

Universal, Not Just Global

The Ideology of Globalization Aims to Destroy Universalism

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The benevolent contemporary observer may be perplexed when forced to acknowledge that Western artists and scientists of all people welcome and foster the program of globalization with an almost ecstatic zeal. Why do they content themselves with the world merely as spatial continuum, despite the fact that globalization is explicitly opposed to any notion of the unity of all mankind? Economic interests clearly (and we must give them credit for being so straightforward and clear-cut) seek to prevent any assertion of the universal values of a world civilization. Instead, they favor value relativism or unbounded free enterprise. As the fundamentally guaranteed freedom artists and scientists enjoy has only existed since the former explicitly liberated themselves from the shackles of all cultural and religious control in the fourteenth century, their right to carry out their activities is per se bound up with the notion of transcultural universality.

Back to culture

Does celebrating globalization imply that the economy and culture, religion and traditional ways of living once again seek to gain a position of mastery over the arts and sciences? Is globalization the call “back to culture”, meaning the demand for individual freedom once again to be subjugated to the polytheist religion that is capitalism, sporadically supported by traditional religious foundations in the most diverse of cultural settings? Do the “cultural bodies triumph over the artistic bodies” once again with the ideology of globalism, as Gottfried Benn wrote? Did not Karl Marx suggest that capitalism had the power to destroy all cultural entities and does not the majority of Western globalization fanatics follow the cynical ideology that capitalism and pornography will finally destroy all cultural identities?

Uncreative destruction

This may be the case, but this destruction of all alterity will then also wipe out democracy, the rule of law, the welfare state, and civil liberties. It is precisely the weaponry that capital brings to bear against all forms of resistance, regardless of the motives behind this resistance, that makes capitalism overly self-contradictory as a regulating force. It may be “creative destruction,” but it destroys all creatures, even itself.

No believer in capital will go this far. He will tell himself that he can appease his god by offering up prayer and sacrifices, replacing the omnipotence of his god with the reasonable interests of those who believe in him.

Globalism may eliminate borders between territories, but it erects new, culturally defined walls. A universal civilization that stands above all cultural uniqueness is rejected in the name of purportedly protecting cultural identity.

Empires for the world civilization

Yet no one can deny that it is important to consider how the many cultural singularities ought to engage with each other despite not having any common ground. This is the transcultural entity that all must submit to if the assertion of cultural identities is not to lead to their elision in the pernicious race between religious convictions, customs, the use of power and the social order. Businessmen engaging in long-distance trade and diplomats have always known from experience just how important transcultural communication if you want to operate on a global level. The unity consolidating all cultures has been called world civilization since the days of the Roman Empire. Emperor Augustus and the Chinese Han dynasty simultaneously tried to secure this unity; in political terms it took the shape of an empire.

However, under the banner of globalization, the Chinese are today claiming that we do not need a world civilization. According to this view, finance capitalism, the exchange of commodities and the development of high-tech resources are possible without any concession being made to civil liberties or the constitutional division of powers, i.e., the rule of law and democracy. Universal values would thereby be unnecessary as traditional Chinese social ethics, such as submission to established representatives of power, subjugation to a collective and patriotic nationalism are ostensibly far more compatible with the spirit of capitalism than are any Western ideologies. In fact, so-called universal rights are, they suggest, truly just Europe-specific; and demanding that the rest of the world uphold values such as expressed in democracy, the rule of law, and civil liberties are just a reflection of the West again seeking global dominance as it did in imperial or colonial times.

Eurocentrism?

To repeat: It is very surprising that artists and scientists, intellectuals and politicians of all people so very often level the charge of eurocentrism against any kind of universalism. Do these people not know – or are they merely denying the fact – that bloody battles were fought in Europe over the centuries to ensure the validity of these universal rights, including democracy, the rule of law and the freedom of the

individual? How then can the modern notion of universality be derided as being Eurocentric if it was so fiercely contested, even fought over, in Europe and in the Western world in general, with arguments and battles at least as fierce as those taking place between Europe and the Third World today?

Indeed, the fight against eurocentrism spawns many a grotesque situation. Refugees from the Third World demand admission to Europe on the basis of those selfsame universal rights that they categorically deny as being eurocentric. Foreign copyright claims are refused in China with a mischievous smile, only Chinese rights to be asserted ever the more radically. All of this takes place under the label of a socialist-communist understanding of society that was imported from Europe precisely because it had universal significance.

This kind of mischief has always existed in Europe, and still exists here to this day, for example in its southern countries, where experience with opportunism and corruption among state authorities is taken to justify the idea that citizens may be corrupt and opportunistic themselves.

Vigilante justice – parallel justice

Few things are more essential to the Western understanding of justice than the prohibition of “a tooth for a tooth”, vendettas and parallel justice. Connected to this, those singing the praises of globalization elicit the greatest amazement when they imagine, for example, that even brutality and cruelty must be pardoned if these are based on a response to previous violence, exerted, for example, by colonialists or imperialists. This however is not another case of so-called Eurocentric presumptuousness. It has always been unbearable, here as it is anywhere else, when arbitrary murders, rape and raids are carried out as a response to previously suffered injustices of the same kind.

Do Europe’s intellectuals and politicians, artists and scientists want to close their eyes to the harm they have caused all universalism by supporting this ideology of the assertion of cultural identities? The majority of the 48 wars and civil wars currently being fought across the world are justified by the duty of everyone including minorities to enforce their cultural identity by all means and against all constraints. The fact that religious beliefs are often used as mere pretext is no argument against the efficacy religion has as a medium of cultural identity. The universal human right to freedom of worship is also cited here, despite at the same time being combated as an example of eurocentrism. Such strife over the legitimization of religions were still in full swing in Europe well into the mid-20th century, though the conflicts were becoming gradually less vehement. Even today, radical confrontation between Catholics and Protestants exists in Northern Ireland. We should not therefore let our

constitutional right to freedom of religion be destroyed by people who demonstrate historical ignorance or ostentatious indifference respectively by making accusations of eurocentrism.

FIFA Globalism

Is there a reliable reconstruction of the concept of globalism? Why did we abandon the focus on universality, previously taken for granted? It is logical to assume that in a “global” society, all the social entities that can be found on the globe must be accorded the same right to exist, regardless of the number of their members or their economic clout. The history of FIFA could be used to support this claim as it gives the smallest football associations with just a few thousand members the same right to vote as it gives associations with millions of members. We have recently learnt the reason behind this anti-democratic curiosity: It makes the weaker associations susceptible to corruption if they want to flourish and benefit economically, as they cannot achieve their desired independence with their own resources alone.

We are seeing similar acrobatics in reasoning in the EU, when very different justifications have to be touted to elect a single Member of European Parliament (MEP). But giving an equal weight to these disparate elements is supposedly not happening out of opportunism and a hope for being able to abuse possibilities for corruption. Rather, the integration of all into a single system is intended to force “change through rapprochement.” Such change, along with trade between all parties, would make wars impossible, as war would hurt the interests of all those trading with each other – as was the line of argument in the summer of 1914.

Change through rapprochement?

Change through rapprochement would by no means imply that the lesser-evolved regime would have to adapt to the superior one in every case. In order not to refer only to German evidence, let us look at France in this respect. In France, the culture minister is currently adapting of the French school curriculum to the home countries of migrants, with the argument that migrant children find it harder to adjust to French notions of education than the French-born students would find adjusting to North African ones.

This is the logic of globalization carried to the extreme, reaching an apex in the subtle art of argumentation. Of all the universal educational goals, it is those goals based on the achievements of the French Revolution in particular, that would, if nothing else, help form the migrants’ self-confidence in their new home and yet these of all things are being altered. The minister thinks that migrants are under no obligation to learn about European history, or familiarize themselves with the events

that ensued in the fight for universal rights. She justifies this with the observation that in a global world, all “stories / narratives” are of equal value. Further, the minister argues that in any case, the European school systems have led to all educational canons that may have previously existed having been quashed. Is this not true, and does she not have the right to make these changes? Surely. But we cannot hold migrants and refugees, irrespective of their religious or cultural backgrounds, to account, as until a short while ago, they had no influence on the structure of school and university curricula, educational canons or the lifestyles of the indigenous Europeans whatsoever.

European satanisms

The claim that uniform global technical standards, for example in road or air transport and medicine, will automatically guarantee the supremacy of the world civilization over local cultures has been lastingly disproven by the 9/11 pilots. The “devils of Western ideology” certainly can be taunted by religious men, who resort to Western weapon technology to exterminate European Satans. In short, the concept of “change through rapprochement” has proven counter-productive in the political arena. A commitment to adherence to the highest standards of civilization is not even guaranteed by the policies passed in the Western world. Even as regards European global market leaders, the precepts of rationality, of a commitment to functionality, design quality, and morals are fairly dire. Those sleeping in hotel beds on a regular basis bemoan the fact that even simple products like reading lamps hardly ever fulfill their function. Overriding contexts dictating rational action, such as those related to sustainability, are often only paid lip service. The morally imperative introduction of consumer liability, corresponding to the manufacturer’s liability already in place, is yet to be implemented. And the question as to whether contemporary manufacturers or consumers have any idea what a commitment to design quality implies can be answered with a resounding No. Not even in their grandest speeches do urban planners and arts educators mention the formative virtue of design and its ability to shape human behavior. Instead, they follow the general demand that everyone have a license to do his or her own thing without being committed to accountability in any way.

Unity through difference

In order for these – admittedly pointed – remarks not to be dismissed as an arbitrary political opinion, let me quickly sketch the way the concept “universalism” has evolved and the scholarly arguments given, specifically as regards my own line of work, namely aesthetics and art history. Johann Joachim Winckelmann casually

mentions his method for justifying universality in the second edition of his “History of Ancient Art,” published in 1769. First, ancient artifacts from the most diverse of cultural environments are brought together in the same place. The archeologists then try to create relational structures between the objects: hypothetical ones at first, then according to the empirical evidence of their historical discriminability. In doing so, they utilize every minor artifact in order to determine and justify the positions of the evidently more substantial, elaborate, and iconographically charged objects. This in turn means that any alleged or purported supremacy or dominance that one culture may have cannot then erase or suppress the subordinate culture and render it meaningless. The order established by the archeologists or art historians is then transferred into designations according to eras or entire historical lines of development. This means that the scientists achieve a unity between the artifacts by means of their differences. Scholarly work becomes an exemplary form of a transcultural approach to civilization. It is the very difference between the artifacts of art and culture that leads to a unity, which can in turn serve to distinguish their variation. This in turn implies thinking universally, an act that is the very antithesis to the globalism of capitalism, which works towards creating unity from plurality. The American motto of the melting pot *e pluribus unum* is fantastic testimony to this. By acknowledging the differences between cultures and their artifacts (art in the sense of today’s art did not exist in the all-encompassing and formative cultures of pre-Modern times), the universalist ideal aims to counter the mere spatial standardization of the world in globalism. Universalism hereby demonstrates unity as a psychological necessity – not as an arbitrary indicator of philanthropy: “Per differentiae ad unum,” meaning that the characterization of differences employing uniform criteria necessarily results in unity as a psychological consequence of differentiation. Those wanting to make a sensible call for cultural identity must also allow the criteria for distinction to be applied to those they want to distinguish themselves from. This in turn leads to the realization that the criteria for distinction cannot be exclusively claimed for one culture. This makes the acceptance of universal unity based on meaningfully justified differences binding to all who claim difference from others for themselves. And this is precisely what it means to be a member of a civilization. Birth and enculturation undeniably bind every human being to a particular culture, religion, set of customs, tradition, language, and so on. If he wants to assert these allegiances against others he must inevitably concede that those others, who have been shaped by different cultures, exercise the same right. If he aims to bring the other into subjection by employing violence, he must grant the other the right to do the same. However, under the circumstances we face today with regards to the objective potency of instruments of subjugation, this is accompanied

by a high risk of being destroyed oneself. Individual martyrs may find short-lived satisfaction here, but collectives will hardly benefit from viewing their own demise as a truly redemptive resurrection.

In a global context, this absurdity may yet evolve some suggestive potency as the fight of all against all in a capitalist rivalry towards obliteration. But civilians of universal self-determination will see this as mere foolishness dressed up as ideology or religion. Must we assume that “being dumb and employed” is the one-size-fits-all answer for all those believers in capitalism without capital? After all, we have even gotten used to belief without a deity. FIFA and its beneficiaries furnish the mass-ecstasies they produce with precisely this credibility. Never and in no mode of behavior has this very open system of opportunism and corruption been able to limit the audience’s desire to be thrilled even for a moment. The less god-like hubris is needed from functionaries and capitalists, the greater the miracle of business success.

Translated from the German by Jeremy Gaines.