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Radikaler Universalismus

Jenseits von Identität

Englische Leseprobe

Introduction

In 1959, W. E. B. Du Bois was invited to the Kremlin, where he was informed that a committee had chosen him as that year's recipient of the International Lenin Prize. The timing was not accidental. A Soviet committee bestowed on the towering African American scholar and author of *Black Reconstruction in America*¹ a prize "for the strengthening of peace among the nations"—a sort of communist Nobel—to make a point. As the Cold War was in full swing and the Civil Rights Movement was picking up momentum, Soviet Russia presented itself as successful where U.S liberal democracy had failed: in achieving racial justice. No doubt, there was a political agenda behind the committee's decision, but it would be mistaken to dismiss it as mere propaganda. In Jim Crow America, Du Bois could hardly have been bestowed by the White House a similar honor. The previous year, he had already received an honorary doctorate in economics by the Humboldt University of East Berlin, where at the turn of the nineteenth-century he spent a brief but formative period, taking classes with figures such as August Meitzen (Weber's mentor) and Wilhelm Dilthey. In 1960, as the Lenin Prize was awarded at the Soviet Embassy back in Washington—Du Bois insisted that the ceremony would be held in America—the man who once described his life as the "autobiography of the race concept,"² concluded his acceptance speech with a statement that in his mouth is hardly laconic. "I still cling to the dream of the America into which I was born."³

Four years after, in September 1964, Martin Luther King Jr. would travel to Berlin for an historic visit, on the invitation of the city's mayor, Willy Brandt. The official reason for the invitation was commemorating John F. Kennedy, who spoke in Berlin the previous year in front of the wall and was assassinated but a few months after. Brandt's decision to honor the assassinated president of the Western superpower conqueror-turned-protector by inviting the

¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1935).

² See W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward and Autobiography of a Race Concept* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Acceptance speech by Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, June 23, 1960*. James Aronson-W. E. B. Du Bois Collection (MS 292). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries. <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums292-b001-i142>.

black and still highly controversial icon of the Civil Rights Movements was remarkable. Just the year before, King was sitting in a Birmingham cell for marching in Alabama against court orders. The publication of his Letter from Birmingham Jail overlaps virtually to the day with Kennedy's "Ich bin ein Berliner." Clearly, West Germany also had ways to make a point about Western values and racial justice. During his visit, King insisted on crossing the wall and visiting the east, despite the reluctance of his hosts. In fact, the American embassy attempted to sabotage the crossing by confiscating King's passport. In the end, he did cross and gave a short sermon in the Marienkirche, using his American Express card for identification at the border. A president of the American Academy in Berlin would comment many years after that this was one indication that "capitalism can work" after all.⁴

It may be tempting to think that the heated identity debates of the last years were eclipsed overnight by Russia's gruesome attack on the Ukraine and the sudden return of an old-new type of conflict to the center of attention. But think again: questions of racial and social justice have always haunted Western liberal democracy—with the United States of America as its blemished symbol—against challenges facing it from without. True, by contrast to Soviet Russia, Vladimir Putin does not confront the West with a thorough ideology. But for years now, he has been positioning himself as the alternative to Western liberalism with regards to gay rights, the attack on Christian family values and ethnic "threats" posed by welcoming immigrants. That's one of the reasons why not just a former U.S. President counts as a Putin enthusiast, but large portions of the Republican Party. Besides, it seems clear that if Putin has any ideology, it is a nihilist one, celebrating power, and the question is to what extent the West stands in good faith for an alternative ideal. The strength of the principles for which we fight externally is measured by the integrity with which we hold these principles within.

For several years now, liberal democracy has been facing a crisis. The familiar intellectual attacks on its core value—enlightenment, universalism—have increasingly gained footing in political circles beyond sophisticated intellectual debates and lofty philosophy departments. What began in the sixties of the previous century as a postmodern provocation from Paris, carrying clear echoes from the Black Forest of the twenties and thirties, now influences politics well outside America's "Culture Studies" departments of the eighties. The version of

⁴ Michael Steinberg speaking at Cornell University: <https://www.cornell.edu/video/michael-p-steinberg-martin-luther-king-jr-east-west-berlin>.

postmodernism that is being exported back to Europe in the form of critical race and post- or decolonial theory is one that does not take the dreams of a Martin Luther King any more seriously than “the dream of America” into which Du Bois was born. Those dreams are being dismissed as illusions by both the Left and Right that tend to agree on at least one point: the problem with enlightenment universalism is not so much that it has failed, but that it was attempted. Indeed, both sides of the isle strive to replace the measure of abstract universalism by concrete identity: as the Right fights in terms of traditional values, the Left fights in the name of gender and race. Universal humanism is no longer accepted as the basis from which unjust laws and discriminatory power structures should be criticized and transformed. Rather, it is perceived as the mask that allows those in power to keep those power structures.

Authors writing in solidarity with African Americans, LGBTQ, ethnic minorities, and other discriminated groups often oppose the critique of “identity politics” by presenting it as a form of “white fragility,” or the hypocritical oversensitivity of the privileged. One author went so far as to dismiss the growing talk of an “illiberal left” as a “fairy tale.”⁵ While it is easy to focus on “juicy anecdotes about the excesses of anti-racist leftists,” the argument goes, these only constitute a “marginal phenomenon.” The growing progressive anti-universalist trends are not about “locking people into a would-be prison of identity” but about “demanding fundamental rights.”⁶

Especially if fundamental rights are at stake, however, the growing opposition to enlightenment universalism, and the accompanying conviction that Kant was the father of modern racism and even Nazism,⁷ should be taken more seriously. At stake are not minor juicy anecdotes, like the firing of a *New York Times* columnist or a *New York Review of Books* editor-in-chief for holding views that disagree with the current. As we enter an epoch of consolidating Western liberal democracy in Europe, as we fight the rise of far-right politics and ethnic nationalism, face global disasters and migration waves, it makes a difference whether we hold fast to the idea of universal humanism as a compass, even a weapon, or create a society in which this idea is mocked and despised.

⁵ Jan-Werner Mueller, “The Fairy Tale of the Illiberal Left,” *IPS*, August 21, 2020, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy/the-fairy-tale-of-the-illiberal-left-4584/>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See Robert Bernasconi, “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism,” in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), pp. 145–66; but especially Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) p. 72.

I can imagine that some liberal universalists in the center are at this point nodding their heads in agreement. That may be too fast. For many years now, what liberal democrats understand by “universalism” has been shrinking and shrinking; by now, the only remains are that concept’s empty shells. The clearest indication of the void may be the disappearance of the concept of duty, and the prevalence of the concept of right. All of us are familiar with the canonization of human rights that emerged at the end of the Cold War “as the international morality of the end of history” and called for an “entire library” of literature that explains their grounds.⁸ While there exists a vast literature on the history, philosophy and sociology of rights, hardly, if ever, is the question posed whether human duties are still alive. As one classic article on the topic suggests, whereas the concept of duty is pre-modern and religious, the concept of right is modern and secular: duties are what philosophers call heteronomous: Moses brought written divine duties down from Mount Sinai and *gave* them to the Hebrews. Rights, by contrast, are the mark of human self-determination, or autonomy.⁹ In this convenient atmosphere, liberals rarely argue for some hard universal duty for all humans that may well demand that they act against their interests—it usually does. Instead, they invoke their right as citizens to refrain from doing just that. When such “universalists” in turn defend enlightenment rationalism against ‘identity politics’, it tends to be the positivist strand of that movement that identifies ‘reason’ with ‘interests,’ and for which “enlightenment universalism” is, properly understood, a contradiction in terms. It isn’t surprising, therefore, that a professed anti-universalist such as Richard Rorty provides the backbone for much of liberals’ allegedly universalist worries about identity. When in the ninety-nineties Rorty led the attack on “culture studies,” he opposed the postmodern concept of identity with that of “national pride.”¹⁰ His most acute current follower, Mark Lilla, similarly confronts identity with “we-liberalism” and “patriotism,” but, unlike Rorty,

⁸ Samuel Moyn, “The Modernization of Duties,” *Liberties* 2:2 (2022), p. 52. It is remarkable that this powerful essay refrains from mentioning the one modern philosopher who did strive to modernize the concept of duty, namely Immanuel Kant. Arguably, this isn’t a side episode in the development of modern political thinking. For a notable exception, see Aleida Assmann, *Menschenrechte und Menschenpflichten: Schlüsselbegriffe für eine humane Gesellschaft* (Wien: Picus Verlag, 2018).

⁹ Robert Cover, “Obligation: A Jewish Jurisprudence of the Social Order,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 5:1 (1987), pp. 65–74.

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

he does hold that the alternative he thereby offers is universalist.¹¹ For Jill Lepore, who is much more progressive than Rorty or Lilla, there is “only one way” to defend liberal universalism and that is “making the case for the nation.” Since she makes the case specifically for the American nation, she adds, this requires “holding onto a very good idea: that all people are equal and endowed from birth with inalienable rights.”¹²

It should have been obvious that to make a case for universalism, the nation is the wrong starting point. A gulf separates the only possible origin of universalist politics—a truth about the equality of all humans—and the reduction of this truth to a “very good idea.” That we have become numb to the allegedly insignificant difference between the two may be the best evidence that the meaning of universalism has been successfully shredded to pieces.

For those who still hope to defend universalism, Kant remains the indispensable thinker. He grasped that the enlightenment movement that preceded him was not a universalist movement but, in fact, universalism’s worst enemy. Its positivist reduction of humans to blind nature replaced humanity by what Nietzsche would call “wise beasts”—objects of mastery and possession, exploitation and enslavement, not dignity. It is against this reduction that Kant insisted that the concept of humanity must remain abstract: free of biological, zoological, historical, and sociological facts. Such a metaphysical idea of humanity was familiar at least since the biblical prophets; what made Kant’s achievement epoch-changing was his ability to translate the biblical idea without falling back on religious faith or scientific reduction. In Kant, the idea of humanity was for the first time formulated as a moral concept: what makes humans human is not a natural characteristic but their freedom to follow their duty to moral laws. It is because human beings are open to the question what they ought to do that they themselves are subjects of absolute dignity.

The term ‘absolute’ is not gratuitous. By formulating the idea of humanity as a moral concept, Kant did not just translate the biblical notion of duty; he modernized the idea of following a law that is not manmade. The fate of universalism hangs together with the fate of this concept: only a law or a truth that’s independent of human convention is universal in *scope* rather than relative to the interests, desires, and ‘good ideas’ of those who have the power to legislate in human society. More importantly, only such a law is universal also in *authority* rather

¹¹ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper, 2017).

¹² Jill Lepore, *This America: The Case for the Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019), p. 20.

than just scope—it transcends the legitimacy that is conferred upon human agreements that may well be unjust. Kant would agree on this point with “identity-leftists”: short of an abstract idea of humanity and a metaphysical concept of law, universalist lingo is identity politics for white men. It allows those in power to exploit the shells of an empty moral language to preserve unjust power structures that ought to be transformed.

And yet, just as fake-universalists in fact pursue their own identity politics, the identarian left shares with fake-universalism more than they would like to concede. Anti-universalist theories tend to provide intellectual frameworks that deconstruct race or gender as biological concepts. Debates focus on unearthing the Enlightenment, or Kant, as the inventors of the scientific idea of race; on whether, say, Du Bois, did or did not completely overcome a biological understanding of that concept; whether we should occupy ourselves only with the biological “meaning of race” or also with “the truth of it” (and, as the case may be, its falsity).¹³ The tacit assumption is that by contrast to race (or gender), humanity *is* a biological concept. But it makes very little sense to deconstruct a dehumanizing concept of race while at the same time celebrating the destruction of the concept of humanity. The fight against systematic injustice and fake universalism can only be carried out in the name of true universalism. Not in the name of identity.

In the following, I offer a re-reading of three texts: The Declaration of Independence, Kant’s “What Is Enlightenment,” and The Binding of Isaac. This is not going to proceed as a one-text-one-chapter scholarly sort of interpretation. Rather, I make a case for universalism by studying the way in which these texts intertwine: they are monuments of a tradition that stands near to us but remains too often misunderstood; one in which the moral idea of humanity as open to absolute duty was still living.

The Declaration of Independence is the clearest political expression of that tradition. That is the reason why from pronouncing a “self-evident truth” about humans it moves by logical syllogism to asserting the right of revolution—here is one conclusion that doesn’t follow from a mere ‘good idea.’ The history of modern liberalism from Dewey to Rawls, from Rorty to Lilla or

¹³ Anthony Appiah: “The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race,” in *“Race,” Writing and Difference*, ed. H. Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). See also Bernasconi, “Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism,” and Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Lepore can be told as a story of intellectuals turning their backs on the Declaration in the aftermath of the Civil War. If this is so, liberalism as we have come to know it, or what I call fake-universalism, consists in rejecting a lineage that starts at 1776—not 1619—continues with the abolitionist movement, Abraham Lincoln, Gettysburg and King, and still regarded truth, not just freedom, as the driving force of the American dream.

Kant’s definition of enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity”¹⁴ contains the foundation of the redefinition of humanity in moral rather than biological terms. Immaturity in humans can be self-imposed only because maturity, or thinking for oneself, is an *Aufgabe* that depends on our use of our own freedom—not a development that is naturally ensured. However, as Kant and Tocqueville both realized, thinking for oneself—rejecting the authority of others—is virtually impossible where an independent standard of justice has been replaced by human consensus. Modern liberal thinkers sometimes take pride in rejecting all independent standards and the creation of an idea of humanity that has “no room for obedience to a nonhuman authority.”¹⁵ But this allegedly democratic replacement of higher justice by sheer human authority threatens to create a tyranny of the masses that makes conformism into a second nature. Paradoxically, perhaps, thinking for oneself, refusing the authority of others, is only possible by following a law that is not manmade.

The Binding of Isaac will be considered here not only because that story seems to pose the greatest obstacle to the biblical tradition of obedience to a higher law. Coming to terms with that narrative is necessary to correct a lingering misconception about the origin of universalism in biblical monotheism. Nietzsche provides a powerful formulation of that misconception: “Monotheism,” he writes, or “the faith in one normal god beside whom there are only pseudo-gods—was perhaps the greatest danger that has yet confronted humanity.”¹⁶ For Freud, too, the monotheistic idea, imposed on the Jews by Moses—an Egyptian priest, he claims, not a Jewish prophet—infused into Western civilization a universalism that is, among other things, the most

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,” trans. James Schmidt, in *What Is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, trans. James Schmidt et al., ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 58; “Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?,” ed. Heinrich Maier, in *Abhandlungen nach 1781*, ed. Heinrich Maier, Max Frischeisen-Köhler, and Paul Menzer, vol. 8 of *Werke*, ed. Wilhelm Dilthey, vols. 1–9 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Prussian Academy of the Sciences (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1912/23), p. 35.

¹⁵ See Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 18, where the idea is ascribed to Dewey and Whitman. See also his *Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2021), pp. 126–43.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Sec. 143.

violent form of intolerant religion.¹⁷ Jan Assmann analyzes this Jewish-Egyptian notion as the Mosaic Distinction, or as monotheism's "price": a revolutionary intellectual innovation that combined an absolute exclusive truth with religious thinking and created, among other things, violence and exclusion.¹⁸ One way to see how these mixed views of monotheism reverberate is the idea that liberal tolerance—not just about religion but about ethics—is a progress of Western tradition from Jewish-Egyptian monotheism to more tolerant polytheism.¹⁹

This view, however, contains a grave misunderstanding of biblical monotheism and, accordingly, of universalism. Moses is not the father of monotheism—Abraham is—and the idea that there is only one true God to the exclusion of all pseudo-deities is not monotheism's chief intellectual achievement. The main accomplishment of biblical monotheism is the affirmation of an exclusively one, true God—*and then still subjecting him to a higher justice standing above him*. Only with this move is the ethical significance of monotheism, and the universal idea of humanity to which it gives rise, understood, but that innovation is completely unfamiliar to Moses—egal whether he was Jewish or Egyptian. It is Abraham, the "father of all nations" and of the three monotheistic faiths who confronts the only true deity: "far be it from you to do such a thing, and sly the righteous with the wicked; shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?"²⁰ There is only one true God, but the authority of universal justice stands above it.

The paradox, of course, is that the same Abraham who utters this speech receives immediately thereafter a direct divine command to sacrifice, or murder, his "only beloved son". And on a first look, he demonstrates the model of monotheistic faith by placing God's order above justice.

Kant is the first thinker in modern history who condemned Abraham's obedience. Since the duty to humanity is universal, it stands above the authority of any command—of kings or deities. We shall see that once The Binding of Isaac is properly understood, Kant's condemnation of Abraham only translates Abraham's own monotheistic innovation. The origin of universalism in monotheism cannot be understood by reference to Freud's relation to Moses; it must be studied through Kant's relation to Abraham. His idea of humanity, and indeed of

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

¹⁸ Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Cf. Rorty : "Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism" in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, *Philosophical Papers* vol. 4 pp. 27-41

²⁰ Gen. 18:25.

enlightenment, is grounded in the Abrahamic Distinction: following absolute duty is not the origin of obedience but of disobedience. A law that is not manmade exists, but it remains firm in human hands. Because humans have a duty to this law, no human ever has the right to obey. To be alienated from this right is to be human, and command absolute respect.

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