, Parisian students would shout in May 1968. They did so because that is how they were denominated by an Other – Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Never mind that their present and the past of their identities written into it had nothing to do with either Jews or Germans, as they were flesh and blood the children of a French soil. But the ‘Red Danny’ coming from the future denominated them like that.

So, if there is an ethical dimension to this situation – and there is one – and if it is to be something else than the bad faith of ‘faithfulness’, it lies precisely in this mode of turning towards the future that allows us to recognize whatever new name – the definition transcending the identity of each of us – is ascribed to us by an emerging Otherness. To see it past the identity mirror that lures us with the idea of being faithful to oneself, and past the delusions of the past, tempting us with a melancholic faithfulness to the dead. Through that new name, we come to directly face the Other/Otherness, the moment Badiou called an Event. An Event deprives us of past identities and gives everyone a new name, one capable of creating a community.

The political implication is that only this mutual recognition within a large collectivity of Others, seeing one another as a challenge to make a community with no prior conditions, offers a chance of universality without identification within One, one identity infinitely copied. Something that was the murderous implication of Mao Zedong's gesture.

Thus, in this other-oriented dimension of the future, practice becomes seminal for the new theory, as it is practice that turns the future into the present, endowing it with a definite form that will allow the transition of an event into a rule, as Badiou would have it. Yet, the event will not be possible without an initial openness to the Otherness of the Other who emerges from the future.

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The third objection, one that warns us against the destruction of our community, tends to forget that 'there are no epochs of decline'. This perverse statement by Benjamin reminds us that the dying of a community is actually more of a demise of a certain identity, form, language – a dream – and the waking up to a new one. A community dies by becoming a new community. In this understanding, epochs of decline are those in which the concepts we use, the languages and stories by which we attempt to tell others about the world, as well as the figures that we evoke, no longer convey the sense of what is going on. The 'going on' just seems to escape the language. It is as if the whole imaginary in which we live no longer adheres to the real.

The metaphor of unsticking is apt insofar as that moment is much alike unsticking wallpaper. Or some structure that is coming apart. A grotesque sense of untimeliness, bizarreness, often absurdity arises but we are lost for words that would adequately convey that strange impression. The words we use still belong to the languages which were absolutely adequate not so long ago, which seemed to represent the world as it is. But no, they are now unsticking from the Real, the way old wallpaper does.

Meanwhile, processes and events take place which, on finding no room within the existing naming order, imperceptibly alter the conditions of human life. This causes us to live in a different way, while still trying to use the old ways of naming and practicing it.

As if the Other were not coming from the future! Not coming to give us all a new name which will allow us to shake the dust of old identities off our sandals and move on to look for a new community, whose shape we may not yet be able to imagine. Maybe it will be an Afro-European community? Or a community of living beings feminine in gender? Or of sentient beings, even if ones based on silicon? A community that will be denominated by the Other coming from the future.

translated by Jerzy Paweł Listwan

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ADULT

THE ETHICAL PARTICULAR AND THE POLITICAL UNIVERSAL

ROBERT PFALLER

DO ADULTS HAVE TO BE ADULT?

Let me start with a little anecdote. A while ago, on a flight, to the US, I wanted to watch the movie *Amour* by Austrian director Michael Haneke on the board entertainment system. Before the video started, I got a warning. It said: 'Attention! This movie contains adult language that might hurt your feelings.' At this moment I immediately thought, 'Wow! Neoliberalism at its best.' Actually, it is neoliberalism's ideology in a nutshell. Since it contains both constitutive elements of this ideology. On the one hand, it displays the typical postmodern, increased concern about people's vulnerabilities and sensitivities: I could get hurt by something – even though 'Amour' is a movie about two old people dying in Paris, and not a frivolous burlesque or porn movie. On the other hand, it dismantles a hitherto valid standard of general trust in society. From now on it is not anymore sure that adult people are able to deal with adult matters (since the warning did not say something like 'This movie is 18+'). Instead, it is predisposition now that even adult people could get hurt by adult words. This is how the postmodern concern for sensitivities exerts its neoliberal function of dismantling and privatization of the public space: the basic principle of mutual trust in public space gets revoked. Nobody is anymore allowed to expect from other adult people that they can behave like adults. Why should they? Aren't they, as postmodernity has tried to teach us, infinitely different?

By this, the elementary solidarity and recognition that in modernity had constituted public space – and its correlative, 'public man' (in the sense beautifully described by Richard Sennett) – is being annihilated. Until then, everybody adult expected every

other adult to be able to behave like an adult, i.e., to leave their idiosyncrasies, whimsies, moods, sensitivities and other personal matters behind and to give themselves

1 See Sennett: "City" and "civility" have a common root etymologically. Civility is treating others as though they were strangers and forging a social bond upon that social distance. [...] [Incivility] is burdening others with oneself.' (Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, New York: Knopf 1977, p. 264 f.).

a better, stronger, more serene 'impersonal', public appearance,¹ and everybody was entitled to expect this.

To give a comparison, when acquiring a driver's license in certain countries like Austria, everybody learns a fundamental principle of traffic law – the 'principle of trust' (*Vertrauensgrundsatz*). This principle says that every participant of public traffic is allowed to expect from every other (except for children and certain other exceptions) that they will behave reasonable. Analogously, public space in modernity contained the assumption that everybody adult was able to act as 'public man'. Revoking this principle in the name of personal sensitivities means to destroy public space and its constitutive elementary solidarity.

2 For a lucid criticism of the fallacies of this popular quick connection between enlightenment and colonialism see Neiman: 'Placing the dividing line of colonialism on skin color means to disavow the deep implication of the local elites in the colonialist exploitation. On the other hand, "white" philosophers like Immanuel Kant praised China and Japan for keeping out predatory Europeans.' (Susan Neiman, *Why Grow Up?*, London et al.: Penguin Books, 2014, p. 47).

I think, this is what created the alleged current 'crisis of universalism': it is not the alleged connection between colonialism and the rise of the bourgeoisie with its program of enlightenment,² but instead the interest of privatization of the public sphere and the quest for hitherto common resources, goods and spaces.

DO WE NEED A NEW UNIVERSALISM?

Michel Montaigne once stated that no idea is ever too stupid to not find some people ready to sacrifice their blood for it. This principle can also be formulated to its reverse side. It would then come up to the sentence: 'No idea is ever smart enough to not be able to serve as a pretext for something else'.

I think, this is the problem with traditional, modern universalism. It has been used as a pretext for something else. Precisely those people who formulated universal principles such as the Rights of Man used this idea as a pretext for subjecting and exploiting others whom they declared as non-Man or as non-universalist. Universalism itself was used as a dividing line between, on the

one hand, something that regarded itself as universal and, on the other hand, something else that it regarded as particular (people of color, women etc.). Yet, as the philosopher Hegel stated, a universality that borders to particularity cannot be a 'true universality'; it is instead another particular, or what he calls a 'bad universality'. In order to achieve true universality, it would have to relate to the particular not as its opposite, from which it is to be distinguished, but as its general class, of which the particular is a subsumed kind.

So the problem with modern universalism does not lie in its content. Instead it lies in its form – or, to be precise, in the contradiction between its content and its form: the colonialist universalists have been universalist in a non-universalist way. This can be clearly seen by the fact that the colonialists even de-modernized the colonies; they revived and restored feudal social hierarchies that had already been overcome.³ Thus the colonialists have betrayed their universalist content by its form; by its function as a pretext. Nothing about the content has therefore to be changed, apart from its structural position. This corresponds to what the philosopher Louis Althusser has taught about theoretical ideology: theoretical ideology does not so much consist of wrong ideas or assumptions; rather it consists of displaced assumptions. For ideology trades in the problems you actually have for those that you would prefer to have. Ideology therefore always indicates a certain reality, yet without delivering the theoretical understanding of this reality – since it speaks about something else.⁴ Therefore even true propositions can well

3 See Žižek: 'British colonialism did many horrible things in India, but the worst among them was resuscitating the oppressive Hindu tradition of caste. Before British colonization, the caste tradition was already disintegrating because of the influence of Islam. But British colonizers understood very quickly that the way to rule Indians was not to make them like us or to bring to them our modernity. No, a much better way to rule them was to resuscitate their own traditional, patriarchal, authoritarian structures. Colonialists did not want to create modernizers.' (Slavoj Žižek, 'Migrants, Racists and the Left. Interview', *Spike Review*, May 2016 <www.spiked-online.com/spiked-review/article/migrants-racists-and-the-left/18395#.v9XVPiOLQTG> [accessed 11.11.2019]). Cf. David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism. How the British Saw Their Empire*, Oxford et al.: Oxford University Press, 2002.

4 See Althusser: 'An ideological proposition is a proposition that, while it is the symptom of a reality other than that of which it speaks, is a false proposition to the extent that it concerns the object of which it speaks.' (Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', in *Lenin and Philosophy' and Other Essays*, transl. from the French by Ben Brewster, New Left Books: London 1971, p. 79). The object of this remark has its counterpart in the other type of ideological proposition which appears as true with regard to the object of which it pretends to speak, yet is still misleading with regard to the object of which it is a symptom. Therefore ideological displacement exists in two forms: 'False, but true (as symptom)', and 'True, but false (as symptom)'. In psychoanalysis, these two types are embodied by the hysteric who lies about the facts but remains truthful to his desire, and the obsessional neurotic who sticks to the truth with regard to the facts in order to deceive about his desire.

5 I have elaborated more extensively on this problem in: Robert Pfaller, 'Where is Your Hamster? The Concept of Ideology in Slavoj Žižek's Cultural Theory', in *Traversing the Fantasy. Critical Responses to Slavoj Žižek*, ed. By Geoff Boucher, Jason Glynos, Matthew Sharpe, Hants and Burlington: Ashgate, 2005, 105–122.

this were true, it would obviously be a distraction, a pretext for something else; a way of speaking in order not to speak about something else. The same goes for universalism. The sentences 'All men are equal', or 'It is a great idea that all men are equal' start serving as a pretext as soon as I start oppressing you; especially if I do so by explaining that this were necessary since you did not yet have the idea that all men are equal.

Therefore there is nothing to be won by changing the content of the proposition, for example by making it less universal. The idea 'not all men are equal' is not an apt way out of a suppression under the pretext of 'all men are equal'. On the contrary, this just means to take the very position in which the enemy wants to see you; an agreement to his claim to suppress you. The fact that the universalist idea has been a pretext, an ideological

weapon in the hands of oppressors, is not an argument against the content of the idea. And even less is it an argument for promoting the opposed idea and believing that it could not serve ideological purposes.⁶

Most of the weapons and goods in the hands of oppressors and exploiters are precious goods that have to be appropriated – every partisan army knows that very well. Since their only weapons' supply has in many cases been the enemy – so they were very careful to overcome their enemies, but not to destroy their weapons.⁷ Today's frequent demonization of enemy properties and enemy ideological weapons is a 'childhood disease', a severe mistake that the contemporary left has to

6 This can be seen today, for example, when so-called 'New Materialism' and 'Posthumanism' claim that any difference between mankind and other species is purely arbitrary. This claim is made in order to protect animals from that human cruelty which is allegedly based on the assumption of such a difference. Yet removing the difference is no guarantee for a less cruel dealing with animals. This can be seen clearly in the philosophy of Benedict de Spinoza, one of the sharpest critics of the 'humanist difference' and of the alleged 'human exception' from nature (see Benedict de Spinoza, *On the Improvement of the Understanding, The Ethics, Correspondence*, New York: Dover Publications 1955, p. 128), and at the same time one of the most explicit advocates of human cruelty against animals: 'Nay, as everyone's right is defined by his virtue, or power, men have far greater rights over beasts than beasts have over men.' (ibidem, p. 213).

7 See for this, for example, Paul Parin, *Es ist Krieg, und wir gehen hin. Bei den jugoslawischen Partisanen*, Berlin: Rowohlt, 1991.

overcome if it ever wants to win again. As Susan Neiman has perspicuously demonstrated,⁸ those very philosophers of enlightenment, like Immanuel Kant and Denis Diderot, who today tend to be removed from the reading lists by 'post-colonialist' critics, were the sharpest opponents of colonialist politics. Precisely such weapons that come from the 'other' side are the sharpest tools for an anti-colonialist critique and for convincing others than those already convinced.

NEOLIBERALISM AND PARTICULARIZATION

The lesson from the experience in the airplane was that the typically postmodern concern about not hurting anyone's feelings is not just a kind of small consolation for neoliberalism's big destructions and disappointments. Instead, it is an outright prolongation of those destructions exerted upon the social fabric. Warning adults about adult language is an instance of the destruction of a standard hitherto existing in public space: that everybody had the right to trust in the other as being an adult and being able to behave accordingly. The postmodern propaganda of vulnerability thus was an attempt to destroy a social standard and to privatize public space – i.e., to subject it to private claims (such as that of somebody's most private vulnerability). Postmodernism thus revealed itself as being the cultural program of neoliberalism – or, at least, of neoliberalism's 'progressive' advocates. Nancy Fraser's notion of 'progressive neoliberalism' appears to adequately account for this conjuncture.⁹

How could this conjuncture come about? – Well, to give a rough picture: around 1980 the centre-left parties in the rich capitalist countries abandoned the hitherto successful Keynesian economic politics that had, after World War II led to a considerable increase in equality within Western societies. While until the early 1970s even rightist parties had, when in government, pursued Keynesian policies,¹⁰ after

9 See Nancy Fraser, 'The End of Progressive Neoliberalism', *Dissent Magazine*, 2 January 2017 <www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser> [accessed 19.11.2019].

10 Even Richard Nixon is said to have stated in 1971, 'We are all Keynesians now.' (See for this Thomas Biebricher, *Neoliberalismus. Zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius, 2015, p. 150).

1980 centre-left parties just as their right opponents followed the neoliberal principles of austerity politics, privatization and the subjection of sectors such as healthcare, education and public transport to the principles of profit-orientation. In order to distinguish themselves from their right-wing opponents, the centre-left parties then shifted their agenda from the field of the economy to that of culture. Left-wing politics thus became a cultural issue; the so-called 'cultural left' was born.

Culturalization of political issues brought about a slight shift of accents. Instead of securing people's economic life-standard and perspectives in an economy that made working conditions increasingly insecure, politics mostly cared for calling every social group by a nicer name that would not hurt their feelings. Instead of financing childcare institutions, politics aimed at making women more 'visible' in language. The old 1970s' call for equality got replaced by the new (suspiciously Darwinian) notion of diversity.

Social inequalities now became preferably described as the effects of discrimination. This

11 Adolph Reed writes: '... within that moral economy a society in which 1% of the population controlled 90% of the resources could be just, provided that roughly 12% of the 1% were black, 12% were Latino, 50% were women, and whatever the appropriate proportions were LGBT people.' (Adolph Reed, *Identity Politics is Neoliberalism*. Interview by Ben Norton, 29 June 2015 <bennorton.com/adolph-reed-identity-politics-is-neoliberalism/> [accessed 16.03.2017]).

12 See for this position for example, I. Villa, in: Robert Pfaller, Paula-Irene Villa, 'Wo liegt die Grenze des Sagbaren? Dialog', *Philosophie Magazin*, 3(2018), pp. 36–39.

13 See Bradley Campbell, Jason Manning, 'Microaggression and Moral Cultures', *Comparative Sociology*, vol. 13, issue 6(2014), 692–726.

neglected the fact that also a non-discriminating society could be an unequal one, as Adolph Reed has sharply remarked.¹¹ Yet replacing inequality by discrimination allowed to exculpate the elites: if everything was just a matter of prejudice, then the more educated classes were clearly innocent. *Vulnerability* now became the – philosophically highly appreciated¹² – key stake and currency of social conflict. Suffering and its recognition thus became re-distributed from below up to the elites. For describing oneself as a victim and capitalizing on this status only brings about advantages for well-connected members of the elites, as Campbell and Manning have perspicuously demonstrated.¹³ One has to have a lot of friends on social media that are ready to exert moral pressure on institutions and to

flood, for example, a university with a shitstorm. Within the lower classes in the suburbs, on the contrary, with their moral code

of 'honour', describing oneself as a victim does not allow one to gain any sympathies from others. 'Fuck off, you victim', is a typical swearword-call that can frequently be heard these days amongst young Turkish proletarians in the outskirts of Vienna. For the most underprivileged people, vulnerability of feelings does not appear as a priority. They have got other concerns: for example, how to pay their children's dentist; where to go when the last pub in town has closed down due to smoking prohibitions; or what to do with one's children in summer when the only public swimming pool in town has been closed down due to communal austerity policies.

Culturalizing political issues turns them into a matter of social distinction. Members of the elites became able to distinguish themselves from their peers by caring about hitherto neglected minorities, and by knowing that some names were not anymore seen as appropriate and had to be replaced by new ones. Political correctness was a language game that could be played well in the absence of any members of the groups it is talking about. It was sufficient to be a step ahead in the art of naming them against some of one's peers. Elites delighted in competing for the 'symbolic capital' that could be gained by knowing the newest 'correct' designations. Knowing the newest not offensive name allowed you to de-classify your ignorant colleagues. Thus an apparently egalitarian content could be applied as a social weapon, due to an anti-egalitarian form.

The transformation of emancipatory issues into symbolic capital brought about a shift in focus. For the logic of symbolic distinction implies that those who care for the smaller group are regarded as superior. And those elite members who demonstrate the highest sensitivity for the smallest issues are regarded as the finest. Thus a 'miniaturization' of political attention took place: While the discussed issues became more and more symbolic ('microaggression'), the groups that were cared for became smaller and smaller: center-left parties ceased to care for class issues and shifted to the matters of women's rights. But soon even those were regarded as too big and heavy-handed, and advocates of women's rights started to take delight in discussing the more sophisticated 'gender' issues. In the next step, it appeared more appropriate to speak in a more abstract way about 'diversity', and finally one ended up with the 7-letter acronym 'LGBTQIA' followed by '+' to underline

the open ended character of that 'miniaturization'. Abundantly mentioned, for example by Hillary Clinton in some version in her presidential campaign of 2016. Gender and Queer issues obtained a particular role here. For both allowed for one to dream of a permeability that politics was not able to provide otherwise. If, due to austerity measures, equal payment for women could not be attained, then it was good news to hear that 'womanhood' was just a social construction, as Judith Butler taught. If women could not fully transgress the social borders that separated them from men, why not let them transgress the psychic borders instead? By the same reason queer people became an object of fascination for non-queers. Not because one cared for their specific problems; but instead because queers got seen as the solution to non-queer people's problems. A mobility that could not be established in the social field seemed to become possible within individuals' self-determination. If all of a sudden it was revealed that everybody could individually decide about his or her own gender, all the trouble about gender equality seemed to be a matter for yesterday.

Now caring for the most discriminated groups was not anymore a proof of caring for all groups. The venerable Christian rule 'Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers that you do unto me' – the principle of universality for the poorest particular group – did not apply here anymore. On the contrary, under neoliberal conditions, one always picked a favourite minority and gave small, mostly symbolic advantages to it in order to thoroughly neglect all other ones. Fierce 'victimhood competitions' started due to this, and those who were not able to come up with 'intersectionality' and multiple discrimination experiences lost poorly and had to shut up.¹⁴

14 For a detailed depiction and lucid analysis of these mechanisms within the German LGBTQ-scene, see *L'Amour La-Love Patsy* (Hg.), *Beissreflexe. Kritik an queeren Aktivismus, autoritären Sehnsüchten, Sprechverboten*, Berlin: Querverlag, 2017.

The amazing number of institutions – especially within universities – created in order to fight the 'discrimination', 'microaggression', injury done to feelings and other misdemeanors, play a significantly ambiguous role with regard to these problems. As the sociologist Frank Furedi has remarked, these institutions tend to create the problems they pretend to fight against:

Paradoxically, the more resources that universities have invested in the institutionalization of therapeutic

practices, the more they have incited students to report symptoms of psychological distress.¹⁵

¹⁵ Frank Furedi, *What's Happened to the University?*, London: Routledge, 2016, p. 47.

Instead of helping people to gain the strength required in order to lead a self-determined life, these apparatuses tend to keep people in a state of permanent dependency:

...the unintended message conveyed by the Wellbeing Service is that you are unlikely to cope with the demands of university life on your own.¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 38.

Measures taken with good intentions end up with the most evil effects. This is of course, under the neoliberal condition of everybody fearing for their jobs, due to the 'grievance' – apparatuses' interest for self-preservation. Institutions created to solve problems would dissolve if they did so. Therefore they must actually try to work for the preservation, if not for the increase in these problems. This can also be seen in the always insufficient attempts at transforming language. All suggestions made by such apparatuses for a more gender-equal language soon turn out to be either unspeakable or unwritable, or they are in contradiction with other suggestions (for example, should we call all children in the kindergarten by a neutral pronoun, or should we make women at university 'visible' by giving the notion 'Prof.' a feminine ending? But how could a neutral child become a female professor?). Symbolic politics that replaces real social politics consists in creating loyal apparatuses that, with considerable passion, pursue an agenda which only serves these apparatuses themselves, and not the people in whose name these apparatuses speak.

Postmodernism thus revealed itself as neoliberalism's embellishment. The big upwards-redistribution of social wealth that had created in Western societies by 2010 an inequality comparable to that of 1930s,¹⁷ could be realized due to a culturalization and miniaturization of the emancipatory politics

¹⁷ See Göran Therborn, *The Killing Fields of Inequality*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013; Matthias Martin Becker, *Mythos Vorbeugung. Warum Gesundheit sich nicht verordnen lässt und Ungleichheit krank macht*, Wien: Promedia, 2014; Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge (MA), London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014; Richard Wilkinson, Kate Pickett, *Gleichheit. Warum gerechte Gesellschaften für alle besser sind*, Berlin: Haffmanns and Tolkemitt, 2016; Branko Milanovich, *Die ungleiche Welt. Migration, das Eine Prozent und die Zukunft der Mittelschicht*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016; Joseph Stiglitz, *Reich und Arm. Die wachsende Ungleichheit in unserer Gesellschaft*, München: Pantheon, 2017.

that produced ever smaller groups only concerned for themselves. Encouraged to focus on the vulnerability of their feelings, these groups became increasingly unable to see the danger to those interests that they shared with other groups. As the sociologist Frank Furedi remarks, university students today, when a difference of opinions occurs in a seminar, instead of saying 'I disagree', tend to state 'I am offended'.¹⁸ This is a perfect neoliberal result: it is the end of any open discussion amongst adult, rational beings. Neoliberalism has thus succeeded in creating a full particularization of society, even at university level – which for a long time had been its most open-minded forum of universality.

¹⁸ See Frank Furedi, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

RECLAIM ADULTHOOD

Under these conditions, the notion of adulthood appears today as a battle call to overcome the predicaments of both the ethical and the political level. Everybody's right to be addressed as a rational, adult person is the elementary and universal human right that has to be fought for today. Infringements of this right such as the warning of adult people about adult language (or, to take another example, the equally infantilizing warnings of adult people about the dangers of smoking on the cigarette packages) should be severely punished. This would at the same time be a measure against discrimination: for the utmost disrespect for anybody consists in the assumption that the other, due to their sexual, ethnic, cultural, religious etc. identity, were not able to behave like an adult person.

The profoundly emancipatory Kantian notion of adulthood (Ger. *Mündigkeit*) would allow us today to exit from the infantilism inflicted upon us by well-meaning postmodern apparatuses. De-culturalizing politics and starting again to talk to each other like adult people would shift our focus: we would then become able to talk about the problems that we have, instead of indulging in those we wish to have.

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THE METAMODERN CONDITION

POPULISM AND THE NEW UNIVERSAL, OR, AS IF AN SICH AND AS IF FÜR SICH

ROBIN VAN DEN AKKER
JULIEN KLOEG

Why then is [common sense] important? Because it is the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed. It is the already formed and 'taken-for-granted' ground on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery, the ground which new conceptions of the world must contest and even transform, if they are to shape the conceptions of the world of the masses and in that way become historically effective.¹

¹ Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1986), p. 20.

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON? FROM THE PARTICULAR TO THE UNIVERSAL, AND BACK AGAIN

Let us start this inquiry into that hoary old chestnut of the universal – its very possibility as well as its need in these metamodern times of rapid re-politicization – by asking you, the reader, to momentarily pause and briefly reflect on what is perhaps most particular to you or, for that matter, to anyone's subject position in today's common objective conditions: Which side are you on?

We propose to do so by way of an installation with the titular name – *Which Side Are You On?* (2012) – by the Berlin-based Libanese artist Anabel Daou.² The installation consist of an outdated television set, a 1975 Grundig Super Colour 1610, showing an image of a woman behind what could very well be a confessional screen. Meanwhile a sound track of a female voice asking

² See also Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Art Criticism and Metamodernism', *Artpulse*, vol. 19, issue 3 (2014), 22–27.

the singular question 'which side are you on?' to what seem to be random passers-by plays in a loop, as some kind of vox-pop in a news item about an evidently momentous, yet otherwise undisclosed event. Some passers-by reply in a jocular manner or try and evade the question in another way; others hesitantly formulate an answer in the most general of terms:

Which Side are you on?
I am on the far side
I am on the flipside
The dark side
Which side are you on?
South Side
(etc.)

Daou's work powerfully mediates the conundrum posed by the conditions in which we find ourselves. In the postmodern condition we neither (1) had to choose a side (because of TINA and the relative peace and prosperity at the End of History) nor (2) did we want to choose a side (because of an aversion to what Derrida called the white terror of truth as well as, say, the cultural relativism of multiculturalism) – and that has greatly weakened our capacity for taking stands, and especially so in the name of a universal (hence the evasions, hesitations, and banalities in the answers). Yet under metamodern conditions, which emerged, combined and coalesced in the '2000s' (to which we shall return below), we have no choice but to choose a side (as per the insistent questioning of the installation). This effect is magnified – to rather extreme levels we can testify from personal experience – by way of the undoubtedly anticipated reaction of the viewer-cum-listener who finds herself increasingly frustrated with the endless dithering of the interviewees (as per that persistent voice in your head perpetually reminding you of the current crisis-ridden moment: 'choose a side, damn it!'). All of this is underlined by the very outdated-ness of the television set that is the principal medium of the installation, and hence its message.

At the same time, the confession screen asks the question that is lingering over our entire engagement – how complicit are you (and aren't we all)? It reminds us of a slogan seen at Occupy Wall Street Amsterdam: 'I am a hypocrite, but I keep trying.'

Taken together, then, the viewer-cum-listener is maneuvered – via a double negation (old medium; old message) and a double affirmation (choosing sides; complicity) – in a rather conflicting and conflicted subject position. This subject position, which, to us, circumscribes the contemporary starting point for any political project aiming at a new universalism, can be summed up as follows: we cannot not choose a side, so we keep trying to further its causes in spite of the inevitable risks and hypocrisies.

This detour along the particularities of today's subject position brings us back, then, inevitably, to the problematic of the universal – its possibility; its need – in our current historical moment and our contemporary social situation. Today universality cannot any longer be a matter of an 'objectivity which necessarily imposes its own diktats'³ on subjectivity. Rather, it is the place of the universal that counts or, better put, that which enables the occupation of this place so as to raise this or that from the status of the lowly particular to the high ground of the universal. This is what Ernesto Laclau, following Antonio Gramsci, has designated through the concept of hegemony.⁴

Thinking in terms of hegemony emphasizes the processual nature of particulars and universals. There is no universality that is given externally to the political process. In political terms, we may say that there is no final truth about the nature of the constitution of the People. There is no People as such, only a struggle over what belonging to it would and does entail. Populism is the name of an unheard demand rising⁵ to challenge the differential system of meaning set up by the prevailing powers. It does so by articulating its claim as the People, that is, occupying the place of the People. It is necessarily *plebs* claiming for themselves the position of the *populus* (the People),⁶ while taking sides against what is given. It is one complex of meaning that is advanced against another, which claims to embody the social as a whole. This total or universal embodiment is in fact impossible, because the competing logics of claim and counterclaim can never be fully reconciled; but according to Laclau, it is at the same time necessary, because without such a totality, even

³ Ernesto Laclau, 'Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics', in *Contingency, hegemony, universality. Contemporary dialogues on the left*, ed. by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau & Slavoj Žižek, London: Verso, 2000, p. 49.

⁴ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 115.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

7 Ibidem, p. 70. if precarious, 'there would be no signification and no identity.'⁷

It seems clear to us that within the context of a populist moment gathering steam, the emphasis of any progressive cultural politics and political education should be on the necessity of reclaiming the universal: a new universalism, by way of populism (because there is no other kind of universalism that takes politics as seriously as it should be taken). Especially, since right-wing authoritarian populism has been particularly successful in constructing its counter-hegemonic appeal in relation to precisely such a universal (as any aspiring hegemonic project would do), a whole way of life, albeit, as we argue below, through an internal-national political orientation. Right-wing authoritarian populism has been first out of the gate – what now is to be done is articulating a progressive counter-hegemonic project that has a fighting chance of finishing first past the post. We claim, following Gramsci, by way of Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau, that any political project that wants to bridge the gap between the particulars of today's dominant subject position (as mediated by Daou's work) and the universal can only do so by taking into account a contemporary cultural terrain – or terrain of struggle – that has been predefined by the rather successful deconstruction and reconstruction of common sense by the ideological work of right-wing authoritarian populists of all kind.

The task at hand, then, is to map the terrain of struggle, while giving long overdue acknowledgement to right-wing authoritarian populism that it has changed the terrain beyond recognition – no small feat, indeed – and is therefore by definition playing on its home turf. Any progressive project – that is: any political project that truly wants to progress beyond the current state of affairs *par la gauche* – therefore needs to be aware that they are always already the underdog playing an away game, outside of their own stadium, in front of a crowd that is in the majority supporting what they are convinced is the winning team. We mapped and organized the terrain of struggle along five themes, summed up by an instantly recognizable acronym, as some kind of helpful reminder of the various axes along which this reconstruction of common sense, or ideological work, has taken place; lest one forget that politics requires dirty hands on a terrain of struggle not of one's own choosing. These axes, which we illustrate below

via a Dutch situation in which right-wing populism has indeed been quite successful, are nationalism, socialism, 'Diets' (or the Dutch 'leit kultur'), the 'arbeider' (the hard-working and tax-paying patriot) and party. So, this leads us to the question: If the need for a new universalism exists, *in what manner* should we take up the mantle of idealism, given the terrain of struggle defined by common sense? Or, rather, how to mobilize popular support for a progressive political project from the position of the underdog and on this cultural terrain?

The main conceit of this essay is, then, that any progressive project that is serious about hegemonic politics should be populist in its appeal and, to paraphrase Gramsci, raise popular thought from its muddy, particular position by re-articulating it in the light of a universal position. We are aware that the very notion of a universal is problematic (see Section 1). We therefore propose that successful political projects should grapple with the problematic of the universal as if it were without risks and hypocrisies,⁸ and that this 'as if'-attitude should be accompanied by defensive and reflective stances.

We then argue (Section 2) that – in the present conjuncture – the only way to construct a counter-hegemonic claim with universal reach is by way of a politics of the imagination that is necessarily populist in its appeal. We contrast the politics of imagination with today's imagination of politics (or so-called 'identity politics'), as well as the forms of politics (or post-politics) and imagination (or post-imagination) that held sway during the postmodern years at the End of History.

We subsequently zoom in on the populist moment⁹ by way of the successful challenge of right-wing authoritarian populism to the hegemonic settlement of liberal democracy and neoliberal economics, as well as the various ways in which it redefined the terrain of struggle by being first out of the gate (Section 3 and Section 4).

In the final section, 'By way of conclusion: Openings for a progressive populism – First past the post?', we argue that the right-wing authoritarian articulation of the populist moment represents the 'as if'-logic of any counter-hegemonic claim that aspires to become hegemonic, and hence universal, in a manner

8 See also Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Metamodernism, History, and the Story of Lampe', in *After Postmodernism*, ed. by Rachel MagShamhrain and Sabine Strümper-Krobb, Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 2011, pp. 25–40.

9 Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, London: Verso, 2018.

that could only be described as *an sich* (in Hegelian terms) – that is: a form of popular thought that aspires to the universal as if it were an unequivocal possibility, whilst at the same time not being fully conscious yet of its aspirations and limitations (as articulated in Section 1). We claim that a truly progressive political project aiming at a new universalism needs to raise popular thought to the level of concepts – philosophical or theoretical – that can be used to construct a populist project, or a hegemonic politics, geared towards today’s cultural terrain and aimed at reclaiming the universal from right-wing populism for itself (or *für sich*): a populism *par la gauche* for a new universalism.

We think all of the above is necessary to articulate a counter-hegemonic claim in the present conjuncture, whose material conditions, including its cultural ones, are marked by a protracted organic crisis of an older hegemonic settlement. This organic crisis, which may very well last another decade or so, can be characterized by what could be called the ‘metamodern sense

of a bend’ (to contradistinct it from the Jamesonian postmodern ‘sense of an end of this or that’).¹⁰ This sense of a bend points, amongst other things, to the widely shared sentiment that at present there are many things at stake whose outcomes will be determined by the hegemonic settlement – politically, economically, culturally – that may very well come after the current organic crisis. Meanwhile, we rapidly move towards a clusterfuck of world-historical proportions – hidden around the bend, as it were – in which wealth is concentrated at the top 1 per cent of the pyramid, while rising sea levels and super storms crumble its base, where the rest of us reside in highly precarious conditions. The stakes are high, indeed.

¹⁰ See Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism’, in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. by Van den Akker Robin, Gibbons Alison and Vermeulen Timotheus, London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, pp. 1–19; Fredric Jameson, ‘Periodizing the 60s’, *Social Text*, 9/10(1984), 178–209.

UNIVERSALISM, REVISITED

Any new universalism, worthy of its name, or rather, perhaps better still, once more worthy of its name, must first of all revisit its own historical lineage and scavenge through that momentous garbage heap on which, throughout history, many of its incarnations have been discarded – sometimes rightfully; sometimes

wrongfully. The universal, let's face it and then confront it head on, has as bad a reputation today as it had a good, yet highly problematic standing in the past. Its many connotations, which all ascribe to the universal some form of aggressive incorporation – by way of the ideals it claims for itself – of subjects, spaces and times, with no hostages taken, is a part of its heritage that we first need to come to terms with.

In this section we propose a threefold set of distinctions – to be used as so many techniques for the avid scavenger of history's junk yard – in order to identify the dimensions of idealism that are most certainly unsuitable for such a new universalism as well as the dimensions that still might very well be used to operationalize, or put to work, the universal *tout court*. This figure of the scavenger, who sees itself confronted with all of the waste generated by history reminds us of the flight of *Angelus Novus*, by way of Walter Benjamin (1999). The universal, here, is that 'storm blowing from Paradise', which, as we now know (benefiting from *Angelus Novus*' hindsight), could never, and should not ever, be entered again, obstructed as we are (as much as *Angelus Novus* is) by 'the pile of debris [...] grow[ing] skyward.'¹¹ Yet it is precisely from this pile of debris that we now must pick out and unpick those elements that enable passage from the particular horrors of the universal applied to the universal applied without particular horrors. The distinctions we use to do so – as with so many scavenging techniques – are positive versus negative idealism, offensive versus defensive idealism, and immediate versus reflexive idealism. These distinctions enable us to identify two polar opposites, or 'ideal types,' of idealism: design-idealism and project-idealism.¹²

Positive Idealism and negative idealism

The first distinction concerns positive and negative idealism. Positive idealism can be understood literally as an idealism that posits – namely a pot of gold at the end of history, or the concrete and full

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 249.

¹² The terms 'design' and 'project' are taken from the work of Jürgen Habermas, who warns us of political philosophy as a 'design [*Entwurf*] of a concrete form of life' and distinguishes its approach from an open-ended project (Jürgen Habermas, *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017, p. 12; Matthew Specter, 'Habermas's political thought, 1984–1996: A historical interpretation', *Modern Intellectual History*, 6(1) (2009), pp. 98–99). Habermas sees his own philosophy as project rather than design; we do not engage with his assessment here, but consider the question of how design-idealism (positive/offensive/immediate) is distinguished from project-idealism (negative/defensive/reflexive).

13 For a lengthier discussion see Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol. 2, issue 1 (2010), 1–14; Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, 'Metamodernism, History, and the Story of Lampe', op. cit.

realization of a moral norm, or any goal that can be predetermined and is seen as reachable. Negative idealism, by contrast, is identified by the as if.¹³ The universal aspiration is still intensely felt and defines one's effort. In contrast with the positive idealist, however, the negative idealist does not go beyond the aspiration to cross over into the territory of achievement. For the negative idealist, the effort itself becomes the site of idealism, while knowing that its aims can – and perhaps should never – be realized.

Defensive and offensive idealism

A related but separate, second, distinction is that between defensive and offensive universalism. Whereas the first distinction concerns a different understanding of how to strive towards ideals, the second concerns the way a given ideal relates to the world insofar as the latter has not yet absorbed the former. As briefly indicated above, universalism can certainly be understood as a force that seeks to recreate the world in its image, so that the image (the ideal) itself cannot be understood apart from the tendency to dominate. This is what Peter Sloterdijk calls

14 Peter Sloterdijk, *God's Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms*, John Wiley & Sons, 2015, pp. 37–55.

15 James D. Ingram, *Radical cosmopolitics: The ethics and politics of democratic universalism*, Columbia University Press, 2013, p. 39; see also Hauke Brunkhorst, *Solidarity: From Civic Friendship To A Global Legal Community*, London and Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2005, p. 21.

16 James D. Ingram, op. cit, p. 39.

'offensive' as opposed to 'defensive' universalism.¹⁴ The universalism we find in the history of politics and ethics can mostly be understood as the offensive variety, which forms a cosmopolitan-universal ideal meant to encompass the entire globe – inclusion by means of extension of the ideal to other parts of the world, that is, in the end, domination. On the obverse side we find not defensive universalism, but indeterminacy: the 'cosmopolitanism' of the Cynics, for example, was a license to withdraw from the world rather than to master it.¹⁵ This is the diagnosis that can be brought to bear on the majority of universal positions: suspended between indeterminacy or wordlessness and domination.¹⁶ Defensive universalism is qualified by Sloterdijk in terms

of his analysis of the Jewish religion as a declaration of surplus harnessed as a response to life under terrible conditions. Here, in

the words of Leo Baeck, 'People understood that mere existence can already be a declaration, a sermon to the world [...] Self-preservation was experienced as preservation through God.'¹⁷ This differs from withdrawal to the extent that the universal is not used as a reason for passivity, but instead governs practical activity within the world engaged in by those who invoke it; not with a view to others, but for themselves.

¹⁷ Leo Baeck, *Das Wesen des Judentums*, Wiesbaden: Fourier, 1991, p. 290, as quoted in Sloterdijk, *God's Zeal...*, op. cit., p. 53.

We already see a quadrant of idealisms emerge here. Positive/offensive universalism is in the business of exporting ideals as a mode of domination, overly familiar to us from history. Negative/defensive universalism refers to a way of life not bent on expansion or domination, but instead of existing for itself, if need be against all odds (defensive) while acting as if the universal was available (negative). Yet there is a third distinction that covers a dimension of idealism that carries specific importance to an investigation into populism.

Immediate and reflexive idealism

The third distinction concerns immediate and reflexive idealism. In post-foundational times, the universal occupies the terrain of the mythical, as positive idealism has increasingly lost its credibility. Carl Schmitt was an early observer of the political potency of myth in the face of a rational organization of politics based on 'parliamentarianism', 'balancing', 'discussion',¹⁸ and, one might add, 'consensus.' Schmitt here harks back to Georges Sorel, who had sought to defend the principle that the 'direct enthusiasm' of 'the masses' requires a 'mythical image', which for Sorel was the general strike and more generally class struggle.¹⁹ This is where Proudhon (as well as Donoso-Cortés on the other side of the fence in 1848) was right, and Marx the 'schoolmaster' was wrong; Marx remained trapped in an intellectual exaggeration whereas Proudhon 'at least had an instinct for the real life of the working masses' and the 'expression of immediate life'.²⁰ But such immediacy can be captured far more readily in an alternative myth, continues Schmitt: nationalism. This is proved conclusively by any conflict

¹⁸ Carl Schmitt, *The crisis of parliamentary democracy*, transl. E. Kennedy, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2000, p. 68.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 68, 70-71.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 70, 72.

between the two myths in the modern age, as in the Italian struggle between communists and fascists (Schmitt admiringly cites Mussolini's speech on the myth of the nation: 'It does not need to be reality, it is a striving and a hope, belief and courage. Our great myth is the nation which we want to make into a concrete reality for ourselves'²¹).

21 Ibidem, p. 76.

His central assertion is that '[...] the energy of nationalism is greater than the myth of class conflict [...] the stronger myth is national', and it is supported by an insistence on the 'more naturalistic conceptions of race and descent', an 'apparently more typical *terrisme*', an 'awareness of belonging to a community with a common fate or destiny, a sensibility of being different from other nations – all of that tends toward a national rather than a class consciousness today'.²² Thus, following

22 Ibidem, p. 75.

Schmitt, the universal that operates on the mythical terrain is to be evaluated on the extent to which it satisfies the needs of immediate life. On opposite ends of this continuum we find the two terms of our distinction: immediate and reflexive. Schmitt's wager, as we might call it, is clearly to sign up for the more immediate myth. The problem of the immediate and its dangers has haunted political philosophy at least since Rousseau formulated his concept of the general will. Immediate universalism is thus a form of a fixation of the political, which affixes it to an ontological and/or normative given, by taking the given as being logically prior to politics, directly available, and as placing an absolute constraint upon politics.²³ Fixation is in fact an extreme form of depoliticization, so derided by Schmitt in other contexts.²⁴

23 Julien Kloeg, *Europe's political frontier: On ethics and depoliticization critique* (unpublished doctoral thesis), Rotterdam: Erasmus University, 2019, pp. 94–95.

24 E.g. Carl Schmitt, *The concept of the political*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 56.

*

We are now in a position to see the full spectrum of idealisms, and hence modes of grappling with the universal. We are here particularly interested in the two extremes of the spectrum. Positive/offensive/immediate idealism is utopian in the most pejorative sense of the word: it concerns a preset ideal that reaches out over the world and masters it, thereby completely fixating politics to an ontological and/or normative given. This is what we call design-idealism. Its ideals are based on a design that dictates

a concrete form of life, in Habermas' terms. On the other end there is negative/defensive/reflexive idealism. This is a project-idealism in terms of its ongoing character. The ideal is not merely posited, let alone attained, but one lives and acts as if; the point is not to expand and dominate, but to exist for oneself; and the ideal is not one that is injected into one's blood and grows out of native soil, but one that requires some more distance. Before analyzing in more detail this third component of project-idealism, reflexivity, it is vital to remark that concepts of race, national belonging, and the like, do not have a privileged place compared to concepts of class when it comes to being constructed or 'primeval'.²⁵ In other words, it is an open question whether the appeal of Schmitt's wager is tied to a specific set of circumstances. Our wager is that, indeed, there is no *a priori* difference between class and national identity, with one styled as more immediate than the other by definition. In granting them both an ambiguous position, we are claiming that there is no 'given' to which we can resort that stands outside of culture itself: hence, every version of immediacy is determined by the hegemony that allows it to stand out as immediate.

²⁵ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, London and New York: Verso, 1991.

So we claim then that – in a situation in which there is no given, fixated politics of national identity or class – there can be no politics without imagination. This is to say that we should consider how imagination should figure in the mythical realm of the universal.

POPULISM: THE POLITICS OF IMAGINATION

If we are serious about the very project of working ourselves from the particular(s) of our own subject position to a shared imagined universal horizon – negatively, defensively, reflexively – we need a politics of the imagination. Such a politics of the imagination is, we maintain, per definition a hegemonic politics, aimed at deconstruction and reconstruction of what is common sense by way of a political education and a cultural politics geared towards today's terrain of struggle.

²⁶ See Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983. A Theoretical History*, Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016.

This is Gramsci's principle lesson²⁶ – and today much, way too much, progressive energy is

spent while not taking this lesson into account. We are thinking, here, and we can only be blunt about it, of that which goes under the name of identity politics (which, due to its ever-narrower modes of identification and signification may very well warrant the use of neither identity nor politics). For identity politics, with its insistence on essences rather than commonalities, generalized victimhood rather than shared complicity, and factions rather than alliances, could perhaps better be described as the imagination of politics – or perhaps even better still: politics imagined – because it imagines itself to be political by way of mirroring the positions it purportedly aims to invert (as some kind of not-so-funny funhouse mirror), and, hence, ends up being merely a distortion and still very much a reflection of, dare we say it, alt-right politics: Alt-left politics (although this might very well be giving too much credit to its mobilizing power).

Still, today's identity politics is one step up when it comes to re-politicizing and re-imagining the subject position – as well as its associated forms of either politics or imagination – that could be considered to have been culturally dominant during the years of the liberal democratic and neoliberal economic hegemonic

settlement (which is now in crisis). We can discern two positions, here. The first, politics without imagination, this being well documented,²⁷ merely poses as politics, but could better be described as post-politics (which must, of course, not be seen as a descriptive notion as much as an ideological, prescriptive notion). This position reduces all political categories to ethics and economics to such an extent that the notions of perpetual discussion and perpetual competition gradually replace the outdated categories of war and conflict.²⁸ The second, imagination without politics, merely poses as imagination, but could better be described as post-imagination. This may very well be illustrated by the defeatism of the left and the euphoria of the right as encapsulated by a 'capitalist realism'²⁹ in both art and politics that blocked the historical imagination to such an extent that one could either acquiesce and despair or play along and indulge in the historical moment. Both of these positions might be best illustrated by referring

27 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998; Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017; Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, New York: Routledge, 2005; Alain Badiou, 'The Communist Hypotheses', *The New Left Review*, 49 (2008).

28 Carl Schmitt, *The concept...*, op. cit., p. 72.

29 Konrad Lueg and Gerhard Richter, *Leben mit Pop: eine Demonstration für den kapitalistischen Realismus*, Düsseldorf: Möbelhaus Berges, 1963; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism? Is There No Alternative?*, Ripley: Zero Books, 2009.

to the – by now very tedious, yet by then very influential – thesis first advanced in Fukuyama's essay on the 'End of History' (1989).³⁰ With the 'unabashed victory of liberal democracy,' he wrote in his book-length follow-up *The End of History and the Last Man*:

³⁰ Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, 16 (1989), 3–18

mankind had achieved a form of society that satisfied its deepest and most fundamental longings... This did not mean that the natural cycle of birth, life, and death would end, that important events would no longer happen, or that newspapers reporting them would cease to be published. It meant, rather, that there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled.

This is, of course, as self-congratulating a statement as any from the perspective of the liberal democratic and neoliberal economic settlement – and one of the clearest elevations of popular thought, or common sense, to the level of a philosophy of this hegemony.³¹

³¹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, London: Penguin, 1992, p. xii.

In the 2000s, however, when seen as a period roughly lasting from 1999 to 2011 (and not so much as a temporal decade) various material conditions emerged, converged and coagulated that together constituted a reconfiguration of western capitalist societies and inaugurated the organic crisis of their shared hegemonic project. This is not the place for a full-blown analysis of the various interlocking dialectical moments across spatial scales, temporal cycles and techno-economic, cultural and institutional levels that resulted in what we have come to call the metamodern condition.³² Yet perhaps it suffices, in lieu of such a full-blown analysis, and as symptomatic evidence of the organic crisis of the hegemonic settlement of liberal democracy and neoliberal economics, to point to the cycle of struggles that neatly bookend the 2000s, consisting of so-called networked social movements that coalesced around economic inequalities and democratic deficits.³³ This cycle started at the turn of the

³² For a more detailed analysis of the 2000s as a period see Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s...', op. cit.

³³ Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, Cambridge, Malden (MA): Polity, 2012.

millennium with the alterglobalist protests – in Seattle (1999) and Genua (2001) – and ended, at the close of our period, with the various movements protesting inequality and austerity such as ‘Syntagma Square’ (Greece, 2010), the Indignados (Spain, 2011) and Occupy (US, EU and many other countries, 2011–2012).

It would be an error of judgement, however, to ignore – or dismiss, as some kind of progressive reflex – another form of political mobilisation that runs more or less parallel to this cycle. We refer, here, of course, to the various mobilisations by right-wing authoritarian populist movements that have been on the rise across Europe and the United States, as well as in many other parts of the world. Built on a platform of nativist, identitarian, anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, anti-establishment, and, to be sure, economic issues, these movements, too, gained momentum between the beginning and end of the 2000s, giving rise to

the substantial political influence of, among others, the Tea Party (post-2009) resulting in Sarah Palin’s candidacy for Vice-President and ultimately Donald Trump’s presidency, UKIP under Nigel Farage’s leadership (re-elected as leader in 2010) and then the Leave Campaign and the Farage-led Brexit Party, Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party and then Thierry Baudet’s Democratic Forum, and Front Nationale’s Marine le Pen (elected as leader in 2011).³⁴

Whereas both of these counterhegemonic currents stem from a growing group of people disaffected with neoliberal globalisation, disenfranchised with representative democracy and at ease with the Internet as a means to discuss, cultivate and rally around shared frustrations (however disparate), and both are very much populist in their appeal (‘we are the 99%’; We, the people), it could be argued that the most recent update on right-wing authoritarian populism³⁵ has been first out of the gate. It has been, in other words, rather more successful than progressive politics when it comes to deconstructing and reconstructing common sense. So much so – that many of its themes are adopted by traditional mainstream, formerly centrist parties, especially in Holland (but also unequivocally elsewhere). Right-wing authoritarian populism, put differently, has been

34 See also Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, ‘Periodising the 2000s...’, op. cit.; Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti, *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet*, London, New York: Routledge, 2016 (2013); Thomas Greven, ‘The Rise of Right-Wing Populism in Europe and the United States: A Comparative Perspective’, *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, 19 May 2016, <www.fesdc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf> [accessed 1.11.2016].

35 Stuart Hall, ‘The Great Moving Right Show’, *Marxism Today*, January 1979, 14–20.

particularly effective when it comes to the politics of imagination (please note the dialectical inversion of the above described position of the imagination of politics) and has therefore been capable of defining today's terrain of struggle by jumping into the gap left by the organic crisis of the old settlement in a situation in which no new hegemonic settlement is in sight.

THE CHALLENGE OF RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM IN AND OF THE 2000S

In many ways the 2000s are the culmination point of the reduction of political categories to ethics and economics, such that notions of perpetual discussion and perpetual competition have gradually replaced the outdated categories of war and conflict.³⁶ If we are currently living the 'populist moment',³⁷ this moment serves to destabilize the parameters of what was in place before. There are many related but distinct diagnoses of the disappearance of politics. They hold in common an analysis of a certain hegemony of politics as an 'art of correct governing.' The correctness of the said governing is referred to the aforementioned poles of ethics and economics; perhaps never more clearly than in the mantra of the European Union, 'Peace and Prosperity'.³⁸ Taking this hegemony as a point of reference, it is clear that the polarization sought after by the more recent onset of populism can only appear as a mode of the New that seeks to conquer, to upend boundary stones and established pieties.³⁹ The reaction to the onset of populism has thus focused on the economic dangers it represents as well as its moral evils. In order to clear up conceptual space for our subsequent discussion, we shall first address the shortcomings of this dual reaction and then propose a new function for populism, extending the arguments of Laclau.

Why would one dismiss populism as such? In 2005, the Netherlands along with France responded with a resounding 'Nee' in the referendum on the European Constitution. This was against the consensus of political experts at the time, and (therefore) also contrary to the expected outcome. '[A] majority of

³⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The concept of the political*, op. cit., p. 72.

³⁷ Chantal Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*, op. cit.

³⁸ Julien Kloeg, *Europe's political frontier...*, op. cit., p. 47.

³⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science; With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, par 4.

40 Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, London: Verso, 2007, p. 79.

voters [...] judged that the question was a real question, not a matter calling for the simple adherence of the population, but a matter of popular sovereignty and therefore a question to which one could respond “no” as well as “yes”;⁴⁰ and this surprised the analysts all the more since experts had spelled out in advance that adherence would be in everyone’s best (economic) interests. The ‘Nee’ and ‘Non’ jointly constituted a break in the virtually uninterrupted

41 Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, ‘A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(01), January 2009, 91–195; cf. Jürgen Habermas, *The lure of technocracy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2015, pp. 3–4.

42 Jacques Rancière, ‘Introducing disagreement’, *Angelaki*, 9(3) 2004, p. 4.

43 Julien Kloeg, *Europe’s political frontier...*, op. cit., p. 22; Hauke Brunkhorst, ‘Demokratischer Universalismus – Von der evolutionären Gewohnheit zur emanzipatorischen Praxis. Jürgen Habermas zum 90. Geburtstag’, *Leviathan*, 47(2019), 286–307.

44 Danny Michelsen and Franz Walter, *Unpolitische Demokratie – Zur Krise der Repräsentation*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2013, pp. 12–15.

process of integration and expansion guided by consensus, generally described as a ‘permissive consensus’ in the European context.⁴¹ In the later decades of the twentieth century, this logic applies on a more general level as well: the economic aspect of consensus grows out of predictions and advice formulated by experts. They point out an optimal (in that sense ‘correct’) way of proceeding that is most in tune with the objectively existing economic forces in play. More in particular, the ‘common position’ of a globalized market ‘posited’ as global economic necessity limited politics to a ‘consensus around solutions’ that was imposed on parties across the political spectrum.⁴² This gives political action an air of necessity⁴³ that forces upon us a choice between, on the one hand, going along in a scientifically appropriate way and, on the other hand, ignoring the data in front of us and electing a suboptimal course of action. As a result, any fundamental alternative to the latest version of economic optimization is only conceivable in terms of an abyssal collapse: an irresponsible response to an unbearable risk.⁴⁴ What is left is a society that has to ‘maintain its balance’ and to optimize the ‘objective’ economic forces inside its borders with the aid of expert advisors, so that the inherent danger of politics is gradually removed from politics (the fact that the advice offered by the experts has a tendency to shift around is of little importance). Populism drives a wedge in the gradualism of permissive consensus, and that is for many reason enough to dismiss it out of hand.

A more foregrounded reason, if only because it is loftier than the insistence on economic expertise, is ethical in nature.

Populism is then seen as a subversion of politics, its 'evil twin.' This is a paradoxical dismissal, which insists that populism is out of the bounds of proper politics – itself a highly political claim, but one that is played out 'in the moral register',⁴⁵ thus adopting a posture of neutrality and good sense whilst actually politicking by adopting this very posture.⁴⁶ This serves the highly desirable purpose of constructing a *cordon sanitaire*. An example is Moral Fortress Europe,⁴⁷ built on peace, democracy, reconciliation and human rights⁴⁸ which in the words of European Council President Donald Tusk excludes 'submission to populist arguments'.⁴⁹ Such a *cordon* lifts the necessity of arguing with one's adversary on an equal basis – since they are now plainly evil and not to be reasoned with – and simultaneously creates an identity based on 'puritan good feeling' (Flahaut) which is essentially moral, thus (re)discovering a type of heroism for itself.⁵⁰ In Nietzsche's formulation: 'What [good people] hate, that is not the enemy, no! they call it "injustice" and "godlessness"'.⁵¹ To travel in the opposite direction: this species of moralization transforms our own position into the self-evidently ethical one (in that sense 'correct'), while also reifying both our adversary and our relation with the adversary: they thereby are no longer adversaries, but 'outbreaks of moral disease' that cannot be either rationally explained or rationally approached.

The twofold allegation against populism is thus economic (populism is economically/politically unsound) and ethical (populism is evil) in nature. The economic aspect of the allegation presupposes a composition of economic forces that necessarily antedates politics; the ethical aspect in turn presupposes a settled answer to who 'we' and 'they' are, as well as an absolute ethical boundary separating the two beyond hope of repair. We insist on the opposite of these two presuppositions, which jointly require politics to neatly fold itself into an economic-ethical universe that is not itself up for discussion, so that both matters are completely depoliticized. This would entail the 'reabsorption of politics by the sedimented forms of the social' and thus the 'death of

45 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, op. cit., p. 75.

46 See Carl Schmitt, *The concept of the political*, op. cit., p. 79.

47 Julien Kloeg, *Europe's political frontier...*, op. cit., p. 48.

48 Danny Michelsen and Franz Walter, *Unpolitische Demokratie...*, op. cit., p. 336-337.

49 Donald Tusk, 'United we stand, divided we fall', <www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/01/31-tusk-letter-future-europe/> [accessed 10.04.2017].

50 Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, op. cit., p. 76.

51 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: ein Streitschrift*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2009, p. 38.

52 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, London: Verso, 2005, p. 155.

53 Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London and New York: Verso, 1990, p. 160; Oliver Marchart, *Post-foundational political thought: Political difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, p. 12.

politics'.⁵² The populist moment is nothing other than a reversal of the relations of priority between ontology and ethics on the one hand, and politics on the other hand.⁵³ For the hegemony of politics as the art of correct governing, economic forces and established ethical boundaries comes first; the onset of populism signals the gradual collapse of this hegemony and builds a frontier that reverses the older tenets: for populism, economics and ethics are themselves consequent to political decision, which takes the primary position. Thus a frontier is set up that jolts politics without imagination out of its would-be political posture. Populism

challenges its hegemony on a fundamental level, concerning the width and scope of politics in general, and the political standing of universality in particular. Demands are set in motion that invoke the notion of the *populus* against the system of meaning now in place, with its insistence on given standards of correctness in economic and ethical realms.

RIGHT-WING POPULISM: FIRST OUT OF THE GATE

Any progressive politics of the imagination worthy of its salt needs, then, to take both of these terms – politics and imagination – as serious as they need to be taken in this dire situation. The first task at hand, we argue, is taking seriously the appeal of right-wing authoritarian populism. This presupposes an analysis of the various ways in which right-wing populists have been capable of re-defining the cultural terrain by altering common sense. Ideas, after all, are material forces too – and therefore co-determine the set of material conditions that form any conjuncture, including our own, that progressive politics needs to relate to if it wants to be a form of politics proper.⁵⁴ As indicated we propose mapping the cultural terrain by way of that infamous acronym – NSDAP – that indeed provides, once more, the parameters of today's terrain of struggle.

54 Stuart Hall, *Cultural Studies 1983...*, op. cit., p. 26.

Nationalism

'*Forum voor Democratie* (Democratic Forum) is the flagship of the Renaissance fleet,' Thierry Baudet, the political leader of the latest populist addition to the Dutch political landscape, once said. 'We are going to re-conquer our country and restore our democracy.' Today's nationalism, that is: Schmitt's wager on the most immediate ideal of shared roots, territory and destiny, as well as the experience of being unlike those in other nations, can be characterized as a symptom of what has been described as de-globalization 2.0.⁵⁵ This is to say that nationalism often is framed in juxtaposition to supranational institutions, such as the EU, and that a re-claiming of sovereignty is at its core. This frame serves to attract disenfranchised voters and to deflect unwanted outcomes – and both by 'blaming Brussels'.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the *ethnos*, the border and the sovereign are placed in a relation of equivalency with such a firm grip on the imagination as to become a fixation.

⁵⁵ Peter van Bergeijk, *Deglobalization 2.0: Trade and Openness During the Great Depression and the Great Recession*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2019.

⁵⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The lure of technocracy*, op. cit. p. 101; Vivien A. Schmidt, *Democracy in Europe: The EU and national politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 9.

Socialism

This fixation is in turn paired to a re-articulated notion of solidarity at the core of what we call socialism 'for us', often by referring to what is left of the welfare state after decades of neoliberalization. 'Why do asylum seekers get free healthcare?' Geert Wilders for instance asked in parliament, 'while normal Dutch people can't even afford their medication?' Solidarity is mobilized, here, as a device to raise a fundamental political question about inclusion and exclusion in socialism that has always already been answered in advance: exclude them (i.e., immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees) and include us (i.e., 'normal' Dutch people). Solidarity ends at the border.

Dutch: 'Diets' as Leitkultur

Nationalism and 'socialism for us' are symmetrical in their modes of fixation and lead naturally – as in: ideologically – to a re-articulation of common sense about the notion of 'us' and

the constitution of the *ethnos* that should inhabit the nation and could receive welfare benefits. The plebs, here, are envisioned as a people that are the true heir of, especially, the Enlightenment and the Renaissance (with its 'fleets' and so-called 'VOC-mentality'). The first is framed as the decisive breakthrough in national – 'Western' – culture (and one not present in other cultures), of values such as democracy, human rights, tolerance, and rationality. The latter is used to evoke a spirit of entrepreneurship and a shared pride in 'our' cultural heritage. All of these values are then projected backwards in time, far past their own origin, and connected to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Chantal Mouffe described this anchorage in a 'leitkultur' as a *cordon sanitaire*, which produces both a coherent identity for the *ethnos* deemed 'us' and, quite helpfully, its other, the 'them' that does not belong. This 'them' can then include a whole bunch of 'others,' including people with an immigration backgrounds from Islamic countries (who become a threat to our tolerant way of life), asylum seekers (who become 'gelukszoekers' coming for our hard-earned cash and our wives and daughters), and so on.

Arbeiter: hard-working Dutchmen (vs. the elite)

The true protagonist of the populist narrative, and the standard bearer of the Dutch 'leitkultur,' is the hard-working Dutchman ('hardwerkende nederlander'). Once adopted and popularized by prime minister Marc Rutte it – he or she – is now a staple of the populist mythology. The point being, of course, that they have to work too hard, and earn too little. Geert Wilders once characterized them by way of the typical Dutch names 'Henk' and 'Ingrid,' an imaginary couple running a typical nuclear family. 'They are people who are now robbed by each and everyone. While ignored by the political elites, we chose for those who have to work hard to make ends meet. Not for the "grachtengordel" (cosmopolitan elites), but for Henk and Ingrid. [...] They form the beating heart and backbone of our nation [...] and they have the right to live in a Dutch Holland.' Please note how, here, nationalism, socialism 'for us,' *Leitkultur* and hard work all intersect and reinforce each other in a combination that internalizes elements of starkly different intellectual traditions yet manages to cast all of them in the same mold.

Party: Building a Movement

The preferred vehicle for breaking-and-entering into the 'cartel' system of established political parties is the movement. 'The most important point on our agenda is what we have called 'cartel extermination,' the self-proclaimed movement Forum voor Democratie explains on its website. 'The cartel of established parties must be broken up. [...] Their interests are often opposed to the interest of the Dutch people. They work for themselves – not for the country.' The movement is able to reawaken the imagination because it shows the political pose of the 'cartel' for what it is – a pose. Hannah Arendt demonstrated how the rise of totalitarian movements exposed two illusions of 'European states and their party system in particular'.⁵⁷ First, the illusion that the majority acted politically through the government and that every individual was 'covered' by a party existing somewhere on the political spectrum. Second, the illusion that the 'politically indifferent masses did not matter', that they were 'truly neutral' and a type of background prop on the parliamentary stage.⁵⁸ Today's movements serve the same double function: they shatter the illusion that the majority was represented prior to the onset of the populist moment, while also mobilizing those once indifferent masses who had merely tolerated parliaments with their 'silent approbation'.⁵⁹ In our terms this is a twofold rejection of the fixation exercised by politics without imagination. The movement effects a repoliticization of the prevailing system of meaning at its most fundamental level: its ethico-economic standards of correctness.

⁵⁷ Hanah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York, San Diego & London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1973, p. 312.

⁵⁸ Ibidem.

⁵⁹ Ibidem.

Taking sides

Right-wing authoritarian populism has been so successful because of its ability to reconnect politics to the universal. Its frontier serves a war against the model of building towards an unideological consensus without involving political partisanship and 'taking sides' (ethics and economics suffice). Populism often banks on a direct moral appeal that is simply not compatible with

60 Maxine Molyneux and Thomas Osborne, 'Populism: a deflationary view', *Economy and Society*, vol. 46, no. 1 (2017), 1–19.

the mediating effects of traditional politics.⁶⁰ The point of politics, in this view, is to make this direct type of appeal and sweep aside those who seek to inauthentically 'represent' such an appeal. Populism thus intensifies the ethical aspect of the hegemony it opposes. Many criticisms can be brought against populism, but one cannot criticize it for refusing to take sides.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: OPENINGS FOR A PROGRESSIVE POPULISM – FIRST PAST THE POST?

For today's right-wing authoritarian populism, the universal must by necessity be posited by way of an 'as if'-logic that must remain *an sich*. It needs to flirt with design-idealism, and its associated positive, offensive, and immediate qualities, in order to position itself as a counterhegemonic quick fix by and for the people. Yet it cannot allow itself to become fully conscious of a social situation in which its aspirations – its 'strivings,' to cite Mussolini – are, for now at least, necessarily kept in check by the garbage heap of history that stands between them and the actualization of their ideals. This is to say that the impossibility of its wager on the immediate of national identity cannot be fully articulated – and hence rightwing authoritarian populism cannot fully realize its own reflexivity. It is for this reason that right-wing authoritarian populism remains caught in a movement – for now highly productive – back-and-forth between design and project. Yet this oscillation can only be called cynical: it cannot apply its own teachings, yet it cannot reflect on this given, at least not in public.⁶¹ Yet commenting on its own failure to situate its project within the present conjuncture would diminish its popular appeal.

61 Sloterdijk Peter, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1983, pp. 37–38.

Its Kantian moment in spite of itself, the as-if that must necessarily remain *an sich* and cannot be articulated, leaves it in an unenviable position. It cannot stand the test of another one of Kant's principles: 'Publicity'.⁶² For now that is. But for now this suffices – though we need to remain vigilant. It is precisely for this reason that right-wing

62 Immanuel Kant, 'Zum ewigen Frieden', in *Kants Werke*, Berlin: Prussische Akademie Ausgabe, vol. VIII, 1795 [1923], pp. 341–386

authoritarian populists in western capitalist societies, such as Wilders and Baudet, but also, say, Le Pen and Trump, need to constantly backtrack on their boldest statements, unintentional slips, and intimate musings made public. Baudet's reaction to the public condemnation of his remarks about the 'homeopathic thinning' of the Dutch *Leitkultur* by immigration is typical in this sense. 'It was just an innocent metaphor,' he said, 'a pun. I speak in public everyday, and sometimes you try something new. This attempt to frame me as a racist, to demonize me, is appalling.' This is, of course, the only move to make (for now). Owing up to what right authoritarian populism really stands for would indeed result in what Kant would have called 'universal opposition'.⁶³ As a result, reflexivity is substituted for an uncomfortable secrecy (which is then deflected by pretending to be the victim of politically correct 'fake news,' the 'cartel,' etc.). All of this is to say that, in the present conjuncture, and despite all of its counter-hegemonic momentum and successful shifting of cultural and political parameters, this species of populism ends up, for now, organizing a party that it is not invited to.

If the first task at hand has been to map today's terrain of struggle, the second task at hand requires a reconceptualization – or rather: re-reconceptualization – of popular thought in order to mobilize an alliance of political forces – a historical bloc, as Gramsci once put it – that can win popular support for the historic task of bridging the gap – negatively, defensively, reflexively – between the particular and the universal. One can only do so, we claim, by moving from an 'as if'-logic that still necessarily remains *an sich* to an 'as if'-logic that can become *für sich*. So, any form of progressive populism for a new universalism requires an approach that *is* able to reflect on its impossibility in public – and in that sense becomes *für sich* – yet nonetheless aspires to its ideals as if they were a possibility. This 'impossible possibility,' to give a nod to the eclectic Marxist Henri Lefebvre, should not allow the horizon to be dominated by a single-minded ideal, a fixed immediacy, intended to exclude the 'others.'

To conclude this essayistic attempt to come to terms with the present conjuncture: what is to be done now in any form of political education and cultural politics is to re-articulate the populist axes – by way of populism – of nationalism, socialism 'for us,'

the Dutch Leitkultur, the hard-working patriot, and the party for the sake of a new universalism. Our wager is that a truly progressive populist movement may very well finish first past the post.

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THE QUESTION OF UNIVERSALISM IN THE 'POSTHUMOUS CONDITION'

ON DEMOCRACY AND (THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF) STATEHOODNESS IN A DIGITALIZED MODERNITY¹

ULRIKE GUÉROT

The people's liberty resides in their private lives, which nobody should disturb. May the state represent only the power that protects this state of simplicity against power itself.

LOUIS-ANTOINE DE SAINT-JUST

INTRODUCTION

I fear that we can only hope that freedom in a political sense will not disappear again for God knows how many centuries from this Earth.

HANNAH ARENDT

Enlightenment! What more beautiful, more noble an ideology has humanity ever produced than that collective quest for Reason, the emergence of man from his self-inflicted – and self-assumed – state of dependence, the casting-off of the ballast of ecclesiastical dogma, the rupturing of narrow-minded thinking by the call of freedom and access to knowledge, and lastly, that parallel promise – at least in Europe – of democracy and socialism? 'Men are born and remain free and equal in rights' is the first sentence of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, following on from the revolutionary battle cry *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternelité* which notoriously ended

¹ This text is an adapted and shortened English version of Ulrike Guérot, *Begräbnis der Aufklärung? Zur Umcodierung von Demokratie und Freiheit im Zeitalter der digitalen Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit*, Wien: Picus, 2019.

with the guillotine. Even today, under the conditions of what Cornelia Koppetsch calls 'global modernity', this sentence – although burningly topical – seems almost like a tipsy flight of fancy.

For almost 230 years now, texts about the Enlightenment have been among the jewels of European writing on the history of ideas, from Kant's opening salvo in his 'What is Enlightenment?' of 1784, via the emancipator Rousseau and the sceptic Hegel, to Horkheimer and Adorno's 'Dialectic of Enlightenment', written in a state of absolute bewilderment at the betrayal, by the Enlightenment, at the start of the 20th century, of that very promise of civilization it had itself initially seemed to hold out. 'I am quite sure that this whole totalitarian catastrophe would not have happened if people had still believed in God, or rather in Hell; that is, if there had been ultimate principles. But there weren't any. There was no one to appeal to,' Hannah Arendt would later write.² The fact that the great political thinker and idealist here postulates ultimate, metaphysical principles must give us pause. For a second, Hannah Arendt is being neither liberal nor enlightened. What would be required here is a call for immanent, earthy beliefs, of a kind which, following the loss of absolute transcendent faith, could create a political credibility based on understanding, trust and practical cooperation. The early modern Enlightenment had overturned the medieval cosmos, from its Christian-scholastic head onto its modern-day feet. But instead, robbed of all faith, an absolute, unanchored irrationality had led to a human catastrophe on a scale hitherto unknown, nor even dreamt of.

Finally, in the late 1970s, a quarter of a century after Adorno, Michel Foucault wrote 'What is Enlightenment?', and in his interpretation he surprisingly relegates Kant's *aude sapere* – the right, indeed the duty, to make use of one's intellect – to the realm of obedience, not that of freedom. Or, to be more precise, Foucault draws attention to the difference between the private and the public use of reason. Enlightenment is therefore not merely the process through which individuals see their personal freedom of expression guaranteed; enlightenment exists where the universal, the free-individual and the public use of reason overlap. And this is ultimately only the case where politically empowered citizens voluntarily consent and engage in the duty of serving the common

² Hannah Arendt, *Briefwechsel mit Hans Jonas*, zitiert nach Eva von Redecker, *Gravitation zum Guten. Hanna Arendts Moralphilosophie*, Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2013, p. 51

good; or at least, in the limitation of their freedom by the *volonté générale*. According to Foucault, the unique thing about Kant's text is the way he places it in the context of (what was then Kant's) 'today', that turning point in history which opened the horizon onto modernity, from which point forward the Enlightenment became, not a state, but a human task.

In 1997, on this same spot, Helmut Reinalter asked in his Vienna Lecture³ whether the Enlightenment is still a viable or useful principle. That was probably the last time this question could be posed in such a (from today's perspective) naive way. Because what awaits us now lies open on the table to be viewed. The libertarian-liberal concept of freedom as independence and self-determination has been exhausted. And the (global) common good is a chimera. This new narcissistic offense that this insight entails will not be easy to recover from. Humankind has failed in its role as Lord of creation.

While Foucault was able to perceive in Kant's 'today' of 1784 – from now on, enlightenment! – the outline of an attitude characteristic of modernity, that modernity, which turned subjects into citizens and held out the prospect of a future of freedom for all, is now finally over. As is postmodernism, too, which celebrated the inexhaustible present of the individual. Today, as the Catalan philosopher Marina Garcés puts it in her call for a *New, radical Enlightenment*,⁴ we live in the 'posthumous condition'. Under the apocalyptic conditions of climate change, which the IPCC's 2019 Special Report⁵ sets out on no fewer than 1200 pages, the global populace now suddenly finds itself living – or perhaps better, surviving, all against all – in what is manifestly a finite time. And, on the other hand, in an ever smarter world that is constantly driving forward the infantilization of its inhabitants.

Today's 'today' is anti-enlightenment, in that it seeks only technological solutions and no longer articulates an aspiration towards an enlightenment that is inherent in reason, towards making us better, either as individual people or as a society. That at least was the idealistic aspiration which began with Kant's politically empowered citizen (the conscience instead of God, inspired himself by Rousseau's

³ Helmut Reinalter, *Ist die Aufklärung von ein tragfähiges Prinzip?*, Wiener Vorlesungen, Picus, 1997.

⁴ Marina Garcés, *Neue radikale Aufklärung*, Wien: Turia & Kant, 2019.

⁵ See unknown author, *Weltklimarat warnt eindringlich vor Folgen des Klimawandels*, BR24, 25.09.2019 <www.br.de/nachrichten/wissen/weltklimarat-warnt-eindringlich-vor-folgen-des-klimawandels,Rd4650K> [accessed 8.11.2019].

Emile to Pestalozzi's enlightened (or idealistic?) pedagogy. For many decades, the improvement of humanity was a post-revolutionary, large-scale social experiment, which, however, went off the rails, when the long dreamed-of,⁶ but then the 'really-existing socialism' was materialized with a lot of pain for mankind; and consequently vehemently pushed aside by the competing idea of capitalism, which was not at all idealistic.

6 Axel Honneth reminds us in his book *Die Idee des Sozialismus. Versuch einer Aktualisierung* ('The Idea of Socialism: Towards a Renewal') that socialism, too, was one of the ideas of the French Revolution – only later to lose its way – and calls for further thinking on a new way to connect democracy and socialism in the 20th century.

A positive normative understanding of the idea of abstinence or renunciation, once a primary virtue, let alone of prohibition – even of renunciation in the interests of the common good – has long since seemed an impossibility. The sheer idea of prohibition is currently failing to make its way through the political process even with respect to a simple plastic bag.

The president of a German trade association opined on the radio, on the same day that the German Ministry of the Environment tried to ban plastic bags, that modern consumers favour 'impulse buying', especially in the areas of clothing and consumer technology; and that for that reason, 'plastic bags were indispensable'. At the beginning of the third millennium, the individual in the 'posthumous condition' is apparently unable to renounce on the use of a plastic bag; nor should it be forced to do without them, for it might thereby be placed under an intolerable affective burden. That is neither sensible nor reasonable. Nor is it idealistic.

7 Pankaj Mishra, *Books that Challenge the Consensus on Capitalism*, 24 December 2018, <www.bloomber.com/opinion/articles/2018-12-24/two-new-books-challenging-the-consensus-on-capitalism> [accessed 21.01.2020].

The stupendous normative reluctance of the actually existing capitalism to even consider the possibility of any concept of society outside itself, the almost systemic suppression of any political discussion of alternatives,⁷ and the subtle, psychoanalytical forms of communication practised by and in its institutionalized system of self-preservation, especially under digital cybernetic control, bring to mind the sentence from Frederic Jameson: 'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.'⁸ Whereas the Enlightenment had made citizens out of subjects, in the 'posthumous condition' there are no more citizens, only consumers⁹ or spectators, who watch global events dispassionately, as if they themselves were unaffected by them or

8 Frederic Jameson, 'Future City', *New Left Review*, 21(2003).

9 Jean Baudrillard brought up this topos already in the 1970s in his book: *La société des consommateurs*, Paris: Folio, 1970.

could save themselves at any time on a planet B – which is why they are increasingly shifting their own activity into the virtual world. It's as if the climate catastrophe – like almost everything else now – could be experienced only through the lens of an iPhone attached to a selfie stick: the main thing is to make sure you're there, and to record it.

Contemporary society is currently negotiating the question of whether the monstrous, infinitely malleable entity that is capitalism, which is capable of absorbing everything, will also assimilate the Fridays for Future movement; one manifestation of this is the increasing ridicule directed at the historical subject Greta Thunberg because of her supposed emotionality – as if it were part of one's civic duty to face the climatological apocalypse with composure. What is striking, however, is that accusations of female hysteria, to which the (perfectly reasonable) demand for women's suffrage was subjected only a hundred years ago, have so far not been employed by Greta Thunberg's mostly male critics. However, although she bases her arguments on scientific figures and studies, she is now being publicly accused of being 'irrational'; and this at a time when no policy area can do without 'evidence-based' research as a basis for decision-making, because sovereign political decisions have long since been pathologized. So it seems that the point when politics becomes problematic today is when the 'evidence' doesn't fit, or isn't compatible with one's own preferences or intentions. The truly political element then lies in applying the qualifier *notwithstanding*.

This institutionally-butressed political irrationality has become the central element of the 'post-democratic turn' and the core of what Ingolfur Blühdorn calls 'simulative democracy'.¹⁰ When democracy seems incapable of balancing long-term benefits for all (the common good) against short-term costs (the renunciation or even prohibition of plastic bags, let alone of SUVs, skiing, meat or aeroplane flights), and certainly not on a global scale, then there is only one time left, a time without a future, in which the many want to have everything and nobody wants to renounce on any privileges. In advanced consumer societies, the purpose of democracy is no longer to change this situation, but to conceal it. Democracy is therefore currently changing its form like a chameleon changes colour, and the more a frightened civil

¹⁰ Ingolfur Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2013.

society appeals to the democratic process, the more it is in fact succumbing to a post-factual delusion about the democracy for which it yearns.

In the course of this anti-enlightenment war, the more radical question currently emerging in literature, art and even political activism (*Extinction Rebellion*) is that of the 'posthumous condition', or how long we want to hold on to democracy as a social mechanism for regulating society. In other words, the question of whether it might even be reasonable to pursue the project of enlightenment, as a project of *Reason*, with other than the democratic means of creating or identifying majorities, and of what such means might be? But in fact this question, too, is obsolete even before it has been posed, because since at least the middle of the last century it has been entirely unreasonable to continue to postulate enlightenment as an end in itself; and since the second half of that century it has been equally unreasonable to assume that there is still such a thing as a society: 'There is no such thing as society,' Margaret Thatcher declared in the mid-1980s.

Nevertheless, the true spirit of Rousseau's *Social Contract* – one of the most beautiful, powerful and lucid books from the period leading up to the French Revolution (it was published in 1762) – lies not in the idea that something is just or fair because the people want it, but that, under certain conditions, the will of the people is more likely to correspond to justice than any other (individual) will. 'The criterion for what is good is the truth,

is justice, and in second place the common good,'¹¹ wrote the young French philosopher Simone Weil in a short paper from 1943, in which she called for the universal abolition of political parties on the grounds that they only ever adopt perspectives that

have been filtered through their own opinions and can therefore never really stand up, in the political process, for what is good and true. Identifying truth and justice in the sense of Rousseau's social contract, however, requires a social mechanism. 'If democracy represents such a mechanism, then it is good.

Otherwise not,'¹² writes Weil, with breath-taking simplicity, and without thinking, as political theorists do today, about whether in making such a statement one

is making common cause with those – the populists, above all – whose goal is the abolition of (liberal) democracy. 'Democracy,

¹¹ Simone Weil, *Anmerkungen zur generellen Abschaffung der politischen Parteien*, Zürich: Diaphanes, 2009, p. 8.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 10.

and the power enjoyed by the greater number, these are not commodities. They are means of achieving what is good, means which are rightly or wrongly judged as effective,¹³ writes Weil, who, however, was certainly not a populist in today's sense, in fact quite the opposite. It is no longer possible to write with such simplicity today. But what then?

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

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So what, ultimately, can enlightenment and democracy be today, under the 'posthumous condition'? Do we need a new concept of freedom? Do we have to choose between a future of 'totalitarian enlightenment' and one of 'democratic apocalypse'? And which would actually be the worse dystopia, in a time when the enlightened utopia as a normative concept has been lost:¹⁴ the preservation of planet Earth and its natural foundations for life without democracy and individual freedom; or alternatively, individual freedom and democracy without the natural foundations for life? To put it another way: could there be such a thing as a dignified life without a liberal concept of freedom as understood today? This is what the following thought sketches, ones that are merely experimental in character, will concern themselves with.

¹⁴ The nearly contra-cyclical desire for utopia is surprisingly high though. To give just one example: 'Utopia' is the topic of the 2020 annual conference of ECPR (European Consortium for Political Research) in Reykjavik'

I ENLIGHTENMENT VERSUS APOCALYPSE

I hear the message well, but lack the faith.

JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

'Nobody has the intention of abolishing freedom.' No doubt, every head of state and government in the world today, probably even including Xi Jinping, would sign up to this statement – which is modelled on the comments made by Walter Ulbricht in 1961 regarding the plans for the building of a wall. And yet the abolition of freedom is precisely what is happening right now, and everybody senses it. Creative artists picked this up on their radar long ago, and have done their best to dramatize it. In *Children of Men*, as long ago as 2006 (!), Alfonso Cuarón enables us to see how a society without any future erodes from within and crumbles.

The plot of the film is based on the conceit that no children have been born on the Earth for eighteen years. It's hard to think of a more arresting way of expressing the idea of no future. Child-birth in itself, the crib, the child – this is not only the essence of the Christian faith. Hannah Arendt's idea of natality, of the ever-present potential for a new beginning for mankind, was based on the belief that birth heralds the arrival of a new generation, one which always has the potential to open up the world to a revolutionary new beginning – *Novus Ordo Seclorum* – so that with each new generation, the hope of a 'miracle' enters

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Die Freiheit, frei zu sein*, München: dtv Verlag, 2018, pp. 36–38.

the world.¹⁵ What Hannah Arendt is concerned with in her analysis of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue is not the foundation of a New Rome in any absolute or utopian sense, but the fundamental human capacity to

continually found Rome anew. But without children, even that is no longer possible.

Cuarón's film is currently undergoing a kind of update in the form of the 2019 British series *Years & Years*. It demonstrates vividly to the British how Brexit ineluctably leads over time to totalitarianism in Britain. In contrast to the 1930s, when the advent of totalitarianism could be foreseen (and was foreseen by many), nearly a hundred years later you can watch, almost in live time, how the country of Magna Charta, which invented modern liberties, goes about abolishing them. You can even eat popcorn while you watch. So in fifty years, nobody will be able to ask, 'how did that happen?'. And certainly nobody will be able to say 'they didn't know what was going on.' Because the same questions are already being asked today. Everybody witnessed Brexit; nobody understood it. It is still widely assumed – this is the breeding ground of conspiracy theories – that there is some kind of centre from which the (r)evolutionary or counter-revolutionary forces are (or can be) regulated and steered. But there is increasingly less evidence to support this belief.

Not only has art long since made apocalypse into a reality, but science, too. Whereas the apocalypse was once still a Hell of the imagination, its horrified faces captured most tellingly by Goya in his grim charcoal drawings, today – 'evidence-based' – it is summarized on 1200 pages in the report of the UN committee on the climate. Whether the polar ice caps will melt in five or eight years' time, or whether the room for manoeuvre is perhaps a little wider

than had been thought, is largely irrelevant. It is now clear that the global system, including liberal democracy, is not sustainable for seven billion Earth inhabitants, led alone more. This marks the effective beginning of the end of liberal democracy as we know it.

What is new about this state of affairs, i.e., the essence of today's 'today' in Foucault's sense, and which leads to the replacement of postmodernism by the 'posthume condition' from this point forward, is not only that the apocalypse is no longer a sinister, usually religiously-based presentiment of the end of the world, but now a quasi-fact – which purely in terms of etymology is a *contradictio in adjecto*, since the term apocalypse stems precisely from the non-scientific realm. And what is astonishing about this state of affairs is that the 'evidence-based' apocalypse is overtaking humanity at the very moment of historical contingency in which it celebrates the legacy of 230 years of the Enlightenment and the victory of Reason and Knowledge – only to realize today that all that knowledge cannot help us. All of us knew everything, and it still happened. 'Losing the Earth: The Decade We Almost Stopped Climate Change' was the headline in the New York Times of August 1, 2018 – when that was still Earth Overshoot Day. By 2019, it was 29 June. The cycles are getting shorter and shorter all the time, and in fact for most European countries Earth Overshoot Day arrives already in February or March. In 1972, when the Club of Rome presented its Report, we could still have saved the world. Probably not now. Or not together with all its people. The so-called rebound effect, i.e., the fact that all efforts to combat climate change are immediately neutralized by still rocketing population growth, is the still and hidden sigh of UN officials.

Our powerlessness to avert the obvious threat lies not only in those potential technological solutions that we are as yet unable to implement, or have been deliberately suppressing for decades, such as the hydrogen engine,¹⁶ but also in the functional mechanisms of democracy: who wants, who is able, on a global scale and as quickly as possible, to decide what needs to be done, now? Or to prohibit something? And with what legitimation? Democracy, the birth of a citizen who is sovereign and as free as possible to decide his political destiny, precisely and simply because he is sensible and governed by Reason, is the essence of the Enlightenment. But it is precisely

16 See the 'Hydrogen internal combustion engine vehicle' entry on Wikipedia, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydrogen_internal_combustion_engine_vehicle> [accessed 8.11.2019].

this primacy of Reason that has evidently failed to avert the apocalypse. This is the paradox of global contemporary society, and it is directly linked, at least theoretically, to the question of whether enlightenment and democracy are still defensible under these conditions. But what's more, it is well-nigh heretical even to ask this question, since it represents a betrayal of liberal democracy. Yet, since enlightenment and democracy – in their truly reasonable form – have not yet become reality, they can hardly be defended at any price or, at least, are increasingly put into question. At best, they function as what Ernst Bloch called the (utopian) revelation, as a kind of political star of Bethlehem for the post-social forms of existence with which we are currently experimenting.

Enlightenment and apocalypse should have been mutually exclusive. Today, however, the dialectic of enlightenment seems to consist precisely in bringing about the erosion of the kind of rational action which the Enlightenment and its materialized way of living, democracy, should have produced, and ultimately in making it impossible under conditions of democratic majority decision-making. In view of the mentioned report of the UN committee on the climate, for example, it would be sensible for the European Parliament to decide that, with immediate effect, SUVs will no longer be produced in Europe or exported; that the food supply in Europe will be converted to vegetarian until further notice; or that a ban on intra-European flights will be introduced – even if only temporarily, in order to win time for further deliberation. The automotive, meat and aviation industries could be compensated on roughly the same financial scale as the rescue of the banks in 2008. No one would feel that these three prohibitions constituted a serious violation of human dignity or a severe curtailment of freedom. The German or European economy would probably survive such state intervention just as well as it did the recent swift shutdown of several nuclear power plants following Fukushima. So what is at stake is neither freedom nor dignity, as enlightenment values, but convenience. But however plausible this proposal may sound here, it is in fact entirely implausible to assume even for a second that something like this could be decided on democratically in any European parliament today.

As early as 1967, Johannes Agnoli, in his book *Die Transformation der Demokratie* [The Transformation of Democracy], drew attention to the fact that liberal democracy in its representative

form should actually be described as a 'constitutional oligarchy'.¹⁷ For about twenty years now, it actually represents 'state of the art' political theory to assume that democracy, in an analysis which some authors do not even regard as cynical, is nothing more than a system 'designed to promote the political and economic interests of the dominant classes',¹⁸ or a system 'in which, de facto, organized, rich or simply fanatical minorities are in charge, groups who are making themselves better off in the here and now at the expense of future generations'.¹⁹ It is interesting in this context that, over the same period, *Kill the Rich* made it from a sub-culture underground rapper song in 1996²⁰ to a bestselling novel²¹ in 2016.

Democracy is therefore not primarily threatened by systems of non-democracy, such as Islamic states, 'failing states' or autocratic regimes, as the American NGO Freedom House likes to stress in its annual reports. Rather, the threat to democracy comes from within itself, and lies – beyond outrageous income discrepancies on a global scale – in the fact that it is apparently unable to generate suitable methods for implementing Reason under conditions of freedom. 'La démocratie contre elle-même,' democracy opposes itself, as the French intellectual Marcel Gauchet wrote back in 2002.

This conclusion – Ingolfur Blühdorn calls it the 'post-democratic paradox' – stands in contrast to the contemporary call for more and more (participatory or discursive) democracy and the defence of democracy against nationalism and populism; and to the demand for ever better methods of deliberative democracy and the cry to

17 Johannes Agnoli, *Die Transformation der Demokratie und verwandte Schriften*, Hamburg: Konkret Literatur Verlag, 2012, p. 208.

18 Sheldon Wolin, *Tocqueville Between Two Worlds. The Making of a Political and Theoretical Life*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001, quoted in Ingolfur Blühdorn, *Simulative Demokratie. Neue Politik nach der postdemokratischen Wende*, Berlin: Edition Suhrkamp, 2013, p. 261.

19 Fareed Zakaria, *Das Ende der Freiheit? Wieviel Demokratie verträgt der Mensch?*, München: DVA, 2007, quoted in Ingolfur Blühdorn, op. cit., p. 261.

20 By Anti-Flag.

21 See S. Avery, *Kill The Rich*, Scotts Valley: CreateSpace, 2016. It is important to note in this context that in the past, mostly (educated) Aristocrats were Rich, whereas today's Rich are (often) the Parvenus, e.g., making their money out of real estate, through inheritance etc. Parvenus (e.g., Donald Trump) claim to belong to or even to represent the people, but can only do so, because in the current discursive and political environment, especially when it comes to describe the schism between 'elites' and 'people', being itself at the origin of modern populism, no differentiation is made any longer between money elites and opinion elites or opinion leaders. At the opposite, the increasing precarisation of intellectuals (professors, journalists etc.) – still considered to be 'elites' though – is part of the problem. In short: the Topos of the Parvenus is the modern marriage between money and stupidity or un-culture, reigning on public opinion ever more, as the media including the internet are increasingly bought or at least highly submitted to commercialization.

be heard emanating from civil society. Where democracy is in danger, appeals for its rescue are voiced aloud – at least concerning its form.

And indeed, perhaps with the exception of the Easter marches in the 1960s or the anti-Pershing demonstrations in the 1980s, there has rarely been more civic engagement in recent history than there is today. For twenty years now, civil society and the new social movements have dominated both the streets and the online forums (like We Move, Campact), as well as the research landscape of political science. They are part of the transformation of democracy described above, starting perhaps with the first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2001, via Hardt & Negri's 'Multitude' in 2006, to Attac, Occupy, the Indignacios, and the 'We are the 99%' at Zucotti Park after the banking crisis of 2008; and now Fridays for Future, almost everywhere in the world. Not to mention the peaceful revolutions on Tahrir Square during the Arab Spring of 2010, the mass protest in Gezi Park in Turkey in 2013 or the protests on Ukraine's Maidan in 2014. It is tempting to say that civil society is saving the world on the streets, while representative parliamentary democracy is increasingly failing.

This not unwelcome conclusion, which so emphatically contradicts the cliché of the supposedly apoliticized citizenry,

nevertheless has two snags. As long as the so-called populists and their sympathetic forums (Pegida, identitarian movements...) do not take up arms,²² they are also part of civil society, however much one is tempted to call them uncivilized.²³ Secondly, civil society cannot decide anything, because although it has the power to mobilize and to engage the media, it (still) has no institutionalized power in the most important social covenant of the first Enlightenment, the state. The Enlightenment, or the Revolution of 1789, dethroned the sovereign, but did not abolish sovereignty. Sovereignty embodies the principle that a single actor acts and decides for all.

Where kings were overthrown, a new sovereign has since been

22 Unfortunately, they are doing so more and more: the sale of weapons has increased alarmingly recently, especially in right-wing radical and extreme right-wing milieus, as German newspapers recently reported.

23 Cf. the work of the Italian political scientist, Carlo Ruzza, on the concept of 'uncivil society', which however is problematic. Social groups are not a priori 'uncivil' because they do not support the normative settings of the majority society: see Carlo Ruzza, *Identifying Uncivil Society in Europe: Towards a 'New Politics' of the Enemy?*, in *The New Politics of European Civil Society*, ed. by Ulrike Liebert, Hans-Jörg Trezn, London: Routledge, 2011; see also Cornelia Koppetsch, *Gesellschaft des Zorns. Populismus im globalen Zeitalter*, Bielefeld: transcript, 2019, p. 95 ff.

reconstructed by majority voting of the 'electoral body' and its role performed by representatives. The rule today is that 'the electorate is the sovereign', which is absurd, since the electorate can neither act nor decide. In either case, legislation operates arbitrarily.²⁴ Sovereigns, or their performers in parliament, follow an abstract idea of what is right or wrong for the people. This idea is embodied in specific provisions. Of course, the idea can be dramatically wrong, and already under normal circumstances it always lags behind the changes taking place in society anyway. Law and politics are systematically out of date or out of sync. In addition, 'except on very rare occasions, it is only measures that obstruct the common good, justice and truth that are adopted and implemented,' Simone Weil remarks.²⁵ This last point in particular explains the current widespread

sense of political impotence and the anger of the citizenry, from both sides of the normative spectrum. 'It cannot be right that we should hand over these huge rescue packages to the Greeks and let all these refugees into the country,' some say. 'It cannot be right that these 'Nazis' are allowed to say all these things again and to obstruct parliaments,' say others. In principle, both have the right to say what they feel to be right. The current crisis of democracy is a crisis of representation that ends in institutional paralysis, a *stasis* – the Greek notion for what one would call civil war today – our political or party systems clot like sour milk in coffee.

Even if the electoral body were to find a new and different way of representing civil society from both sides of the political spectrum than via the traditional parties and parliaments, and if civil society were then able to assert its interests more effectively – citizens' assemblies and sortition are currently universally *en vogue* – one thing would still be certain: parliamentary-representative democracy, as we know it in more or less large territorial states in continental Europe or in the liberal-democratic 'West,' would be finished. It can only be touched on in this context, that the sheer change of vocabulary with respect to democracy has slipped into formal, not functional elements: participatory,

²⁴ This is exactly why the liberal Hannah Arendt, and this point is often overlooked, was also in the last resort in favour of council republics ('Räte-Republiken'), cf. See Wolfgang Heuer, *Föderationen – Hannah Arendt's politische Grammatik des Gründens*, Hannover: Leinebögen 5, 2016, pp. 17–19, i.e., for concepts of power without sovereignty, because sovereignty ultimately means claiming power over others.

²⁵ See Simone Weil, op. cit., p. 26.

deliberative or discursive democracy, modern words in political science and abundantly used, only feature formal methods, not the content driven results (e.g., social peace) of democracy. The frequent use of citizen consultations is, in fact, an insult to citizens, as citizens are not consulted: they decide! Speech here is again anticipating feudalisation, as consultation reminds of the *Etats Généreaux* of Louis XIV, who wanted to consult the *Tiers État* the moment he sensed disquietude in the population, shortly, before the French Revolution broke out.²⁶

26 See Hannah Arendt, *About Revolution*, München: Piper...

Yet, even if a new form of comprehensive representation could be created, what then? Parties and parliaments, after all, were invented within the framework

27 E.g. the Rojava, the autonomous federation of North Syria, founded by Kurdish, Turkmens, Arab and other delegates in 2016 in the commotion of the Syrian civil war. Its continuance – or even transformation into a ‘full-fledged’ state – will need to be observed, should the lasting conflict be ready for settlement.

28 David von Reybrouck, for example, has not only written a bestseller, *Gegen Wahlen* [Against Elections], on this subject, but is also committed to real, local political experiments in Belgian cities based on citizens’ assemblies constituted by lottery. In general, the trend is to use lotteries to promote a different social mix at citizens’ meetings than is usually the case in classical and highly mediocratic parliaments. People without an academic education, in particular, are chronically underrepresented in European parliaments, although the current diversity debate is largely focused on the representation of women or homosexuals. The assumption that the search for political solutions would have different outcomes if conducted by a better social mix is therefore not only theoretically justified, it has now been empirically substantiated. Yet, assemblies of this kind can only function in a local realm, the cannot deal with state functions or decisions (e.g., taxation, retirement funds etc.)

29 See Chapter III to further understand that losing the State is a necessary consequence of digitalization.

30 Interestingly enough, the (Re-)Call for a State has started in political science

of representative democracy for the purpose of representation at the level of the (nation) state. Historically, it should also be noted that the many different experiments in *autogestion* or direct democracy throughout history, from the *sans-culottes* of the French Revolution to the Paris Commune to the soviets set up by the Russian Bolsheviks, mostly failed as they were actively destroyed by those who found them unfavourable to their interests, notabene *bourgeois* forces. Admittedly, today we have the Internet. Nevertheless, participatory democracy functions – with a few exceptions²⁷ – only in small, manageable spatial units,²⁸ not *at the level of the state*. What we are losing in the process is *de facto* what for long in the social and political sciences we called political *Überbau* (superstructure), namely: the State.²⁹

In other words: under the conditions of the apocalypse, in the era of the ‘posthumous condition’ and with the increasing erosion of Statehoodness or *Überbau*,³⁰ enlightenment and

democracy (in the non-reasonable way we are experiencing them today) seem to lead increasingly towards both, a civil war (*stasis*)³¹ between social or other groups on the one hand, and at the same time into an organized helplessness or political impotence on the other. Something 'has gone wrong with democracy'.³² But while the feeling of unease is certainly growing, it is equally difficult to identify exactly what is at the root of it, let alone what now needs to be done. All concepts and elements that have been used to build over time the democratic project ever since that 'today' of the French Revolution, where subjects became citizens, are under attack: sovereignty, elections, legitimacy, state, power, government, parliament, citizens. The terms have gone soft, like bread rolls soaked in water for meatballs. Either the concepts behind them have dissolved, or else they have been transformed: citizens have become consumers, government has become governance, elections have become participation, sovereignty has become market conformity, legitimacy has become legality, parliaments have become grand coalitions, as a result of which it is no longer possible to distinguish between 'reft' and 'light'.³³ The final hour, the moment of truth for representative democracy – and with it the final hour of the Enlightenment? – has struck. As German political scientist Peter Graf Kielmansegg recently wrote in the FAZ,³⁴ today's liberal democratic politics is not proof against the apocalypse. But what comes next?

The core reason why enlightened but un-reasonable liberal democracy is 'not proof against the apocalypse' is that it is incapable of prohibition. For prohibition – like death, from which no one can escape – is one of the last remaining levellers, and thus an egalitarian component. Such egalitarian components are at least as important for democratic societies, or for any polity, as liberal components. Not for nothing

literature, see Thomas Fazi, William Mitchell, *Reclaiming the State. A Progressive Vision of Sovereignty for a Post-Neoliberal World*, London: Pluto Press, 2017.

31 Cf. Ninon Grangé, *op. cit.*, pp. 14–16.

32 See Hanna Ketterer, Karina Becker, *Was stimmt nicht mit der Demokratie? Eine Debatte mit Klaus Dörre, Nancy Fraser, Stefan Lessenich und Hartmut Rosa*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2019, pp. 7–18.

33 A game of words where the 'l' with the 'r' in 'left' and 'right' is interchanged to express that you can no longer separate the two. In German it runs 'rinks' und 'lechts' instead of 'links' und 'rechts' [editor's note].

34 See Peter Graf Kielmansegg, 'Brauchen wir eine Öko-Diktatur?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 September 2019, p. 6.

was the battle cry of the French Revolution *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* – recently condensed by the French political theorist Étienne Balibar into the term ‘Égaliberté’ [Equaliberty]. The revolutionaries were careful not to make the concept of freedom an absolute one. It would be, indeed, undemocratic if issues

35 Cf. the (courageous) ‘Interview of the Week’ on Deutschlandfunk with the German Green Party Chairwoman Annelena Baerbock on 29 September 2019, who is now advocating a new ‘Ordnungspolitik’ (regulatory policy), including prohibitions.

36 Many figures on this are given by Thomas Piketty, *Capital et Idéologie*, Paris: Seuil, 2019.

involving the curtailment of supply or access were to be regulated purely on a voluntary basis, or – via drastically increased prices – by the market, because it would mean that only the rich could then afford freedom (or mobility, travel, meat...) or could ‘buy their way out’ of their social obligations.³⁵ It is above all through this market mechanisms that a re-feudalization of liberal democratic societies is de facto predetermined, or rather already in full swing.³⁶ Who will soon be allowed to ban whom from doing or consuming what, how prohibitions will be legitimized, and how they will be monitored and enforced, are all likely to become pressing topical questions.

Yet, it is a characteristic of feudalism, and not of democracy, that prohibitions apply only to the masses, not to the nobility. Today, we tend to think about the limits of universalism in cultural terms – Samuel Huntington’s bestseller *Clash of Civilization* set the tone for this more than two decades ago. However, the whole-body burka or face cover up, a very visible sign of cultural and religious

affiliation and conflictual topic in modern cultural discourses, the tolerance of which – or not – is ardently discussed in the public sphere of modern societies, is at the same time generally no problem in the shopping malls of Dubai airport, in Paris’ fancy Avenue Montaigne or in the Vienna Louis Vuitton shop, as long as the *Foulard Hermès* is popping through the black burka tissue. The main problem to universalism thus seems to be class, not culture, in other words, the question how to extend any universal regulations to all social classes, which is, after all, a question of equality. The paradigmatically raised question from Hannah Arendt in the last century, ‘can there be a state of mankind in which all are free from dominance and all from need,’ is therefore back with urgency on the table of the global community.³⁷

37 Hannah Arendt, *Die Freiheit, frei zu sein*, op. cit., p. 56; see also FN 25 and Hannah Arendt’s scepticism of sovereignty (and de facto centralized statehoodness), seeking more a horizontal network of small federations; see, for a paradigm of sharing, Luce Irigaray, *Welt teilen*, Verlag Karl Alber, 2010. In terms of revolving our thinking or when it comes to the question of how to finance the universal claim for equality, the emerging Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) has a lot to offer.

Or does the liberty and prosperity of one – and this independently from culture – depend on the submission and the need of others? A lot of well received economic, societal and political paradigms may need to be changed to give appropriate answers.

The new subjects in the ‘posthumous condition’, however, have in the meantime long become accustomed to the global fact of subtle re-feudalization and have already adapted to it linguistically: for years now, free, adult citizens, even in the Western World, especially younger ones, have been talking more and more about being allowed to do something. Or say they managed to do something, which represents a growing difficulty to navigate in the precarious world of today’s casino capitalism.³⁸ This is not something that suggests political empowerment or a sovereign behavior. Who should have to grant or receive permission for something when it is the law that governs? But is it still the law that governs under the digital conditions of cybernetics?

³⁸ In the German language at least, one can notify for years an increased use of *Ich durfte* [I was allowed], when it comes to describing an (ordinary) activity: ‘I was allowed’ to make an internship, ‘allowed to study’, ‘allowed to speak’, or ‘allowed to visit somebody’... Instead of ‘I have done an internship’, ‘I have studied’, ‘I spoke there’ or ‘I visited somebody’. The use of the language already anticipates the future servility of today’s citizen losing out their sovereignty and freedom at the occurring, but subtle shift from democracy to a more re-feudalized organization of society.

II HOPE OF HEAVEN UNDER DIGITAL CONDITIONS?

Believe nothing that you have not experienced yourself.
Teachings of the BUDDHA

In a key scene of his novel *Machines Like Me*, Ian McEwan describes how a man has the best sex of his life, but then feels uncomfortable and tortures himself with a question. ‘Are you real?’ he finally asks his partner, who is an android woman – but equipped of course, in the year 2050, with a passport and with ‘civil’ rights.

What will be real in 30 years? The ‘posthumous condition’ bears within it not only the (climate) apocalypse, but also digitalization and robotics, both of which put the anthropological constant at risk. In the 2004 film *I, Robot*, the robots overwhelm the humans in the end. So whether the development of artificial intelligence is sensible, or Reasonable in the sense of the Enlightenment, is therefore open to question. It is not trivial that we talk

39 The German language, interesting enough, differentiates between *Verstand* [Intelligence] and *Vernunft* [Reason – a concept broader than intelligence], which is hard to do in English. Something can be rational, but must not necessarily be reasonable (*vernünftig*), e.g., pardoning instead of punishing

about AI (artificial intelligence) and not about AR (artificial reason).³⁹ Proverbially, Reason in this sense means intellectual reasoning mediated by the heart, because intellectual reason on its own can be cruel. Only Reason in this sense can put mercy before justice, or turn a blind eye to strict logic when required. Intelligence cannot: Where is the heart that is going to mediate artificial intelligence? One of the many wonders of humankind is the small but important fact that humans are made of flesh and blood, and that even though they can analyze every component of blood under the microscope, they still cannot produce it.

Ergo: knowledge does not help, it cannot produce anything real. An algorithm cannot capture the essence of humanity. Digitalization and robotics are therefore not only anti-enlightenment, but wage an anti-enlightenment war against humanity or, more precisely, against humanity and everything that makes the essence of a human: pain, failure, error, inaccuracy, curiosity, the unexpected, uniqueness, imperfection, insight, forgiveness, humility. In the transition from the epoch of the Enlightenment to the 'posthumous condition,' Immanuel Kant's four questions therefore

take on renewed relevance: 'What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for? What is Man?'⁴⁰

40 This chapter was inspired by Florian Felix Weyh, *DigiKant oder: Kant's Vier Fragen, frisch gestellt, Deutschlandfunk-Audiofile, Essay & Diskurs*, 8 September 2019, <www.deutschlandfunk.de/philosophie-in-der-digitalen-welt-digi-kant-oder-vier-fragen.1184.de.html?dram:article_id=454492> [accessed 8.11.2019].

The answer to the first question is easy: at the push of a button, or with a wish, I can know everything, or at least everything that has been digitalized. And that will soon be everything. What I can no longer know is what is real. In the digital universe there is no truth anymore; no ultimate truth, as there was before the Enlightenment, no immediate truth, as there was during the time of the Enlightenment, when there was a political struggle to find this truth. When everyone can know

everything, but nobody has truth any more – or can no longer assert their own – then knowledge is no longer power. Ultimately this means the end of politics, as is already becoming apparent, because despite all knowledge no more decisions can be made that are based on lasting and ultimate truths. The question of political power does not lie any longer in the accumulation of knowledge, which is merely a service question of the digital registry and thus

no longer a social battlefield, but in the ability to successfully assert claims to truth. If such claims are lost, politics loses its subject matter: it is no longer about anything. Knowledge (without thinking underpinned by Reason) is in danger of becoming anchorless. Martin Heidegger knew this when he said that 'science does not think'.⁴¹ For there is no such thing as data-driven thinking. Data-driven political will is similarly impossible. Only arithmetic is data-driven. Theory, which is based on thinking, is something given in advance. It transcends the positivity of the given and makes it appear suddenly in a different light. This is not romanticism, but the logic of thinking, which has applied since its beginnings. The endlessly growing mass of data and information today is, for science, a huge distraction from theory, from thinking.⁴² The digital knowledge society can therefore only be apolitical and at the same time incapable of action, because supposedly unfounded and thus irrational decisions are pathologized, and yet it is precisely the irrational which is human. The Catalan philosopher Marina Garcés therefore bases her demand for a new, radical enlightenment on a large-scale collective movement united by the cry 'We do not believe you', on opposition to knowledge.⁴³

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, p. 8.

⁴² Quoted after Florian Felix Weyh, Audiofile, op. cit.

⁴³ Marina Garcés, op. cit., p. 125

Algorithms feed on data and thus on the past, and therefore cement and seal off history and deny mankind a new beginning, whether on a small or a large scale: algorithms are stereotypical. In a recent interview, a manager with the relationship platform 'Parship' said almost apologetically that their algorithms systematically bring together younger women with older men who earn more. The way the customer data was fed in – and the great majority of them want it that way – made it almost impossible to want something different: the emancipatory (but perhaps also more interesting and provocative?) project of younger men with older women? The breaking up of gender roles? The ideological championing of new forms of relationship? The non-wage earning house-husband with a working wife, who politicians wanted to support with a parental allowance? The algorithm kills off every emancipatory project, every idea-driven political ambition. It can neither grasp nor promote the lofty goals of human transformation. Thus it cements what is all too human,

namely what has always been. Human beings, trapped in themselves, without ideals – is there a worse hell, with no prospect of a piece of heaven? The mediocrity of society becomes the standardized norm, with no exception possible. Codes determine behaviour, based on a binary logic of 1 or 0, meaning good or bad,

norm or not, and there is no more need for human norm-making: society is basically cut-off from progress.⁴⁴ It would be the intellectual funeral of critical theory in general and of Theodor Adorno in particular, who's famous dictum was: Because what is can change, what is, is not everything. Brief: nothing can be changed any longer.

⁴⁴ Hear the alarming Audiofile on Deutschlandradio Kultur, Lesart, 2.11.2019 <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/alexa-whatsapp-und-co-bequemlichkeit-mit-nebenwirkungen.1270.de.html?dram:article_id=462451> [accessed 21.01.2010].

What would be the function, let alone the need for a State under those conditions? The algorithm can read from ubiquitous data tracks what humans are like, and thus learn, unencumbered by abstract assumptions, how society really functions.

For the individual, democratic participation no longer consists in proffering their biddable and unstable political opinions, but in providing society with their data tracks. With the analysis and evaluation of what Florian F. Weyh calls 'foot trails left behind in the digital universe', politics is finally achieving honesty, as a system in which data-reality operates on politics and people, and not – as it was for centuries before – a system in which reality was hostage to the ideological beliefs of the rulers of the day. Power is now passing from (ideological) political representatives to data providers. The entire class

⁴⁵ Florian Felix Weyh, Audiofile, op. cit.

of political representatives is losing its *raison d'être*.⁴⁵

Kant's second question – 'What should I do?' – also loses out in the anti-Enlightenment war, insofar as the algorithm undercuts any work on oneself, any ability to just remain in control, let alone to develop abilities or capacities that are artistically, creatively, or even ideologically or spiritually motivated. What 'the smart world for incurably stupid inhabitants' (Marina Garcés) wants us – to choose only this most banal of all the stupid examples – is e.g., to no longer trust on our sense of taste or smell when it comes to judging whether a yogurt has gone mouldy, but on 'intelligent packing systems' linked to the expiry date. Whether self-propelled cars or Google Maps location tracking: everything is aimed at making

people lose their abilities (e.g., to park sensibly), beyond that making them lose their orientation, and to forfeit their power of judgement. We are being programmed not to have to do anything on our own, not to have to decide or choose anything, any more, ever: there is an app for everything, an app that already knows what you want. And above all: programmed to no longer get in touch with other people directly. But the app can't provide what you dream of: if you use Tinder, you most of the time get sex, not love. That may be digital, but it's not new. The new form of de-humanization, however, lies in the relationship between man and machine, in the new interfaces between organic and inorganic life. According to some studies, Japanese women no longer want sex because it makes them sweat too much, and that's too 'dirty'. The uncontrollable beard growth of Max Frisch complained about in his novel *Homo Faber* was just the beginning. Even Tinder, based on humans, is structurally outdated, as its success is already challenged by androids: the only prototype sex computer in the city of Berlin is fully booked three years ahead, because another element of the 'posthumous condition' is the 'contactless society'.⁴⁶

Various computer games are structured in such a way that the players are instructed to e.g., sing in a chorus with headphones and microphones (but basically they sing alone with a computer at their desk, and tragically, often enough, that's the only moment they sing at all), because it would be all too difficult to sing in real life with others.

It is worth noting *en passant* that the planned abolition of cash amounts to the complete disenfranchisement of sovereign citizens, who would thereby completely be reduced to the status of mere consumers. Revolutions – for Hannah Arendt the epitome of the political, of the possibility of a new beginning – would then be impossible. No one who is subject to continuous tracking can plan a revolution. The next spontaneous new beginning (*re-volvere* = turning back the wheel) already lies behind us. We didn't want it and didn't start it, but we are already suffering from its consequences: We are no longer *zoón politicon* in the Aristotelian sense.

Above all, however, we are programmed to stop experiencing things ourselves. As it is not possible to start a fire on the

⁴⁶ Elizabeth von Thadden, *Die berührunglose Gesellschaft*, München: C.H. Beck, 2018. If sex is, in Freud's sense, an essential element of mankind – whereas computers don't do (or don't need) sex – shifting this human need (or pleasure) to machines is not a trivial observation.

47 See the book *Blackout* by Marc Elsberg, written as a thriller, which vividly shows that after only about four days without electricity in Europe we can expect a kind of collapse of civilization as we know it, with looting, murders...

Internet, this raises the question of how to use a digital 'survival kit' when the going gets tough, e.g., in the case of a simple power cut.⁴⁷ Older readers will recall King Louis' plea in the Walt Disney film *Jungle Book*: 'Give me the secret, man-cub; give me the power of man's red flower...' The discovery of fire was one of the decisive milestones in human development. But with real fire candles being replaced now

in restaurant by 'LED-candles' (semantically a *contradictio in adjec-to*), the question is how long will mankind know how to make fire?

To Kant's next question, 'What is Man?', the thoroughly infantilized and disempowered human being – who loses touch with his digital self at every server failure, and panics because his personal identity is now located in records stored on servers – no longer has much to offer in response. If the project of the first Enlightenment was to become a different, empowered, autonomous, sovereign, emancipated human being by comprehending that God does not exist, then the 'posthumous condition' in the digital age is about comprehending that there is no 'I,' that a personal I does not exist: individuals are being delivered over to knowledge. Politics and democracy – let alone a state or nation state, things we get heated about in political discussion in these days – then no longer make any sense. Nowhere is there an 'I' which programs itself through personal experience and wants to realize through politics its own truths or ideals. On the contrary, everyone draws on all the experiences ever made and engenders their (pseudo)'personal distinctiveness' by means of selection algorithms. Individual humans are then sub-servers of the global

knowledge server, a new *Homo Deus*, as Yuval Harari called them.⁴⁸ They diffuse into an elusive entity, into a 'We' that should perhaps be welcomed, one that doesn't need any 'I's. Thus, in historical irony, there might be a genuinely collective sovereign emerg-

ing, and no longer a merely metaphorical one as in today's parliamentary democracy. Perhaps it would be the world's first truly egalitarian grassroots democracy, analogous to cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, where all the information is stored in each particle and nobody is in sole possession of power. If we are lucky, this would be the digital version of Rousseau's *volonté générale*. If we are unlucky, it could be a totalitarianism of a new kind – not

48 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus. Eine Geschichte von Morgen*, München: C.H. Beck, 2017.

the classical tyrant in any of the familiar forms (Louis XIV, Hitler or Stalin), but the hell that is other people, in Sartre's term, enforcing global standardization way beyond Aldous Huxley's imagination.⁴⁹ No one can get by alone any more, and simply not taking part is not an option either: the annihilation of one's own person on the Internet really is death. We can be sure of a thoroughly modernized hell: it replaces the silver shimmer on the horizon we used to think was heaven.

⁴⁹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*, Stuttgart: Klett, 2007.

And finally Kant asked, 'What can I hope for?'

Perhaps we should hope that someone will be able to pull the plug in time, even if only to buy us a little more time to think? And that the UN is able to swiftly implement the idea of establishing meditation on school curricula throughout the world? Or simply that we might recollect that the most human of all human qualities is to believe in miracles...

CONCLUSIONS

Freedom is the recognition of necessity.

FRIEDRICH HEGEL

What conclusions, if any, should one draw from these reflections, and in a way that makes it clear that the contingency of history and the fate of the Enlightenment have not yet been settled? How can the interactions be fathomed between the two new anthropological conditions of climate catastrophe and digitalization, which can, both for better and for worse, promote or hinder each other when it comes to securing a free and – in dignity – livable world for all?

AD I

In 1963, the great liberal thinker Raymond Aron was able to end his *War or Peace: A Theory of the World of States*,⁵⁰ which postulated the atomic bomb as a new anthropological condition, with the vehement exhortation that humanity now depended all the more on its capacity for politics, i.e., on the skills of great statesmen, those who would be in a position to negotiate the nuclear stand-off in such a way that nuclear war would not occur.

⁵⁰ Raymond Aron, *Frieden und Krieg. Eine Theorie der Staatenwelt*, Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1963.

For the 20th century, one can say *cum grano salis* that, despite brief moments of collective fear (such as the Cuban crisis) and isolated incidents, this has essentially been achieved. And it is to be hoped that Donald Trump's current attempts to open again a nuclear arm-wrestling with regard to North Korea can be contained by the international community. In his literary treatment of the issue, Friedrich Dürrenmatt consigned the physicists who invented the nuclear bomb to a madhouse because of their nuclear aberration: one house (!) was then enough to contain those behind the greatest evil of mankind in the last century. Today, however, it is no longer a question of one house, and certainly not of handing over responsibility for what happens to 'capable politicians', since it is becoming ever more apparent how overburdened politics is.

Both the climatological catastrophe and digitalization, as new anthropological conditions, not only affect all people; everyone also has access to everything. It is no longer just a matter of the statecraft of a few politicians; it is about the ecological behavior of all (the climate) and about the terms of use of the new favorite human toy (the Internet), on a global scale. The whole world has thus become a kind of madhouse, in Dürrenmatt's sense. Liberal democracy is unlikely to be able to resolve this. It is ultimately a question of redefining a modern concept of freedom in which the current spirit of anything goes is challenged to devote itself to the dignity of humanity, and ultimately to subordinate itself to it.

From the tension between Enlightenment and apocalypse, from the now almost systemic un-Reasonableness of the 'real-existing capitalism,' arises inevitably the necessity for renewed reflection on a political culture of self-restraint and how it can be enforced. The paralysis of today's liberal democracy results from the fact that Fridays for Future demonstrates what an ambitious

concept of freedom might mean: namely, a freedom that has a goal (corresponding to Isaiah Berlin's 'freedom to'),⁵¹ and specifically, now more than ever, the goal not only of a life worth living, but of a life of dignity for the whole of humanity, even if this comes with restrictions. Freedom, for today's liberals, has long since become an 'empty signifier,' a mere paraphrase of anything goes. But nothing goes any longer as it used to do in times of ending resources. Anyone who has a concept of politics, which is no

51 Isaiah Berlin, *Vier Versuche über die Freiheit*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2006. Also the newly edited writings of Judith Shklar on the 'liberalism of fear' become ever more relevant in this context, see e.g., her fundamental book *Ganz normale Laster*, Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2014.

longer pervaded by economics, anyone who counters the collective will, *la volonté générale*, to influence things, because that in itself would mean too much regulation, coercion or self-denial, anyone who seeks answers only in technology and not in what Emile Durkheim calls the 'organic solidarity' of the community, that person forfeits the Enlightenment. What the ecological movement articulates, throughout the world, is not re-education, but, on the contrary, the expression of its enlightened autonomy and of a new, positive acceptance of the prohibition of what is dangerous and the abandonment of what is superfluous. Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion symbolize a desire for freedom that does not want to be forced into a pre-cast way of life which not only exploits resources, but is also quite simply dysfunctional and incapable of survival.

For in the era of the 'posthumous condition', no one is *sovereign* anymore; on the contrary, the claim to sovereignty obstructs the path to freedom. Interestingly enough, political theory is currently in the process of revisiting the entire concept of sovereignty,⁵² or rather of critiquing any claims to 'sovereignty'. Hannah Arendt, who had already written the following in the 1950s, can once again provide assistance here:

The famous sovereignty of political bodies has always been an illusion, which, moreover, can be maintained only by the instrument of violence, that is, with essentially non-political means. (...) If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.⁵³

52 Daniel Loick, *Kritik der Souveränität*, Institut für Sozialforschung, Beiträge zur Soziologie und Sozialphilosophie, Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2012, presents a comprehensive critique of the modern concept of sovereignty.

53 Hannah Arendt, 'What is freedom?', in: *Between Past and Future. Eight exercises in Political Thought*, New York 2006, p. 163 (quoted in Wolfgang Heuer, op. cit., p. 17).

This sentence alone contains a whole research agenda for political theory and the humanities in the 21st century, around imagining a world without nation states or borders but instead a legitimate and self-regulating organization of the global commons.

AD II

A new global culture of self-restraint and the abandon of sovereignty will, as things look today, have to take place under digitalized

conditions of cybernetic control: whereas God and his prohibitions and commandments were morally worn out by the first Enlightenment, and Reason, as an expression of the Kantian conscience, failed, self-chosen regulation under what Shoshana Zuboff calls 'surveillance capitalism' – the exchange of freedom for an online presence – may therefore be the factor that counteracts the development of a new concept of a 'freedom-to', based precisely on self-restraint and the surrender of sovereignty. For Hannah Arendt, the surrender of arbitrary sovereignty is an autonomous act in the interests of freedom, not a technologically coerced or controlled act of pre-emptive, collective obedience or submission to standardization. Herein may lie the central difference, which would mean that a humanity that has been 'enlightened' again, or at least given the benefit of greater clarity, could perhaps avert the climate apocalypse; a totally digitalized society, at the opposite, cannot do so because it is no longer able to defend itself, meaning it is no longer capable of any act of freedom – and thus: capable of voluntary change! Where everything is recorded, nothing is fleeting anymore, there is no more 'accidentally', no more 'I made a mistake', or 'I didn't mean it like that', or 'that was then – today I see things differently'. Human wisdom, the ability to change one's mind or opinion through reflection, is undermined. In short: learning is made impossible. Everything that was ever done or said is always there and becomes totalitarian, as it were, because there is no more forgetting. Adrian Lobe therefore speaks in his

book *Saving and punishing*⁵⁴ of a 'data prison'. There is also no need any longer for a conscience as what Hannah Arendt calls an 'operational site for moral principles' (*Operationsort für moralische Sätze*).⁵⁵ Data trails take over the role of *Moral Scrutiny*, as China is already demonstrating. In addition, algorithm cannot differentiate between sentences which are facts and those which are judgements, because they cannot contextualize.⁵⁶ Algorithms, depending obviously on who programmed them, can thus be structurally compared to traditional education

54 Adrian Lobe, *Speichern und Strafen*, München: C.H. Beck, 2019.

55 Hannah Arendt, *Über das Böse*, p. 68 (quoted in Eva von Redecker, op. cit., p. 51).

56 Adrian Lobe, op. cit., mentions the famous sentence from Kurt Tucholsky 'Soldaten sind Mörder' [Soldiers are murderers], highly disputed in the Weimar Republic, and again subject in a judgement of the German Constitutional Court 1995, which had to judge the right to 'quote' this sentence or whether this would defame soldiers of the Bundeswehr. Kilotons of files were turned around during the year-long process to obtain a judgement normatively highly relevant for the German society (in the end, the Court allowed the quote). Algorithms however, are not able to differentiate in the

or belief systems, in short: the nurturing space. What gets lost however, is the (human) rebellion capacity despite opposite nurturing. Escape attempts are futile, because the highest punishment available for people will be exclusion from the digital system: far worse than moral scrutiny is the inability to participate in social scoring, because then one is no longer an element of the social, the social group. State institutions, insofar as they have not long since been taken over by commercial tech giants, as anticipated in the socio-political satire 'The Circle',⁵⁷ will have punitive powers of which

same way the very necessity of a critic for a society, let alone to distinguish between 'fact' and 'judgment'; they would most likely react to the word 'murderer' and probably prohibit or automatically remove the sentence from the online world.

⁵⁷ See Dave Eggers, *The Circle*, Stuttgart: Klett, 2016.

a moral system based solely on the individual conscience can only dream. In future, every instance of online access can be permanently locked down, using digital locks programmed with unchangeable individual codes. Anyone who for any reason has left the collectively permitted pathways (however these are defined, and from whomever) will be punished with exile into the digital nothingness. The new version of Kant's moral imperative will then be 'Always act in such a way that your present actions do not close you off possible future actions. Always be obedient and adapt to the norms, no matter what you are told or asked for'.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Florian Felix Weyh.

In other words: Hannah Arendt's 'banality of evil' becomes the social norm because that's what either the GAFAM complex or the political executive want, or simply because 'that's what everyone does'. Disobedience or the freedom to behave contrary to the rules has disappeared, because social psychology is digitally manipulated – and no longer normatively structured by a law-producing State. The famous dictum of the communication theorist Paul Watzlawick 'One cannot not communicate'⁵⁹ therefore needs to be reformulated as 'One cannot not obey' (the opposite of Hannah Arendt's 'No one has the right

⁵⁹ Paul Watzlawick, *Man kann nicht nicht kommunizieren. Das Lesebuch*, Bern: Hogrefe, 2016.

to obey') – nor can one decide on anything any longer. But this would mean that the conditions for a voluntary culture of self-restraint or of an autonomous surrender of sovereignty in the interests of freedom of all would no longer be given.

And so ultimately there remains the fear that, because of the increasingly totalitarian, algorithmic cementation of the past, people may, firstly, lose their structural ability to think, led alone to think anew, and with it lose Hannah Arendt's concept of natality – the idea that with every new human being, in principle, a new thought can come into the world. Secondly, that under digital conditions, people may lose the civilizing potential of disobedience, because data-driven *Moral Scrutiny* is a powerful mechanism for what Marina Garcés calls the 'neutralization of critique.' And that is why the concern must be expressed that people may increasingly lose the ability, and even the hope – worse: the idea of hope – to grab hold for themselves of a piece of heaven.

Rarely has the world awaited so eagerly (and for so long) a revolution that would burst the toxic body of thought of a supposedly unchangeable capitalist path for world history, in its inevitably determined contingency, thus freeing the world for a *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. It remains to be hoped that this revolution – should it yet arrive, against all expectations – will be peaceful and promote, as a result, the formation of a global state regulating an earthy living-together in dignity, based on the famous sentence of the Declaration of Human Rights: 'All Men are born and remain free and equal in rights', with which these reflections began.

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DOES THE WEB PUSH FORWARD

UNIVERSALISM OR TRIBALISM?

ALEXANDRE LACROIX

My very first remark here is that the Web is a difficult object to think about, because it is two sided or it has a double nature.

Some criticism is currently launched against that technology because it would be close to Orwell's 1984 dystopia, and thus the Web could be seen as a gigantesque tool of surveillance, as a large *panopticon*. At the end of the 18th century, the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham designed a specific architecture for jails, the *panopticon*, which consists of a circular structure with an 'inspection house' or a special tower at its centre, from which the manager or staff of the institution is able to watch the inmates, for their rooms have no plain walls, but just metallic bars. So Bentham's *panopticon* basically allows one unique guard to keep an eye on many inmates. To some extent, the Web is quite similar to the *panopticon*. Since Edward Snowden's revelation in June 2013, we know that the State Department of the United States intercepts and stores every single post on Facebook or Instagram, every mail, message, and even every form of communication that take place through the Web. Well, to be more precise, it depends a little here, for some countries the content of the written or oral communication is stored, whereas for some other countries it is solely the fact that A was connected to B that comes registered. And this really is as if a worldwide *panopticon*.

But, at the same time, the Web is used by proselytes and recruiters from the Islamic State to radicalize youngsters in many Western Countries, social networks have furnished a concrete support for the spreading of the yellow *gilet* movement in France, and whistle-blowers use the Net to publish their disrupting information.

Here, we are in the very heart of the complexity we have to cope with, when we try to understand the political effects of the connected technologies: we have to admit, as a preliminary, that the Web is both a means for surveillance and for contestation or even revolutionary or insurrectional action.

As we come to the tension between universalism and tribalism, we encounter the same kind of ambiguity. In the present intervention, I will consider the problem on two different levels: first, I examine if the Web is or not balkanizing, fragmenting the public opinion of our modern societies, so I will consider its socio-political effects; then, in a more epistemological sense, I will wonder if the notion of a universal truth is soluble in communication networks.

IS DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE ALWAYS MORE FRAGMENTED?

First, let's have a look at the historical origin of the Web. The World Wide Web was invented in 1989 by a British man named Tim Berners-Lee, who was then a young physics researcher attached to CERN in Geneva. Berners-Lee is practically unknown to the general public, since he never sought to obtain a patent for his invention, nor make big money from it, nor find fame through television. Nevertheless, he was without doubt a crucial innovator.

It's difficult to grasp the extent of his contribution without having some basic notions: 'the Internet' and 'the Web' are not the same thing, though people often get the two terms mixed up and generally use them both as synonyms. Back in the 1980s, the Internet already existed, in the sense that we had an international network of telecommunications, which computers were connected to through modems. But it was a mess. Each company, each research lab, each administration had its own intranet, with its own data formats and access protocols, so much so that the internet looked like an inextricable forest, or a library where none of the books had been written in the same alphabet.

Tim Berners-Lee had three genius ideas, there. First, he and his team developed a unique data transfer protocol, the HTTP (for Hypertext Transfer Protocol), which has the particularity of being versatile and allowing us to convey not only text, but also images, sounds, and videos.

Then he had the idea of separating website addresses from those of computers connected to the network. Put like this, it sounds a bit technical and even rather boring, but it really was a leap forward: it's as if everyone on the planet suddenly went from using a physical address to an actual post box, in the blink of an eye... The Net then immediately became emancipated from physical places, and a new, legally neutral sphere opened up.

Finally, he conceived a programming language, HTML (for Hypertext Markup Language), in order to develop online platforms – the famous 'web pages'. These platforms were neutral: you could use them however you wanted. All of a sudden, anyone could create a website to post poems, or photos of their cat, or set up a commercial activity...

From the very beginning, the World Wide Web was conceived as a worldwide free public service, decentralized and separate from the state, and designed to encourage one big democratic conversation.

The invention of the Web marks a break in the political history of modern times, because it corresponds to the formation, for the first time, of a transnational public sphere. To understand the importance of this point, we must go back to the Enlightenment: one of the main dynamics of the 18th century was the emergence of a public sphere in European nations. The rise of a free press, literary salons, publishing houses often located in the Netherlands at the beginning but capable of spreading libels and critical essays throughout Europe, and of course the rise of a new social class, the educated bourgeoisie, whose members were able to read and write, and therefore able to receive and comment on the news, played a crucial role in the weakening of absolute monarchy.

Each new law promulgated, every royal decision became, not an act of a somehow divine right, but an issue that could be discussed, weighed, contested. Arbitrary or iniquitous resolutions were gradually exposed to criticism or even public condemnation. The prerogative of the monarch, the irrational caprices or the aristocratic class, often contrary to the common interest, began to be perceived as unbearable.

The philosopher who best understood the importance of the public sphere is certainly Emmanuel Kant, who proposes, in the second appendix of his pamphlet *Perpetual Peace* (1795), what

he calls 'the transcendental formula of public law', stated thus: 'We will then have a transcendental formula of public law: All actions relating to the rights of others whose maxim is not liable to publicity are unfair.'¹

¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, Philadelphia: Slought Foundation, 2010, p. 52 (translation modified by the author).

This formula is said by Kant 'transcendental' because it gives no empirical content to public law itself – it does not say, concretely, what kind of actions are right or wrong. But it poses a criterion that comes logically before practice: if a sovereign

or a legislator makes a decision that is impossible for him to announce publicly, because it would provoke anger or general discontent, the decision is wrong and bad.

However, since the Enlightenment there has been a serious limit to these dynamics of emancipation through freedom of expression. Until recently, public spheres have remained confined to the national spheres. There were as many public spheres as there were nations. As late as the mid-1980s, a clear distinction could be made between countries with a modern public sphere that was ruled (more or less) by the Kantian ideal, thus guaranteeing (in most cases) freedom of the media (France, the United Kingdom, West Germany, the United States etc.), and authoritarian countries where this freedom did not exist and where all public communications were closely controlled by the State (the Soviet bloc, North Korea, Pinochet's Chile, Khomeini's Iran, etc.). Let's say that having a public sphere, or not, depended on the country in which one lived and on its political institutions. That's what has changed with the Web. For the first time, we see the emergence of a transnational, even global public sphere. Authoritarian countries have infinite difficulty in blocking access to the network, to ensure that protesting blogs, petitions, information published in the international press on their malpractices and corruption scandals, are not disseminated among their citizens. China, Iran or in another way Turkey and Russia are authoritarian regimes, but they also have to deal with the global public sphere that is, actually, the Web.

But the emergence of a global public sphere is not only bad news for dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, it is also a first step towards a larger metamorphosis. What humanity has not succeeded so far in doing is to constitute itself as a political entity. The paradox of our time is that all important problems or crises are

global, while truly effective leaderships remain national: whether it is global warming, the sixth extinction of living species, radioactivity emissions from the Fukushima plant, the management of drinking water supplies, we face challenges that cannot be addressed nationally. That's why today's world is so scary: humanity faces global dangers, yet there is no global governance and major international organizations are either partial or powerless.

In such a context, the Web is good news: today, we see something like a global public opinion emerging, likely to reach consensus on certain issues, and thus to weigh on national governments. It is even possible that this metamorphosis of humanity into a unified political community is a first step towards the constitution of world governance, or even of a global federal state, as Zygmunt Bauman used to advocate.²

But that was the positive dimension, it was the claim for universalism. Let's make room here for an objection: does the Web really work like an open and free public sphere? This is not, for sure, the opinion of the American philosopher and lawyer Cass R. Sunstein, who worked in Barack Obama's team at the White House before returning to his academic career, as a professor at Harvard university. As early as in 2001, Sunstein published an essay, 'Republic.com', where he expressed the strongest concerns about the misuses of knowledge and freedom of expression that the Web encourages.³ The essay was updated and has been republished many times subsequently.

Sunstein's central criticism is based, to sum up, on the very structure of the Google homepage: it is a simple blank page, with a search bar in which the user inscribes the subject of his choice. Thus, Web users go to the world with a 'filter'. When you open a book, when you take a course at university, you don't know in advance what you are going to learn, and you may be confronted with things you did not know at all, or by views different than yours. On the Web, according to Sunstein, we are only going to search for what we already know and trust, and we favour sites that reinforce us in our own prejudices. Thus, the Web would promote a phenomenon of 'group polarization': there are sites for anti-globalization, neo-Nazis, Islamists, Catholics, atheists, ultra-liberals, anti-abortions and supporters of gay marriage, but

² See Zygmunt Bauman, Carlo Bordoni, *State of Crisis*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014.

³ See Cass R. Sunstein, 'Republic.com', *Harvard Journal of Law & Technology*, vol. 14, no. 2(2001). See also Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

in no way do these diverse groups find themselves in a common discussion area, all together in a public sphere.

According to Sunstein, a public sphere, to play a truly democratic role, must fulfil two conditions: first, it must make possible 'unexpected encounters', that is to say that each person who evolves there can be confronted with perspectives or speeches that do not resemble his own; secondly, it is necessary that it creates 'common experiences'. The front page of a newspaper is typically an editorial space creating unexpected encounters: you buy the newspaper for the main title (which is the common experience), but you may discover in the side columns an article on the exploitation of gold mines in South America or the condition of Erythraean immigrants that will excite you or provoke you to revise some of your prejudices. The classic mass media also offers most massive common experiences, the archetype of which being the final of the Soccer World Cup.

The fragmentation of the public sphere, the dissemination of the speakers into tribes having no more shared references, represents, if Cass Sunstein is right, a major danger to connected societies.

What should we think of the harsh criticism we find in 'Republic.com'? It is impossible to deny that the Web is balkanized, with a lot of radical ideas or conspiracy theories shared by various and non-melted groups of people. It's the effect of what we now call 'filter bubbles' or 'informational bubbles'. There are xenophobic or anti-Semitic pamphlets, stories of encounters with aliens, testimonies on alternative medicines supposed to miraculously cure cancer, pseudo-journalistic investigations leading to the conclusion that the Americans have never been to the Moon or that AIDS doesn't exist or that we are all ruled by Illuminati. The Web is a not well-regulated sphere of expression, and one discovers caricatural or even toxic opinions while navigating – there is no doubt about that.

However, I would try to challenge Sunstein's criticism. a little First, navigation on the network does allow for unexpected encounters – because of the almost unlimited possibilities for exploration that hyperactive links open. It is no coincidence that the network has put forward the concept of serendipity. *Serendipity*: this neologism was invented by the 18th century British writer Horace Walpole who was inspired by a Persian tale *The Travels and*

Adventures of the Three Princes of Serendip. In this story, three princes go on a mission and never stop, on the road, making apparently useless or extravagant discoveries, which will later prove very valuable. Applied to the Web, serendipity is an experience we all currently have: we go on the Web to look for a specific piece of information, and we find several documents that have nothing to do with our initial topic, but are much more interesting.

Secondly, as far as common experiences are concerned, Cass Sunstein is mistaken, from a purely quantitative point of view: some videos, some clips, which should logically remain confidential, are brought to be seen hundreds of thousands, millions, even more than one billion times. The clip *Gangnam Style* by the South Korean singer Psy has been viewed by hundreds of millions of people, possibly over one billion, while the final of the 2018 World Cup was attended by more than a billion spectators. Another example: *Game of Thrones* episodes were downloaded illegally two billions of times in 2018.

Thirdly, a huge sociological study conducted in seven countries including the United States, France and Poland, led by William H. Dutton and Bianca C. Reisdorf of Michigan State University in 2017 has opened up a new horizon.⁴ Basically, the conclusion is: if you look at what people do like on social networks, they like what is close to their religious, political or cultural preferences. But... they don't read the same things that they like. They often read contents that they wouldn't like on FB. The same goes for the act of sharing. Why? It's obvious: liking, sharing are public declarations, while reading is private.

Another important result: a left-wing voter never shares a content on politics from a right-wing voter, but he or she could share and like a content on soccer or on *Game of Thrones* coming from the same person. So, it's much more an open game than the classical newspapers. In France, a left-wing reader will never, never read an article in *Le Figaro*, because he or she doesn't buy *Le Figaro*.

To conclude, I am less confident than Cass Sunstein in the democratic virtues of the classical/traditional public sphere. In addition, we must be prudent with the idealistic tendency very widespread in political philosophy, which consists in setting standards that are too demanding for the public sphere.

⁴ See William H. Dutton et al., 'Search and Politics: The Uses and Impacts of Search in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain, and the United States', *Quello Center Working Paper*, no. 5-1-17(2017).

The original source of this trend is the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. According to Habermas, the public sphere is the place where rational deliberation makes it possible to arrive at the best possible choices, that is to say that which is in the interest of all. However, for the deliberation to bear fruit, it is necessary that a certain number of conditions are fulfilled: it is necessary that all those who have a voice in the public sphere do not speak under the blow of emotion and passion; that they put aside the pursuit of their selfish interests; that they are fair players, that is to say they are able to recognize when their opponent is right and when they are wrong; it is also essential that everyone considers carefully the arguments of the opposite camp... No doubt, Jürgen Habermas is right. Alas, this kind of public sphere is not for humans – maybe for chatbots.

Ultimately, I think it's better to be realistic and consider the public sphere as it is: a place where emotions, passions, vanity, irrationality, prejudices come to expression. But is it so bad?

IS THE NOTION OF UNIVERSAL TRUTH SOLUBLE IN THE NETWORKS?

In February 2017, Daniel Dennett launched a famous attack against postmodern philosophers, so against deconstruction and French theory inheritors, accusing these philosophers of having made fake news and post-truth politics possible. In responding about the state of American politics, Dennett argued: 'Philosophy has not covered itself in glory in the way it has handled this. Maybe people will now begin to realize that philosophers aren't quite so innocuous after all... I think what the postmodernists did was truly evil. They are responsible for the intellectual fad

that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts.'⁵ And maybe, the source of this quarrel is to be found in Nietzsche, when he writes: 'There are no facts, but only interpretations.'

But in my mind, the great American rationalist has missed the target. Maybe he was far too obsessed with his enemies on campus, in the academic microcosm of philosophy, and he wanted to use Trump's election to attack them, why not... but he has eluded two essential components of 'fake news'.

⁵ See Carole Cadwaladr, 'Daniel Dennett: "I Begudge Every Hour I Have to Spend Worrying about Politics"', *The Guardian*, 12 February 2017 www.theguardian.com/science/2017/feb/12/daniel-dennett-politics-bacteria-back-dawkins-trump-interview [accessed 21.01.2020].

First, a perfect piece of fake news is not a lie, neither a false proposition, because it's a sentence that is not true nor false, it is ambiguous in such a way that it's up to the receiver to decide if it is true or false. In a perfect fake news statement, the charge of the truth is translated from the emitter to the receiver. That is clear from two examples:

- Trump's declaration about the riots in Charlottesville: 'But you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides.' It's a very strong affirmation, because Trump doesn't precise the sides. You can affirm that it's about policemen and protesters. Or about ultranationalist protesters and antiracism protesters. It's unclear. And maybe you have fine people in every human group. What you understand is that he's defending white supremacist, but it's your conclusion or supposition. So the fact is correctly stated, but your interpretation is really important there.
- Trump about Amy Klobuchar, who is an ecologist, and who launched her campaign commenting on climate change in the middle of a blizzard: 'Bad timing. By the end of her speech she looked like a Snowman(woman)!' That's true. It was a bad timing for a discourse on global warming. But you understand what Trump has not said, that global warming doesn't exist!

So, a lot of tweets and declarations by Donald Trump are factually exact and logically well-stated. But it's another dimension of language, suggestion, that is used. To resist this kind of suggestion, you need a lot of critical spirit. As a matter of fact, you are better protected if you practice a hermeneutic, interpretation, science of literature, than if you are just a positivist scientist. Because the sentences are scientifically correct.

Secondly, an item of fake news is shared and become viral because it reduces what the psychologists call the 'cognitive dissonance'. The dissonance is an inner state of conflict. You experience cognitive dissonance when you smoke, for example, because you know it's bad for your health and may provoke cancer. If you are a Texan, driver of a big car, you can use Trump's declaration on climate (above) to reduce your cognitive dissonance: he's the president, and he tells you that you don't need to feel guilty. The same if you are a white man with a very fragile social and economic

status – he tells you that you deserve to be defended as well as Afro-Americans, Gays or minorities.

So fake news and post truth-politics are not so much about facts and truth, than about natural language, interpretation and psychology. You can keep on reading Nietzsche.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we are in an ambiguous situation, with a Web which enhances both universalism – as a transnational public sphere – and tribalism – because it is filled with conspiracies theories and a diverse kind of radicalized discourses or fake news.

So, what's the solution? In my mind, it is less relevant to promote an abstract ideal of universalism, than to bet on the autonomy of judgement, to keep being sceptical about what we read and experience through the Web. Scepticism: this is the habit to grasp contradiction, to accept the *isosthenia* or equal force of contradictory argumentations. It's a good habit if you want to understand the connected world. We shall need more individual scepticism than ever, and even Cass Sunstein (with his nostalgia for the traditional mass media) or Daniel Dennett (with his faith in reason) are, here, far too idealistic to be completely helpful.

A GAZE ON EUROPE FROM THE SOUTH

UNIVERSALISM AND ITS LIMITS

ANNA CURCIO

SPEAKING OF EUROPE

During the intimate closing reception of the symposium 'The Missing Denominator – Universalism and Progressive Cultural Politics', on the opening of the Warsaw Biennial, last May, I had the opportunity to chat with a young Polish student who affirmed her European identity with force and enthusiasm. The Europe we were talking about was that of Schengen, of the free movement of goods and (although some limitations) people, of the triumph of the neoliberal model. The Europe that after 1989 had welcomed the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and opened up with enthusiasm to the countries of the former Soviet bloc. The Europe of 'possibilities' was how the student described it, for she had been born after the fall of the Berlin Wall and grew up in a country that opened up to the market economy, preparing to join the EU. The enthusiasm of her arguments struck me as an element of redemption, as she was taking distance from her country's history to fully embrace a European identity of progress and wealth: Europe vs. the Soviet bloc was how I could somewhat summarize matters.

Without underestimating the genuine (though naive) enthusiasm of this young woman, the conversation left me a little uncomfortable. In those statements I have reviewed the old story, so dear to capital, of the 'poor cousins', who are lagging behind the development of the capitalist West and who proudly claim to have been admitted to the family, to be part of the 'greats', while in the background the rewriting of the communist experience passes in *chiaroscuro*. My discomfort was particularly pronounced in this teleological narrative of capitalist progressivism, in the idea of a saving Europe, a Europe homogeneous in composition and

aspirations. An idea that collides at least with my experience. The neoliberal Europe, as I live in it and I know it, is not at all a horizon of universal liberation.

Since I was born and I had my political education in Italy, precisely in the South of Italy (the so-called *Mezzogiorno*), I have a more sceptical attitude towards the progressive tale of capitalist development. Although the Italy in which I grew up was that one of the founding countries of the Union, and the Europe I have lived in is indeed one without borders, of student exchange programs and of the mobility of living labour, to look at European-ness from a southern South of Europe assumes particular veins, that are specifics and partials rather than universals, and to speak a language different from the Europeanist enthusiasm. Who from the European South has lived, like me, in the European metropolis as a student or worker, has, for sure, experienced the superiority of the Whiteness that projects the representation of a Mediterranean as hinged between Europe and Africa, as hanging between

development and backwardness. Within this frame, the European South still emerges as an important supply of cheap labour for the European labour market, which is feeding important inflows of young highly educated workers towards the North. There, as southern Europeans and new comers, they live in mistrust and social exclusion and especially with the deskilling and devaluing of their work, both in terms of essentializing the contents of their work and by dealing directly with rising social insecurity and the blackmail of income discontinuity within a highly deregulated labour-market.¹ Thus southern European workers, such as the Italians in the German 'Gasterbeiter program' or in the Marcinnelle mines in the 1950s and 1960s, did not experience a completely different fate from that which now has befallen postcolonial migrant workers, rather they live, similarly within a racial order. What is more, as a scholar of the contemporary labour transformation, the capitalist transition and the recent years of crisis in Europe, I have seen, in some rhetoric promoted by the dominant neoliberal elites, such as that of a Europe of Pigs² in vogue especially in the heat

1 As I wrote a few years ago reflecting on southern European so-called 'cognitive workers' in Germany: 'A creative worker is constantly reminded to look at the world with German lenses, that is, in terms of clarity and effectiveness, and to abandon that slightly romantic and somewhat naïve look that characterize the gaze of people that come from Mediterranean countries. This is, at least, what a graphic designer from Madrid working in Berlin for some years told me.' (Anna Curcio, *Un consiglio aguzzino. Razza e lavoro nell'Europa della crisi*, 23 September 2013, <www.commonware.org/index.php/neetwork/63-un-coniglio-aguzzino> [accessed 21.01.2020]).

2 The term 'Pigs', sometimes written 'PIGS' or

of the crisis, the translation into the present of the racialized representation of the countries of Mediterranean Europe that refers to the origin of Western capitalist modernity.

'P.I.G.S.' is a derogatory shortcut describing the Southern European nationalities of Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain [editor's note].

What I want to say is that the conversation with the student made explicit the existence of at least two different stories and narratives about Europe: one smooth and linear that speaks the language of capitalist development and another that breaks with this narrative and brings to the fore fractures and blocks that question the teleological view of capitalist development. Thus, I recalled the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty: *Provincializing Europe* (2000), a text that has become a classic in its criticism of European and Western universalism. A book that made explicit the existence of different historical narratives: 'History 1' and 'History 2'; one is the history of capital – this being the dominant narrative, the other is the set of singular (rather than universal) histories and temporalities that do not speak the language of capital but break – or at least allude to the break – with the logic of capital, questioning the progressive linearity of its development.

In what follows, I would like to draw on these singular and antagonistic historical times to discuss Europe, universalism and the intrinsic limits of Europeaness. From this point of view, Europeaness – as well as its construction/definition – rather than a universally shared condition remains an open question (conflictual and contradictory) that resides on different subjective paths and experiences, ones that are historically determined, such as those that in their simplicity and inevitable partiality marked the chat between me and that young Polish woman.

Then, Europeaness, such as a shared European experience, is always at stake in the construction of the European narrative (and of its supranational identity). To identify the coordinates within which it unfolds is the first, indispensable, step to be taken.

EUROPEANNESS: A HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL MAP

Europeaness, as a condition of being European (the condition that combines European citizens, that defines their identity and that refers to the issues that the definition of this identity entails),

presents itself as a problem rather than a certainty. What is Europe, what geographical location do we mean when we talk about Europe? Who are the Europeans? What is the material basis that defines Europe's wealth and political power? These are questions that cannot be left unanswered if we really want to understand our Europe and the issues it raises.

In order to answer these questions, I propose to look at contemporary Europe from a historical but not linear perspective, and to compose a map that includes different places and historical times. A map that (by its own historical definition) extends beyond the geographical boundaries of Europe and declines different temporalities; a map that unfolds between the present and the origins of 'modernity',³ between Schengen and the birth of the nation-state, between the emergence of the colonial project and capitalist rationality on the one hand and the post-coloniality of the contemporary metropolis marked by the unstoppable autonomous mobility of living labor on the other.

3 Although the history of Europe far precedes modernity, I set here the time limit from which my reflection starts because the legacies of that historical phase (the affirmation of nation states, the development of capitalism and colonial expansion) live in the present, defining the coordinates of the Europe we experience today.

Then, speaking of Europe and Europeanness, I am not only thinking about the European Union – my approach is neither Europeanist nor anti-Europeanist – but rather I want to take into account the historical depth and the geographical articulation of

the signifier 'Europe' in order to draw up a peculiar historical and geographical map showing elements otherwise alien to the political debate and theoretical reflection on Europe today. The Europe I propose to talk about is the one historically marked by colonialism, racism and the primacy of whiteness that lives today within the postcolonial migrations and the austerity programs dictated by the crisis. A Europe, therefore, that goes beyond the political institution (the EU) and its borders, but that within those borders and around the policies of that political institution, organizes and manages the definition of its identity.

Taking in hand the geographical and historical map that describes Europe and Europeanness today, we could highlight at least two guidelines (or fractures) that draw the leaps and blocks within the European history of modernity (and that goes beyond a linear vision of the historic development toward capitalist and Western progress). Along these lines displayed are the European openly racist attitude and the intrinsic violence which sets

it apart, set out as colonialism yesterday and as the 'governance of the refugee crisis' today. These two trajectories, which arrive in the present from the origins of European modernity (and to which the concept of universalism itself refers), follow the other (or counter-)stories of the colonial resistance and of the autonomous mobility of living labour which are developed along the fracture marked by imperialism and colonialism on the one hand, and by the irreducible difference of the populations of the Mediterranean countries on the other.

These two lines of fracture speak about the intrinsic coloniality of the European project and the primacy of the white and western capitalist rationality, that is to say, about the racial capitalism (Robinson 2013) which governs Europe. To put it otherwise, modern Europe is the outcome of both the colonial project and the definition of its identity by the internal fracture that marks the boundary between Calvinist and Mediterranean Europe, between European modernity and African backwardness, and, within a historicist vision, the Mediterranean acts as a hinge between the two worlds. European modernity is therefore born based on very racial and colonial hierarchies which still inform every possible discourse on Europe today.

One of these trajectories retraces the European colonial project, from the conquest of America to the Scramble for Africa and arrives in the present along the routes of postcolonial migration; the other is mirrored in the image of Mediterranean Europe as a 'paradise inhabited by devils' (according to the description of the city of Naples improperly attributed to Goethe) which is widely echoed in travel literature between the Seventh and Eighth centuries and has been supported by the pseudoscientific beliefs of positivist anthropology. This representation of a sluggish and lazy South, corrupt and incapable of self-government, reverberates in the present through the rhetoric of the 'European P.I.G.S.' and the austerity policies by which Europe managed the crisis that exploded in 2011. Both trajectories bring to the fore an idea and an experience of living in Europe and of being European that is marked by hierarchies and deep tensions, by irremediable differences, conflictual explosions and paths of resistance that openly call into question the image of a Europe that is homogeneous in composition and aspirations and that tends inexorably towards capitalist development.

4 Cf. C.R.L. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, London: Penguin Book, 2001.

5 This new acronym – 'P.I.(I.)G.S.' – is also taking another form: 'GIPSI' [editor's note].

6 As I wrote a few years ago reflecting on the *Pigs's* rhetoric: "the international press and the gray literature that flanks the European 'Troika' insist on identifying the origin of the crisis in some forms of politics and in the functioning of the economy in the countries of the Mediterranean. In this way, a productive North, which is rigorous and sober, is contrasted to the lazy South, which is wasteful and corrupt, exactly as at the beginning of European modernity. In an explicit way, Hans-Jürgen Schläpfer wrote in *Der Spiegel International*: "The true problem of the South isn't the economic and financial crisis – it's corruption, waste and nepotism, thereby establishing a linear relationship between the Eurozone crisis and some of the worst features of the functioning of politics and the economics in southern Europe" (Anna Curcio, 'Paths of Racism, Flows of Labor: Nation-State Formation, Capitalism and the Metamorphosis of Racism in Italy', *Viewpoint magazine*, 12 October 2014, <www.viewpointmag.com/2014/10/12/paths-of-racism-flows-of-labor-na-tion-state

In light of this, we can, and must, question the idea of Europe itself and the universal principles of which it is the bearer. Let's think, for example, of the Black Jacobin uprising against French colonial occupation in the Haitian Revolution in 1791, in the aftermath of the Storming of the Bastille. When the slaves of this French-ruled Caribbean island revolted against this foreign occupation for the same *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* that the French revolution have affirmed; and when the French General, Lacroix was shaken by fear as he heard the song of a black Marseillaise from the ranks of the rebels, squaring another idea of freedom, new struggles and new revolutionary subjects. The Black Jacobin claim at *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* was showing a new (or counter) *telos* of a history that went beyond Western universalism and the magnificent and progressive fates of capitalism.⁴

Let's think now, along the other trajectory, about the acronym P.I.(I.)G.S. to indicate the countries that have encountered the greatest financial difficulties in the crisis of the 2010s: Portugal, Italy (Ireland, which is not a Mediterranean country but has historically represented the 'other' from the Protestant work ethic of Great Britain), Spain and Greece.⁵ The *Pigs*, in this sense, for an explicit rather than casual assonance, evoke an image of dirt and laziness. Skyrocketing public debt, failure to comply with fiscal and monetary parameters, low productivity, financial waste and political mismanagement: this is the dirt that lurks in the countries of Mediterranean Europe that one can discover in reading the international press or listening to the statements of the European political elites in those years.⁶ This is a clearly discriminatory rhetoric that shows how Europe, both the modern and contemporary one, is crossed by deep fractures and irreparable tensions: on the one hand the ethics of rigor, of business and work that Max Weber already posed as a *sine qua non* condition of capitalism and on the

other the counter-stories made up by the resistance to the logic of capital, that has been branded as indolence, unproductiveness and corruption, to the extent that these appear as a blocking point of capitalist development.

In light of all this, Europeanness is marked by the specular although conflicting claim of both France and the Haitian Jacobin, by the opposition between subjective paths that follow the spirit of capitalism and other paths that express the resistance to the logic of capital; such as by the devils that infest the Mediterranean.⁷ From this point of view, it seems more appropriate to problematize the issues of Europe and European identity when speaking about a 'European Question' (De Genova 2016). That is to say, to discuss an idea of Europe that is continuously challenged by its own narration, beyond and against the idea of the Europe prevailing today, that tends to be collapsed into the concept of the European Union.

formation-capitalism-and-the-metamorphosis-of-racism-in-italy/> [accessed 21.01.2020]).

⁷ It is useful here to highlight that in the narrative of capitalist modernity, rebels are always represented as devils. In this sense, the devils are the undisciplined and indisciplined subjectivities that are irreducible to the capitalist organization of labour.

THE EUROPEAN QUESTION

In talking about the European Question I refer to the need to problematize the European identity and the sense of its belonging, considering the unresolved legacies of European colonialism and the subordination of the Mediterranean countries. In this sense – and this is my point – there is an intrinsic racism in the very definition of Europe and Europeanness which cannot be ignored. Racism and colonialism, or if you prefer colonial and internal racism, are key elements of the European identity itself, conditions that refer to the heart of the productive ontology of capital, today as well as to the origins of modernity. Then, in order to discuss the European question, I propose to place our historical and geographical map in the background of this discussion, in order to follow the trajectories that cross it and retrace the deeply racial matrix of the Europeanness that reverberates through its external and internal borders, ones marked through the primacy of whiteness.

Clearly, the European colonial project, and the desire for 'civilization' that accompanies it, speaks about the primacy of whiteness: the primacy of the European 'modern civilization' that should spread out among the 'wild' populations of the

Americas first and subsequently Africa. However, the definition of an internal border within Europe speaks as equally about the primacy of whiteness. The image of the South emerging from the narrative of European modernity, the image of the South as the periphery of the continent living in a precarious balance between Europe and Africa (Moe, 2004), is based precisely on the primacy of whiteness, and it runs to define Mediterranean countries as an 'internal elsewhere' that act as a buffer between Calvinist Europe and wild Africa. Therefore, in contemporary Europe, the primacy of whiteness lives through the unresolved legacies of both European colonialism and the subordination of the Mediterranean countries.

Let's try to observe more closely the current situation and to read it through the geographical and historical coordinates traced on our map; then, let's try to interrogate in the present the deep sense of Europe and Europeanness considering the colonial and internal racism that reverberate in the crisis of consensus that affects contemporary Europe.

Talking about a crisis of consensus in Europe, I refer especially to the rise of sovereigntist inspirations that are challenging the European model built around the Maastricht and Schengen

project. It is a 'crisis of hegemony', wrote Miguel Mellino⁸ (2019) describing on the one hand the exhaustion of the *ordo-liberal* model of *governance* promoted by the EU during the last twenty-five years (the one that has laid the foundations of the current material constitution of European territory), and on the other hand the irruption into the European political context of sovereigntist formations⁹ which plan to renationalize sovereignty over their countries, challenging the supranational dimension of EU institutions.

Two dates and two trajectories trace the coordinates of this new political conjuncture in Europe: 2011 and 2015. On the one hand, the 2011 impact of the global financial crisis bursts in the United States, along the internal borderline between North and South Europe, and on the other hand the construction in 2015 of the so-called refugee crisis, along the trajectory that follows colonial conquests and post-colonial migrations.

Along the first trajectory, the tightening of austerity policies, tax collection and deflationary measures imposed on the

⁸ See Miguel Mellino, *Governare la crisi dei rifugiati: sovranismo, neoliberalismo, razzismo e accoglienza in Europa*, Roma: Derive Approdi, 2019.

⁹ Talking about sovereigntism, I refer in particular to its right-wing version that is *regressive* sovereigntism.

less virtuous countries (the P.I.G.S.), together with the continuation of widespread economic stagnation, have pushed entire social fringes into rapid processes of downgrading and impoverishment. The middle class, which collapsed under the pressure of these processes, has stopped performing its social function of mediation, leading to the exhaustion of the social compromise of the second half of the twentieth century. Populist right-wingers, on their part, have stirred up the spectre of 'migrants invasion' in order to manage social discontent and gather consensus. The failure of the role of the middle class combined with the sovereigntist aspiration of some countries has led to tensions between some fractions of the national capitalist classes of different countries (those less tied to financial capital) and the European political apparatus. Also on the social level, austerity policies have produced a profound delegitimization of the European political elites, fueling the crisis of the ordo-liberal project and increasing the support of sovereigntist instances (Italy is emblematic in this sense). The other trajectory passes instead through what we can define as the *coup de grace* to the Schengen consensus. It describes the formidable movements of resistance and processes of migrants' political subjectivation that have literally blown up the management of the European border.¹⁰

¹⁰ Miguel Mellino,
op. cit.

Economic crisis on the one hand and crisis of the migratory regime on the other have therefore marked the end of the consensus around the neo/ordo-liberal model of European governance, at least in the form in which it had worked over the last two decades. From 2015 onwards, and increasingly, ordo-liberalism and sovereigntism have been advancing themselves as two different projects for governing the European crisis. However, beyond their real and important differences it is difficult to view these two projects in Europe as something *alien* to each other. Despite different rhetoric, characterized respectively by two different types of 'authoritarianism' – economic-fiscal the former, xenophobic-reactionary the latter – ordo-liberalism and sovereigntism present significant resemblances that hold on the indelible mark of the racial and colonial discourse that informs the modern European narrative.

Taking these reflections in mind, I would like now to think about the possibility and limits of a universal idea of Europe and Europeanness.

WHAT UNIVERSALISM IS POSSIBLE?

In the tradition of the Autonomous Marxism to which I refer, the universal is not a fact or an absolute horizon, but rather an ambivalent result of irreducible antagonism between the classes; this antagonism moves history. On the one hand, the living labour and its struggle and practices of resistance to capitalist exploitation and domination, on the other hand the capital as a concrete form of the organization of the relations of production and labour exploitation. 'First the workers, then the capital' wrote Mario Tronti in 1969 in *Workers and capital*, a seminal text in the Italian *operaismo* that influenced whole generations of militant intellectuals.¹¹ First the workers act, from their irreducible antagonist partiality (marked by social relations of production organized on the basis of racial and gender hierarchies), then the capital follows them, trying to reduce partiality to universalism (by translating hierarchies and differences through the discourse of general interest, which is always the bourgeois interest). The partiality embodied in the class struggle, and its antagonism, is the actual driving force of history; the capitalist productive organization can do nothing but follow the challenges that all the exploited, the dominated and the subordinates articulate each time towards it. In reversing the direction of the relationship between capital and labour, Italian *operaismo* (like other traditions of critical thought) has questioned the salvific image of capitalist development as general interest and launched the challenge of the particular to the universal.¹²

¹¹ See M. Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, London: Verso, 2019.

¹² Cf. Gigi Roggero, *L'operaismo politico italiano*, Roma: Derive Approdi, 2019.

The many different counter stories of those exploited, dominated and subordinated by capital, and the partiality of their resistance (from the black Jacobin in Haiti to the devils inhabiting the Mediterranean paradise, and beyond them), live along the geographical and historical coordinates of our map. These are stories of collective and subjective resistance that live conflictually within the ruptures and interruptions of the capitalist logic of domination and exploitation. Stories that refer to other temporalities and other subjects, that cross other places and interrupt the smooth process of the capitalist management of labour and production, bringing to the fore the unstoppable mobility of contemporary living labour and

the failure of austerity programs both economically and socially. For what here interests us most is that these stories question the racial hierarchies that inform the same idea of Europe and Europeaness therein revealing the limits of Western universalism.

This is the perspective I here choose to look at the current European political conjuncture by a reading of a geographical and historical map with mobile borders, which traces trajectories that proceed by leap and interruptions beyond the linearity of capitalist historical development. It seems to me that there is a political urgency that requires us to take into account such a perspective. Starting from the 1980s and 1990s, in fact, the critique on universalism has been swallowed up by (postmodernism and) multiculturalism, while the conflictual charge of this critique has been put aside. Partiality (as the conflictual other of the whole) has become identity, that fragment of a whole that competes with other fragments in order to advance within the capitalist hierarchy. Partiality has lost its conflictual aim and has rather become an identity that indulges the capitalist counterrevolution, proposing an authoritative form of bourgeois universalism that is unable to interrupt the capitalist narrative and which remains within the same logic of capital.

Let's look, for example, at the 'humanitarian reason' that animates the anti-racist discourse and practices in the current European refugee crisis. Let's now ask ourselves how this can concretely question the racial capitalism at the very core of the European constitution and its narrative. In no way, I would say. The (conflictual) partiality of the many histories and trajectories that describe contemporary Europe disrupting the dominant narrative has disappeared, as these histories are absorbed into the 'compassionate ethos' of humanitarian rhetoric.

Didier Fassin,¹³ who has dedicated his most recent work to humanitarian reason, speaks of it as a new rationality for governing the poor, the excluded, migrants and refugees, based on the deployment of moral feelings or emotions. This is a compassionate

¹³ See Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

logic that urges one to consider the malaise of others and asks one to remedy it. However, behind the attitude of goodness, it leaves the social and productive hierarchies intact, first of all racial hierarchies, ones badly hidden behind an appeal for equality, which is a purely formal equality in the sense that it does not

take into account the different conditions and opportunities of the subjects. In other words, the compassionate ethos at the very core of humanitarian reason presupposes a hierarchical social relationship in which a 'speaking subject' – generally white and western – defines, in a completely arbitrary way, through the line of the colonial and racial divide, the universal regime of truth and the condition of existence of a 'subordinate subject' – generally a radicalized migrant.

What I want to say is that the 'humanitarian reason', that today moves a large part of the European antiracist archive, fails in questioning the racial hierarchies and the intrinsic coloniality at the very core of Europe and Europeanness. This turns out in the end to be a blunt weapon since it limits itself to claiming a better placement of the racialized subjects within the capitalist racial order. It is a call for a 'more human' condition of existence for migrants, thought within the same social relations of production. Here is the fall of 'humanitarian reason' while here, as well, the limits of universalism show up. Any universalism is possible as long as it follows the European racial order.

DECOLONIZE ANTIRACISM

To disrupt the racial order means to make room for the only possible universalism, the one that disrupts the logic of capital. As Italian *operaismo* reminds us, the universalism lives in the conflictual partiality of struggles that disrupt the capitalist social order. In the current European conjuncture, the crisis of the migratory regime brings to the fore the irreducible partiality of the living labour always avoiding European border control. This is a challenge to the general interest of the European racist migratory regime through the partiality of postcolonial living labour. The only possible antiracism lives within this challenge. This is the antiracism that actually lives in the partiality of the many and varied (counter)stories developed along the disconnected routes of our historical and geographical map of Europe, along the colonial conquests and the postcolonial migration, and along the subordination of the Mediterranean countries and the irreducible conflictuality of a 'paradise inhabited by devils'.

A 'common denominator' that in Europe 'would allow us to look beyond particular attachments to race, ethnicity, gender

or nation and to define all men and women as just equal members of the human race' (to quote the Call for the symposium that preceded this book), should necessary be defined by the tension between the partiality of the postcolonial labour and the general interest of racial capitalism. *Tertium non datur*. Humanitarian reason sounds only as spectre for the larks behind which the White sense of guilt lies. Thus, we should assume the political impracticability of an antiracist archive of discourses and practices that arises without any reference to a black and/or non-Western criticism of racism (from anti-colonial thought to black Marxism) and grows without taking into account the other histories and temporalities that found contemporary Europe and that are the disconnected and jagged trajectories which define the historical and geographical coordinates of our time. Now, we should learn how to decolonize antiracism. A theoretical and political practice that has no memory of the historical and geographical coordinates of contemporary Europe, will only continue to operate within the Eurocentric and synchronic limits of the empty and homogeneous time of the history of capital, within the immediately racist framework of the epistemic and material violence proper to capital.

As Miguel Mellino wrote, 'the memory of the loser bars the possibility of any peaceful universalism, of any attempt at (dialectic) reconciliation between the parties.'¹⁴ In this vein, to decolonize antiracism means to assume in our antiracist archives the legacy of colonialism that impregnates the European narrative and constitutes the basis of the contemporary racialized management of the different European populations. It means to look beyond the humanitarian reason and the compassionate ethos that echo the general interest, to bring to the fore the partiality of the conditions and subjective possibilities that are determined in the materiality of relations of production.

In her book *The Whites, the Jews and Us* (2016), Houria Boute-dja launches a decolonial appeal to the other Europe, the Europe of the counter stories and temporality that follow the trajectory of post-colonial migration. It is an appeal to break with the western bourgeois narrative that reveals the limits of European universalism and which speaks the language of the irreducible partiality of living labour.

¹⁴ Miguel Mellino, op. cit., p. 44.

We, the indigenous people of the Republic [...] will be beggars as long as we remain prisoners of their philosophy, their aesthetics and their art. We'll be beggars until we question their side of the story. We assume the breakup, the discord, the discord. We are ruining the landscape and announcing new times. We decide not to imitate them, to invent our own sources elsewhere. They tell us 1789. We're responding 1492!¹⁵

¹⁵ Houria Bouteldja, *The Whites, the Jews and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2016, pp. 81, 93–94.

Two more dates and two different historical trajectories: 1789 and 1492. Two different philosophies of history, two different epistemologies of modernity, that is to say the struggle between two different historical temporalities. One looks utopianly at the progressive fortunes of capitalist development, the other turns to the past to read, in the historical depths of a Europe that goes beyond its borders, the origins of the epistemic and material violence of the present. One speaks the language of the European and the primacy of whiteness, the other the language of the indigenous racialized and their resistance. Two languages and two stories that cannot be reduced to the synthesis of 'equal members of the human race'. Two languages and two stories that remind us that no peaceful universalism is possible within racial capitalism.

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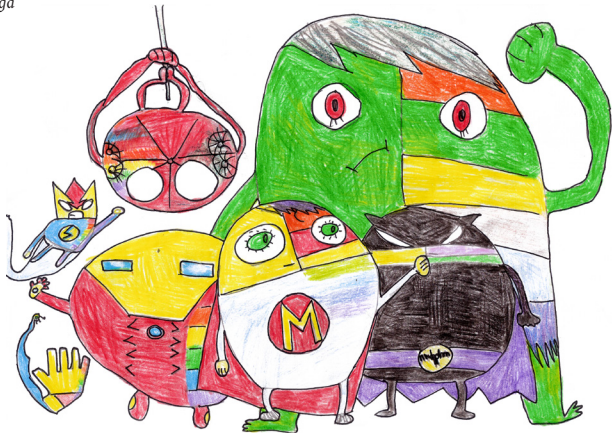
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WE, ITINERANTS

CLAUDIA CIOBANU
TEODOR AJDER

When, in haste, we accepted the invitation to join the volume *The Missing Denominator – Universalism and Progressive Cultural Politics*, we thought we would be writing mainly about the fact that we, as an active grassroots collective of immigrants in Poland, might have something to say about how various universalisms, ones often defined by outcasts and exiled thinkers, kept emerging and failing in European History. However, when we looked again at the proposal, we realized that what the organizers wanted was a team of superheroes constituting and acting in the name of a certain new universalism who would eagerly take upon themselves all the problems that Europe is facing and even the problems that the whole world needs to deal with at the moment. We might not be heroes of this ilk. But what we have to offer you instead is this:

These are us –
round *Mămăliga*
superheroes.



Mămălița is a roundish traditional corn bread popular in Romania and Moldova. Recollect, however, that Husserl speaks in his *Origins of Geometry* of a protogeometry that addresses the concept of *vague*, in other words, vagabond or nomadic, morphological essences which are distinct from sensible things, as well as from ideal, royal, or imperial essences [...] Roundness is a vague and fluent essence, distinct both from the circle and things that are round – it is essentially and not accidentally inexact. It is nomadic.

We have a nomadic essence. We are an immigrants' grassroots collective based in Warsaw, known under the name of *Mămălița de Varșovia* – a tentative English translation of our name would be: Warsaw Mush. Our main focus is the publication of a trilingual magazine (with the same title: *Mămălița de Varșovia*) – in Romanian, Polish and English, that comes both as an online blog¹ and as annually printed books.

¹ See the blog *Mămălița de Varșovia / Mamalyga Warszawska* <mamaliga-devarsovia.wordpress.com/>.

The collective also runs various immigration-focused events – debates, public readings, meetings with authors. We even produce politically engaged art-works and participate in art exhibitions.

We also run one of the many Warsaw Book Clubs, with the twist being that it is for kids and it is in Romanian. Our collective is also a research institute and many of our texts target an academic audience. Nevertheless, our points of view are shared for the time being, as one of our active members stated, by a minority of a minority (of Romanian speakers in Poland). We betray, in a way, simultaneously our home community and our host community.

The collective came together and started producing texts in November, 2014. We are 5 years old! Freud would say that we are at the Phallic stage, having passed through the Oral and Anal stages of development. We are at the moment when the Superego emerges and many other interesting things develop. Piaget, on the other hand, would say that we already have a language of our own, a memory and imagination. Our intelligence is both egocentric and intuitive and our goal yet to be achieved is symbolic thought.

On a more serious note, our collective decided to work together under the imperative of the freedom of expression unremittently stated in the Polish public sphere, coupled with the apparent lack of a medium, at least in Warsaw, that would broadcast the voices of immigrants. Literally there were no places we could go and talk full-heartedly about our condition of otherness, except

perhaps in the Irish Pubs, over a beer with random foreigners who, and one could never know, how carefully they would listen.

The year of 2014 was a turning point. As Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk criticized Russia's annexation of Crimea and later on Poland complained of 'unprecedented' Russian military activity in the Baltic Sea region, saying that NATO was being tested, months before the actual great right-turn in Poland's domestic politics, the figure of the immigrant was (and actually still is) visibly demonized to a higher degree. This was happening not just in Poland but all around Europe. This clearly challenged, in our opinion, a certain notion of rights and universalism, a term often used in the context of humans being treated alike by state authorities and non-governmental actors, and why not, fellow humans. We did not yet have a word for that fairly common form of discrimination. We had just the explicit knowledge of that which came and still comes to us from personal anecdotes, the mass-media and later on from social networks. Lots and lots of observations.

The alternative culture space that we wanted to create was temporarily to provide us with a home in our – otherwise – homelessness, or countrylessness – *dezțărare* – a term often used historically by Romanian exiles – uncountrry; or perhaps we could say: to provide us with an Utopia. Famously Thomas More coined the term from the Greek words – no place. This was our collective's founding rationale.

One could consider us to be a migrant itinerary case study. Our route meandered and interacted with the authorities at home and in host countries, societies at large, media discourse or cultural institutions. We will discuss our history in a relational way, in the sense that it will be a history of grassroots self-organization and interactions with various public and semi-public institutions, as well as a trace and an attempt to archive the experiences of our lives as immigrants in Poland, currently an EU member state. Each such interaction ends with a lesson that we have learned as a result.

In this paper, we will try to address the three questions our curator suggested we dwell upon in the opposite order. Firstly, we will try to give an account of various public institutions that we have interacted with and their more or less progressive cultural policies. This is our main goal. Secondly, we will attempt to tackle the role of culture in constituting, let us call it, the new

universalism. Thirdly, we will try to suggest certain ideas, goals or practices, as constituting factors for a universal project that would overcome the heritage of oppressive Western universalism of the colonial enterprise. As you will see, certain twists in our path and the stories they came to, indicate ongoing practices that absolutely need to be rethought and eventually changed, others offer hope in certain types of democratic and inclusive practices.

These encounters with various public institutions are, in fact, one of the objects of our collective's observations and research. We also do a lot of introspection when we try to understand these interactions. We write about them and make these texts public. We argue over, revisit, edit and live with these interactions as a piece of collective work. Or even, as some of our members think, this work results in our art (Stuart Hall

² See Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*, London: Macmillan, 1978.

wrote along the same lines in his *Policing the Crisis*).² In order to restore the idea of universality – or, indeed, build a new one – we tend to think it necessary to take a closer look at migrant's itineraries and the subject of the immigrant themselves. Interestingly, the conceptual link between universalism and migration is present in many scholarly texts on migration, no surprise, often written by migrants themselves. To give just one example, in Julia Kristeva's 230 pages long *Strangers to Ourselves*, the word 'universalism' is listed on 22 pages, and without the suffix -ism, the word 'universal' is listed on 85 pages.³

³ See Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

As we were planning our collective, we encountered in the institutionalized discourses and actual institutional practices that we witnessed that migrants were either vilified, meshed together and turned into pitiful clichés, or simply ignored altogether. We started to believe that developing an ability to read migrants' individual stories and creating a space for those voices to be heard in the public sphere was important. We were reading and began sharing these readings firstly inside our Home culture, defined by its language, Romanian.

However, although stated only informally, our collective's mission from the very beginning was not only to be as inclusive as possible with immigrants, but also to be as inclusive as possible with all voices that were seeking expression and came across our project – no matter their formal training, level of education,

linguistic abilities or writing skills. We also attempted all the time to pursue an egalitarian, non-hierarchical organizational structure. Ideologically we clearly placed ourselves in opposition to the Right and various nationalisms. Due to some representations the Romanian Diaspora has in the Romanian media – and to what we were discovering ourselves in Poland – some Romanians in Poland seem happier to deny the universal rights of minorities both vis-à-vis their home, being in denial about Roma minority rights, and abroad, where they are quite ready to simply fulfil the role of a ‘model minority’. Just think of the concept of the Ideal immigrant – conscious pariahs (Bernard Lazare) and their counterpart: Hanna Arendt’s social parvenus. Some of us expected, therefore, the Romanian Diaspora to be fairly on the right wing. The ideological frame was so important to some of us that in the beginning each text we wrote had to be spell-proofed by two editors, to make sure no ultraright content would get through. Eventually we dropped this practice. Our contributors turned out to be much more to our likeness than we originally expected.

INSTITUTIONS

Two of us writing this text met for the first time in a partially public/open institution, in the famous Warsaw Syrena squat. It must have been in February, 2012. It was a fairly new spot on Warsaw’s culture map. The activists there were holding an open meeting on the mass protests in Romania that exploded as a result of an initiative by the then Romanian government to privatize the state’s medical emergency system. Being a squat run by anarchists, Syrena facilitated two quite extraordinary events: firstly, they fed the curiosity of some Poles who were interested in current events in neighbouring countries; ones that were below the radar of Polish national or the international media; secondly, that we, anonymous folk in Poland, but knowledgeable about the country of concern, could contribute to the debate.

We met the third member of our collective, Mihai Tarța, at a protest we organized in 2013 in front of the Romanian embassy in Warsaw against the cyanide gold mining at Rosia Montana. Then there were massive protests in Romania itself against the reopening of the mine. Mihai told us that if there had not been a protest in Warsaw that day, he would have chained himself to

the gates of the embassy anyway. Mihai's writings are as radical as his declarations.

So, in the summer of 2014, after countless discussions, we realized that although we were otherwise talkative, it was in vain and no one listened to us, neither in our Home Culture, because of our non-presence there for lengthy periods of time, nor in Poland. Here we had no voice, as immigrants, because we did not speak Polish, or we spoke it ungrammatically, with accents, or because we were simply immigrants. We were often told we would never be Poles. Therefore, we had to become the medium, to say what we had to. The three of us were united by a sense of deep urgency about this. We wanted to tell our story, not out of a lack of modesty but because we were not able to do anything else but that. Olga Corochii, our forth crucial and truly homeostatic editorial member joined us in this period. The four of us are like the four elements: we constantly disagree and have very different communication styles.

At our pre-launch meeting – which was an open meeting, advertised via Facebook so that everyone potentially interested in the magazine could join the editorial team – a representative of the Romanian Embassy was present and even contributed to the name choice. In the beginning we tried to publish weekly three, four texts. Often these would be written by the four main editors, but as the word about our project spread, we received contributions from many other immigrant authors. Over fifty authors have contributed to our Magazine over the course of the last, almost, five years.

In the meantime the Romanian Culture Institute in Warsaw was becoming more aware of the local Romanian/Moldovan community in Poland and began organizing cross-cultural events at which Warsaw-based Romanians and Moldovans could lecture on various culture-related topics to an open audience. Unfortunately, these events do not happen anymore. In the good old days, these events had a strong community building feature. After one such event, and as Facebook was becoming more popular, the group 'Romanians in Poland' was set up on this social network. The group's membership quickly grew. Currently it has some 1600 users. Social networks, including Facebook, and in the older days various forums, could, with some reservation, be considered autonomous public spaces governed by certain rules, in which minority groups self-organize, discuss and weld

communities and political identities. Especially in its beginnings, this Warsaw-based group was actively discussing domestic culture and its presence in Polish culture, the events organized by the Romanian Cultural Institute, news from home, jobs. Discussions are not as common these days. Though the group's members do still offer advice and information on jobs, various Romanian and host culture issues.⁴ For us, this growing group was also important because it provided us with an awareness of the presence of so many fellow Romanian speaking nomads in Poland. Fairly similar to ourselves, often also English speakers, they could hardly participate in or consume mainstream Polish culture.

⁴ See Teodor Ajder, 'Romanian Diasporic Facebook Groups as Public Spheres', *Open Cultural Studies*, 2 (2018), pp. 723–734.

Although we did collaborate to some extent with this online community and we still publish content on the group's wall, when we requested half-jokingly admin rights (we suggested, among others, that *Mamaliqa* could become the community's journal), we were refused, also half-jokingly – we were very political. Eventually we set up an autonomous Facebook page.

Despite the initial sympathy, the progressive discourse that we tried to practice turned out to be even more consuming and difficult than we originally had thought. Within the relatively small Romanian-speaking community in Poland, people simply seemed happy that we existed. They liked or followed our page, but rarely read our content. On the other hand: no matter how sympathetic people were regarding our existence, our texts complaining about the fallacies of capitalism, encouraging people, and particularly immigrants, to protest, criticizing famous Romanian authors for their islamophobia and xenophobia was not to everyone's liking, although these texts in particular brought us, paradoxically, more readers. On the whole, it seems we were half-accepted, in the way a poor relative who is a bit of an embarrassment to everyone, nevertheless gets invited to Christmas dinner.

A couple of months before the first issue appeared in print, the president of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, visited Poland. Iohannis notoriously came to power because of Diaspora votes, as the Diaspora is sometimes perceived to be (not just more critical but also) 'more liberal' than some of the 'provinces' back home. We were invited to a reception with the president but we wanted more. Especially because Iohannis was 'the president of the

Diaspora' we thought that he of all people would take some questions from a Romanian Diaspora magazine in addition to reciting his prepared speech. What wishful thinking. We were told that an interview with the President was out of the question, because of his tight agenda, and that we should email our questions. But that we could do any time, we argued. Then we were told to bring our questions to the meeting. So we did. We prepared our questions, but to make sure that they would not get simply stacked away, we had painted them on a large canvas attached to a frame. The painting looked just like an official letter, only that it was much bigger. Because of security concerns, we were not allowed to bring the painting in. We had nothing left to do but take our questions on paper inside, and hand them to an attaché of the presidential team. When we took the painting to the Embassy later on, it was not delivered to the Presidency, as we had been promised, but stacked away somewhere out of view and out of concern for everyone's safety.

Our magazine was run originally like a business. Our colleague Olga Corochii tried several times to organize us into an NGO or charity, but we never broke through the formalities, nor ever gathered enough supporters. Hopefully one day the procedures for registering a NGO will become more user friendly in Poland and presented in other languages, not just in Polish. We also did not obtain any state funding from Romania even though we tried very hard. The Romanian state dishes out money for Diaspora projects, even some of it is especially dedicated to the media. You'd think a magazine with the perspective of print issues, and later indeed with print issues, an online portal, materials cross-posted in the Romanian, Moldovan and Polish media, and which translates materials into Romanian and Polish, and sometimes from and into English too, would deserve a bit of money from a fund that has been founded in order to sponsor Romanian Diasporic publications! Not to mention that we never stopped promoting abroad contemporary culture produced in Romania and Moldova, as well as Polish contemporary culture in Romanian! Yet, we never really qualified for the funds. We applied twice. Perhaps our project proposal writing skills are not good enough. But when we scored one point below the minimum criterion for funds (49/50) we checked who got 50: in some countries, it was projects to renovate Orthodox churches, in others it was folkloric music

festivals, in all of them it was various events centred around the national flag.

We did not belong to the officially sanctioned Romanian Diaspora. As understood by the government, the Diaspora is an artefact colonized by the state that cries on seeing the Romanian flag, longs to read 19th century poems praising the sweet Romanian language and – crucially – prays in Orthodox Churches. The Diaspora cannot be critical of national symbols – it is supposed to be petrified in its love for them. The Diaspora, especially, cannot criticize the Romanian state or its policies. The Diaspora cannot think on its own. Of course a Diaspora, whatever this means, including the Romanian, is never as the State wishes it to be.

With the launch of our first print edition, in June 2015, we understood better where we stood. The launch was received with much warmth by the Romanian community with hundreds in attendance and the Romanian embassy providing glasses for the wine and some pocket money for snacks. Luckily, two members of our community, a Romanian and a Moldovan (Marius Năvodaru and Alex Casian), each running wine import businesses, also stepped in.

As time went on, and we did our gig, more Poles and Warsaw based non-Poles and non-Romanians started paying attention. To some – very niche – Polish audiences, we were becoming interesting. In a climate of migrant-phobia, Polish progressives were pushing back by trying to be inclusive with the immigrants. Some of us, here and there, were invited to speak as the 'go-to immigrant'.

The collective too was gaining some attention. In fact, one such immigrant inclusive program partook in the publication of our fairly eclectic first paper issue. The Inna Przestrzeń Foundation was running a workshop (called KIW1), for migrants who were considering creating non-profit cultural or social activities at the newly opened Warsaw Centrum Wielokulturowe (Multicultural Centre). We did attend the workshop and received a small grant. Although modest (and taxed), at only over one thousand zlotys (around 250 euros – editor's note) it still constituted very, very important support. It was not just the matter of money, which was very little, but the support came in many other ways, openness, real interest, an eagerness to discuss options, advice given. Currently we are happy to report that the grant formula of Centrum Wielokulturowe has changed for the better. Centrum

is announcing calls for grant applications that are up to 5000 zlotys and there are no compulsory lengthy fundraising workshops to attend.

With time, however, it became clear that our Polish audiences mostly needed content in Polish. Our musings in Romanian – and even those in English – could not be further from the radar. During the first issue launch event in Cracow, we were told loud and clear by our Polish friends that our writings must be in Polish because this is the cultural space in which we function, therefore we must produce content in its language. The problem was, only a few of us spoke Polish. Few of us would dare to write in Polish. It was, and still is, not an easy thing to learn Polish in Poland. There were only a few Polish language programs for foreigners. Those who could translate were already buried under the responsibilities of their day job. As we became aware that some of our friends at the launch could not understand what we were saying on stage, as the event went on, we tried, as much as possible to translate it into Polish as well. English is not a *lingua franca* in Poland.

Our physical audience, then, was split in half: to the half of the room where the Romanians sat, we spoke Romanian – and we talked to them about our struggle as migrants, about Polish culture. To the other half of the room where the Poles were, we spoke Polish – about Romania, its cultural products, and recently published books. That split room is a metaphor for our split condition: here and there, in both places and nowhere. Nevertheless, for all our grammar mistakes and illegibility, some Poles were becoming more interested.

On the occasion of the launch of our second book, focused on the topic of migration, Paweł Sulik, the host of the *Los Polandos* Radio Show, at the Warsaw Station Tok FM, invited us to speak about the magazine. Of course, we brought along four people, holding four different passports (Katy Bentall – UK, Alan James – US, Claudia Ciobanu – Romania, Teodor Ajder – Moldova). And some of us not even speaking fluent Polish. Paweł was patient. The radio show turned out to be more of an artistic performance than an interview.

Paweł Sulik's extraordinary show was and, we are happy to report, still is a real competitor for our magazine. *Los Polandos* was one of the very few Warsaw based media-programs

that broadcast the point of view and the voice of migrants or foreigners in Warsaw. True, usually the guests speak Polish and not their native tongues. Importantly, however, Sulik goes beyond the migrant or the default ethnic connection of his guests with the topic he discusses and often sees in his guests professionals and experts in certain fields. He is one of the few Polish journalists who invites non-Poles to discuss issues that happen locally or internationally and he treats them as equals. In this sense he is, perhaps one of the most progressive journalists in the Polish capital. Of course, he is not the only one.

After the show all of us moved to the Galeria Studio that is located in the very heart of Warsaw, where we were generously invited to launch our second issue on migration. We called it the bitter issue. Galeria Studio was our host, so we spoke to a mostly Polish audience mainly in Polish but with some English. We were humbled by the interest in both our countries but also in our migrant experience itself. This time a Romanian reader stood up and asked us to speak Romanian. She reclaimed us.

In 2017, after two years or so, a Polish gallery, lokal_30 (the one that represents Natalia LL, whose works were famously withdrawn recently from the National Museum of Poland, an act of censorship that triggered a nationwide protest) invited us to participate in an exhibition focused on the dimension of activism in contemporary Polish art. lokal_30 suggested we show our 'Letter to the President' in a show that dealt with Warsaw's visual art that is tightly linked to political activism. This was a good moment to learn more about the whereabouts of our painting-letter. We inquired at the Romanian embassy. The painting was still at the embassy, although President Iohannis had visited Poland twice since we'd turned in our questions. At least it had not been trashed. The Embassy kindly lent us the painting for the exhibition. We freely translated the questions and created a Polish version of our 10 questions, contextualized and addressed to the Polish President (we did not expect any replies). All the texts and follow-ups around this action were printed as a zine in Romanian and translated into Polish. The first three issues of an edition of 50 were on display in lokal_30. This was our 3rd issue of *Mămăliga*, which is still in the post-production stage. It is bound manually, produced on demand and it is focused on translation as a medium for contemporary arts.

We were invited to run a meeting at Krytyka Polityczna with the editors of fellow immigrant publications, although the event was directed rather at foreigners in Poland. Later on, we ran a similar meeting again during the The Anarchist Book Market at ADA Puławska.

Along the way, our relationship with one very special person to us – who is also an institution, actually – the British born visual artist and poet Katy Bentall, turned out to be key to our existence and identity. Katy Bentall hosted us in her workshop in Warsaw's Shroodmieshche, when we had no place in embassies or no money for renting spaces. Warsaw lacks cheap or free spaces for culture events, or they were out of reach for immigrants. Katy helped us in ways she wants to keep anonymous. She contributed her visual work and poems to our magazine too. In her struggle with Polish words, but in her open channels of communication with Polish society via drawings, art, plants, we saw ourselves.

CULTURE

Recollect that our collective met during a protest against the plans of a toxic resurrection of a mine in the Roşia Montana region. In their treaty on Nomadology, Deleuze and Guattari connect the mines in themselves to the nomad: "The question of control over the mines always involves nomadic peoples. Every mine is a line of flight."⁵ By the line of flight, as we understand it, they mean the composition of a smooth space and of the movement of people in that space... which comes, with the encountering of the war... directed against the State and against the worldwide axiomatic expressed by States... There is a special, primary relation between itinerancy and metallurgy (deterritorialization). The goldsmith's... is the barbarian art par excellence; filigree and gold and silver plating... tied to a nomadic economy that both used and repudiated a commerce reserved for foreigners. Foreigners, because the locals are, of course perceived as foreigners by the nomads.

Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the tension between the nomads and the locals was as old as history. Prehistoric Europe was crisscrossed by the battle-axe people, who came in off the steppes like a detached metallic branch of the nomads, who mix

⁵ See Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translation and foreword by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Eleventh printing, 2005.

and spread across the whole of Europe. Are they the ones who kept up the mines, boring holes in European space from every direction, constituting our European space? Were they the continent's forefounders? We are like the ancient practitioners of itinerant, ambulant sciences that consist in following a flow, like the artisans, for example. The artisan or the smith is the itinerant, the ambulant. To follow the flow of matter is to itinerate, to ambulate. It is intuition in action.

But artisans are neither the nomads nor primarily defined as an itinerant or as a transhumant, nor as a migrant, even though nomads can become these consequentially. They are not nomadic among the nomads and sedentary among the sedentaries, nor half-nomadic among the nomads, half-sedentary among the sedentaries. The primary determination of nomads is to occupy and hold a smooth space: it is this aspect that determines them as nomad (essence). On their own account, they will be transhumants, or itinerants only by virtue of the imperatives imposed by the smooth spaces. Their relation to others results from their internal itinerancy, from their vague essence, and not in reverse. It is in their specificity, it is by virtue of their itinerancy, by virtue of their inventing a holey space, that they necessarily communicate with the sedentaries and with the nomads. They are in themselves double: a hybrid, an alloy, a twin formation, a mush.

States have always had problems not just with exiles, but also with journeymen's associations, or *compagnonnages*, the nomadic or itinerant bodies of the type formed by masons, carpenters, smiths, anarchists, etc. Think of Gothic architecture as a reminder of how extensively the journeymen travelled, building cathedrals near and far, in Poland too, scattering construction sites across the land, drawing on an active and passive power (mobility and the strike) that was far from convenient for the State.

When it comes to writing, the nomads had no need to create theirs, they borrowed that of their sedentary imperial neighbours. Metalworking, jewellery making, ornamentation, even decoration do not form a writing, even though they have a power of abstraction that is in every way equal to that of writing. But this power is assembled differently.

In her essay *The Illiterate*, Agota Kristof talks about the importance of faith in this itinerary and she connects it with the idea of writing.⁶ People

⁶ See Agota Kristof, *The Illiterate*, London: CB Editions, 2005.

whose life stories have to do with the experience of migration and often loss, are perhaps more susceptible than others to the varieties of self-approval opened up by writing. Such people have been so numerous in the last hundred years as almost to seem commonplace today. One could in fact venture and state that these exiles while weaving their itineraries pursue a new, nomadic universalism, even if it is articulated rather on the pages of minor publications.

Today, the ore that is followed by the itinerant is culture. The itinerant learns and speaks the languages it is being articulated in and in which it flows. It is English and Polish, and why not, Romanian, in our case. Although, in a way we are also colonizers, because we colonize a space, but the culture and the languages we speak colonize us. It takes away our time. Our children are confronted with and are more aware of the ideology of the States whose languages we speak. Happily, they do resist in various ways, practicing and developing their tongues. We, on the other hand, follow the culture, extract it and mould things out of it. Like the ancient artefact that we call today jewellery, although we are not very sure about its true original meaning, we produce textual items and artefacts. We give these things to the locals. We give these things to the nomads. Culture is the metal we melt and mould. It is neither a thing nor an organism. It is a body without organs. Perhaps many of the things mentioned above are true about all of us involved with *Mamaliga*.

SUGGESTIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS AND FELLOW CULTURE PRACTITIONERS

There is almost an obligation to offer a few recommendations. Ours are modest, merely starting points, or food for thought. They address the decision-makers of all countries (migration is a reality everywhere) and citizens everywhere:

- acknowledge, once and for all, the existence of immigrants, open your eyes and create institutions and policies for them
- do not make institutions or a policy for immigrants without the immigrants' participation – as our efforts to describe our own experience indicate, it's a very specific and nuanced one, and it helps to have an insight into it, to encourage their participation

- support existing alternative places, progressive institutions, squats, etc. – actually they had already created a space for migrants long before migration became the topic of the day; these places deserve continuous support so that they will be able to continue their practices – it is the marginals who best understand the marginals
- cultural institutions for immigrants cannot be bound by a national frame; they cannot be national institutions; *Mamaliga* was a bad fit for both Poland's national institutions and for Romanian ones; it's not us who should have changed (though there's a lot of room for improvement), it's them
- overcome language barriers, not only by using multiple languages, but also by using images, sounds and movements; explain policy in non-verbal ways to democratize it and make it accessible to foreigners too. Why not translate the constitution in comic strips?
- introduce voting rights for immigrants at national and European elections.

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BIENNALE WARSZAWA

is an interdisciplinary cultural institution conducting artistic, research, educational and social activities. It operates at the intersection of various disciplines, combining the area of culture and art with the area of theory and research, as well as social activism. Its work is managed by a curatorial team and based on the cooperation with other entities: cultural institutions, NGOs, social initiatives, artists, creators, researchers, and activists working in all fields within the interests of the Biennale. Within its statutory activities, BW maintains an ongoing programme of interdisciplinary activities in the form of curatorial/artistic and research explorations, in preparation for an international Biennale, understood as a series of interdisciplinary events going beyond strictly theatrical activities. The idea of the Biennale is based on the premise that culture and art play a vital role in building modern, tolerant, critical society, operating with the respect for democracy and civic liberties, diversity of beliefs, religions, sexual orientations and backgrounds.



EUNIC CLUSTER WARSAW

The operates since 2007 with about 30 active members, associates and partners within the umbrella organisation EUNIC Global (European Union National Institutes for Culture). It aims to create effective partnerships and networks between National Institutes for Culture, embassies and other organisations within Poland, the European Union and in third countries. EUNIC Cluster Warsaw's goals are to promote cultural diversity and understanding between European societies and to strengthen international dialogue and cultural cooperation, applying a cross-cutting approach to culture that includes inter alia arts, science, education and research. Its activity is focused on:

- Reinforcing the networking of Europe's national cultural institutes and embassies in Warsaw and generating synergies and effective partnerships within the network and with other professionals working in the field of culture and beyond in Poland.
- Expanding the role of culture in modern society and strengthening the sense of belonging to a rich and diverse European cultural community.
- Promoting European culture and the values that underpin it, such as cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, gender equality and multilingualism.
- Strengthening and maintaining cultural dialogue, exchanges and cooperation with third countries.

NATIONAL INSTITUTES FOR CULTURE PARTICIPATING IN THE PROJECT:



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Universalism seems to be one of the most ambivalent and contradictory, yet also valuable elements of the European cultural legacy. On the one hand, as it was put by the French philosopher Alain Badiou, it was Christianity that established the foundation of a universalism that does not distinguish between ethnic, national or cultural identities, but rather treats every human person as equal and essentially the same as “there is no partiality with God” (The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans). On the other hand, an ideology of universalism was an important element of the colonial project and a means of keeping the subalterns in check: white conquerors claimed the supremacy of European values and norms – religious, cultural or social – and declared them universally valid in order to force the subjected populations into obedience and destroy their ways of life. It has remained one of the prime reasons of mistrust that many societies and ethnic groups express towards Western claims at universalism.

The predicaments surrounding universalism are far from solely the subject of investigation for historians, philosophers or sociologists. The global and thus universal nature of the challenges that we are facing – such as climate change, mass migrations, the unchecked influences of financial institutions, right-wing terrorism etc. – make the foundation of any kind of new progressive universalism a task of the utmost importance. *from Introduction by JAN SOWA*

