

Research Article

Universalism or Nationalism - Lessons from the Ukrainian War

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Abstract

Beyond the military, economic and political consequences on the whole of Europe, the brutal arrival in 2022 of the Ukrainian conflict has profoundly modified Western social thinking on a level that risks being prolonged in time. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 seemed to open a window of freedom of thought, which was translated by an evolution of the conceptions of citizenship. In these conceptions, citizenship was then defined as an attachment to a democratic society and a will to maintain it. This period is now in danger of being forgotten in favor of nationalism and the abandonment of the organization of a world space where different forms of citizenship could coexist. Under what forms can new spatial organizations be imagined amid nationalism?

The Ukrainian crisis, which had been simmering for a long time, abruptly reignited media discourse in 2022 on universalist goals. It erupted amid a climate of relative international peace, which—in the context of the European Union's formation and gradual expansion—had stripped the ideas of national citizenship of their aggressive nature. In this sense, one could say—and I myself had written at the time that this conflict marked the end of universalism. The increasingly dramatic events of the four years that followed led to more complex interpretations. The event transcended the meaning attributed to it at the time in the Western world, leading to a reexamination of universalism itself. Jürgen Habermas defines citizenship as an attachment to a political culture founded on democracy and civil rights. In today's media landscape, this definition may seem to reflect a "Western" perspective. A disciple of Castoriadis, Thibault Tranchant aptly notes that "de-Westernized universalism should be situated at the intersection of cultures, not in the form of a consensus, but rather as a process of dynamic co-creation based on the recognition that cultural differences are irreducible."

The Nationalist Project is Easier to Implement Politically

We are thus at the heart of the debate between nationalism—which is, in a sense, the guardian of cultural diversity—and the internationalism of the universal process. The Ukrainian revolution has drifted somewhat into this debate, just as the French Revolution itself had done in the 18th century, since, having begun with the philosophical demand for democratic discussion, it went on to claim the annexation of a territorial space—Crimea—outside of any democratic debate. In the current context, "Western" philosophers tend to be wary of nationalism; "national spaces are not given; they are constructed through political practices" (Gilles Deleuze), "the nation-state is a reservoir of power for the expression of capitalist social relations" (Anthony Giddens), and Liav Orgad reminds us that 72% of 15- to 24-year-olds worldwide use the internet. The socio-political literature that developed at the junction of the 20th and 21st centuries may now seem not only unrealistic but almost unreal, so strong is the disconnection from the new reality. The crisis of 2022 has absolutely highlighted the two facets of citizenship. For the Russian ruling class, the essential question is the valorization of the national ideology around the strength of a historical tradition, and the assertion of a solidarity between the Great Russia and the countries which were affiliated to it. In this framework the ideology developed during the Ukrainian revolution of 2014 has absolutely no meaning.

It can only be interpreted as an absence of patriotism and subjection to Western ideology. Human sciences should not propose as universal truths social or political options specific to the Western world. The crisis has highlighted the Russian dilemma in its contact with Europe. Russia is a part of the old European cultural ensemble of Christian origin, but it remains attached to its imperial status as a nation-state. In the hope of refocusing on Siberia, it is attempting an analogy with China, which has been able to maintain a solid cultural area around itself. The war illustrated the difficulty of defining supposed "cultural" boundaries. It also showed the insecurity created by the intellectual and strategic uncertainties of a country torn between a citizenship based on nationalism and a citizenship based on an attachment to a certain political and moral culture. This difference of perception is not the reflection of the national cultures, because, as Jean Brunhes and Camille Vallaux (1921) [1] note it, "in all the modern countries, one can say that it was established a rhythm which makes alternate the periods of overexcitation of the national cohesions turned against the foreigner and the periods of social internal fights which tend more or less confusedly to the civil war. Ukraine of the 21st century is no exception to this rule, since it began with a civil conflict over freedom and democracy, and after the victories obtained in 2022, thanks to American support, it quickly turned, like Russia, towards a nationalist claim to recover the borders that it had obtained administratively during the USSR.

Universal Empire or Universalism

Under the guise of cosmopolitanism, we are entering an era of intense political upheaval that takes us away from the dreams of a world citizenship which, for Kant (1795) [2], would have been a state of nations (*civitas gentium*), which would always grow and embrace all the peoples of the earth in the end. The idea of citizenship attached to the concept of social project is not without ambiguity. “Is it possible to manage, or even solve, global problems within the framework of the market economy?” asks Michel Damian (2015), who adds that “the universal today has only one status, that of the capitalist world market.” A Franco-Serbian author, Nicola Mirkovic (2022) [3], thus compares what he calls “*the American Empire*” to what the Roman Empire had been. America, he writes, by taking advantage of the weakening of nationalism, governs nations that are not directly subject to it according to its own interests. It thus establishes “a world government by consent, as opposed to colonization by territorial conquest. The Empire develops in this way monetarily, diplomatically, and economically according to its standards. The historian Fustel de Coulanges (1864) [4] does not give a different picture of the way in which Rome had obtained the Empire “without making very great efforts. It supported the aristocracy everywhere, he wrote, and everywhere also the aristocrats were its ally, “they turned their eyes to Rome, counted on it, adopted it as their protector, and chained themselves to its fortune... Almost no one then thought that there was a choice between independence and subjection; for most men the question was only between aristocracy and popular party.

Without wanting to make the Nation a superior objective to any other spiritual conception, it seems difficult not to link a brotherhood of human groups to territorial limits within which they are gathered. The conception of nationalist citizenship has, however, evolved since antiquity. “One no longer loved the fatherland for its religion and its gods” deplores Fustel de Coulanges, “one loved it only for its laws and its institutions”. As these changed frequently, he adds, in the state of instability in which all the cities found themselves then, “this new patriotism did not have exactly the same effects as that of the old ages”. His conclusion is that this “modern” patriotism, one might say, “became a variable and inconsistent sentiment, which depended on circumstances, and which was subject to the same fluctuations as the government itself.

Cosmopolitan Thinking Challenged by the Link to Soil

One loved one's country only as much as one loved the political regime that prevailed there at the time; he who found its laws bad had nothing more to attach him to it. The geographers Brunhes and Vallaux (1921) [1] have a similar concern about what could be called intellectual fantasies: “the specialized scientific work of each one of us in his modest field, of necessarily international character, the international congresses, which often put in contact during the years of peace men of all languages and all countries, the increasing internationalization of the capital, of the trade even, all that had led us little by little to dream of a world which does not exist yet”. One comes, according to them, to neglect the powerful realities of human geography, one wants to say by that this distribution of the men in groups whose affinities are made either by the blood, or by the religion,

or by the language, and to believe even more vain, or at least secondary, this major distribution of the men in national groups “. These authors reaffirm further this basic idea: “without land, without territory, there can be families, hordes or even tribes, it cannot be conceived that there is a State”. In a reflection on the end of the Nation-State, Jean-Marie Guéhenno (1993) also wonders: “since the Greek City, politics has been the art of governing a community defined by its rooting in a place, city or nation. If solidarity can no longer be linked to geography, if there is no longer a city, if there is no longer a nation, can there still be a politics?.

Distinguishing Nation and State

In a search on texts of the philosopher Proudhon, F.Ferretti and E. Castleton (2016) [5] analyze the links between geography and libertarian thought, and particularly the confiscation by large political units of diverse cultural identities. For Proudhon “the state is an artificial historical invention”. He gives proof of it by the drawing of the international borders, which often follow rivers valleys, whereas they are precisely places where the people are living harmoniously together. The territorial claims of states based on this or that diplomatic treaty or battle of the past are not geography, but messianism. Certainly, he writes, the geographer is the master, “if it pleases him to give to a land surface circumscribed by rivers, mountain ranges, or seas, such a name as he pleases, but this name is no less arbitrary. The federations, which for him are the basis for the formation of a new Europe, are to be realized according to the will of independent peoples. His model is Switzerland, where what constitutes nationality is not race or language, but cantonal independence...

Universalism is obviously not likely to be realized based on relations between nation-states. It could only be achieved “from below”, outside the will of the nation-states. The development of mobility, which the world has experienced since the 20th century, has affected all categories of population and all geographical environments, under extremely diverse social conditions. The territorial contexts, both national and regional, are often partly outdated, without a clear global context of substitution. “The State should always be the superior political organism that makes several nationalities or nations live together,” write Brunhes and Vallaux, but “the State-Territory sooner or later leads to the incorporation of all the beings that live there”. This makes R. Nejadmerh (2022) [6] say that “nationalisms, by reducing national histories to a single story, told from a single perspective, bring in themselves racism and hierarchies”.

Preparing for Peace as Some Prepare for War

Far from being the illusion of a universal peace, universalist thinking is simply the observation that the development of communications makes it possible to envisage in the long term an organization of human society at the earth level, which will obviously never put an end to conflicts, but will regulate them. Derrida (2010) [7], in a philosophical seminar, reminds us, like Kant, that the greatest evils from which humanity suffers are due to war, or, more precisely, “to the incessant preparations for a war to come”. War is therefore “the condition, the element, the essential horizon of the State and of organized society. Without the horizon of war, the State has no reason

to exist. The end of war is the end of the State. And Kant goes on: it is only after the completion of this culture, God knows when (*Gott weiß wann*), that an eternal peace would become possible “...

It is precisely from Derrida that Thomas Dekeyser (2022) [8] is inspired in taking up the questioning of the same seminar: nothing is as uncertain as the world itself. In this recent text, Dekeyser defines geography as “a discipline of the world under construction”. This world under construction by geographic thinking is normally meant to be attractive and presents itself with a promise of meaning, stability, and community. For Dekeyser, however, following Derrida and Heidegger, the possibility of world lessness cannot be excluded. This was the case of the loss of identity and coherence, in the 16th-18th centuries, of the Black African populations caught in the violence of slavery. A new world lessness is not impossible. Can we not imagine now, for example, a century of division between a Siberian-Asian terrestrial space and an oceanic space?. The war in Ukraine, by the trauma it has created in the Northern hemisphere, could be a factor of change in the world atmosphere. This is how the Second World War brought about the end of the colonial system. After a new period of exacerbation of the nationalism of the nation- states, the 21st century could lead to a further rethinking of world organization. “Modern humanity forms a whole” wrote Brunhes and Vallaux, “but a whole does not mean unity, harmony, fraternity or peace. There is not, there cannot be, a static peace, there can only be principles of organization of the world, which are just enough, fruitful enough and powerful enough to allow for the daily imbalances revealed by the geography of history to be corrected without respite, and to re-establish the compromised equilibrium from day to day. In the present conflicts it is obvious that the UN has lost the game, as its predecessor the SDN in the 1920s to 1930s. That means that the way to a kind of Universalism will not be easy. Precautions must be taken: first a fierce design to achieve the project, and the capacity to take advantage of the opportunities. The fall of the Berlin wall was such an opportunity to open discussions in the European field, instead of what, NATO attempted to recruit new members independently. The most important is to respect the life goals of the different countries and the rejection of any denial of others’ ideas. Cohesion cannot be achieved by force, and the world’s present situation may be a good period to follow these rules, if we consider the recent failures of the countries that have tried to overwhelm by force [9-28].

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