03 2007

Whose Universalism Is It?

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In June 1793, under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Black rebels in San Domingo/Haiti joined the Spanish army, who supplied them with weapons, ammunition and provisions for the fight against the French republic. At the same time in Paris, the decision to behead the king had just been taken in the National Assembly and the sentence carried out; the role of 'slavery' was also being hotly debated. The liberal wing – the Girondists – had succeeded in winning the power of definition with regard to the subject of enslavement. The position on the status of 'slaves' was by no means unambiguous. In their definition of enslaved people, the majority argued for a very long time for ownership, not equality. And so the resolution was taken to drive the rebels back into a state of slavery as quickly as possible. In the meantime, however, parts of the French colony were taken by Toussaint L'Ouverture's troops, who were fighting under the flag of the Spanish Bourbons. The slogan that Toussaint L'Ouverture used to call the Black troops to battle was: "Freedom for All". On 29 August 1793, he published the following announcement:

"*Brothers and Friends. I am Toussaint L'Ouverture, my name is perhaps known to you. I have undertaken vengeance. I want Liberty and Equality to reign in San Domingo. I work to bring them into*

existence. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause … Your very humble and very obedient servant. (signed) Toussaint L'Ouverture, General of the Armies of the King, for the Public Good."[1]

He used the slogans of the French Revolution to mobilize the Black soldiers, fighting under the flag of the Spanish king, for battle against the revolutionary France of the period. Neither of the authorized representatives, Polvérel and Sonthonax, who had been dispatched from France to restore order in the colony's affairs, were able or willing to intervene; on the contrary, they declared the abolition of slavery. But they weren't exactly authorized to do so, and the Convention in Paris still couldn't bring itself to decide on the matter. In the meantime, Toussaint L'Ouverture's troops made further substantial territorial gains for Spain. It was only six months later – in January 1794 and under Jacobin hegemony in the National Convention – that the abolition of slavery was declared in all the colonies. In May, news of the ratification of the decree reached Toussaint L'Ouverture. He immediately decided to turn his back on the Spaniards, switched his allegiance to the Republic, won back all the conquered territories, this time for France, and captured the Spanish, and later the English, counter-revolutionary positions. From that day forward, the conquest of territory was no longer about mere tactics; it was about a revolutionary strategy. For Toussaint L'Ouverture, the liberation struggle was now an integral part of the French Revolution, and the victory for France a component of the liberation struggle. This example is a reminder of the history of a struggle, which to this day is largely absent from the historiography of eighteenth-century revolutions: the history of an anti-colonial, revolutionary liberation and of political subjectivation, for which the mere fact of 'speaking for oneself' is simply not enough.[2] In this paper, it will be suggested that the

question of universalism be posed the other way round, as it were. Why was it always assumed, in the way the revolution in San Domingo/Haiti has traditionally been perceived, that both the revolution and revolutionary discourse radiated outwards from France and reached the Caribbean islands, rather than the reverse? Why is universalist criticism always predicated on the assumption that universalism's perspective goes from the hegemonic centre to the fringes? And why are marginalized positions in common perception and historiography denied the perspective on the whole?

Equality for Everyone! But Who is 'Everyone'? The Legitimate Criticism of Universalism

In order to examine universalism from its other side, a review both of the term in its classical sense as well as the legitimate criticism of it, is necessary. Two aspects of the concept of 'universalism' have been the object of stringent criticism in the past fifty years. The first relates to a scientifico-philosophical or an epistemological problem. In this case, it was a question of breaking down the concept of a universal validity of truth, with its dehistoricizing character that expels every aspect of specificity from the field of vision. Throughout his work, Foucault argues against this universalism. He opposes the concept of a 'universal intellectual', promoting instead the idea of a 'specific intellectual'.3 When considered from the other side, the issue is what happens when questions about universalism are posed in specific circumstances; when the subject of universalism becomes a subject for activists; when the arguments for or against an alliance arise in activism, in plenary meetings. In this sense, universalism is to be seen here as having developed historically, rather than being a topic in its generality. So the second, heavily criticized aspect may now be

examined in this context of a deliberately specific, operative and pragmatic view of universalism. This aspect is more practical and political in nature, and relates to the universal validity of rights. The declaration of human rights and the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity that emerged in the closing years of the eighteenth century – the period of the revolutions mentioned earlier – determine our contemporary understanding of universalism to a considerable extent. But who was equal, who was denied equality and still is to this day? 'Universalism' was subjected to strong criticism by the postcolonial and feminist camps and was exposed as white, western particularism. What was challenged was the very fact that only some were (and still are) 'everyone', while others were (and are) not; that while people talked about 'universal rights', what was assumed to be universal was actually a western, male perspective. Furthermore, universalism was criticized as the tyranny of missionaries and colonials, and its generalizations were nothing more than police methods of suppression and enforced conformity. A third point of criticism was the paternalistic function of universalism, since the logic of the politics of representation produces powerless objects, and often makes political struggles less visible. The concept of universalism was further challenged on a fourth point: the rhetoric that conceals real inequalities, expressed to this day, for example, in the deluded fantasy that 'everyone has equal opportunities. Already, during the French revolutionary period, the statement that: "Rich and poor alike are forbidden from sleeping under the bridges of Paris" was an ironic commentary on the ideological function of the equality postulate. If what is unequal is treated as equal, injustice ensues. For all these reasons, universalism was discredited. It seemed necessary to make use of the strategy of identity politics from marginalized perspectives against the power tactics of precisely such a reduced, monopolizing and exclusive universalism. The exclusions

and inequalities meant that a consciousness, that particular positions and politics had to be created, which demanded access to the universal. Nevertheless, it is still in the name of equality and the prospect of achieving it – those 'Equal rights for all!' – that marginalized positions claim their rights. Of course, equality doesn't just begin with the call for 'equality'. The beginning we define here is the point, rather, where the struggles for equality begin. It is a model for launching a claim against manufactured inequality.

In some ways, the universalism of human rights already has two sides from the outset. On the one hand, the concept of an equality that is valid for one section of society alone opens up a completely new dimension of inequality. While everyone stayed in their allotted place in feudal structures, inequality now occurs in conditions of equality (for humanism had produced the very structure that denied humanity to the 'others'). This is perhaps one of the reasons why the debates surrounding the rights of Black people in the National Assembly turned out to be so violent. The key question was: whose human rights merited recognition and whose didn't (who didn't qualify as a human being, in other words). On the other hand, the idea of equality, once expressed, could no longer be held back as a horizon.4 It makes possible the demand for equality. But a decision on this demand could not be made either in the case of women or workers, or in the case of the Blacks in parliament. In all these instances, it was only through actual struggles that the demand for equality could be exercised.

What was happening up to 1793

The debates about the status of the 'slaves' and the role of the colonies had been persistent themes in the French Convention

since 1789. They were topics around which factions developed and positions split. There were several reasons for this. On the one hand, in relation to the question of the status of 'human beings', an issue central to the whole thinking of Enlightenment, they were taken as examples; on the other, substantial material interests were served by preventing equality and maintaining colonial tyranny. The socialist theorist, C.L.R. James makes this abundantly clear during the 1930s: "The slave trade and slavery were the economic basis for the French Revolution."[5] So when the *Encyclopédistes* and the *Société des Amis des Noirs* became spokespeople for the Blacks and took a stand against enslavement, the politically engaged sections of Parisian society in general also took an interest; this didn't, however, have any concrete, political consequences.[6] "Mirabeau, Pétion, the Mayor of Paris, Abbé Grégoire, Condorcet, all members of the *Société des Amis des Noirs* and deputies [in the Assembly], were dedicated to abolition but the elimination of slavery meant the ruin of the merchant bourgeoisie."[7] In the decree of 8 March 1790 on the subject of the colonies, therefore, it was recorded that the colonists and their property (and 'slaves' were precisely that – property) were entrusted to the special protection of the nation. "According to the decree, anyone who tried, either directly or indirectly, to oppose any commercial branch [of activity] was guilty of a crime against the nation."[8] The preservation of enslavement in the revolutionary National Assembly was legitimized and legalized by means of this decree. The Revolution was not brought to San Domingo by the 'Friends of Black People' or by any other well-intentioned French revolutionary power. The discourse of the Revolution was primarily a discourse for the liberation of the *slave owners*. Countless wealthy slave owners – bourgeois and by no means supporters of the king – discussed the Revolution vigorously. They were as opposed to the nobility and the Church as much as they were to the abolition of slavery. But

the idea of equality spread throughout the colonies. The first of the slave uprisings took place. Fighting broke out with the colonists. The Black rebels were hanged while the number of independently organized liberation struggles increased and definitely bore relation to the news of events occurring in France. Around 1791, the uprisings became increasingly linked and collective actions were planned thoroughly; an organized mass movement emerged. Revolution broke out in San Domingo. Until the Spaniards offered to join in the war against France, Toussaint L'Ouverture joined the insurgents; he very quickly took the lead in the revolution and directed efforts towards more widespread, increased mobilization and organization of the struggles. As is highly apparent here, neither the humanism of the *Encyclopédistes* nor the universalism of human rights were powerful enough to do away with slavery or to liberate the colonies. These rights had to be fought for. As quoted above, L'Ouverture used the ideals of equality and liberty for the purposes of mobilization: "I want Liberty and Equality to reign in San Domingo. I work to bring them into existence. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause ..." This matter of revolution, the liberation struggle in San Domingo radicalized the concepts of 'freedom' and 'equality'.9 By universalizing them and making them applicable to those for whom they were not intended, this struggle gave them a new significance and endowed them with their true power.

Your struggle is our struggle too
Universalism seen from the other side

The question of universalism is posed afresh against the background of Ernesto Laclau's theory of hegemony. Laclau articulates the difference between universalism and particularism as

a tension that neither of the two sides can resolve. In this sense, he rejects pure particularism and addresses the need for a universality, but one that is radically redefined. Thus, he states that "that the universal is no more than a particular that at some moment has become dominant"10. Since Laclau's theory of hegemony posits that society has no place within it from where one might argue its existence as a whole or grasp it as a totality, the place from where universality can be argued must remain as empty as it is contested. Universality is preserved as a dimension without any possibility of fulfilment by a particularism. It is the vacancy that facilitates politics. Thus, the universal becomes the 'incomplete horizon' of particular struggles, as impossible as it is facilitating. Seen from Laclau's perspective, every particularism that aims for hegemony has to make use of this universalistic horizon for its struggles. And L'Ouverture did exactly this when he made 'freedom and equality' his affair. Accordingly, Laclau focuses attention on the facilitating side of universalism, the aspect by which it becomes the basis for demanding rights. Challenging the hegemonic conditions that hold the power of definition over universalism is an essential component of these struggles: what was hitherto held to be universally valid is now attacked in its particularity. This is how one should perhaps read the points of criticism in feminist and postcolonial theory referred to earlier, which discredit the very concept of 'universalism' precisely because of its inequality. Political theory has paid little attention, however, to the productive strand presented by the conscious adoption of a universalistic perspective on potential demonstrations of solidarity with other political struggles.

While universalism was always represented and criticized in one direction only (moving from the majority outwards to the fringes), the fact that it could be productive when operating in the opposite direction was largely ignored. Now, issues like networking and

common struggles, theoretical positions and political strategies between solidarity, internationalism/transnationalism, alliance-building, common political battlegrounds and horizons appear more and more on the agenda in political discussion and in organizational contexts. With their slogan "Everything for everyone and nothing for ourselves", the Zapatistas in Mexico are drawing attention to their non-identitarian perspective. "What we defend, we defend for everyone", declare the intermittent workers in France. Queer activists have in turn criticized classic identity politics in feminism and, in so doing, they have redefined the latter by means of radically anti-essentialist concepts.

"Your struggle is our struggle too", is the slogan expressing the universal act of solidarity of the Zapatistas in Mexico with other political and social struggles in the world. This was the reason why Subcomandante Marcos gave up his lecture fee of US$500, donating it instead to the Italian factory workers who were on strike at the time. The politically symbolic act is clearly in opposition to current paternalistic representations of the logic of donations between 'First' and 'Third' Worlds. The Zapatistas assume the right (the very right a racist perspective denies to the indigenous population) to adopt a standpoint transcending their own, local concerns and their own struggle, and to show solidarity with other struggles.11 Bini Adamczak, writing as a queer theorist on antisemitism, also points out that 'speaking for oneself' and demanding access to normality by no means express the maximum demands of radical politics: "It's not about 'we are here, we are queer, get used to it', where you get used to seeing us, but about an appropriation of the norm, of the phallic gaze itself. *Wir sind hier – wir sehen euch*. We are here – we are watching you."12 And against this background, it is not just forms of heterosexism and the standardizing logics of the duality of the sexes that must be

contested in queer debate and theoretical contexts, but also conditions of exploitation, and forms of antisemitism[13] and racism. Universalism is generally attributed to the majority society – both within its own paternalistic discourses and amongst a large proportion of the critics. It is possible to offer another perspective on this: the appropriation of a strategically universal perspective from the marginalized side, a perspective that steps out of the the position of the victim and the object, and that takes pride in its capacity to act in solidarity with others.

Strategic Universalism

In the mid-eighties, the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak developed the concept of a 'strategic essentialism'. For her, this was about keeping possibilities for a real, concrete political practice alive, in view of and indeed in spite of poststructuralist theory's criticisms of all forms of essentialism. Spivak's concept of 'strategic' became an option for action, as it were: the opening up of a possibility of action, which doesn't retreat behind deconstructivist criticism, and isn't fated – given everything that needs to be fundamentally resolved, analysed and considered in depth – to remain powerless. Now, the concept of the strategic as an option for action could be useful in redefining universalism. If the de-historicizing, scientifico-philosophical and philosophical dimensions, as well as the reduced, monopolizing and exclusive political and legal dimensions of universalism were discredited, then the collapse of larger forms of universalism would mean much greater discussion of the issue of possible or impossible solidarities – of common struggles and alliances, and of something like the 'incomplete horizon' of Ernesto Laclau's writings. In this context, universalism might perhaps gain a new strategic dimension – not as an end in itself, but with a view to actual political practice.

In recent years, the theme of universalism has been revisited and handled in a new way: not as an epistemological model, nor as an abstract political or legal concept, but in the context of real, activist and marginalized struggles and discourses. There are activist procedures that reconceptualize universalism, to some extent, and adopt a 'strategically universalist' perspective without retreating behind the legitimate points of criticism. 'Strategically universalist' actions are already taking place. Within activism, the instances and problems, the possibilities and dangers of shared political horizons are being defined and discussed, all with a view to common action. The question of universalism is being posed in specific circumstances, and that is precisely where it is clear that there may be good reasons for wanting to do more than merely 'speak for oneself', for wanting to share the power of definition. And isn't that the same universalist perspective which has always been denied to marginalized positions and indeed still is?

Back to Haiti

History tells of two revolutionary situations that occurred at the same time – towards the end of the eighteenth century – and were politically and discursively linked. Both had fundamentally different opponents, goals and strategies. In France, it was a bourgeois revolution against absolutism, the nobility, the Church and feudal structures; in San Domingo/Haiti, a Black resistance movement developed along with a liberation struggle against enslavement, the latter carried on largely by the French bourgeoisie. Both revolutions were radical breaks with the power structures of the time, with equally far-reaching consequences. What is at issue is a history whose universalism must at last be told from the point of view of the other side. In the period between the rebellion (the organized resistance struggle, initially fought against France, began

in 1791) and the war of independence (which ended in 1804 with the defeat of the French army dispatched by Napoleon to San Domingo, and the birth of the independent republic of Haiti), the revolution in Haiti adopted a universal perspective for a few years and showed solidarity with the Jacobins' revolutionary France. Of their own accord, the rebels declared their support for the French Revolution. Thus, the struggle for the slaves' equality was not just an isolated struggle; it brought about a context. What makes the slaves' resistance struggle in San Domingo in the period from 1793 to 180214 different from a rebellion and a war of independence, therefore, is the fact that the slaves declared solidarity with the French Revolution. It was only when Napoleon's troops, complete with fluttering tricolour and the Marseillaise, sought to put down the liberated Black slaves of San Domingo – who had also included the flag of revolutionary France and the Marseillaise in the symbolic repertoire of their struggle – that the 'universalized' French Revolution collapsed once more into two opposing parts: on one side, the national-colonial enterprise; on the other, a victorious war of independence for the republic of Haiti. From then on, Haiti was to remain free (and was to pay dearly for it, something for which restitution has still not been made15).

For a long time, the story of the liberation of San Domingo/Haiti appeared at best as a footnote to the French Revolution. When it was mentioned, it was as a glorious aspect, as a testament to the Revolution's wide sphere of influence, as an example of its universality. It was as if the great French revolutionary mass had held out its hand to its little sister (or even its daughter) so she could share in a French ideal. But if the revolution in Haiti became part of the French Revolution – this much is clear from written records – it was because Toussaint L'Ouverture and his troops

decided in May 1794 it should be so, and not because anyone from France brought or taught the revolution to them.

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1 Cited from C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. Rev., New York: Vintage Books 1989, p. 125.

2 Cf Research Group for Black Austrian History and also documents by Araba Evelyn Johnston-Arthur on DVD: *Hidden Hi/stories—remapping Mozart*. An exhibition project in four configurations, Vienna 2006 (http://remappingmozart.mur.at/).

3 Cf Michel Foucault, Truth and Power, in: Paul Rabinow (ed.) Foucault Reader, New York: Pantheon Book 1984, pp. 67-68.

4 Cf Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s),* London/New York: Verso 1996, p. 28; also the preface by Oliver Marchart, Gesellschaft ohne Grund: Lauclaus politische Theorie des Post-Fundationalismus, in: Ernesto Laclau, *Emanzipation und Differenz*, Wien 2002, pp. 7-15.

5 C.L.R. James, op. cit., p. 47.

6 "'Let the colonies be destroyed rather than be the cause of so much evil', said the article on the slave trade in the *Encyclopédie* concludes. But such emotional outbursts carried no more weight at the time than they do today.", C.L.R. James, *Die schwarzen Jakobiner*, Berlin/DDR 1984, p. 32.

7 ibid, p. 71.

8 ibid, p. 85.

9 Cf Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens. Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean 1787-1804,* Chapel Hill/ London 2004.

10 Ernesto Laclau, Emancipation(s), London/New York: Verso 1996, p. 26.

11 Cf Comandante Mister, Speeches from Headquarters on the ninth anniversary of the Zapatista Uprising, http://www.chiapas98.de/news.php?id=466 (24.03.2007): "This bad government believes that we, the indigenous population, do not think in international terms. But we, the indigenous population, do think internationally, and we, the indigenous population, have the right to form our own opinions and to decide on what actions we want to take. The racist government also thinks that we, the indigenous population, do not know the world."

12 Bini Adamczak, "Antisemitismus dekonstruieren? Essentialismus und Antiessentialismus in queerer und antinationaler Politik", in: A.G. Genderkiller, *Antisemitismus und Geschlecht*, Unrast 2005, p. 227.

13 It should be noted here that the reproach of 'universalism' in the nineteenth century was part of the traditional repertoire of the rhetoric of modern antisemitism.

14 In 1802, the French expeditionary army under the command of General Leclerc reached Haiti, its objective to re-establish slavery and put down the rebellion. L'Ouverture was taken prisoner and deported to Europe, where he died in captivity on 7 April 1803.

15 http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/restitutionpourhaiti/ (27.03.2006).