A New Querelle of Universals

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ABSTRACT: We are witnessing and participating in a new “Querelle of Universals” which has indissoluble political and philosophical characters. It ranges from the incorporation of anthropological differences (of gender-sex, race-culture, normality and abnormality, etc.) into the very definition of the “human” to the contemporary attempts at rethinking the diversity of histories within mankind as a multiverse of translations rather than a failed unity. The essay discusses a series of typical aporias that are relevant to this querelle and proposes a concept of subjectivity which elaborates their productivity.

KEY WORDS: universality, community, anthropological difference, translation, unity, multiverse

In this very moment, a new “Querelle of Universals” is keeping philosophers busy, hence philosophy itself, in a broad sense, which of course also overlaps with many other disciplines in the Humanities. To some extent, it is continuing the “Querelle de l’humanisme” or Humanist Controversy that divided philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s, but it also forces one to rethink its very terms and what was at stake. What is at stake now is not only whether one supports or rejects “Universalism”: it is primarily to disentangle the equivocality of the name “universal,” and more decisively to articulate in the proper manner neighboring but heterogeneous concepts such as universal, universality, and universalities in the plural, and universalism (certainly also to be put in the plural, despite the semantic oddity). Paraphrasing Kant, I will say that my intention tonight is not to discuss this issue in a “scholastic” manner (proposing conceptual divisions and definitions) but in a “cosmic” or popular manner, for which I will seek guiding threads in various moments of my own encounter of the paradoxes that I progressively discovered to be involved in every philosophical use of such concepts.

I will submit three sketches. First, I want to locate some variations of the idea of the universal in the field of philosophical anthropology. To me this has become
where different regions or dimensions of philosophical reflection discursively overdetermine each other. I understand philosophical anthropology primarily as a discourse about the historical differentiations of the “human,” and the problem they represent for (human) subjects. In a second moment, I will try to organize the aporias which, I submit, affect our attempts at articulating the universal and its “doubles,” around three major questions: the aporia of the multiplicity of the world, the aporia of the distinction between the common and the universal (which in German bear a single name: das Allgemeine), and the aporia of the transformation of citizenship into co-citizenship. All this will remain very schematic of course. Finally, I will sketch some reasons which can lead us to consider the multiplicity of idioms as it is experienced in the practice of translation as a model for the idea—or ideal—of a “universality of differences,” as advocated by several contemporary philosophers—which of course also means that it illustrates the recurrent paradoxes that I am trying to indicate.

**Anthropological Differences and Human Subjectivity**

What do I call an “anthropological difference”? In the use I made of this expression in recent essays, this doesn’t name any diversity that is observable among humans, or that can become objectified by social sciences, but only certain specific differences, which, I believe, play a crucial role in the governmentality of the humans (to put it in Foucauldian terms), therefore their unequal access to citizenship. They share a formal characteristic, which we will constantly retrieve as a source of theoretical antinomies, and practical double binds: they must be at the same time inescapable (or impossible to avoid), and indeterminate (or impossible to locate), like “internal borders” that would be constantly shifting. In the past, I discussed in particular three of them: the difference of normality and abnormality, the racial and cultural difference, and the sexual difference (which combines gender variation and sexual orientation). This is an empirical enumeration, dictated by considerations of opportunity as much as logical exemplarity. It is certainly incomplete, and also it is problematic in terms of the heterogeneity of the examples—but in fact this is part of the discussion, which ideally should also address the fact that, subjectively and institutionally, the cases are never independent from one another. They permanently intersect. Borrowing the terminology that has been recently advocated, I am tempted to speak of the intersectionality of differences.

My first point is that if such differences are impossible to dissolve and impossible to locate, or “identify,” they are in fact continuously subjected to violent procedures of erasure and/or objectification and localization. This relationship to violence is intrinsic to their characterization. There is violence (overt or covert) in our trying to handle them and make them references, or foundations, for the institution of social relations, which are also inevitably challenged. The
imaginary experience of suppressing anthropological differences (which can sometimes become a “real” attempt) is very instructive: to decide that there is no sexual difference, or no difference between normal, healthy physical or psychic states, and pathological states in given environmental conditions, or no ethnic, cultural or racial differences (if only perceived, or constructed as such), is absurd and potentially violent. This means that it is nonsense to ignore the differences or unify what they tend to oppose. But it is equally, if not more violent to decide where the boundary is located, or characterize in absolute terms the polar opposites, and use such characterization to isolate classes of human beings (in the logical sense)—although this is not only frequent, but clearly essential to the working of our societies. This is true for the feminine and the masculine, a polarity structurally inscribed in the unconscious, but leading to a multiplicity of identifications, sexual orientations, behaviors, and imaginaries, instead of fixed identities. It is true for the normal and the abnormal, as revealed by the critical work of Goffman, Foucault, and their followers (just ask the question: which of us in this conference room are “normal,” and which are “abnormal”? but also: how would we live in a world where the distinction is erased?). And it is true in a complex manner for ethnic, racial and cultural differences, which seem to share a common but obscure relationship to tradition and genealogy, where the strongest opposition (at least today in Western societies) is taking place between denial (or “blindness”) and absolutization.

In my essays, largely following a Foucauldian inspiration, I suggested that bourgeois (or “civic-bourgeois”) society, with its specific brand of universalism (with its definition of universal rights and open access to citizenship) has a tendency to objectify and naturalize anthropological differences, with the help of various scientific disciplines, in order to inscribe them at the core of crucial social institutions, such as prisons, schools, hospitals, workplaces, but also families, the institution of the national border, etc., which typically institute inequalities within the framework of formal equality, and also—in a manner that is historically conflictual and evolving—to make them criteria for inclusion into or exclusion from citizenship (or full, “active,” citizenship). In doing so, it usually relies on the fact that anthropological differences are impossible to dissolve, but conversely it denies their flexibility and evasiveness, or it imposes on them arbitrary delimitations. Accordingly, violence also returns from the opposite side: mechanisms of classification, hierarchization and exclusion provoke rebellions, which in turn are suppressed, in a recurrent cycle affecting the history of bourgeois society. With greater or lesser success, “minorities” (which in quantitative terms can be anything but small) claim equal rights, social and personal recognition. To do so, they often vindicate the universalistic principles that are officially proclaimed but practically denied (putting things in the superb terminology of Mary Wollstonecraft). But the inevitable consequence will be that the paradoxical character
of the differences will be projected on the emancipatory struggles themselves. Since there is violence both in the fact of denying and imposing a demarcation, a rebellion is torn between two strategies, between which it can only choose tactically and provisionally: to vindicate the difference as such, claiming a “right to particularity,” or to vindicate the universality, trying to implement it practically (or possibly to renew its content). The histories of feminism and postcolonial movements of emancipation are plain illustrations of this situation, and there is something very similar on the side of antipsychiatry and movements for the rights of disabled people, etc.

My hypothesis is that such paradoxes and contradictions are located at the core of modern universality and universalistic discourses. Not only are they de facto present, or constantly overdetermining other social conflicts and transformations deriving from the impulse of the general capitalist commodification, the imposition of the Nation-State as dominant political form, and the principles of education deriving from the Enlightenment program; they are (or were) in fact driving forces in the dialectical process of universalism. But the question is also for us increasingly difficult to answer, whether the implications of such universalism are still tenable, whether the way in which a characterization and codification of anthropological differences, as it was used to institute the humanity of the human in a universalistic form, but also to challenge it from the inside, remains actually valid. This is, in fact, a question about the “end” of modernity itself. I don’t know how to answer it, but I think it is necessary to formulate it as clearly as possible.

Of course, this was a terrible simplification, and I should now embark on a number of qualifications and precisions. Allow me to mention one that is philosophically crucial, but that I must largely omit for want of room (although it will somehow return when I discuss the aporia of the “multiplicity of the world”). This is the question of the articulation of “differences” which seem to be internal to the human species—dividing it and also locating the “inhuman” within its boundaries—and “differences” which seem to be external with respect to these boundaries—separating the human from its two “limits”: the non-human animal (zoon) and the divine, or in a more recent version the mechanical automaton. This ontological and cosmological articulation, as we know, was treated very differently in the Ancient and the Modern World. More generally, it changes decisively between epochs of World History, and between cultures or civilizational areas. I do not believe that these two kinds of anthropological discourses, which, in one case, seem to refer to an anthropology of the human “essence,” whereas in the other case it refers to an anthropology of human or social “relations,” are ever completely separated “in the real.” But this won’t be directly my object today.

In the same spirit, I want to make more precise what I said about race and culture as combined names for a specific anthropological difference in my sense. You must have remarked that I was hesitant and perhaps embarrassed to choose
a name for this “difference.” There are strong reasons for that. These terms, plus others such as “ethnic difference,” and also, increasingly, “religious difference,” are at the core of the definition of communities which, in some places at least, are presented as the main challenge to universalism. I noticed that the double bind here is not located so much in the definition of the difference as in the dispute over the essential (and essentialist) character of the distribution of the humans among ethnic, racial, cultural, religious groups—in other terms it is a dispute about whether humans could form communities (including civic or political communities) without the support and addition of ethnic, racial, cultural, religious differences: either as historical or perhaps natural bases, or as additional fictions, forming “imagined communities” (as Benedict Anderson famously put it). But what Anderson had in mind were essentially national communities, which he deemed to be the modern political form par excellence, and I suspect, personally, that it was the domination of the nation-form as it was exported worldwide by European colonization, that accounted for the implementation of the racial, cultural, and even religious criteria of community formation. But I also submit that human collective diversity has now practically lost the certainty of its implicit anchorage in the solidity of the nation-form (culminating in the codification of Jus Publicum Europaeum, and its transformation into a global order of “United Nations”). This is concomitant with the rise and assertion of a real universality, called “globalization,” which in fact means capitalist globalization. In this context, human collective diversity, which—let us remember—was for Kant a regulating idea of reason (underpinning his concept of cosmopolitanism), becomes at the same time exacerbated and dissolved, which once again rejoins my “definition” of the anthropological difference as a double bind, but can be done in a number of manners. Exacerbation moves from one criterion and name to another, also following political circumstances and interests: religion is on the rise these days, but race certainly is not totally discredited. And I should note at this point (as I once did in official French controversies) that if the concept of “race” is unclear, the concept of “religion” is not clearer. And dissolution is sought for not only in the direction of “abstract” moral and juridical universalism, but also in the direction of an idea of universal hybridization or creolization, which is one of the models of a universalism of differences,” to which I will return.

Desire for Knowledge

At this point I want to add another philosophical consideration, which regards the subjective dimension of anthropological differences, or the relationship of subjects to anthropological differences, as perceptions, institutions, and embarrassments. It is absolutely not the case that anthropological differences, as I understand them, are entirely located on the “objective” side of transindividual institutions
and representations—of which subjective perceptions would form a secondary effect. One might say rather just the opposite: anthropological differences with their paradoxes are a projection of certain subjective dispositions, not necessarily individual from the point of view of their sources (if, in particular, there is an unconscious dimension that is intrinsic here, and the unconscious is essentially a transindividual structure), but which nevertheless must be elaborated by each individual subject in a singular manner. In an essay I wrote a long time ago about questions of sexual and racial identifications, I called this subjective disposition a desire to know or desire for knowledge, which is seeking an answer for the basic questions Who am I?, and Who are we? This was in part a generalization of the Freudian description of the “sexual curiosity” of children—therefore of all of us, inasmuch as we remain eternally children when it comes to identifying ourselves. Allow me to shift to a slightly different formulation, referring to a different author. I believe that every human individual is possessed with an irreducible desire to find answers for the ultimately unanswerable question of identity—which is not just ideologically imposed through an interpretation of anthropological differences, describing them and making sense of them. Paraphrasing Heidegger, but also returning him to the anthropological terrain that he claimed he had left when framing the method of “existential analysis” (in Being and Time), I will say that humans are such beings for whom the anthropological differences (or the different manners and possibilities of being “human”) are a problem, and therefore a concern. Humans are those beings diversely concerned with human diversity, or non-identity. If there is something corresponding to the idea of their essence, this concern is the essence—an essence which is rather an unstable condition.

This was only apparently a tautological statement, especially because it contains an indication of what circulates among consciousnesses, and especially their unconscious side, when subjects become the bearers of social relations.

**APORIAS OF UNIVERSALITY**

Let me now address the next point in my discussion, which regards aporias of universality in their conceptual form: a form that prevents questions we ask about the universal from ever receiving answers which are not the infinite reiteration of the question itself, thus making universality a “dialectical” idea in the Kantian sense. This dialectic has a speculative side, but also an immediately political one, which is more or less insistent. Anthropological differences are at the same time motors and motives for the construction of universalities, and ironic factors of resistance—taking “irony” in the sense in which Hegel writes that Weiblichkeit or femininity (and I am tempted to say: femininity inasmuch as it differs from masculinity, or we cannot reduce a sister to a brother) is the “irony of the community” (he didn’t dare write “feminism,” which didn’t exist as a name at the
time, but already as a vindication). I presume that this fact is underlying all the aporias. Again, they are analytically distinguished in this presentation, but they are not independent.

The first aporia concerns the idea of the “world,” and the representation of the function of “differences” in the world. A universalistic discourse always has a cosmological dimension—in particular because there is no possibility to perceive and reflect on identities and differences, on the same and the other, without attempting to locate them in specific places that are appropriate for them (where they are “at home”: this is the *oikeiosis* of the Stoic philosophy, which Cicero translated into Latin as *convenientia*, and Adam Smith into English as *propriety*), thus conferring a necessity or raison d’être upon them. To articulate the proprieties inscribing differences in the human with places in the world, is part of the desire to know, or it is one of the basic ways to fulfill it. Of course, “the world” is no invariant, universal notion itself; it is a representation that profoundly changes in the course of history, and from one civilization to another. If the world or the *imago mundi* (in Heidegger’s German: *Weltbild*) changes, particularly for what concerns the articulation of the “natural” and the “social” element (themselves complex ensembles), then the mode of “inhabiting” the world with and through the differences, or against them, also changes: in other terms, we are presented with different *cosmopolitanisms*. I want to insist here, once again in the most simplifying manner, on the crucial difference that is taking place in the Western tradition between the *Ancient model* and the *Modern model*. In the Ancient model, “places” are essentially differentiated in order to achieve complementarities between moral capabilities (often called *virtues*, *aretai*), which are located or cultivated in different places, with a social and a cosmological meaning (e.g., the *oikos* or household, and the *agora* or civic space). It is the totality or totalization of these situated differences that embodies universality, or can be related to an objective rationality or *logos*. In modernity, as it becomes eventually expressed in the discourse of civic bourgeois universalism (which, as we know, greatly derives from a secularization of the idea of the *person* previously elaborated by Christianity), individual subjects as “free” persons in the double sense of the term (emancipated, de-affiliated) are directly the bearers of the universal, which they carry with themselves wherever they go (I am tempted to say: wherever they *migrate*) to perform their professional and other duties. And they are supposed to be conscious of the responsibility that this confers upon them, in short, they are “self-conscious.” But the remarkable “universalistic” consequence, theorized in particular by Kant who makes it the criterion of morality, is that they can simultaneously *come to occupy the same place*, or “trade place” with one another. This place is not Wall Street (although any citizen who can invest in one security has a share in Wall Street), it is *the place of the other*—not this or that singular other, but the abstract, indeterminate other. This paradoxical “place” appears not
only as the “universal place,” but as the place of the universal, where the subjects are universalizing themselves when they come to “occupy” it by becoming interchangeable while losing nothing of their particularity. Therefore it can be called the place of transcendental equality, around which the world is constructed as if around a ubiquitous center.

As we know, however (and here again I am following Foucault’s notion of the empirical-transcendental doublet, of direct Kantian ascendency) there is a counterpart to the assertion of transcendental equality, namely the fact that anthropological differences as such are shifted to the empirical realm. This is the object of that crucial book: Anthropology from a Pragmatic Standpoint (1798), published in the last moments of Kant’s very long life, but elaborated throughout his academic career to form a “double” of the famous Critiques.  

Reading this book shows that the “empirical” differences—whose description in Kant is filled with the most blatant sexist, nationalist, and Eurocentric prejudices—are not just relegated to an inferior, subordinated realm of contingency and particularity, but they are pathologically affecting the realization of the universal, or the transcendental configuration of the world, both in terms of collective culture and in terms of the “aesthetic and moral education” of the individual. Their intrinsic instability becomes reinterpreted in terms of a double function: as obstacles and/or supporting elements for the development of morality and culture. In that sense they become themselves universalized, or they form a constitutive part of the history of the universal (which is “Humankind”). But—as a number of contemporary interpreters, including Spivak, Bernasconi in the U.S., and Marcuzzi and Lagier in France, who performed a careful “symptomatic reading” of Kantian texts, have shown convincingly—not only this universalization (which in fact is Kant’s cosmopolitanism or weltbürgerliche Idee) involves a complete system of inequalities (mainly conceived as temporal inequalities, or inequalities in the rhythm and duration of access to culture for different individuals, peoples, genders, races, etc.), but it involves the definition of a residual place of exclusion for those individuals and collectives who will never achieve the recognition of the universal, because they don’t have in their original constitution the capacity to enter the teleological process of “unsociable sociability,” i.e., culture itself.  

Universal Mankind is not total Mankind, or the whole of Mankind—in Lacanian jargon it is pas tout or “not all,” or it leaves a place for the remainder, which is the exact antonym of the place of transcendental equality, and only the correlation of both constitutes “the world.”

This is already aporetic, but it becomes even more interesting if we add the consideration of another “bourgeois” cosmopolitanism, which was elaborated in the same period (roughly speaking) in the work of Herder, and above all the two brothers Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt (who, in this respect, really form an indivisible couple). It forms the alternative cosmopolitanism within modernity.
The discourse of the Humboldts, combining geography (*Cosmos*, by Alexander von Humboldt, 1845–1862) and philology (*Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, by Wilhelm von Humboldt, 1836, posthumous) is (for us at least) a clear prefiguration of the attempts of some of our contemporaries to construct a universalism or cosmopolitanism “of differences” (borrowing the expression of Giacomo Marramao), where the differences are constitutive, or to transform the *Universum* into a *Multiversum* (as suggested already, retrieving an occasional formula from Novalis, by Ernst Bloch in the 1950s). However this alternative is also aporetic, I submit, because of the way in which it *relocates the differences* (here essentially, if not purely, considered as cultural differences). The Humboldts share the provocative idea of an *equality among cultures*, whether “primitive” or “advanced,” qua creations of the human genius, which are all indispensable to give its meaning to the history of Mankind and the variegated resources of the Planet (which would be later retrieved by Boas and other advocates of “cultural ecology”). No language, accordingly, is more “perfect” than another one, since they are all systems of signs, which make it possible to express the totality of human experience, albeit from a *singular point of view* (a Leibnizian “monadological” and pre-structuralist idea). And no geographic environment is less favorable than any other to the invention of modes of cultivation and the humanization of nature (a pre-ecological idea). Although it was European colonization that made the travels and ethnographic descriptions possible, on which this vision of the *location of cultures* and their equality is based, it is undoubtedly anti-Eurocentric. The problem does not lie there, but rather in the fact that, for equal cultures to remain perfect and for ecological systems to survive, they must also remain essentially *closed*, protected, not to say “immunized” monads or totalities. This also means that individuals who are extracted and exiled from their “native” cultures, languages, and environments, become *alienated subjects*, “strangers” to themselves and to their own humanity as it were. As philosophically predictable, the monadic perfection entails an impossibility of communicating without degenerating, which in fact is an *interdiction* to communicate and “change” through communication and translation. No place for translation, in the complete, dialectical sense (later illustrated by Benjamin), between the transcendental equality and the location of equal cultures.

Second: the aporia of universality and community; or the aporia of “*das Allgemeine*.” I need to use the German word (and I particularly follow its uses in Hegel here, as I did in a previous essay), because it contains a decisive play on words, to which we can attach a speculative dimension. *Allgemein*—the word that we translate as “universal,” beginning with the logical uses—literally means *common to all*, or it can be heard as *allen gemein*. It stands at the very point of intersection of the two substantives: *Allgemeinheit* (universality) and *Gemeinwesen* (community, literally “common being” or “common essence”). Hegel used
it, of course, to translate and interpret the Rousseauist volonté générale, which is supposed to embody exactly that: the perfect adequacy of community and universality, since it forms the principle of a community of citizens expressed in the universalistic form of the law, where the totality of the people decides for the totality of the people. However, this is where the aporia begins (and, as I submitted elsewhere, the whole of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit is devoted to elaborating the figures of this aporia). Why? Because a political community requires that the universal (especially in the modern form of equal rights among its members) become the principle of organization of all its institutions, the moral trigger for the patriotism (in Hegel: Gesinnung) of its citizens. Otherwise it would not be a community of citizens, but only of subjects in the old sense of the term (subjecti, subditi: subjected to the unilateral authority of a prince or an upper class). But it is no less the case that the Universal calls for its own realization or implementation (Verweltlichung, Verwirklichung) in the form of a historic community, because it is only in that form that the “spiritual masses” forming the people, or the social groups in the society, become organized in institutions that secure the rule of the law. A collective will, and the representation of that will, are needed for that. And if I dare project an Arendtian formula onto Hegel, I would say that this is the condition for the Constitution of the Universal (in the American sense, constitutio libertatis) to determine the right to have rights. The two movements of the becoming universal of the community, and the becoming common of the universal, are clearly reciprocal but they are not, in fact, really coinciding. They only chase after one another.

You will say that, for Hegel, this is not the case, because he believes that the State does accomplish the reciprocity of the two movements. Leaving aside Marx’s demonstration in the 1843 manuscript (Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Staatsphilosophie) that Hegel’s arguments to this effect in the Philosophy of Right are completely inconsistent, we may simply return to the Phenomenology, where Hegel has clearly argued for the impossibility of reducing the aporetic decalage, and where there is no State-solution (and also not a religious solution, or a revolution-ary solution, but these are other questions to be discussed attentively). What the Phenomenology allows us to understand through its “self-deconstructing” logic (of which the passages on Antigone and the Terror are climaxes), is that a mutual recognition of citizens in institutional forms, whereby all the members share their rights and duties, will never perfectly coincide with the universalistic opening whose criterion is a “reconciliation” with the figure of otherness, and particularly the interior enemy (who can be a visitor, but also a woman, or a “class” antagonist). This is illuminating if we turn towards the present. In contemporary societies and political communities, the “end” of the decalage is less than ever in sight. Again, let’s combine Hegel and Arendt. When the “crisis of the Nation-State” has begun, the traditional equation, legally enforced and constitutionally guaranteed,
between citizenship (representing universality) and nationality (representing the community), becomes shaky. It is challenged every day and forcefully reasserted. This is a kind of interregnum. On the one side, you hear a demand of the broadening of the community, to incorporate those relegated to the limbos by the closure of the community which is necessary to assert its sovereignty as “sovereignty of the people” (since, for the people to be sovereign, it must exist, and to exist it must be closed). On the other side, you hear symbolic demands to dissolve the community, or create a “community without community”—in other terms (following Jean-Luc Nancy’s explanation) a “being in common” which avoids every communitarianism, i.e., every proclamation of a collective identity or “common substance” as a precondition for the institution of the political, through the imposition of criteria for its membership. This, in fact, is a way to “overcome” the political.

As an appendix to this second aporia, I bring in a third one, which represents a kind of political displacement of the speculative argument. However, instead of presenting it in a purely conceptual manner, with the help of references from the history of philosophy, I will take the liberty of attaching it to a personal anecdote.

In 1997, an event was organized in Paris—one year after the conclusion of a quasi-mythical episode in the struggle of so-called sans papiers, or undocumented migrants, to obtain a legal recognition by the State of what, in fact, is the simple reality: their being present and active on the French (national) territory, as workers, caretakers, even taxpayers. A year before, they had occupied the Church of Saint-Bernard, and carried on several hunger-strikes to claim their rights and bring their cause to the public. Intellectuals and activists on the left had been supportive of the movement, which nevertheless did not reach its goal, or only to a limited extent (a small number of permits granted, with the State foregoing its own promises—as always). I wrote a kind of address to the migrants of Saint-Bernard, which later was republished in a book called Droit de cité, with the title “Ce que nous devons aux Sans-Papiers” (our debt towards the sans-papiers), where I listed three complementary “debts”: (1) we were indebted to the migrants, I said, for publicly coming out about their conditions of life and work, which made them the modern proletarians, at the risk of being violently suppressed; (2) we were indebted to them for refuting the racist mystifications in the press and the opinion about why they travelled and settled in Europe, thus inaugurating a “politics of truth”; (3) we were indebted to them for contributing to the reactivation of political conflict and democratic struggle within the national space, becoming actors of politics, and not only victims. I concluded that, although they were not citizens in the legal sense, they had emerged as “concitoyens,” which in ordinary English would be fellow citizens—but I prefer to render more literally as “co-citizens,” to express the idea of a political solidarity or comradeship reaching beyond the borders and limits imposed by the State. Ten years later (in 2008), Austrian linguist and philosopher Stefan Nowotny picked up this text in a lengthy paper
published on his blog, and systematically discussed it, in particular setting up a confrontation with a remarkable essay by Émile Benveniste that greatly enhanced its meaning, but also led him to raise a serious critique.\(^\text{16}\)

Benveniste’s paper, to which Nowotny was referring, called “Deux modèles linguistiques de la cité” (Two linguistic models for the city), was published in Volume 2 of Problèmes de linguistique générale (unfortunately not translated into English).\(^\text{17}\) It deals in a structuralist manner (based on formal semantic oppositions) with the etymologies of the Greek word \textit{polites} and the Latin word \textit{civis}, both of which we translate as \textit{citizen} (in French \textit{citoyen}), i.e., the active member of a “city,” endowed with full rights of citizenship. Benveniste argues that they have in fact opposite meanings for what concerns the relationship of the member and the whole (i.e., the city), elaborating this foundational relationship in opposite ways. Therefore, they illustrate what you may call antithetic political ideologies. This is visible in the fact that the name \textit{polites} (which practically has no feminine in Ancient Greek) derives from the \textit{polis} (the root-name), therefore indicating that there must already exist a \textit{polis} or a whole for the part, the \textit{polites}, to exist and come to being, whereas, in Latin, it is \textit{civitas} that derives as an abstract name, or the name of a community, from the preexisting \textit{civis}, which is the root-name. The question then becomes: how does the notion of the \textit{civitas} arise out of that of the \textit{civis}? The answer is: it cannot be just as a universal, a name for the collection of all \textit{cives}, because in fact \textit{civis} is ill-translated as “citizen.” The crucial demarcating element comes from the fact that Latin-speakers (Romans) routinely write \textit{civis meus}, whereas “my citizen” is meaningless in French (or English). However, you can speak of \textit{my fellow citizen} or “mon concitoyen” (\textit{my co-citizen}), a phrase whose meaning is made even more precise by its semantic opposition to \textit{hostis meus} (my enemy, or in some cases my guest). \textit{Civis meus}, a reversible notion indeed, denotes the \textit{ego}’s relationship to an other who is neither an enemy nor a guest, and the resulting meaning is that the \textit{civitas} names the institution arising from the joint practice, the interaction and the mutual recognition of all those who call themselves \textit{cives} (i.e., address each other as \textit{cives}). If you return now to the \textit{sans-papiers}, applying Benveniste’s idea to my formula, which in fact was an \textit{interpellation} directed towards them, this produces a new subversive idea, which goes beyond what I had apparently said: it is this mutual recognition of French statutory citizens and migrant foreigners struggling for their rights, that creates citizenship in the active sense on French (or European) territory, therefore activates politics there. In a different terminology, you may suggest that it produces the \textit{constituent power} of politics by precisely lifting the restrictions imposed by the nation-state. This also endows, conversely, Benveniste’s highly esoteric analysis with a revolutionary after-effect. Benveniste, a Lebanese Jew who emigrated to France in the early ’20s, was an active communist in his youth—but this is another story. In extricating the revolutionary element that is latent in the performative
use of the “Roman” idea of co-citizenship, Nowotny would suggest, and also, in fact, attribute to me a dialectical way out of the dilemma of community and universality, by explaining that the genuine element of universalization resides in the originary co-citizenship or practical reciprocity that creates or recreates occasionally something called “citizenship.”

At the same time, however, Nowotny directed a devastating critique at my text—this time with the help of a Bakhtinian notion of dialogical discursivity: in the very moment when my interpellation named the reciprocity, it also interrupted it, both through the fact that I was praising the sans-papiers in terms of “our” indebtedness to them, in fact speaking to my fellow French citizens over their heads, and through the fact that I was doing this with the rhetoric and the linguistic resources of the dominant language (i.e., French). Despite my obvious benevolent intentions (or perhaps because of them), there was something paternalistic in my discourse, which remained a fictitious gesture towards hospitality (or hostipitality, as Derrida would say). More than ever, the process of universalization of the political community remained aporetic. This will now allow me to return to the question of the universality of differences, in the guise of a set of concluding remarks about the type of universality that is (or can be) immanent in the practice of translation among foreign languages. The absolute opposite, in a sense, of the idea of a universal language—whether in its imperial modality, or its utopian version.

**Languages Speak (to) One Another**

In this final moment, I will make use of certain idiomatic properties of French, illustrated in the sentence “les langues se parlent,” which can be explained, but not translated in the strict sense. My latent idea is that the universal is not really a concept or an idea, but it is always the correlative effect of an enunciation that, in given conditions, either asserts the differences or denies them (or even prohibits them), therefore leading to a conflictual modality of internal contestation of itself. But enunciations are always made in a specific language—an idiom—and idioms exist only in the form of a multiplicity of languages that are never isolated from one another, but continuously interacting, therefore inducing transformations within one another. “Translation” is the general name for this interaction, which as we know takes a number of different forms, involving cultural determinations and institutional power relations.

This is a post-Humboldtian hypothesis that, of course, owes much to Walter Benjamin and some of his commentators, including Derrida but also, more recently, our student at Kingston University, Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier. It tries to derive something positive from Nowotny’s dialogical and dialectical picture of the “interrupted reciprocity.” The multiplicity of languages, as a practical or a living system (i.e.,
not just a mapping of idioms to be enumerated and localized on the surface of the earth: a practice very important for early philologists, but increasingly difficult to achieve, since languages are travelling with their speakers very far away from their “birthplaces,” another important aspect of globalization), is indeed always riddled with inequalities and relations of inequality, differential status among languages and imperial domination generating contestation in turn. It is therefore approximately the best model we have of a Multiversum in Bloch’s sense (although Bloch himself was using rather a musical model of polytonality and polyrhythm that, in fact, was less dialectical). It is the practice of translation among languages that creates the Multiversum and permanently deconstructs its internal hierarchies and relations of power. Derrida once defined “deconstruction” through the simple sentence or injunction: Plus d’une langue, “more than one language!”

But here I want to introduce my own allegoric use of the phrase: “les langues se parlent.” The commonsensical idea behind it is that we speak languages (expressed here in pronominal form). Of course, this is true in an obvious indisputable sense: in this moment I speak English, and I try to make use of the elements of that language that I know, but in fact I am translating a preexisting text from the French. Returning to another moment in Benveniste’s theory of the act of enunciation, one can say that I am appropriating English and French to my needs, therefore in a sense elevating to the second power the capacity of appropriation that, according to Benveniste, realizes “subjectivity in language,” and is manifested, in particular, through the use of first person pronouns, such as I and we. This appropriation, however, can be seen as the reverse side and the secondary effect of an expropriation, in the sense that what commands the possibility of translation, and defines its internal difficulties and conflicts (eventually giving rise to transformative capacities), arises from the languages themselves. It is in the structure of languages, in their differences and comparisons, that are rooted both the essential untranslatability of languages (or part of them) and the infinite “task” (or rather practice) of translating the untranslatable—as explained and illustrated in a recent Dictionary of Untranslatables, directed and introduced by Barbara Cassin. This is a double bind that, I believe not by chance, retrieves something of the structure of anthropological differences as I proposed it at the beginning of this lecture, in terms of something indestructible and impossible to arrest in a fixed place. But the paradox is now transferred onto a different plane—the plane of languages and their “translating effect,” an illustration of the idea of “conflicting universality” in the highest degree.

So, we do speak languages (“speak in tongues,” as the Gospel has it). But more profoundly “les langues se parlent.” If I use the French here, this is because it captures two different meanings in a single phrase: languages are spoken, or even languages speak to themselves, as quasi-subjects; but also, languages speak to one another, as quasi- or meta-interlocutors, essentially in the form of translation,
assuming successively the function of translating and translated, signifier and signified, transformed and transforming the other. As a consequence, of course, translation is the practical effectuation of universality as multiplicity.

In my allegoric use of that phrase (I must be irredeemably a philosophy teacher) there is another ironic relationship to Heidegger (as previously in the case of the care for differences). Heidegger famously wrote in his 1950 essay Die Sprache that “die Sprache spricht,” which again means two things: (1) it means that it is the language that speaks—not “us” (note here that the English, or for that matter the French, cannot keep the “tautology,” because we need two words of different etymology (language and speech, or langue and parole), to express the same idea; and (2) it means that the only thing that language “does” is to speak (in any of its varieties: to communicate, to translate, to express, to signal, etc.) but (according to Heidegger) either in a banal, inauthentic way, or, more essentially, in a poetic way (because, according to him, only the poetic use dispenses of utilitarian intentions). When I say les langues se parlent, I am trying to “universalize” this notion of idiomaticity, producing both an allegory and a political illustration of what universality says, or “speaks” to us, while speaking in fact to our languages themselves.

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Notes

This essay is a transcription of my original keynote lecture at DePaul University, in the last session of the conference, with only minor stylistic and grammatical corrections, and references added in the endnotes. An expanded version, adapted into French, was included as the concluding essay in my book Des universels. Essais et conferences (Paris: Editions Galilée, 2016). I am very grateful to Peg Birmingham and her colleagues for making this possible.

5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, “The Methodology of Pure Reason” (1781); and *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1795).


10. Foucault translated the *Anthropology* and left the translation unpublished during his lifetime, also writing for it a long introductory essay, which has now become a book in its own right: *Introduction to Kant’s Anthropology*, trans. Roberto Nigro (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008).


19. Lucie Mercier just completed her PhD, “The Inside Passage: Translation as Method and Relation in Serres and Benjamin” (2015), at Kingston University London.


