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Book Review

Universality and Identity Politics

Todd McGowan
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Review by Brett Nicholls

Readers outside the American political and cultural milieu tend to be perplexed about the right and left spatial metaphor at work in American political discourse. This is because the differences between right and left seem to overlap. In this context, the problem of leftness or rightness seems to revolve around competing versions of how friendly or tolerable capitalism can be without losing touch with the nostalgic moralism that undergirds the American political imaginary. Identity is a central concern here; it produces a politics that demands either identities be asserted and recognised as a part of the (friendly) capitalist society or protected against threats to particular moral ideals.

Todd McGowan's *Universality and Identity Politics* tackles this political scene head-on. The book clarifies how right and left overlap despite seeming differences, and explains how this existing political topography stifles an actual leftist, emancipatory politics (which characterises seemingly progressive politics such as the diversity and colour blind movements) or ignores it when it does arise (as in Christianity, Black Lives Matter, and the disaster film). The main argument is that left and right politics share the same epistemological underpinning. They merely contest

or assert particulars, such as a particular identity, rather than open up to the universal and its emancipatory potential. While the book doesn't spend any time defining the particular, it goes to great lengths to outline a heterodox yet persuasive understanding of the universal. If the universal is conventionally understood as the colonial imposition of Western value and knowledge systems upon the other, or the expansive militarist aims of the Nazis, or the aim of Stalin's total control, for McGowan the universal has no content; it emerges as an absence or lack. The universal appears in what doesn't belong and, as a consequence, undoes particularisms. Particularisms such as identity cannot hold because in a capitalist context, in which capitalism trades upon identity as the site of consumption, openness to the universal disrupts this ideological formation. In this view, the point of political struggle is to escape the identity the subject is born into, to forge a more emancipatory society. As Fanon reveals, the particular is the problem to be overcome rather than the object that must be protected or recognised. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement, for McGowan, "focuses upon race not for its own sake or to create a sense of racial identity but because race is the site of inequality" (183). BLM sparks the universal because it reveals those who don't belong. Political solidarity ought to be built around such unbelonging, a shared sense of lack. The goal is not to include more and more identities in an ever expanding totality. It is to be open to the expansion of non-belonging itself. Crucially, there are no enemies in the Schmittian sense that act as a constitutive outside to galvanise the struggle. Solidarity is forged in non-belonging, and works by opening up rather than a consolidation that overcomes differences. In Hegelian terms, the universal is a negation of negation and as such becomes the positive basis for political solidarity.

This sense of the universal goes against the grain of conventional understandings of the term, as in say human rights, where the universal is a purely positive term that refers to the values or needs that all humans share in common. It is precisely this positive sense of the universal that is attacked by philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Adorno, Agamben, Butler, and Laclau, among others. This is where McGowan stakes a claim. For McGowan, the universalism that these philosophers attack – of the colonialists, Nazis and Stalinists – is false universalism. As McGowan is at pains to demonstrate, these so-called universalisms are really forms of particularism (with grandiose aims) that work by imposing a particular identity upon the other. No lack to be seen here. The book claims that this philosophy, produced as it is in the aftermath of Nazism and Stalinism, is rightly concerned with the terror and its effects, etc., but, ultimately, has misunderstood what the real universalism actually entail. In the view of Foucault, for example, the positive universal imposes itself upon the particular. This means to defeat it, one

must assert the particular. Indeed, Foucault's analysis of the microphysics of power, in which particular sites of power are loci of struggle, bears this out (though I do think it more apt to read Foucault in terms of the epistemological tradition of Canguilhem). The upshot is that the universal is either ignored or erroneously rejected. We might say the baby is thrown out with the bath water. The result is that political philosophy that champions the particular is conservatism in disguise. It fails to escape the aforementioned epistemological framing of the political, just like the American political landscape, as a problem of particularities.

McGowan's position is made apparent in his reading of some of the stalwarts of contemporary social theory. I think, though, that it is this point we encounter important questions for this position on the universal as lack. Adorno, for McGowan, misreads Nazism as a universalizing modern machine. He is charged with popularizing the holocaust as industrialized annihilation, and mythologizing *Auschwitz* as the logical consequence of modernity. The upshot is that the responsibility for these horrors is displaced away from the particularities of German modernity. In other words, Adorno takes particularity for the universal. This is no more evident than in Adorno's much cited (universal) claim, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric". We have to wonder, though, if Adorno emphasizes the supremacy of the universal in such a straightforward way. It isn't clear, for example, that Adorno's claim is that the particular is merely subordinate to the universal and therefore the particular is the site for political struggle. The popular remark can be read: to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, but not impossible. At any rate, Adorno retracted the claim in *Negative Dialectics*, stating "Perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; hence it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems" (2004, 362). The subject of this latter retraction is, of course, Adorno himself. The quote McGowan reads as a dictum mistaking the particular for the universal, is more aptly read as Adorno's own grappling as a result of the lucky accident of him having escaped Nazi Germany. Adorno's position is more complex than McGowan allows. His dialectic of enlightenment work and non-identity thinking, for example, aim to rescue the project of enlightenment from the grip of positivism. The intellectual "villains" of universalism, as McGowan would have it, have wider developments in their sights, namely developments in science and technology, and the mechanisms through which positivism becomes a tool for capitalism. In Adorno's work, the political problem hinges around the contradictory relationship between the particular and universal. Both are subject to critique. Adorno understood Nazism as an attack upon universal freedom. We might add, he defines freedom negatively as that which arises in the face of unfreedom (2006). The upshot of this position is not antithetical to

McGowan's. For Adorno, a truly transformative collective praxis emerges spontaneously rather than in terms of a predetermined vision of an inclusive future. At any rate, the terms of the contradiction between the particular and universal are present in McGowan – the universal alienates the particular – but this relation is left untheorized.

Laclau's work also raises questions. McGowan reads Laclau as one of the villains. The problem here is that Laclau attempts to locate the universal in the particular and looks for hegemonic processes that might raise the particular to the universal level. As he puts it in *Emancipations*, we should note, Laclau's position is not that this universal would serve as an inclusive schema for all. It is that it would transform the particular or alienate the particular to use McGowan's term. The disagreement between McGowan and Laclau hinges around where the universal might be located. For McGowan, the universal has no place; it is an absence. It makes no difference that universals such as freedom, equality, solidarity etc., first emerge in the context of the French revolution. The key point is these Universals do not belong to the French and so travel seamlessly to the Haitian revolution and beyond. Universality travels and connects with particular struggles. But it is precisely this point of connection that Laclau raises. The question *Universality and Identity Politics* leaves us with is how is the universal evoked and embraced? For Laclau, though from a different direction, the concept of hegemony does this work. McGowan offers no concept in its place. The universal is discovered. While the particularizing busting power of the universal, as McGowan conceives it, can be spotted in particular struggles and serves as a good defence against conservative critiques, as well as helping explain how seemingly progressive movements secretly harbour conservatism, the problem remains to theorize the political relationship between the particular and universal.

References

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