

Why the world needs a universal politics

Many of the problems facing the world are global, from climate change to rising inequality. But how can ordinary citizens hope to tackle these issues when they take place across national borders? Ilan Kapoor and Zahi Zalloua argue that what is needed is a universal politics that can address these collective challenges. But rather than relying on the narrow particularism of identity politics, we should build this new politics on a 'negative universality' that is rooted in people's shared experiences of exploitation and marginalisation.

Now more than ever, a universal politics is sorely needed and lacking. This is because capitalism appears unstoppable today, accompanied by growing socioeconomic inequalities and diminishing avenues for political contestation. Thus, in a [new book](#) we propose a model of universal politics aimed at countering both the globalisation of capital and its accompanying 'post-political' accoutrements.

We claim there is a negativity at the core of all social articulations that provides the basis for a universal politics. We therefore argue for a *negative* universality, rooted not in a positive element (e.g., identity-based politics) but a discordant one, so that under our current global capitalist system, solidarity is to be forged on the basis of social antagonism (i.e., shared experiences of exploitation and marginalisation).

Such a conception of shared struggle, we believe, avoids the trap of both a neocolonial universalism (e.g., the rights of Europeans parading as universal rights) and the narrow particularism of identity-based politics. Most importantly, it foregrounds the struggles of the systematically dispossessed and excluded (the permanently unemployed, migrants, refugees, sweatshop labourers, and others), who stand as a symptom of our global capitalist order.

What is universal is neither identity nor thought but the antagonism that structures both.

The universalist project that is capitalist globalisation is matched politically today by a scepticism about advancing any alternate universal project: given universalism's (neo)colonial history, many on the left appear to have abandoned it in favour of more localised forms of politics. But to date, the latter have failed to either meaningfully challenge the system – capitalism appears only too ready to commodify new identities and localisms because they pose no real threat to capital mobility – or redress the systematic exclusion of the subaltern. It is squarely this contradiction that we aim to address.

We begin with the Hegelian-Žižekian move to identify universality negatively, that is, through that which is absent rather than present. Since, according to Hegel, every identity/thought depends on that to which it stands in opposition, contradiction is not to be seen as its limitation or weakness but its very driving force. Antagonism is therefore the internal condition of every identity. In this sense, what is universal is neither identity nor thought but the antagonism that structures both.

Since the universal is the name of the gap that prevents the particular from achieving its self-identity, it is always particularised. But this is only to rehearse the above-mentioned point that every identity is always unstable, that is, at odds with itself, unable to be identical with itself, as when the 'universal' rights of white male property owners inevitably bump up against the rights of women, racialised groups, workers, and so on. The paradox here is that universality can only be articulated from a specific standpoint, making it possible to avert the postmodern trap of insisting on particularity while denying truth.

It is the antagonism at the hub of every 'particular' that enables the possibility of shared struggle. When each particular (e.g., an identity-based movement, worker's struggle, or anti-globalisation protest) discovers that the deadlock which stymies it is also the deadlock that stymies others, then their common predicament becomes the basis for political solidarity. What each particular shares is not a positive content (e.g., an identity, which can end up dividing people across class, gender, North-South, or racial lines), but an inability to complete itself (as a result of common patterns of socioeconomic marginalisation or exploitation). Hence, it is this shared universality-as-antagonism that we claim lays the groundwork for a global left politics today.

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We compare such a ‘negative’ conception of universality with four competing contemporary versions of universalism – conservative, liberal, postcolonial, and Marxist. We also bring negative universality into dialogue with present-day critics of universalism – postmodernists, post-Marxists, queer theorists, decolonial pluriversalists, and new materialists. Finally, we examine what a universal politics might look like today in the context of such key global sites of struggle as climate change, the refugee crisis, the Palestinian question, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, political Islam, workers’ struggles, the Bolivian state under Morales, the European Union, and Covid-19.

In the case of the EU, we argue in favour of a left universalist Europe and the potentially progressive role it could play in current global politics. The idea here is for a Europe, armed with its social democratic-egalitarian legacy and socioeconomic power, to counter the neocolonial and postpolitical directions of global capitalism; that is, for Europe to stand for something politically challenging and antagonistic, thus acting as a viable leftist alternative to either US or Chinese hegemony.

This would of course mean a self-critical Europe that comes to terms with its many pernicious legacies (colonialism, liberalism, racism, the holocaust, exploitation, misogyny, and so on) so as not to reproduce them in its pursuit of global egalitarian justice. Such a universalist vision of Europe also serves as a counter to populist responses to the EU. Unplugging from global capitalism – and thus returning to national sovereignty (England first, France first, Germany first) – is both nostalgic and myopic.

What a left universalist Europe crucially points to is transnational governance – a key priority in our globalised world (especially post-pandemic). Despite its many internal squabbles and troubles, not only does the EU allow for the imposition of standards on such things as women’s rights, anti-racism, or environmental and labour codes, but more than ever it is proof of the success of multilateral cooperation to establish executive power at a supra-national level. Only by acting transnationally do we have a chance of meaningfully regulating and constraining global capital. And only by acting transnationally will we be able to confront such pressing issues as climate change, Covid-19, or the refugee crisis.

For more information, see the authors’ accompanying book, [Universal Politics](#) (Oxford University press, 2021)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [CHUTTERSNAPE](#) on [Unsplash](#)
