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Strategic Universalism: Dead Concept Walking

On the Subalternity of Critique Today

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Universalism has been declared dead as a concept. Not only the exact time of its death but even the cause have long since been announced: in the West it has been dead since 1968, and it died in Eastern Europe a bit later, specifically in 1989. At least, this is what is maintained by Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, both of them post-Marxist philosophers and famous followers of Lukacs, in their book "The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism", published in 1991.[1] In fact, the book takes leave of this concept that, according to the authors, has been one of the most important and influential visions of high modernism since the late 19th century. They explicitly emphasize that they take leave of this concept retrospectively, looking back at the past of radical universalism, and not in terms of a vision of its new practice.[2] The methodological concept of the book also reveals the true cause of the death of radical universalism: it has not died of internal theoretical weaknesses and deficits, but rather of the attempt to practically apply it.

What Heller and Fehér understand as radical universalism is actually Marxism, or, as they call it, the philosophy of praxis.[3] For them, radical universalism is nothing other than a philosophy of praxis, for which reason they represent Marx as a kind of Super-Hegel. Instead of deconstructing the Hegelian system and with it metaphysics and the grand narrative, which first Feuerbach and then Kierkegaard had attempted, they maintain that Marx restored and radicalized it. The same applies to Hegelian universalism, to the idea that there is a universal history, whereas all other histories are particular and only significant to the extent that they are able to contribute to this universal history. Hegel understood this universal history as a progress towards freedom. For him, there was also a universal model of society, a universal science, etc. According to Heller and Fehér, Marx radicalized Hegel's all-encompassing universalism yet again, projecting it into the future and functionalistically reinterpreting it. He sought to reestablish Hegel and transform universalism from an "interpretive device" into a "predictive and action-orienting device". And it is precisely this practical application of universalism, its transformation into a philosophy of praxis that, according to Heller and Fehér, is what sealed its fate.

Consequently, all the iniquity of Marxism, meaning most of all the horror of communist totalitarianism, all the civil wars, mock trials, the gulag, etc., is said to come not from Marx' critical philosophy, but rather from the will to change the world through its practical application. Thus an interpretation of the world became a manual for action. In the language of philosophical tradition: the devil of radical universalism qua philosophy of praxis is found in the convergence of theoretical and practical reason, in other words in the idea of a realization of philosophy.[4]

Hence we can say that the fate of radical universalism was sealed in a single statement from Marx – in the famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it."[5] This was, so to speak, its death sentence.

Many intellectuals – including Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér by their own admission – have since then toyed with the idea of giving the project of radical universalism a third chance, following the failed attempts of social democracy and Bolshevism. However, this hope has been abandoned once and for all in the West since 1968 and in the East since 1989.[6] Thus the whole project of radical universalism has been scrapped forever.

So this is the death of universalism. What came after that cannot really be described, according to Heller and Fehér, as post-universalist or post-Marxist, because these descriptions would only make sense in an autobiographical context, as they say. "Therefore, we prefer to be postmodern," they write, which does not mean merely "after history", but rather "after the era of radical universalism". It is allegedly this radical universalism that became the past in postmodernism, along with all the universalist movements, ideologies, parties, and the philosophy and social theory based on radical universalism. Neither a new universalist vision nor a reanimation of the old vision is possible in postmodernism. Instead, there are endeavors again to understand the world, explore certain new possibilities, and supply arguments for everything that appears to be better, more beautiful or more equitable.[7]

A Universalism That is Not Really Dead

There is, however, a general problem with all the postmodern pronouncements of death. They do not really mean what they think they mean. The human being declared dead in postmodernism somehow lives on. Althusser or Foucault, for instance, even made this death the starting point for contemporary thinking. Also the death of art does not yet mean that it no longer exists. Danto, for instance, expressly defines contemporary art as art made after its postmodern death.[8]

Benjamin called this life after death the "afterlife" and used it to explain his concept of translation. According to Benjamin, a translation is nothing other than an afterlife of the original. However, this also includes the death of the original. No path leads from a translation back to the original. This is the context, within which we are confronted with the concept of "strategic universalism" today. It is to be understood as a form of afterlife – a life after death – of the old, radical universalism, which means as its translation, which has liberated itself from the original once and for all. What is irretrievably lost in the translation, what died with the original and can therefore no longer be grasped in the translation, is the revolutionary meaning of the old concept of universalism, its practical aspiration to change the world. This is consequently the paradox of the globalized world, in which everything can be changed except this world as world. The global is specifically not the universal, but "only" its translation. One can recognize the echo of the original in it, but not the original itself. The world in its universalist sense is dead. The global world is the form of its afterlife.

It is in this historical context that the concept of strategic universalism can first be understood. It belongs unequivocally to the global and not (no longer) the universal world. For this reason, its real meaning first becomes clear in the language of this global

world. It results more from the relationship between the concept and other phenomena of the global world than from the relationship to its original, to the meaning it had in the language of the universal world.

What does that mean specifically? First of all, it means that even without being an expert in postcolonial theory, one can immediately recognize in the concept of strategic universalism a reaction formation: it was coined in a direct analogy to the concept of strategic essentialism. If we understand Spivak's "strategic essentialism" as an anti-anti-essentialism, than Paul Gilroy's concept of strategic universalism can thus be understood as a kind of anti-anti-anti-essentialism.[9]

At the same time, we must not forget that essentialism and universalism are not opposites per se. Essentialism – actually an old-fashioned or old-modernist position – stands for the conviction that identities necessarily have a positively tangible substance, something like a set of timeless and immutable properties that definitively determine the essence and are clearly and unequivocally distinct from other identities. In this way, it is possible to define gender, for example, or political communities or political subjects such as nation, class or even – as is most frequently the case nowadays – a certain "culture". Yet one of these properties can also be universality. Hence the West's concept (of culture) that has become so politically important today, for instance, is identified by certain values – "our values", such as individuality, freedom, democracy, secularity, etc. – that are understood as being universal. In Marxism the working class was also defined in an essentialist way, for example by Lukács, with its specific, unique class consciousness. Yet particularly this class consciousness is the consciousness of the universality of the working class as class, or of its role in world history respectively: by

suspending itself through the revolution, it abolishes the class relationship as such and thus all classes.

In short: that which was understood in modernism as universal, has become in postmodernism a specific property of a particularity. More precisely, in postmodernism every universal position was confronted with its outside, with which it is in a power relationship, whether it is one of open antagonism, a battle for hegemony or for recognition. It was thus, for example, that the universality of the West was challenged by the colonized. The Black person proved to be the outside of the now particular, Western universality; in other words this universality proved to be white and racist. The proclaimed universality of the working class underwent something similar. It also proved to be mainly male and patriarchal by excluding women.

The position that is theoretically directly opposite of essentialism, which we may call constructivism, also forms no parallel politically, no counterweight to political essentialism. Although one can theoretically deconstruct the identity of a nation and show that it is nothing other than the effect of a discursive construction, that it is void of content and only consists of relationships to other identities, the political use value of this kind of knowledge is minimal. Deconstruction does not produce politically effective subjects. It is not capable of politically challenging an essentialistically founded community – such as a nation with all its political and cultural institutions and reproductive mechanisms, especially with its political expression, the nation-state.

This division between knowledge and action – in this concrete case between theoretical deconstruction and political essentialism – is constitutive of the concept of strategic essentialism. Indeed, this concept is nothing other than a bridging maneuver, an attempt to

close this division again, to reconnect thinking and acting, theory and practice, but this time under the aforementioned postmodern preconditions, which means, most of all, after the death of universalism.

Yet Another Strategic Concept: Essentialism

As is well known, with *Can the Subaltern Speak* Gayatri Spivak excluded and theoretically deconstructed the possibility of a subaltern subjectivation and thus also of political articulation. She showed that subalternity can only be grasped through elite thinking, which is why it does not even exist outside the elite presentation, and that it is always only a purely discursive phenomenon. This is the background of the thesis that a subaltern woman cannot speak and that some father or the rebel of the nation takes her place and speaks in her name. In other words, subalternity as such precludes a subjectivation that is transparent to itself, can never be the subject of its own history and hence the subject of its own emancipation. Yet this is something that we only know, something that only applies at the ontological level, where the concept of subalternity is void.

At the strategic level – for Spivak this means at the level of political articulation – this void can be filled with an essentialist projection. Although a subaltern woman cannot speak per se, the *Subaltern Studies Project* can do so in her name, as long as it has a clear political interest in sight, namely as long as this interest means subverting official Indian history. This means the history, from which the subaltern woman is already excluded. It is only in the name of this interest that it makes sense to essentialize subalternity, thus making it politically effective.

With the concept of "strategic essentialism", Spivak attempts to provide a theoretical legitimization for a subversive political practice based on essentialism and to have it approved by deconstruction, despite its theoretical incompatibility with deconstruction. The point here is to attempt to salvage the political dignity of deconstruction and of postmodern thinking.

The ideal political role of strategic essentialism that Spivak projects is to enable oppressed people of all kinds – nations, ethnic, sexual and other minorities – to present themselves and pose political demands, but without extinguishing internal differences and internal debates. It is to be used only temporarily and only for a specific political purpose, because otherwise there is a danger of abuse, nationalisms, totalitarianisms, etc.

The concept of strategic essentialism actually became necessary, because the historical situation that we live in is articulated in two different languages: on the one hand in the language of postmodern, anti-essentialist reflection and on the other in the language of old essentialistic politics. Strategic essentialism is proof that there is no way to relate these two languages back to one another or to suspend them in another, universal language. Therefore, they can only be translated into one another. Since Humboldt, however, we know that no word in one language ever finds a perfectly corresponding word in another language. Translation is by definition imperfect, or it is only possible as a compromise that necessarily leaves a blind gap behind that constantly seeks its ultimate closure. Every translation – and in this it differs essentially from the original – urgently requires a further translation. For this reason, it is an endless task. In addition to a further meaning of the original, it also produces the need for yet another meaning and so forth. It can only close the gap by reopening it. This is specifically why the term strategic

universalism was coined. It is not at all merely a reaction to the concept of strategic essentialism, which articulates a contrary and now allegedly neglected political motivation, such as the universalistic side of the binary relationship between the universal and the particular, but rather a kind of Derridian supplement: the concept of strategic universalism was developed to close the non-reducible gap between two languages of our historical experience, between the language of reflexive critique and the language of political practice.

Can the Critique Speak?

Yet which should one ultimately choose under these circumstances: critical deconstruction or essentialist politics? Which translation of these two languages is preferable, the essentialist or the universalist? Is it not time now, after all the attempts to articulate a leftist political engagement in the sense of strategic essentialism, to try out the other, universalist strategy?

The best that one can do in this dilemma is probably to make a decision for the dilemma itself. That means lingering in the gap that neither of the concepts can close. It would not mean evading all the extorted decisions and foul compromises once and for all, but rather recognizing them as such. There is something worse than yielding to extortion and opportunistic calculations, namely praising them as an emancipatory strategy.

As an example, let us take the famous case of the Mohammed caricatures. Which choice should one have made in this case? Racism disseminated in the name of freedom of speech and press? Or fundamentalism appealing to the democratic rights of minorities? Should a decision have been made following the logic

of strategic essentialism or the logic of strategic universalism? The right answer in both cases is: neither nor!

Naturally the reproach is heard that keeping silent in the face of the burning problems of our world is not a strategy of resistance, but rather the ultimate capitulation of critical thinking and of political engagement!

Our response to this is another question: Can the critique speak? In analogy to Spivak's question about the speechlessness of the subaltern, the answer is already given: it is the critique itself that has become the subaltern today. What is meant by this is a critique that is articulated through the integration of critical thinking and a changing practice. This critique is speechless today, which means that it is now only expressed through elite thinking. Academic knowledge, for instance, appears in its place and in its name, specifically the professors of deconstruction and the scholars of all the forms of critical studies: post-colonial, cultural, subaltern, etc. Yet critique itself can neither represent nor subjectivate itself. In other words, at the ontological level the concept of critique is completely void in the same way as Spivak's concept of subalternity. At the strategic level, however, at the level of political articulation, critique dives into an interplay of universalism and essentialism: sometimes in a fight for the recognition of an oppressed (essentialistically subjectivating) identity (nation, gender, culture or various minorities); sometimes in the universalist transgression of the boundaries of identity and the identitary logic of political subjectivation as a whole. Or as the driving force of multiculturalism: as its parasitic correction, a kind of plastic surgery on it. The aim of a universalist critique of multiculturalism essentially resembles the task of a plastic surgeon, which does not consist, as we know, in operating an anomaly of nature away from

the body, but rather in tailoring this body to the dominant ideal of beauty.

To summarize: in the two forms of the strategic appearance of critique – the essentialist and the universalist – it is not their fundamental contradiction that is manifested, but rather their mutually complementary character. Universalization is conventionally understood as a proto-democratic and thus also a proto-political event. An inherently particular position suddenly raises a universalist claim, thus evoking a new antagonism, which divides and newly articulates the given political field. One of the most famous examples for this kind of event was the slogan articulated in 1989 by the dissidents and rebelling masses of the former German Democratic Republic: "We are the people!" The portion of the people excluded from power and declared a counter-revolutionary mob suddenly declared themselves the people – representative of society as a whole – and thus induced the fall of the *ancien régime*. This is often cheered as the birth of the political per se and thus as a model of a radical critique of our post-political era. As it is well known, however, a short time later these same masses changed their slogan somewhat: "we are one people", is the slogan now. The original event of "the democratic revolution of 1989" was now only present in its translation "German reunification", which is generally interpreted as a kind of regression: as a new closure of the only just opened space of the politically possible and as a return from the actually political to that which Rancière calls the police[10], in other words to the existing order, in which every part is in its corresponding place. In this way, political universalizing – or the appearance of strategic universalism in a concrete political situation – appears as a kind of intermezzo of the political in the normal course of essentialist post-politics. An essentialistically generated political action, on the other hand,

appears as an unpolitical phenomenon. This imbalance is implausible. It is actually an effect of the same post-politics, through the critique of which it is articulated. This also explains why the concept of strategic essentialism became necessary – namely to reestablish the balance between universalism and particularism, which had been disturbed by the universalist and deconstructivist critique of multiculturalism. Yet just like its counterpart strategic universalism, strategic essentialism always remains bound to the hegemonic liberal-democratic order – and not its critique. What the two have in common is the vision of a gradual progress of emancipation that takes place as a clever balancing between the two poles of the existing political world order, the particular essentialist and the universal constructivist world order.

Yet the position of critique is a different one. The first step of its subjectivation is the certainty of its own subalternity, which is also a step that it has in common with the artistic avant-garde today[11]. This immediately changes its task: instead of seeking a balance of impossibilities, it prefers to face the radical impossibility of balance.

What is it that the probably most famous maxim of the global world, "Think global, act local!" wants to tell us? That one can outwit the limitations that globalization imposes on our thinking and acting and even manipulate them for one's own advantage, if one is clever enough? From the perspective of a critique that is conscious of its own subalternity, this formula for success of globalization proves to be pure extortion: "think global, act local", because there is nothing else you can do. Today it is actually impossible to offer resistance against global power that is politically effective at the same level. In the same way, it is impossible to articulate a reflexively effective critique at the local level. Local,

political essentialism makes all critical thinking mute, just as reflexively universalist critique leaves every locally effective political act untouched. Seeking to overcome this division can be a noble task, but it is not the task of critique. It is not there to balance a world again that has lost its balance, but rather to probe the depth of the crisis in which this world finds itself. For this reason, it must dare to gaze into the abyss, even if it loses its tongue at the same time. This is part of its historical experience. Those who do not believe it should recall the words of Karl Krauss, which he wrote – completely isolated in his critique – on the horror of World War I in 1914: "Those who have nothing to say, because the deed is speaking now, continue to talk. He/she who has something to say should step forward and be silent!"[12]

The sense of a genuine critique does not consist merely in intervening in current antagonisms and speaking up in the name of one side. It can often better fulfill its purpose by being silent in the name of an emerging antagonism.

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[1]Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, *The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism*, New Brunswick, London: Transaction Publishers 1991.

[2]Ibid., p. 5.

[3]Their concept of a philosophy of praxis should not be confused with the philosophy of praxis from the so-called Yugoslavian "Praxis school".

[4]Ibid., p. 3-4.

[5]Cf. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Vol. 3, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1969, p. 5-7; http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm.

[6]For Heller and Fehér, the year 1989 is "Eastern Europe's 1968".

[7]Ibid., p. 4.

[8]Cf. Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1997.

[9]Cf. Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 2001.

[10]Cf. Jaques Rancière, *Das Unvernehmen. Politik und Philosophie*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2002, p. 40ff. (Engl.: *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[11]"The task of an artistic avant-garde in this context is defined less by achieving global recognition within the proliferating artworlds, than by positioning itself below the radar as a subaltern, globally connected underground that serves, not the warring factions, but those civilian multitudes who are caught in the crossfire." In: Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror*, London, New York: Verso 2003, S. X.

[12]Karl Kraus, "In dieser großen Zeit", in: *Die Fackel*, issue 404, Vienna December 1914, p. 2.