*On Universals: Constructing and Deconstructing Community* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020; translated by Joshua David Jordan)

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Etienne Balibar’s *On Universals* rigorously engages in the philosophical and political exigencies of the universal, aiming neither to restore nor amend universality but, instead, to clarify the meaning and value of universalism while analyzing universalism’s relationship to equality, democracy and the institution. However, intra-linguistic and inter-linguistic translations demonstrate that the name “equality” is never equivocal within democratic constituencies. Similarly, universalism, which scaffolds “equality,” is also never equivocal. In navigating this aporia, Balibar’s project radically pluralizes universality.

Balibar’s first chapter, “Racism, Sexism, Universalism: A Reply to Joan Scott and Judith Butler” recalls his "Racism as Universalism" (1994), where he makes the case that universalism and racism are determinate contraries, with one affecting the other “from the inside” (2020: 1). A critical feature with the humanist model of anthropological universalism is how universality underpins racist/sexist discourses. That is, an element of discrimination and generic exclusion is involved in the constitution of the general idea of the human that identifies fundamental values, investing them with normative functionalities. In "Ambiguous Universality" (2002), Balibar applies Lacan’s analytical schema to illuminate the logic of universality qua domination, with universality galvanizing majority vs. minority status. “Real universality” is always conditioned by “fictive universality,” the constitution of ethical norms through which identity is recognized and internalized, and “ideal/symbolic universality,” where community values are challenged in name of class struggle. Emancipatory projects appeal to infinite negativity, giving universalism its capacity for political subversion by way of a historical positive, problematizing the relationship between universal and community, identity and difference.

In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), Judith Butler takes issue with Balibar’s argument that racism is present at the core of current notions of universality and at the same time his attempt to reconcile universality with the normative-political use of the universal. For Butler one cannot assume consensus about universalist values like equality and we have to challenge universality's normative naturalization of differences. Butler takes Balibar to task for offering a picture of *universality that cannot be established without exclusion* and necessarily contradicting itself (4). Joan Scott’s *Only Paradoxes to Offer* (1996) engages with a “pluriversalist” universalism, bringing Balibar's conception of paradoxical class and ideal universality to task. The antagonism that both Butler and Scott identify is the *very condition of politics*, which pushes us to look for emancipation beyond any instituted given. In turn, what inscribes contradictions of the universal is not only on the side of institutional effects but the institution's *conditions of possibility*. For Scott, Balibar’s “paradoxical class” and “ideal universality” seek to transform community instead of integrating minorities into a given community of citizens. Scott has Balibar say that *every exclusion* is open to the challengeposed by those who turn that exclusion's principles against it (4). Balibar sees these retorts as making pellucid that universalism represents a site of struggle against the structural domination and violence to which it invariably leads. Accordingly, Balibar seeks to deracinate instrumental universalism from conceptual universalism (i.e., universalism in-itself).

For Balibar, the institution uniquely constitutes the essential mediation between individuals and historical collectivities, determining developments of subjectivity (8). Balibar agrees with Foucault that modernity gradually deprives sovereignty of political and social privilege in favor of more institutional mechanisms of power—mechanisms of discipline, governmentality, and control. However, Balibar also adds that modernity has not deprived the institutional function of the universal, as power structures putatively “universalist.” The historical progression and emancipatory removal of constraints and discrimination has merely led to the emergence of new constraints and new forms of discrimination.

Still further, for Balibar the universal is established, realized, and acknowledged in history to the extent that it becomes the ideal and the norm of the community, such that there is an identity-relation in which individuals relate to themselves. This logic involves construction of identity and always has potential to lead to the exclusion of an “otherized” remainder (12). The paradoxes of universality and universalist principles oscillate between subjective and homogeneous belonging. Balibar does not seek a pure, egalitarian universality but offers a more pessimistic scenography: that universality’s contradictions originate in the institutive process itself. This does not mean that actualizations of universality’s paradox, such as violence, are immutable—rather than naturalizing the *content* of the universal, Balibar argues that basic *forms* of discrimination such as racism and sexism will not disappear but will assume *new forms* and, thus, prompt new emancipatory struggles.

The second chapter of the book, “Constructions and Deconstructions of the Universal,” is based on a lecture concerning the notion of conflictual universality from Hegel through Derrida. To ground his talk of forms and emancipatory struggle qua universality, Balibar here offers his interpretation of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*. According to Balibar’s reading, Hegel conceives of the universal as processually proceeding “by the internalization of its opposites within the concept itself, opposites that are thereby transformed into mediations of its own development until, from the dialectic, a *concrete figure of the universal* emerges." (20) Balibar’s reading underscores that to think the universal as such we must recognize the particulars that participate in it, with these particulars playing a determining and contradictory role. Given this rendering of Hegel, readers may find many commonalities between Balibar’s Hegel and the Dialetheist reading of Hegel forwarded by Graham Priest, Elena Ficara, and Gregory Moss, amongst others. This is not to suggest that Balibar espouses a genuinely Dialetheist reading of Hegel proper, but simply to say that, by Balibar’s own lights, every universal we *think* fails to be a true universal, and contradictions do not “explode” into indeterminacy. Instead, contradictions are productive, insofar as every contradiction in the self-differentiating process produces different concepts of different types. But rather than settle in theorizing contradiction qua Hegel’s modal metaphysics, as many Dialetheist interpreters of Hegel do, Balibar prods productive contradiction into the terrain of universality via social institutions and practices. Thus, Balibar’s interest is in contradiction qua conditions of possibility as they pertain to the dialectical processes of “progress, education, and revolution” (20), as well as the institutions that relate to them. In order to deepen how these processes and their conditions of possibility are grounded in contradiction, Balibar underscores Derrida as a necessary supplementary point of reference.

Indeed, Balibar thinks that deconstruction is already implicit in the Hegelian universal—after all, the Hegelian universal, though its self-referential activity, creates its own particulars or differentiations, and thus Hegel’s universal is the *power* of self-particularization. But because the particular is universality in a differentiated form, the power of self-particularization is equipollent to the power of self-differentiation, where the latter speaks to the way that universality acts on/refers to itself. Balibar here strategically culls Derrida to proffer a somewhat critical appraisal of the Hegelian universal, noting that, for Derrida, the process of universality is doomed to lose control of its own idea—deconstruction thinks the antithesis of the universal. Where Hegel's discovery of the infinite designates the absolute as a subversion of representation, sublating and naming the nonrepresentable element of experience that prevents the world from totalizing itself in any one figure or moment, Derrida's deconstruction of the universal as metaphysical essence thus instates a kind of construction of universality without the hyperbolic supersession of particulars. Balibar sets up this critical dialectic between Hegel and Derrida, for he hopes to theorize the limits of thought, and apply this to the conception of the universal. This is a broadly successful operation, and one which furthers the insights of those aforementioned Dialetheist, as it pushes contradiction into the terrain of political thinking.

At the same time, Balibar is interested in how those aforementioned particular are brought to the fore by different points of view within a universal, with the universal emerging as a force. As a “force,” the universal cannot retain the stability of finite representation but must seek out totality, pursuing the inclusion of all determinations from a certain point of view until it falls back into the absolutization of a partial concept. It is not that discourses of the universal, once expressed, fall into the material world or into the field of empirical reality that deprives it from original purity. For Balibar, Hegel demonstrates that discourses of the universal do not exist prior to their enunciation and coincide with it, always inscribed in a context. In confronting the concept of universality, Balibar claims there are pluralist *universalisms*, which attempt to realize, appropriate, or express the singular universal.

To think through how the universal is thought, and how thinking the universal also effects it, Balibar culls Marx. Balibar finds an alternate, and in some sense more politically productive reading of the universal in Marx’s treatment of ideology, for “[r]ather than reducing the universal to the particular, it elevates the particular to the universal” (22). That is, Marxism makes “ideology” equipollent with domination, such that a “dominant ideology” must be understood via *intensive modalities* (power, control, sovereignty) and *extensive modalities* (that which prevails everywhere without exceptions Thinking *intensive universalism*, Balibar often references Michael Walzer’s "covering-law universalism," which brings together all claims to rights under one and the same law where all experiences of emancipation are collected under the same narrative. At the same time, Walzer’s "reiterative universalism” produces the immanent principle of differentiation—the virtual capacity of moral values and definitions of right to contest and communicate with one another in a process of mutual recognition. This corresponds to Balibar's *extensive universalism*, which has to do with territory or imperium. *Intensive universality* engages with institutional foundations and normative orientations while *extensive universality* is universalism-as-ideology, sprawling everywhere, exacting control, and requiring obedience in constituting the entire field of experience—including the perception of objects and representations of the world. This recalls Hegel's conception that the universal cannot be expressed in the form of a *universalist discourse* without being appropriated and becoming a means of appropriation (of thought, language, life itself) by the subjects that make themselves agents of this discourse.

Moving from Hegel to Marx vide Althusser, Balibar engages with dominant ideology as nothing other than the *enunciation of the universal*, which the dominant class constructs just as much as the dominant class is constructed by it. *A class that becomes dominant is a class whose domination is* “*universalized*," *such that it is recognized by the dominated themselves*. Thus unspools another paradox, this time tethered to the reciprocal relation between ideology as the universalist discourse of human rights and the logic of the market based on possessive individualism (32). In turn, *the struggle of the dominated*, *as expressed in the language of the universal*, *is not only not incompatible with domination but in a sense constitutes its condition of possibility, as this struggle forces the dominant class to universalize its own language to represent collective social interests*. Balibar reads the Hegelian dialectic of "sense certainty" as proffering a formal description of an elementary ideological effect, which enables the subject to inhabit the universal and to oscillate between the appropriation of the world and the expropriation of the self in the name of the universal. The subject is summoned to submit to the law and, consequently, impelled to transgression—*the universal expresses itself with an injunction*.

Yet Balibar also recognizes that while the universal may particularize itself in dominant ideologies, this is by no means some static and even-handed affair: although it transpires in both thinking and language, one finds the universal taking a particular form in the speech-acts that communicate it. Thus, Balibar moves on to carefully considers the enunciation of the universal. According to Balibar, in stating the universal, one irremediably finds themselves in particularity. Thus, the very idea of an *absolute enunciation*, detached from its determinations, is a contradiction. Nevertheless, this is a *productive contradiction*: the universal does not exist *prior to* or *beyond* its enunciations—it is their aim and effect. The typical form of particularization or determination of the universal is conflict—the battle of symmetrical and incompatible universalisms (47). As it relates to the problem of universality in its relationship to domination and emancipation, Marx identifies class struggle and Freud terms this "culture,” where the repression of drives is necessary for community's construction. Balibar follows both emancipation and the remainder of the unconscious to show that there must be something beneath the economic mechanisms of exploitation that explains the expropriation of ideology of the dominated by the dominant themselves.

The third chapter , “*Sub Specie Universitatis*: Speaking the Universal in Philosophy”, continues where the last chapter left off—thinking through how the universal qua communication, broadly understood. Balibar highlights three strategies to deal with “real universalization” and its logic:

1. *Spinozist-Wittgensteinian disjunctive strategy*: *Theoretical universalism* deals with representation/description while *practical universalism* speaks a language of norms and uses. Spinoza's *theoretical universal* is the infinite determinist chain of causal/productive relations between things (including ideas) which bars contingency. In Wittgenstein’s *practical universalism*, the general form of the truth-function makes the truth of a proposition, or its correspondence with reality, depend on truth of other subordinate propositions. Thus, we still inhabit the same “immanent” world in two contradictory modalities, albeit both universalist (66).
2. *Hegelian-Marxist strategy*: Hegel shows that stating the universal asserts *one universality* against *another*, depriving the latter of its own universality in denying that it can be universalized. Hegel presents *universalities in conflict and with competing interests*, struggling to establish their domination. For Hegel, this competition amounts to life and spirit and, for Marx, as social production. The conflictual character of universality is a criterion that allows us to identify *universalisms* by exposing their ability to represent within themselves their “other” as the negative element necessary (e.g., the adversary, enemy, or object/subject of superstition) for the development/attainment of self-consciousness. Hegel’s notion(s) of "consciousness" and "antagonism" (or conflictual recognition) are taken up by Marx's conception of ideology and ideological domination. Navigating through both thinkers, we obtain an understanding of universality in the realm of ideas or representations, which here includes actions and practices. The sole exception is the logic of *domination*, where certain ideas and representations are suppressed and relegated and to minority status, pushed to the status of the *excluded particular*. With this strategy, not only do universality and hegemony become equivalent but, also, we see that conflict exists where there is not only self-affirmation of the universal but where conflict is always asymmetrical (74).
3. *Quinean-Benjaminian translation:* Balibar recalls W.V.O. Quine's doctrine of the indeterminacy of translation developed in *Word and Object* (1960). Quine develops an ontic position of “semantic ascent” where shared meaning in translation can result solely from shared learning processes-cum-ontological background assumptions and extensional equivalence. According to Balibar, Quine’s axiomatic device carries the discussion of recognition into a domain where two parties with foreign conceptual schemas agree on objects (viz., words) and on the main terms concerning them. For Balibar, Quine's cognitive concept of radical translation denies semantic universality, even if such universality is limited to the logico-scientific domain. Balibar relates Quine’s radical translation to Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” (1923), which forwards a purely poetic concept of translation and extends the aesthetic effect produced by linguistic creation from its original language into another. According to Balibar, the best we can do when it comes to translation is have rough sameness of meaning, where equivalence is *extensional equivalence* (i.e., for sentences, sameness of truth value); Balibar notes that this problem is transposable for Benjamin, as “meaning” is converted into a “state of affairs.” Nevertheless, despite the opposition that Balibar draws out, he also thinks synthesizes the lessons of both approaches, such that “the historical character of the relationship between language as totality or system, on the one hand, and the community as the horizon of mutual understanding (or intercomprehension, recognition through dialogue), on the other, exemplifies the fact that the relationship is always a *political reality*” (79). As such, speak of the *universal as translation* means to translate anew.

In the fourth chapter, “On Universalism: In Dialogue with Alain Badiou,” Balibar responds to Badiou’s work on universal, universality, and universalism. Balibar notes that, for Badiou, there exists a “universalism of equality” that erases genealogical, anthropological, and social differences and which is opposed to the “false universalism” of the world market and its representation. Badiou’s “false universalism” pushes Balibar's "extensive universalism" to the extreme, making it an ontological product (88). As delineated in *Being and Event* (1988), the philosophical recognition of the “affirmative act” that conditions the constitution of the “subject of truth” requires an inaugural “meta-ontological decision” by virtue of which philosophy historically intervenes in the arcana of “the One” and “the multiple.” Badiou thus identifies being with “inconsistent multiplicity,” ascribing set-theoretical mathematics with being’s inherent expression.

Drawing from Badiou’s rendering of universalism, Balibar examines the intrinsic ambivalence of the institution of the universal, the universal-as-truth. Balibar delineates once again that contradiction is woven into the definition of universal itself. Furthermore, certain forms of universality derive their power not from absolute authority of the institutions in which they are embodied but from their capacity to be continuously challenged on the basis of their own principles or discourses. Recall how “equaliberty” expounds the permanent tension between concepts of freedom and equality, canalized by the thought that discrimination goes hand-in-hand with subjection/tyranny and vice versa. “Equaliberty”, as Balibar theorizes it, is the *archi-institution*, i.e., the institution that precedes and conditions all others, referring to the preeminent right to have rights where individuals and groups do not receive them from an external sovereign power or transcendent revelation. As such, Balibar makes the case that *civic universality exists as an effort, a conatus*. Notably, for Balibar violence is inherent in the institution of the universal—violence is both among universality’s conditions of possibility and a condition of its self-destruction (93).

“A New Quarrel” is the final chapter of *On Universals*, and sets the stage for a “quarrel” amongst heterogenous concepts. Balibar begins by carving three related heterogenous terms: *the universal* (which is putatively singular), *universality* (whereby there is no universality in-itself), and *universalisms* (decidedly plural, thrown into performative contradiction). Having demarcated this tripartite mold, Balibar consults three parallel aporias.

First is the *aporia of multiplicity of the world*, or *universe-as-multiversum*. This aporia underscores that the construction of any concept of the universal and the formulation of universalist discourse always have a cosmological dimension. In molding a constructed transcendental equality inhabited by singular, interchangeable subjects, this multiplicity constitutes the center of socio-political order—anthropological differences are relegated to the empirical realm of particularisms but also understood as, “by law” contingent or nonexistent (107). Second is the *aporia* of *association between the common* *and universality*: Balibar here takes up Hegel’s problematic of recognition and commonality as part of an endless succession of displacements between communitarian closure—which permits mutual recognition through institutions of rights/duties common to all participants who in turn constitute sovereign power—and universal openness—which requires reconciliation with the "other". Lastly is the *aporia of co-citizenship*, the polis that is not yet constructed but is “to come.” Citizenship in this polis-to-come implies both heterogeneity and the political participation of those foreign to the community.

Taken together, Balibar’s project eruditely shows universality's double bind as linked to subjectivity and how subjects become common or foreign, institutionally codified through assigned identities. Balibar’s book is a truly illuminating demonstration of social and political philosophy, which successfully theorizes a conception of commonality that belongs to all anthropological differences yet, simultaneously, is the existence of a double bind that makes certain differences at once *indissoluble*—"we *will never be able to think* that such differences do not empirically exist”—and *indefinable* (98). This double bind affects not only social order but movements of resistance, insurrection, and emancipation, for violence lies both in the denegation of differences and in their absolutization. Balibar's hypothesis is thus that the most adequate approximate model of a *multiversum*, a world that makes room for difference, and is furnished by the linguistic multiplicity of humanity⁠. This multiplicity is not given but is transformed by uneven acts of translation and ineluctable relations of domination, a dialectical process by which languages mutually develop or transform one another. But Balibar does not simply naturalize inequality and regress into nihilistic annals. Rather, Balibar’s solution is to reverse the meanings of universality’s paradox, turning a "contradiction and a negative property of speaking beings into a method for constructing the universal and for moving beyond the particular" (119).

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