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Trump, the Religious Right and a return to Universalism

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Abstract

In recent years, many contemporary academics have encouraged us to celebrate our diversity. We have been advised by postmodernists, post-colonial theorists, political theorists, feminist epistemologists and others, to focus on our differences. To do otherwise, it is said, would be to produce false and partial pretences at universalism, that would serve only to disguise reality or to marginalise those groupings that would inevitably be left out of such grand theories. Indeed, as one writer put it: 'Human universality as an idea, or as an ideal, might seem like an overweening Enlightenment conceit (Calder, 1998, p.140).

This piece will argue that the present period provides an opportune moment to re-think the ready dismissal of universalism.

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In recent years, many contemporary academics have encouraged us to celebrate our diversity. We have been advised by postmodernists, post-colonial theorists, political theorists, feminist epistemologists and others, to focus on our differences. To do otherwise, it is said, would be to produce false and partial pretences at universalism, that would serve only to disguise reality or to marginalise those groupings that would inevitably be left out of such grand theories. Indeed, as one writer put it: ‘Human universality as an idea, or as an ideal, might seem like an overweening Enlightenment conceit’ (Calder, 1998, p.140).

It has seemed to many, then, that universalism as a theoretical approach is dead; that it is irrevocably linked with dubious Enlightenment ideals. From the work of Lyotard, through that of Foucault and Judith Butler and more recently that of Saba Mahmood, the final nails have been knocked into its coffin. In 1989 Fukuyama wrote, after the apparent collapse of communism, that the ‘universalisation of western liberal democracy would be the final form of government’ (Fukuyama, 1989). However, many perceive that period not as presaging a victory of western liberal values, but rather as heralding the end of the colonial era and



introducing a 'post colonial' period which would rightly judge those 'universal' values as western and outmoded.

I would like to suggest however, in this brief piece, that the new developments brought about by the election of Donald Trump into the White House ought to make us re-think this cultural norm. I will suggest that there are two reasons why we ought to re-think this ready dismissal of universalist forms of thinking.

The Importance of Human Rights

On Sunday 29th January, the UK newspaper, *The Observer* proclaimed the following on its front page: 'Theresa May's Washington triumph, if that is what it was, will be short-lived. On issues that matter to Britain, Trump cannot be trusted. The US President's first week has proved that he is like nothing that has gone before. Trump is ignorant, prejudiced and vicious in ways that no other American leader has been' (*The Observer*, January 29th). The levels of sexism, homophobia and racism towards Muslims are unprecedented in an American president. Many of us have felt shock and horror at these developments and a deep despair about what they

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presage for the future. Indeed comparisons have been made between the present period and an earlier one – the 1930's and 40's in Europe. I would like to examine this comparison and, in the process, to offer my first reason why we should re-think the dismissal of universalism.

In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002), first published in 1944, the authors described what they saw as the domination of mass culture over the individual. Putting it briefly, they argued that Enlightenment reason effectively collapses into myth and, in the form of the culture industry, standardised cultural forms are produced that manipulate people into docility and conformity. These ingredients, they suggested, form the ground on which the seeds of totalitarianism are able to germinate. Listeners to the radio, for example, are treated effectively as machines exposed 'in authoritarian fashion' to a cacophony of similar messages.

It is implicit in the thinking of Horkheimer and Adorno that there is evidence, in the period in which they were writing, of little regard for the truth. A trope with which we have become familiar, as a description of the present period, to make a comparison with the earlier one, is that it is the



‘post truth’ era; that there is scant regard nowadays for the truth and that it is possible for the powerful to construct myths that are repeated over and over again that make it difficult for ordinary people to know what is really going on.

However, there is one indication that the comparison does not hold water. It is significant that Hannah Arendt, writing in the same period as Horkheimer and Adorno, makes the following point: ‘terror becomes total when it becomes independent of all opposition: it rules supreme when nobody any longer stands in its way’ (Arendt, 1953, p.310).

In the present period, the women’s marches, organised at very short notice, illustrate the power that people, coming together across continents and cities, can bring to bear to counter the developments of the last few weeks. Nowadays there are multiple sources of information. There are many individuals with the ability, at very short notice, to organise a demonstration (in countries where this is possible); there are many lawyers who are prepared to challenge racist policies that may violate the constitution of an individual nation. In the last few weeks we have seen this, many times over. Moreover, the hugely powerful ‘tech’ industry,

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including the ubiquitous ‘Google’ with its ability to shape how information is disseminated, has tweeted ‘resist’ ‘No Ban; no Wall’ ‘Make America Sane again’ in response to the various policies of the new President of the USA (see *The Evening Standard*, February 18th, 2017). There are many reasons, therefore, to be hopeful that resistance to the new sexism, racism and homophobia, in the present period, is possible and that that comparison with the previous epoch therefore does not hold water. Those of us who can speak out without risk of immediate arrest, therefore, can and should continue to do so.

So one theoretical point I would like to make about this is that it is the liberal state, with its partially ‘enlightenment’ inspired commitment to universal human rights and to the rule of law, that makes all of these things possible. Firstly, liberal democratic states have recourse to the law: it is possible to use the law to challenge such things as Holocaust denial and even to challenge the President of the USA. Secondly, liberal democratic states allow people like me to express opinions like these without (at the moment) risking arrest. There is still in these states, a rudimentary commitment to the principle of freedom of speech.

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When there is a risk, therefore, of some of these hard won human rights being undermined, it is vital that those of us who believe in challenging sexism, racism, anti-semitism, homophobia, racism against Muslims and all forms of discrimination, recognise the deep significance of these rights – rights to freedom, to the rule of law and so on. This is one reason, in the present climate, why it is vital to hang on to some notion of universalism, and indeed to recognise, despite the many criticisms there are of the notion, the power and the value of the concept of a universal human right.

The concept of a right, indeed, if it is genuinely and properly universal, need not be encumbered with Enlightenment forms of liberalism that either implicitly or explicitly exclude certain groups, nor need it be associated with any legal system that does the same thing. Paul Gilroy's (Gilroy, 1993) work, for example, demonstrated that slavery was in fact part and parcel of the Enlightenment ideal. But this need not lead to a dismissal of universalism. Rather it ought to encourage the comment that that form of purported universalism was not universal at all. So any pretence at universalism that excludes women, LGBT people or, at the other extreme, a purported 'terrorist' from the domain of the law is not a properly

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universal system. Moreover, to take one concept that is core to the UN Convention, that of freedom, drawing on Hannah Arendt (Arendt, 1958) once more, this notion is core to a certain conception of action, and therefore of humanity. Arendt draws, in making this point, not on Enlightenment Europe but upon the ancient Greeks, who in turn influenced not only Enlightenment liberals but also many followers of Islam.

So when critics of 'liberalism' claim that the self is encumbered, and not atomised and isolated as it appears to be in some forms of Enlightenment thinking, a universalist can agree, and suggest that one form of encumbrance is precisely our universal humanity and indeed, our deep connections with the rest of the animal and natural world.

The Far Right and the Religious Right

That is one reason why it is important to hang on to some notion of universalism. But there is a second reason. This is that, as Pragna Patel (Patel, 2013) has pointed out, the religious right is increasing its influence at the same time, globally, as racism towards minorities and especially



Muslims is becoming rampant. This gives a second reason for re-considering a universalist outlook.

In the UK, to take one example, right wing and unelected community leaders have become the spokespeople or the ‘authentic voice’ of certain communities and this is harmful to less powerful groups within those communities. Patel speaks of the way in which the religious right in certain ‘so-called’ ‘ethnic minority’ communities in the UK has attained a certain status. One example of this is the furore surrounding the play *Behzti*. This is a play about sexual and ‘honour’ based violence in a Sikh temple. The play exposed corruption and abuse of power within the Sikh community. The play was pulled by the Birmingham Repertory company in the face of protests from within the Sikh community. Community members, including leaders, attacked the play citing the ground of religious hatred, forcing the author, herself a Sikh, to go into hiding. In other words, as well as racism and sexism, this author had to face paternalistic discrimination from within her own ‘cultural community’. The community leaders, who were, no doubt, on the receiving end of racism, were oppressors in their own community.



I'd like to consider inter-sectionality theory in the light of this case.

Inter-sectionality and Universalism

The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991). According to inter-sectionality theory, as Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Nira Yuval -Davis write (Dhaliwal and Yuval-Davis, 2014) all of us are constructed 'along multiple (and both shifting and contingent) axes of difference, such as gender, class, race and ethnicity, stage in the life cycle, sexuality, ability and so on' (Ibid. p.35). The intersections constitute each other, so it is impossible for any individual, according to the theory, to be identified by means of any sub-set of the categories.

While this theoretical approach undoubtedly has value, it also has its limitations. It is, in contrast to the above claim, possible to identify a woman; there are, most of the time, ways of identifying a Muslim and ways of categorising who counts as black. Indeed, it is important that we can identify who is a Muslim in order to note who is discriminated against in anti-Muslim racism.

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Moreover, the case of *Behzti* is not an instance of the ‘intersection’ of two systems producing a double injustice. It is rather, one group – the community leaders – who were no doubt discriminated against in other contexts, becoming themselves the oppressors. Only a universal outlook can make sense of this.

In the present context, a universalising perspective that recognises our collective shared humanity and the needs and rights that stem from this is surely the best theoretical position to adopt. All humans need to flourish. Core to such flourishing is a recognition that all of us are embodied creatures and that there are needs that stem from this embodiment. Humans are also social creatures and a basic degree of freedom is necessary in order for them to be able to exercise their sociality.

A belief in universality about kinds of thing, like women, is also linked with an ability to distinguish the truth from what is not the truth. All of us have the right to have access to the truth about matters ranging from the numbers at US Presidential inaugurations to facts about the Holocaust. It is a universalising perspective about, for example, women, that allows to recognise a woman when we see one. Moreover, employing the general

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concept 'woman' does not preclude recognitions of cultural, racial and other forms of diversity. As Margaret Whitford once claimed, feminist membership is like Merleau-Ponty's heap of sand: each grain is different and minute, but the total sandbank may block a river (Whitford, 1991, p.5). Each woman is both different from every other but also like every other.

A universalising perspective recognises a number of key and core rights – the right to be free from religion as equal to the right to practise religion, the right to be treated equally as well as rights to be free from racism, anti-semitism, sexism, anti-Muslim racism and homophobia. It is on the basis of our shared humanity that it is possible to theorise a perspective that recognises all of these as rights. Racism and sexism deny the humanity of those affected by these oppressions. Anti-Muslim racism may be different but, in its extreme variants, it tends to damn all Muslims as right-wing fundamentalists. Failure to recognise the rights of cartoonists to lampoon religious characters, the rights of all of us to gain access to the truth, the rights of all to be free from religious persecution, the rights of all to be free from sexism is a failure to recognise the rights of all to flourish as individuals and as groups.

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It is a universalising perspective about humanity that allows us to recognise that crimes against humanity have been committed by powers, like, for example, Saudi Arabia, Iran and many more, as well as by states like the USA. One lesser known such crime is the collusion of the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Pakistani army against secular nationalists and religious minorities in 1971 (see Sahgal, 2014). Indeed, it may be the denial of the possibility of a universalising perspective that leads some in the west to castigate as racist white people who set out to critique such practices. Leftist 'multiculturalism' has encouraged the naming of 'non-westerns' as victims rather than fully fledged members of universal humanity, and a corresponding reluctance to critique right-wing religious ideologies. As Chetan Bhatt has put it (Bhatt, 2006): 'Also of importance is the inert, innocent nature of the agency and subjectivity that left culturalism imparts to non-western subalterns and western diasporics, a kind of heroic, narcissistic, victimology that cannot name itself as such. In much multicultural theory, the diasporic subaltern is primarily a culturally-described, infra-ethical victim rather than a subject *fully* capable of ethical existence and judgment.' It is a universalizing perspective that best allows us to recognise the non-western as a fully -fledged subject instead of either

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object of hatred or pity. It is a universalizing perspective that allows us to
condemn all forms of discrimination as unjust.¹

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¹I'd like to thank Dagmar Wilhelm for comments on a draft of this. Also, I have written about universalism for many years. The most recent piece is: Assiter, A, Why Universalism? *Feminist Dissent*, 2016 (1) 35-63. See also my books *Enlightened Women*, Routledge, 1996 and *Revisiting Universalism*, Palgrave, 2003 for more development of some of the arguments of this piece.

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