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The Places of Critical Universalism: Postcolonial and Decolonial Approaches in Context

Abstract: This paper argues that the validity of universalism in the era of global capitalism does not imply a smooth, undifferentiated spatiality, in which particularity is eliminated. The contemporary systemic logic is reproduced in *places* where the universal and the particular are dialectized. This new dynamic raises the possibility of a *critical universalism* capable of evading the objection to Eurocentrism. In order to elaborate the conditions of critical universalism, I consider the debates on postcolonial studies, the proposed decolonial option in Latin America and the discussions that it raises.

Introduction

This chapter proposes a contemporary discussion of universalism. It is argued that a concept of ‘critical universalism’ allows us to understand decisive features of current debates on the legacy of the Enlightenment within a different historical framework defined by globalization.

The critical character of universalism does not refer only to its re-composition after a prolonged period of rejection by a context strongly influenced by particularist notions. Also and above all, it is aimed at showing its derivative, secondary and reactive character regarding a universal order of domination that precedes it. This order is based on the emergence and prevalence of a capitalist logic that subsumes the contradictory lines structuring the global world in which we live today.

The first section elaborates the notion of ‘places of universalism’ in order to show that the re-composition of universalism is not a return to the old monological universalism. I will not analyze whether the monologism attributed to universalism as established from the Enlightenment is historically accurate (although historical studies have provided a panorama of differences and nuances far from the flat Eurocentrism with which universalism wanted to be identified). Rather, to move forward more quickly, I will explain why *critical universalism* cannot be adequately developed without considering its ‘places’.

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The second section shows the peculiarities of critical universalism, such as that it is comprehensible from the Latin American and Latin Americanist receptions of postcolonial and decolonial theories. I explore the tensions inherent in postcolonialism as a rejection of Eurocentrism and the non-essentialist quest for a critical conception of universalism. One of the features of postcolonialism as it has been received in Latin American cultural spaces is to exceed mere copying or translation without modification. The most well-known intellectual movement of the active reception attempts has been the so-called ‘decolonial option’. Rather than enter into the study of the transformations operated by the decolonial perspective (of which I will nonetheless offer some analytical considerations), I am interested in placing it in the series of an endless tension inherent in the rejection of universalism. That rejection can only be a moment of universalism itself. In other words, even beyond the fantasies of an ‘own’ thought, emancipated from Eurocentric intellectual oppression, the issues and problems presented by the decolonial option reveal the demands of a critical universalism. A brief visit to the considerations of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui will show that the debate is far from exhausted.

In the conclusion, I suggest why the understanding of universalism in its ‘places’ requires both a philosophical approach that can conceive its logic (not accessible only empirically or scientifically) and a historical reconstruction—i.e., a historiographical genealogy.

The places of universalism

For many decades, at least in this broad and ambiguous cultural space called the West, universalism has been rejected. The re-evaluation of ‘difference’ or ‘particularity’, especially in the postmodernist moment of thought, led to a blurring of positive evaluations of universalism. Universalism was seen as the more or less immediate expression of a process of domination of the Other; of the subjugation of otherness to the Same.

It is not the aim of this discussion to subject to criticism this attribution to all universalism of an imperial and monological destiny. While some philosophies of history were constructed according to unilineal and evolutionary patterns, resulting in an indisputable normativity that consecrated a path to the best without alternatives, it is equally true that other approaches revised the oppressive pretensions evident in such historical-philosophical narratives. What is important is that the monological and colonial/imperial image was the one that governed, by opposition, the vindication of the particular before the oppression of the universal.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, particularism claimed the rights of a weak critical thinking—a *pensiero debole*: first, thanks to the moderate relativism of culturalist and structuralist theories especially active after the second post-war period; then, since the late 1960s, in an ontological fragmentarism deployed by poststructuralism, in which the minor and the different hold the moment of validity.

The postmodern moment of thought contained the main themes against a universalism stripped of any emancipatory aspiration and identified with a hidden or manifest oppressive will. Postmodern slogans are well known and it is unnecessary to reiterate their main topics. Instead, I want to recover the postmodernist challenge of the whole, or of totality. Indeed, the main objection against the totality in that order of reasons consists in attributing to it a systematic connection with the oppression of the totality on the parts.

Of course, it is possible to submit to the sieve of logical consistency the postmodern statement of particularity, and to show how it is possible only in contradistinction to a regretted totality. In other words, how difference and ‘the other’ are unthinkable without the shadow of wholeness. This was perceptible from the beginning in Jean-François Lyotard’s book on *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), a ‘condition’ that happened to the one where the modern condition had prevailed. It was observed on numerous occasions that the postmodern rejection of totality and its solidary terms (Sense, History, Evolution) implied a philosophy of history.

The theoretical weakness of postmodernism then lies in the absence of a theory of its own possibility, since particularism leads to a relativism by which both the aspirations of modernity and those of postmodernism are undermined. However, logical inconsistency does not invalidate the discursive and cultural existence of postmodernism.

It was Fredric Jameson (1991) who best placed its reality and its historical reason. By postulating it as “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” Jameson allowed us to represent the true aspects and false aspects of postmodernism within an enriched explanatory framework. Postmodernism thus ceased to be a mistake or a decline in radical relativism to constitute a moment of the expansion of capitalism in its most novel phase.

With globalization, theoretical ‘actuality’ reaches a new challenge because we can understand, in the face of the failure of the analytical capacities provided by postmodernism to account for what is happening, the need for a re-composition of an understanding to which totality and particularity do not constitute an irreducible opposition.

My thesis is that postmodernism prevents the development of an active and comprehensive thinking on globalization. This is certainly not the time to at-

tempt a description, however succinct, of what globalization is, but I offer some general features to follow in my argument.

I understand by globalization a multi-dimensional historical process of global interconnection mediated by the world market. In a stricter sense, it is the world market that constitutes globalization. It is not by chance that globalization has attained a clearer intelligibility after the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's definitive passage into the market economy: globalization was made possible by the victory of the capitalist market in expanding to fully cover the globe. I do not think that the so-called 'really existing socialism' (Kurz, 1994) freed itself from the internal pressures of the capitalist market, but I want to highlight that since the events of 1989–91, the continuous development of the mercantile dynamic has advanced by leaps and bounds. This dynamic is not only economic. It is crucial to neutralise any economic reductionism.

Globalization is also internally interwoven between its economic aspects, cultural dimensions, communications and wars, with political and migratory expressions. The common thread, as I have mentioned, is mercantile mediation. But if such mediation is possible, it is due to the reproduction of a global subject, without will or consciousness—a purely automatic subject, which is what Marx called 'the logic of capital'.

It is important to note that the logic of capital is not only economic, and in that sense the concept of globalization is enriching because it far exceeds the economist reduction of capital. As Pierre Bourdieu pointed out (although in his time he did it in debate with the economism of 'historical materialism'), there are 'capitals' in other orders, such as social and cultural. Bourdieu (1986) perceived, in his sociological and anthropological inquiries, the flexibility of a capitalist logic that long ago exceeded the competition for monetary accumulation.

In his analysis of postmodernism, Jameson points to another trait, later taken up in an anti-dialectical approach by authors such as Antonio Negri, who modifies the notion of Fordist society in the expansive period of capitalism (Negri and Hardt, 2000): the flexibility and structured destructuring of capitalist production, where totality and part, identity and difference, are no longer incompatible. The social decomposition by the end of full employment, the fracture of identities, the flows of people and goods, the mixtures of subjects and the defensive reactions to the loss of a stable sense of reality form a very different experience than the one forged during the nineteenth century and the first two thirds of the twentieth century. That is precisely what postmodernism cannot think: that a logic of domination is particularist and totalist at the same time. It deprives itself of something more than its formalist rejection of totality: it rests on a mistaken or, rather, antiquated social theory, for it supposes the determin-

istic framework of Fordist capitalism as the antithesis of a radically fragmented and disconnected actuality. On the other hand, the intellectual challenge behind the crisis of the alternatives posed to capitalism in the twentieth century is to think that the complexity and globality of the planet follow a logic that encompasses them, and that makes their contradictions the engine of their conflictive growth.

Capitalist globalization replaces in new terms the denounced universalism. If it is true that, as Alain Badiou (2003) proposed in his interpretation of the origins of universalism at a certain point in Christianity, a history of universalism can be traced in the *longue durée*, it is a discontinuous history. What is interesting to note here is that at the end of the twentieth century we experienced the fall of the universalism proper to the 'bourgeois world' that emerged around 1800 in much of the world, with very different historical figures. The emergence of 'the rights of man', with its lights and shadows, was an expression of that universalism that was rational and emancipatory.

The present moment of universalism is not merely a continuation of its modern episode. It is certainly historically linked to it, but not its immediate derivation. If, on the one hand, the universalism raised by globalization is incomprehensible without the modern era of the 'bourgeois world', on the other hand it constitutes a novel phase. In order for the transition to be not arbitrary, it should be considered as a self-transformation of capital in its unsurpassed crisis that has dragged on since the mid-1970s and the factual novelty of its triumph over bureaucratic socialism.

The novelty of the universalism of the twenty-first century global order (at least in what we can see in its initial stages) lies in its reconversion of the national constitution of the real that prevailed during the nationalist framework of world-market configuration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It should be made clear that while nationalisms affirmed the substantive and non-transferable character of each national experience, the state-based nation was a modern invention.

Today, it is not that national boundaries have ceased to exist, or that they lack a decisive role in the construction of economic-social and political-cultural systems. It happens that they are organized differently in the concert of global flows of greater vigour. How? To clarify this is the task of, to put it in Foucault's terms, an ontology of our actuality (Foucault, 1984).

It is precisely here that the question of universalism is presented as an impulse of thought. Irreducible to the already obsolete theoretical coordinates of postmodernism, an ontology of the present time requires an account of the decisive tendencies of globalization and its systemic orientations. The aspect of

these tendencies that I have proposed to analyze is the situation of a universalism that requires to be conceived of as a chapter of globalization.

To move to the more 'localized' phase of my argument, I will summarize in just a few lines (for reasons of space) why, in my opinion, the thematization of universalism as it is today is still possible to elucidate through a reinterpretation of Marx's critical legacy.

It is beyond dispute that the capitalist structure studied by Marx in *Capital* has as an empirical reference a historically constituted logic. This generates a real problem in the reconstruction of the validity or relevance of the Marxist critique of capital as an alienated subject when its social condition has changed. Indeed, Marx's capitalism is very close to its initial formations among which, for example, cartelization is in its infancy. The 'intervening' state plays a marginal role compared to the one it will have in the next century.

Again, summing up an idea that would merit further development, I argue that the logic of the expanded reproduction of capital is still valid in the epoch of globalization—or more precisely, by its extension to a geopolitical order different from that in force in Marx's time, that the logic of capital endures its transformation. The concept of its re-composition is the metamorphosis and not the radical rupture towards a postcapitalist reality. Capital does not entail a specifically economic reason in its monetary empirical figure, but the generation of 'the social as such', with its many facets, including the seemingly more subtle and immaterial.

The universality of capital preserves the political-cultural universalities that have usually been considered by political philosophy and by philosophy *tout court*. Democracy as an empty place of power that must be endorsed periodically by the citizens' vote as separate atoms, the constitution of individuals as subjects of rights and the formation of a public sphere in unlimited expansion are among other terms of the universality that has been maintained, despite the fact that the advance of global capitalism has also been accompanied by a privatizing tendency.

The devaluation of mass politics, the particularization of communication through the Internet, the multiplication of media and networks that mediate even sexual and affective relations, transform the ideals of universality that in the eighteenth century had a strong imprint provided by Antiquity. There are no exemplary models for conceiving contemporary universality. Studies of globalization have convincingly shown that this process is not a simplification of what was once complex. On the contrary, in globalization the success of the globalizing dynamic comes from its ability to mutate *in the particular* and return to the global by incorporating, or metabolizing, the particularity as a singularity of the globally valid.

I return to what I had begun to unfold in regard to the exhaustion of post-modernism. The theoretical and philosophical challenges of our day can no longer take refuge in the seemingly radical agenda of the proliferation of difference, nor can they be addressed naively now that the difference has been shown as incorporable to the logic of self-valorization (aesthetic, political, economic, geopolitical) of capital. Hence it is unfeasible to renounce universalism in order to define a site of resistance in the particular. It is important, rather, to rethink an opposition that may have been inadequately elucidated.

Once the universal and the particular are dialectized by globalization, the universal is no longer only unique, but multiple. In his discussion of universalism, from which I have adopted the notion of 'critical universalism', Etienne Balibar (2012) continues to analyse the pluralization of universalism as a distancing from self-reproduction of the same. Balibar defends the idea of the passage from a *universum* to a *multiversum*. However, this distance is obscured by the very singular materiality of global capitalism, where 'glocalities' are deployed. It is here that the supposedly radical alternatives of the partial or peculiar, devalued by assuming an old idea of social domination, are wrecked: they defend the particular as a space of resistance when that same particularity is no longer confronted with globality, but is instead produced for this and in this.

The universality of capital continues to provide the social fabric of theoretical, juridical, philosophical and conceptual universalisms, but modulates them according to the 'places' of the universal. In this sense, the critical promise of the 'place of culture' proposed by Homi Bhabha (1994) is 'put' and neutralized by the logic of capital, which makes the localization of culture an input of its valorization.

The universalism that for two centuries, from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, founded its emancipatory promises in the removal of the particular as a place of tradition, of hierarchies and continuities of the past, is today revealed as possible only as a product of the contradictions of the universal domination of capital. The critical universalism that I want to support in this text is not a regulative ideal nor the vindication of an essence mutilated by globalization, but the radicalization of some perspectives enabled by the same global domination of capital.

The particularity can not be, in this conceptual context, a defensive or evasive refuge, because it is crossed by a universality that incorporates into its own logic that which in previous centuries appeared as the greatest danger: the positivity, the irreducible. In globalization there are no positivities that threaten the capitalist empire. However, that empire is not completely self-regulated. The contradictions of globalization do not emerge from a collision between the universal

and the particular, but from the way of placing itself, in its various places, with its consequent specificities, in the materiality of situated universality.

I leave here the broader theoretical considerations to interpolate a transition towards what I propose to elaborate in the following section: the definition of a critical theory of globalization. The re-composition of the relation between universalism and particularism as a moment of globalization itself enables ‘negative’ interstices that emerge on the very contradictions of the tension inherent in the global capital and defined in its ‘places’. These places constitute ‘the subjects’ in the discussion that I have been carrying out.

A shortcoming of the notions presented so far is that they lack subjectivities, wills and traditions, knowledge and desires, feelings and politics, as well as emotional and cultural orientations. This introduces the possible places of the universalized in their contexts. Today it seems unworkable to rethink universalism without its ‘places’.

Situated receptions of postcolonial and decolonial “theories”

The efficacy of the places of universalism must be evaluated in different situations. Here I will concentrate on the places that are most familiar to me, relative to the ‘south’ and especially to that southern complex space called Latin America. First, however, I need to look at Indian postcolonial studies.

The fundamentally historical research identified with postcolonial studies had a Gramscian beginning, and soon incorporated Foucaultian and Derridian perspectives. The essence of their historiographical profile did not reside in these intellectual influences but in the conviction that materials from Indian colonial and postcolonial history required particular theoretical and methodological precaution. European historiographical schools were inadequate for problems arising in India after the Independence of 1947 and its historical background.

The postcolonial studies approach, as early as the early 1980s, prioritized the ‘subaltern classes’, and their experiences and resistances, both in the colonial period and in the nationalist state-building process of a nation. The peasantry, the communities and working class making were the issues of their historical accounts. A specificity of postcolonial studies lay in the theoretical sensitivity of their concepts and procedures, which called into question the seemingly universal historiographical traditions of the West.

By the early 1990s postcolonial studies became a 'postcolonial theory' that had repercussions even on the faculties of the universities of humanities and social sciences of the Global North. With this theoretical legitimacy (i.e., universal validation), it entered in the spectrum of Latin American conceptual options, to the point that a 'Latin American Subaltern Studies group' briefly emerged (Latin American Postcolonial Studies Group, 1993). After a foundational manifesto, these postcolonial studies vanished after producing some works, perhaps the most relevant of which is the *Peasant and nation* by Florence Mallon (1995).

The deferred translation effect of the subaltern studies came from the Latin American and Latin Americanist reinterpretations known today as the 'decolonial option', with authors such as Walter Dignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Edgardo Lander, Enrique Dussel and Catherine Walsh. Arturo Escobar (2002) organized the clearest exposition of the project of a critique of coloniality, one aspect of which is particularly relevant for what I am discussing here: the epistemological dimension.

The decolonial option calls for a history of thought, organized chronologically and politically, prior to that outlined by postcolonial studies. It argues that the paradigm of universal reason was constituted by a non-rational subject in America, from 1492: the local cultures reduced to the incomprehensible or in need of acculturation. The Western subject is then the product of a colonial operation that has lasted for centuries and somehow continues today. In fact, for Dignolo (2005) the decolonial option implies a rewriting of the Frankfurtian critical theory beyond its European-universalist cleavages.

The Bolivian intellectual Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who played a prominent role in the first diffusion of postcolonial studies in Latin America (Barragán and Rivera Cusicanqui, 1997), has objected to the definition of a new decolonial theory generated and legitimized from the academic places of the Global North.

The most interesting aspect of Rivera Cusicanqui's approach, which is connected with some precisions of the decolonial option (despite her political-academic objections to a university hegemony that speaks for subordinate subjects) is that it does not result in a particularistic variant. As in postcolonial studies, and with the conceptual emphasis of Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), it is by no means a question of opposing an uncontaminated essence to Eurocentric universalism. Rather, it is about negotiating the relevant aspects of universalism in its liberating strands (for example through the very 'Western' demand for 'rights', autonomous communities, women's agency, etc.), with local implementations that involve long and located traditions of social power building. The centrality of the Bolivian case referred to in citing the above-mentioned author is important because it not only exceeds the nationalist argument, but also puts into debate

the multiple levels, scales and temporalities of global places. In that sense, it anticipates issues that will have a huge presence in the coming.

For Rivera Cusicanqui, modernity is present in the same experience of the 'indigenous world', even if it is not within a vision of linear or teleological history. What happens to the universalism inherited from the French Revolution and the Enlightenment? Here I would like to cite some passages from Rivera Cusicanqui:

Today, the rhetoric of equality and citizenship becomes a caricature that conceals tacit political and cultural privileges, notions of common sense that make inconsistency tolerable and allow the reproducing of structures of Colonial oppression. (2010, p. 56–57).

In Rivera Cusicanqui's view, the Bolivian, liberal, populist, postmodern and even postcolonial elites share this rhetoric. From a broad multiculturalism, the notion of the indigenous people as 'minorities' is imposed, in an approach that domesticates and displaces the *pachakuti*, the radical change. Thus, the indigenous demands of 'the issues of modernity' (*las lides de la modernidad*) are excluded and they are confined as peculiarities and stereotypes close to the 'noble savage'. They are deprived of their status as majorities and of the possibility of achieving a 'state effect' (2010, p. 60), i.e., they continue to be 'represented'. They are subordinated as a 'multicultural adornment of neoliberalism' (2010, p. 59). Rivera Cusicanqui distinguishes between the 'modernizing discourse' of the elites and the variegated modernity of indigenous productive activities. Decolonial scholars then reiterate in the epistemological field the 'internal colonialism' that subalternizes indigenous knowledge and especially practices. It is a new colonization in the speaking and knowing by others that they are without voice and whose practices are not effective nor produce reality.

The Aymara term *ch'xi* means the mixed, variegated in the sense elaborated by the Marxist sociologist René Zavaleta Mercado. Rivera Cusicanqui clarifies that, "it raises the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not merge, but antagonize or complement each other" (2010, p. 70). It moves away from the masculine notions of identity that are hardly accessible to the *tejido* (fabric) that characterizes the attitude of the women of the communities. For Rivera Cusicanqui, the genre is introduced as a difference of the manifold within the variegated modernity to neutralise the temptation of identity. Rather than a counter- or anti-modernity, it would be a question of building a modernity of the *tejido*, "more organic and self-sufficient" than that driven by elites with Western categories.

Finally, Rivera Cusicanqui proposes another geopolitics of knowledge than that suggested by the decolonial option. She aims for a south-south dialogue in-

stead of the hierarchical and neocolonial north-south connection, of which the aforementioned option would be a masked form.

These debates, outlined here, suggest that contemporary elaborations are situated within an order of reasons where the pure difference has been displaced by a recomposition of the question for universalism in mixture with the particular. Once all access to an authentic and uncontaminated nucleus is no longer possible, the theoretical conceptions in the times of globalization are oriented towards what I call a critical universalism.

It is an analytic of the actuality underpinning the recognition of the mercantile framework and the complexity of the contradictions that inhabit it, where the values of the Enlightenment are not absolutely denied. The question is not about the stage of modernization at which a given national state or community finds itself, but about how they are settled in a concrete situation, with their histories, traditions and conflicts; universal themes such as citizenship, recognition or rights, become unthinkable without their places and subjects. A historiographical sensitivity, freed from the unifying and evolutionary trends of a nationalist historical narrative, is then required to grasp the genealogies of actuality.

Conclusion

With globalization, we witness the re-emergence of universalism, but not in terms of a restoration of its previous figures. Universalism returns as a problem, and in critical terms, as an aspect of the social domination that prevails in the new global order. Critical universalism is characterized not by the unlimited unity of a clear and distinct set of principles, but by the way in which global hegemony happens in local terms, overcoming an opposition between the universal and the particular.

This re-composition that I call a critical universalism does not have a general formula. It requires an insertion of incorporated local histories (not without antagonisms) into an indisputable integration of the globe. This integration is not that of an absolute spirit that 'posits' its particular features as moments of upward evolution, but of one that posits them as crises, tensions, projects and alternatives. These are not derived from an uncontaminated alterity, but from the very contradictions of the global process that must deal infinitely with the subjects, situations and impossibilities immanent to a globalization without command.

This means that viable universalism is not the product of an authentic meaning. It is the internal and troubled reaction of the possibilities stimulated by a blind and generalized universality that we call globalization; a universality

that is incomprehensible without a conception of the ‘new spirit of capitalism’. In any case, it arises as a set of reactions situated with respect to a dominant universal that finds its general explanatory key in the logic of capital—one which still finds in the mature approach of Marx its most convincing basic explanation.

Critical universalism is not then the mere external repulsion of a global domination structured in the flexible flows of capitalism, but the reverse of such flows. Or, more accurately, it is the set of dilemmas that the same domain generates in its contradictory dynamics. It opens the space for a reconsideration of emancipatory possibilities within a critical universalism that demands philosophical reflections, but also inquiries of the *tejidos*, in which local histories are linked to the new global history that dominates universally the contemporary experience.

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