

**Étienne Balibar, *On Universals: Constructing and Deconstructing Community*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020)**

WILLI GOETSCHEL

In his new book, *On Universals: Constructing and Deconstructing Community*, Étienne Balibar explores an issue so central and fundamental to philosophy and political discourse that it seems to have become a kind of a blind spot, rarefied into a terminological affair. However, universals are aporetic constructions, as Balibar's book, ably translated by Joshua David Jordan, reminds us. Balibar's succinct description of an aporia helpfully suggests that what seems to present a deadlock might—differently approached—serve as a gateway to move beyond the logic of submission that universals, universalism, and claims to universality seem to dictate: “‘Aporia’ means that a *question* is posed in such a way that it cannot be ignored but in terms such that the only available answer is the infinite reiteration of the question itself” (105). In other words, the universal presents a conceptual complex whose obstinate opacity rejects easy resolution despite the facile schematism it seems to impose. Its guise of straightforward simplicity has held schools of philosophers in thrall. They have opted in or out of different conceptions of the universal while remaining oblivious to the fact that, regardless of how universals are conceived, they are generative, dynamic problems rather than solutions to the problems they seek to resolve.

This is why most philosophers simply attempt to cut through the Gordian knot that the problem of the universal poses, i.e., by means of a terminological fiat. Yet, to opt for one or another conception of the universal is to operate inside the conceptual playpen of a prescribed discourse that calls for examination in the first place. For choosing between realist and nominalist varieties of the theme will not help us engage the underlying fact that universals present a problem rather than a solution.

Typically, universals are treated as part of the customary toolkit philosophers are expected to use, or, as Balibar formulates this: philosophy is to speak in universals, or is, more precisely, “a discourse in the modality of the universal” (41).

The question of the universal is therefore not just “a preeminently philosophical” question but “perhaps the very question of philosophy itself” (*ibid.*). Yet the issues surrounding universals are not confined to academe; they profoundly inform our political discourse and praxes of constructing community. For any sort of inclusion depends on, and produces, exclusion in order to be distinct. The problem then, Balibar insists, is not to arrive at a concept of the universal that secures universalism and universality unequivocally—a concept of the universal which would itself be unequivocal and universal—but to address the challenge of this dialectic without resorting to exercises of domestication and containment. Rather than view universals as stable concepts, Balibar suggests we comprehend them as sites of conflict and dispute. Universals are contested and renegotiated; hence, they require critical attention as the sites where disagreement and opposition come to the fore. For the universal, Balibar notes, “unites only by dividing” and, if unexamined, suppresses the conflict it expresses (vii). Rather than resigning in the face of this difficulty, Balibar’s book is an eloquent and compelling plea to recognize the “contradictions of the universals” (viii) as the opportunity to reimagine and renegotiate the role of universals, universalism, and universality in a manner that embraces the “paradoxical nature of the idea of universality” (viii) and welcomes “the multiplicity of differences of the human” (ix). To respond to the insidiously exclusionary character of the normative pressures linked to the thought of universals, Balibar’s book calls for “a new quarrel of universals” (viii). This ‘quarrel’ will allow us to address the repressive tendencies that universals harbor by encouraging us to attend to the intrinsically problematic character of any form of universalism or universality.

Suspicion concerning the repressive and violent dimensions of universals is shared by a number of philosophers. These have been a pressing concern since at least as early as Spinoza and Moses Mendelssohn, and they have received renewed critical attention in the age of post-structuralist, feminist, and postcolonial sensibilities. Balibar conveys a grasp of this issue which is singularly piercing. He avoids the coercive pressure of logical progression that the construction of the universal so dauntingly projects but ultimately lacks. Instead, he circles the subject in a more ‘peripatetic’ manner. Carefully avoiding the temptation to universalize or naturalize one or another—ultimately normatively charged—form of universalism or universality, Balibar resists the pitfalls of simple refusals or reversals which reinforce the oppressive logics they oppose. Remarkably, the book’s lingering repetitions and redundancies steer clear of the posture of an imperiously forward-moving but tautological form of argumentation that seeks to authorize its claims by adverse possession. Refusing entanglement in the maze that the labyrinthine delusions of unexamined conceptual thinking produce, Balibar’s argument dodges the grand discourse of universals that treacherously presumes the very notions it claims to scrutinize.

The book's essayistic sections kaleidoscopically combine, creating an illuminating constellation of intersecting foci. In this way, the book addresses the challenge of articulating its subject while attending to the *differends* that define it: The issues surrounding the question of universals refuse reduction to any kind of clear-cut either/or structure. Instead, they present a more complex situation than a monological approach could adequately deal with. Balibar's casual form succeeds in exposing the authoritarian grip that philosophy's disciplinary discourse on universals continues to project—intentionally or not—as it forces the discussion to succumb to its unreconstructed universalist allure.

Though Balibar does not explicitly do this, it is worthwhile to briefly consider the respects in which his text's performative aspect is crucial to his argument. If form articulates content dialectically, the universal takes shape always in a particular instance of its enunciation that gives the universal its particular singularity: "the history of universality is composed only of singularities" (90). This holds true also for its critique: "as soon as one articulates a critique of universalism . . . *the enunciation is immediately expressed in the modality of the universal*" (42, italics are Balibar's). "To express the universal—or any proposition in the modality of the universal—is an *appropriation of the universal* by a subject at a certain time and in [a] certain place" (30). There is no outside of the discourse of universalism to which one might retreat: "no metalanguage of universality exists" (87). Rather, "every speaker (and every discourse) of the universal is located *within* and not *outside* the field of discourses and ideologies that she or he wishes to explore" (ibid.). This leads to an aporetic situation: "*Not expressing the universal is impossible, but expressing it is untenable*" (43, italics are Balibar's).

Rather than bemoan the predicament we are confronted with when we enunciate the universal or speak in the modality of the universal—which we always already do in philosophy as well as politics—Balibar accentuates the emancipatory potential it can have when fully realized. What in some respects presents the limiting, repressive, and violent aspects of the universal can also serve as a platform for renegotiating the freedom and rights of the individual. Peremptory as the universal might seem, it also offers its critic the means of turning the tables on an exclusionary notion of the universal, as it allows us to mobilize the inclusionary aspects that define the logic of the universal to no less a degree. Consequently, while the universal must be critically understood as a dangerously and often violently domesticating force, it can nevertheless serve as a path to liberation. For constructing community is always profoundly linked to its deconstruction. Again, the universal "unites only by dividing," a dialectic that is based on the instable equilibrium of the conflict any universal represents.

While the "universal serves less to unify human beings than to promote conflict *between* and *within* them" (vii), the conflict and violence it promotes highlight with their repressive aspects the possibility of emancipatory change that the enun-

ciation of the universal holds out. At the same time, they subdue and contain it. This double-edged feature of the universal is a function of its double nature, and the contradictory impulse that informs it: The problem that any enunciation of the universal is possible only in the particular context that defines its instantiation as singular. This double bind does not need to be the end of the story but can be viewed as an opportunity to respond to the “quarrel of universalism” with a cautiously hopeful vision of liberating the universal from the repressive grip of its exclusionary logic. The universal, contested and renegotiated, can come to be envisioned as a more open, more inclusive, and more liberating notion from the bottom up. This is true, however, only as long as we realize that neither of the universal’s two faces can ever be controlled and that the dialectic between them can never be arrested without suppressing one of the sides that only together give the universal its meaning.

Balibar initially turns to Hegel to unpack this thought and flesh out the point “that every universalist discourse is always confronted with its antithesis, with its internal limits or exclusions, and ultimately with its repressed content” (28). This claim, he shows, is borne out by the dialectical movement that Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* traces: one form of a universal encounters its antithesis the moment it manifests itself. They are each other’s opposite because each emerges from one side of the distinction that defines them both. Every universal is exposed in its limits as its opposite confronts it with its internal contradiction and is in turn forced to confront its own internal contradiction. Balibar views the *Phenomenology*’s opening chapter on sense-certainty as the first irrefutable blow to the idea that every enunciation of a universal is unfailingly bound to its singular use here and now by this or that person caught in the paradoxical movement of ascribing universality to particular situations. In the end, however, Hegel goes only so far and Balibar turns to Marx for the next step.

In a stunning reading of Marx’s famous line from the *German Ideology* that is usually translated “the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class,” but that he notes catches the operative term “herrschend” more accurately when translated “the dominant ideas are the ideas of the dominant class,” Balibar argues that, besides its generally acknowledged, obvious meaning, the sentence harbors a more subtle dialectic twist that adds a layer to Hegel’s thinking. This second layer of meaning, as dialectically subtle and at first glance concealed as it might be, must have been implied by Marx, Balibar notes, if his statement that the dominant discourse is the discourse of the dominant class was meant to be more than a tautology. And indeed, Marx’s style is here, as elsewhere, indebted to Heine’s trademark technique of dialectical reversal, which produces cognitive surplus by a chiasmatic interlocking of tropes (Heine was schooled by Hegel himself, though his signature playful and nimble-footed style was ultimately his own). Balibar’s close reading highlights the dialectical thrust of Marx’s comment, teasing out its post-Hegelian suggestion

that “a dominant discourse is a discourse that *reflects in itself the contradiction with its ‘other’* and makes this reflection the intrinsic impetus of its own development” (73, italics are Balibar’s). In other words, the dominant discourse is dominant because it successfully solicits the dominated class(es) to accept their domination. It does so by incorporating and redirecting the conflict with its internal other so that the dominated class internalizes the dominant discourse in a way that, as Balibar suggests, anticipates the Nietzschean turn of resentment (31). For Balibar, then, the universal effectively works like ideology. Just as we cannot step outside of ideology, we cannot step outside of the universal: “[W]e can say that ideology constitutes the very language of the universal, which should make clear that, in the strongest sense, ‘there is nothing outside ideology’” (29).

The hold of the universal or dominant ideology is so powerful not only because, in line with this “Marxist” variation on La Boétie’s *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*” (32f.), the dominated submit to it voluntarily, but also because those who dominate are no less committed to the universal or ideology from which they receive their justification:

What Marx’s proposition really means is that the class that, under given conditions, perceives its interests to coincide in whole or in part with the historical universal (for example, the expansion of the market to the entire world, or human production as the only system of interdependent practices), is *also* the dominant class. We must understand that the dominant ideology, which is nothing other than the enunciation of the universal, “makes” the dominant class just as much as it is “made” by it. In other words, a class that becomes dominant is a class whose domination is “universalized,” which likewise means that it is recognized by the dominated themselves. (32)

The renegotiation of exclusion and domination becomes possible only with recourse to, and through the repurposing of, the universal or the dominant ideology that defines the terms of the discourse. The dominant might dictate the terms of the universal, but only through the inclusion of the dominated on whose internal difference the construction of its universal—or its “universalist” ideology—rests. This means, as Balibar observes,

that the struggle of the dominated expressed in the language of the universal is not only not incompatible with domination but in a sense constitutes its condition of possibility, since this struggle forces the dominant class to universalize its own language so that that language can “represent” collective social interests and not simply its own group interests in the narrow sense. (33)

In other words, “the notion of the universal class *does not refer to a subject of discourse . . . but rather to the unity of two antagonistic subjects*” (34, italics are Balibar’s).

Another aspect central to Balibar's analysis of the function of the universal is the issue of "anthropological difference." This is Balibar's term for human difference, especially racial and sexual difference, though it also engages the fraught question of the distinction between the human and the nonhuman. Balibar's interlocutors here include Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, and others who view difference as a constitutive feature of, rather than at variance with, a 'universal' norm. With Derrida and Foucault—but, as Balibar suggests, already with Hegel and Marx, and perhaps even with Spinoza—we understand that difference and discrimination are a function of universalism and vice versa.

Balibar references Spinoza repeatedly as a critical resource reminding us that Spinoza's thought runs deeper than its various topical applications often suggest. Balibar's long-standing and deep engagement with Spinoza manifests itself here in a unique way: Spinoza returns here as a generative philosophical resource whose approach becomes legible as a framework that limns the double-edged dynamics and double bind that inform the discourse on the universal but also point to its counter-repressive, emancipatory potential.

For Balibar, "the idea of anthropological difference" is so important because it serves as a critical reminder

that the human being cannot escape being divided, split into opposite types or models of individuality, even though *the site of this split or opposition can never be settled once and for all*—except, that is, by institutions of a necessarily coercive or violent kind. (17)

Paradoxically, difference is produced by the universalism that presupposes it as its own condition. But this does not mean that we could do without difference or that there is a state of existence with no difference. Quite the contrary: "universalism and discrimination are produced in the same 'place,' in close proximity to one another and in constant tension" (17). Difference is the function of a variety of irreducible intersectionalities that elude, resist, and oppose the grip of identitarian politics and thinking. More importantly, it is a necessary consequence of the universal. The tensions which mark the universal—its simultaneously in- and exclusionary, or centripetal and centrifugal, impulses—make universalism, despite appearances, an instable, volatile, and potentially violent site of antagonist tendencies. Differences between "the normal and the *pathological*, the division of humanity into 'races' and 'cultures,' and the difference between the *sexes*, a difference *overdetermined by that of sexualities*" (98), as well as that between the "human" and "nonhuman," which gives rise to the dangerous "fantasy of the 'subhuman'" (99), refuse denegation as well as reification. They are a reminder of the violence that is the constitutive feature of the discourse on the universal, the constitutive violence that requires continuous critical attention. Neither negating differences nor declaring them "a principle for the *confinement* of individuals to mutually exclusive identities" (100) will resolve the double bind in which the universal is mired.

But while “major anthropological differences are undeniable or indelible,” yet “at the same time unassignable and, ultimately, undefinable (except, that is, through the negation of their opposite), violence inevitably turns against the mechanisms of classification, hierarchization, and exclusion” (100). This double bind thus makes anthropological difference an instrument not just for legitimizing the suppression and exclusion of others but also for exposing the contradictory and potentially repressive character of the universal. This means that the double bind also applies to the logic of reversal, “affecting not only the social order but also movements of resistance, insurrection, and emancipation”:

[S]ince violence lies *both* in the denegation of differences and in their absolutization, every revolt must face the difficulty of deciding whether it will emphasize the legitimacy of difference, the right to particularity, or the primacy of universality and the need for its reconfiguration on new grounds. (100)

If the double bind of the universal has a neutralizing force that is complicit with repression, its reverse aspect is a subversive counterforce that exposes the universal's double-edged claim: The exclusionary norms instituted by the universal depend on a logic that is contingent on the claim of inclusivity the universal must posit, however unwittingly, as its truth. In this way, the universal functions as the site where conflict is negotiated. Where it is claimed to be “resolved” we must suspect foul play and containment, but where the universal's internal tensions and contradictions are openly addressed there is a breeze of freedom.

Recovering the emancipatory potential buried in the catacombs of the universal, Balibar's book offers a liberating approach to rethinking the discourse of universalism and universality. If speaking in universals—or availing oneself of “a discourse in the modality of the universal”—is often framed as voluntary submission to a dominant normative regime, Balibar highlights the forgotten obverse of the logic of the universal that all liberation movements share. While silence, containment, and exclusion present one side of the coin, the conception of the universal depends at the same time on the claim that its universalism must be shared by everybody, or, in other words, that its appeal is genuinely universal in reach. To confront the universal with its internal differences and contradictions is then anything but an inadequate response. On the contrary, and as Balibar encourages us to realize, it means to enrich and deepen the discourse of the universal, universalism, and universality. Unpacking the conceptually fraught cargo of the modality of the universal is then not the demise of the universal but presents an opportunity for its recognition as an open-ended work in progress. If the universal has been instrumentalized for normative closure and fatal border drawing, it nevertheless only holds if balanced with its deconstructive counterweight. Without it, the universal is just a spurious form of the particular.