

*On Universals. Constructing and Deconstructing Community*, Étienne Balibar, trans. Joshua David Jordan, Fordham University Press, 2020, 160pp, ISBN 9780823288557, £20.99 (paperback).

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What contradictions are articulated when we speak the universal? This is the question that connects the essays and lectures from a fifteen-year period which are collected in Étienne Balibar's new book *On Universals: Constructing and Deconstructing Community*. The central claim of Balibar's book initially appears contradictory: that the value of universalism is found in its pluralisation. However, as he expresses throughout, such a contradiction is found at the heart of all claims to universality. On one side of his argument, universal claims are shown to already be historically and geographically located. On the other, is his contention that rather than promoting consensus, articulations of the universal promote conflict, undermining their universal status. In this sense, he argues, claims to universality are always localised and conflictual. In examining the ways in which articulations of the universal are constructed and deconstructed, Balibar's intention in this book is to revive the notion of the universal as a motivating force for radical politics.

The link between universals and politics plays out in the first chapter, where Balibar examines the universal as a site of struggle between inclusion and exclusion. In response to the work of Joan Scott and Judith Butler, who both complicate the relation between the universal and the community, Balibar highlights an ambivalence within all claims to universality. He argues as every enunciation of the universal "functions as a norm" (p.15). Universal claims set the standards by which all following claims are judged, consequently creating their own exclusions. Simultaneously, Balibar maintains that any such boundaries cannot be drawn without a negotiation and contestation over what the differences and identifications involved may consist of. This leads Balibar to conclude that the contradiction inherent in every universal claim is the very condition for politics.

In the first of two long central essays, Balibar further examines this contradiction via the concepts of construction and deconstruction. Reading Hegel and Derrida, Balibar argues that every construction of the universal, simultaneously undertakes a deconstruction. This takes place both as an “erasure” of what has come before and as a failure of total representation. What this means is that every claim to universality, such as the declaration of human rights, contains its own undoing as it is unable to be wholly inclusive. Accordingly, there will always be that which is non-representable, or which does not fit specific categorisation. As such, every universal turns against its own articulation as contradiction, exposing that every universal claim is both delimiting and fictive.

Balibar then puts this process of construction and deconstruction to work to critique three forms of the universal. In Hegel, Balibar finds that the enunciation of the universal immediately entails its negation. The universal can only be realised as a particular claim, excluding other claims. This in turn makes universal claims resistible. Consequently, Balibar argues, conflict is a necessity inherent in all universals.

Balibar goes further to explore how forms of resistance can emerge in relation to dominant ideologies. Thinking through the implications of Marxist accounts of ideology, Balibar contends that ideology is an expression of the universal which applies its own internal logic of domination onto those it dominates. Yet, as Balibar has already claimed that each construction of the universal contains its deconstruction, this gives rise to the potentially problematic position that resistance to domination must also have its basis within the dominant ideology. In attempting to show how resistance can emerge from within such a position, Balibar returns to Scott, to propose a notion of non-identity with identification that suspends the means by which ideology dominates without giving up on universal claims entirely.

The reason for his desire to hold onto universal claims becomes clear as he examines the relation between subjects and the community. It is through universal claims that the subject’s forms an attachment to the community. Calling on Althusser, Balibar argues that the subject, interpellated by universal law, becomes a member of the community in which the law applies. Through this process, the particularity of the subject is forfeited on the condition of belonging to a community. Yet as Balibar rightly points out universal ideals always exceed the lived experience of subjects within the community. As such, Balibar contends, universal claims serve as an ideal by which the subject judges the merits of the community. Ultimately this links the three different forms of the universal that Balibar examines. The excess provides the space for conflict and resistance to the exclusions that universal claims institute. This then, for Balibar, indicates the possibility of a politics responsive to both the difference and the community.

Balibar’s second central essay examines the contradiction within universals through three differing philosophical substitutes for universality: disjunction, totalisation and translation. Thinking with Hegel and Marx, Balibar contends that totalisation reveals an uneven relation of domination between universals. This conflict is also apparent in the disjunctive approach. Reading Spinoza and Wittgenstein, Balibar examines the incapability of theoretical and practical enunciations of the universal. Theoretical universality regards describing the universal; practical universality regards the norms and uses of the universal. What Balibar concludes is that universality

can be defended from differing yet equal approaches. This highlights again that universal claims are equivocal, relying of the mode of their articulation for their justification.

Translation is another arena in which this equivocacy is found. Translation functions as an attempt to universalise language yet Balibar takes the stance that a perfect translation can only stand as an ideal. The process of translation fails to provide the certainty of meaning and consequently only provides relative truth. Following Walter Benjamin, Balibar maintains that while translation cannot transform one language into another, it holds out the possibility of common expression and experience. Rather than offering a substitution of one language for another, translation contains the potential for a shared community of meaning. Yet Balibar is also surely correct to argue that the community is defined by the historicity of power relations in which translation takes place. As such, he contends, translation reveals that articulations of the universal are always experienced politically.

Universality as a political reality returns in Balibar's debate with Alain Badiou. Balibar points out that "universalism *never does exactly what it says, nor exactly what it does.*" (p.85, italics in text) Balibar's interest in citizenship reveals this. Citizenship as a universalist discourse aims to suppress difference in the name of equality. Yet equality, if taken seriously reaches beyond boundaries and limitations. This leads Balibar to dwell on the notion of exclusion to highlight the troubling spectre of violence that follows claims to the universal. This is not to argue the case against the universal but, Balibar advocates, to recognise the responsibility for this violence that comes with any enunciation of it.

Importantly the violent and political nature of the universal plays out in what Balibar terms "anthropological differences" (p.98). This refers to how human differences are assigned value, unequally distributing access to citizenship. Balibar asserts that within modern societies human differences are claimed to be natural to justify exclusion. Yet, as such classifications are unstable, exclusions provoke revolt against the means by which they are enforced. For Balibar this elicits the recognition that violence inheres in both the exclusion of those considered different and in difference's celebration.

Ultimately Balibar claims that the political rationality of universality is a process of conflict between the localised site of every universal claim and the excess or openness that moves universals beyond unity. The value of universals is, he claims, found within this conflict. Throughout the book Balibar shows how every claim to universality carries exclusionary and violent practices. Yet as universals are always competing and ambiguous, each articulation of the universal is a site of resistance. The point then, for Balibar, is that these competing and conflictual sites of universal make possible the idea of community while refusing to homogenise difference.

In his introduction, Balibar claims his intention is not to resolve the paradoxes found in speaking the universal but to problematise our understanding in order to clarify the value of universalism. In this he is eminently successful. This short, sharply argued text weaves together various and competing strands of philosophical discourses on universality into a coherent whole, highlighting the different forms, institutions and practices by which the universal is articulated. While such a project could become densely academic, Balibar is able to consistently demonstrate

the political implications and relationships that ongoing debates about universality holds with both accessibility and sophistication. As such this book is engaging and readable, making a strong case for the continued need to understand the conflict and paradoxes inherent when we speak of the universal.