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The North Atlantic Universals

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I'd like to engage you in a conversation about the *longue durée* of concepts in the modern world-system by emphasizing a family of words that I call "North Atlantic universals." I don't like to use the word *West,* which we all know is a misnomer, and by North Atlantic I mean what some of us most often call the West. As Martinican writer Edouard Glissant puts it, "The West is not a place, it is a project" (1997). Or to paraphrase a character in Alain Resnais's movie, *Mon Oncle d'Amérique* (1980), "The West does not exist. I know. I've been there."

To locate the West as a project, a geography of imagination is indispensable in understanding the nature, functions, and issues inherent in the longue durée of North Atlantic universals. My insistence on North Atlantic is not simply a quibble with terminology. It is a rhetorical and didactic move toward localizing, or better, parochializing a particular experience. For indeed, North Atlantic universals are words that project the North Atlantic experience on a universal scale that they themselves have to create. I don't like overusing the word *dialectic,* but what I have in mind is indeed a dialectical relation. North Atlantic universals are particulars that have gained a degree of universality, chunks of presized human history that have become historical standards. I suggest that we

may divide North Atlantic universals into somewhat overlapping categories: what I would call *substantive universals,* words that have to do with content somehow and classificatory universals. The division is largely heuristic, but I hope we will agree on its methodological and political relevance as I go on.

In the first set, that of substantive universals, I place universals that claim to project content. Words such as *modernity, development, progress,* and *democracy* are exemplary members of that already extended family that contrasts or expands according to context and interlocutors. Belonging to that category of substantive universals does not depend on a fixed meaning. It is a matter of struggle, contest about and around these universals and the world they claim to describe. There are two examples that come to mind as candidates for substantive universals: *globalization* and the *international community.* I love the *international community* in particular because I think of it as a sort of Greek chorus of contemporary politics. Nobody has ever seen it, but it is singing in the background and everybody is playing to it. So it's very interesting that a new universal is growing right beneath our nose.

North Atlantic universals, so defined, even when assisting or addressing content, are therefore not merely descriptive or referential. They do not only describe the world, they offer visions of the world. They appear to refer to things as they exist. But rooted as they are in a particular history, they are evocative of multiple sensibilities, persuasions, and cultural and ideological choices tied to that localized history. In other words, I'm suggesting that the words that can be used to describe the world and the projects themselves as universal must be located. They come to us loaded with aesthetic stylistic sensibilities, religious and philosophical persuasions, cultural assumptions ranging from what it means to be a human being to the proper relationship between humans and nature, and ideological choices ranging from the nature of the political to its possibilities of transformation.

To be sure, there is no unanimity within the North Atlantic itself on any of these issues, but there is a shared history of how these issues can or should be debated. And these words carry that history. Yet, since they are projected as universals, they deny their localization—especially the sensibility and the history from which they spring. These North Atlantic universals are always prescriptive, inasmuch as they always suggest, even if only implicitly, the correct state of affairs—what is good, just, sublime, desirable—not only what is, but what should be. Indeed, that prescription is inherent in the very projection of a historically limited experience: that of the North Atlantic on the world stage.

In other words, North Atlantic universals do not only prescribe, they seduce. Indeed, they are always seductive, at times even irresist-

ible, exactly because they manage, in their projection, to hide their specific localized and thus partial history. This power of seduction is further enhanced by a capacity to project affect without ever claiming so. We all think of these words as having no affect, so to speak. And I'm suggesting that part of their seduction is that they come to us with full affect, but with the pretense that they don't carry any emotional charge. To be sure, all ideas come with affect, but a successful universal tends to hide the affect it projects behind the claim of rationality.

I think what makes North Atlantic universals successful is exactly the fact that they come to us clean of history, and of any charge, positive or negative. It makes sense to be modern. How can one not be modern? It is good to be modern. Similarly, how could anyone not want to join the international community? These propositions mean different things to different people. At the same time, the numbers of divergent voices that use and abuse these words verify their attraction. Their capacity of meaning many things to different people is also part of the seduction. One might go as far as saying that the capacity to seduce, by hiding their own history, is inherent in North Atlantic universals. The ability to project transhistorical relevance while hiding the particulars of their marks and origins, including their affective load, makes North Atlantic universals as hard to conceptualize as they are seductive to use. Indeed, the more seductive these words become the harder it is to specify what they actually stand for.

Part of their seduction resides in the capacity to project clarity while remaining ambiguous. Even if we believe that concepts are words, a very questionable assumption, a quick perusal of the popular press in any European language demonstrates that North Atlantic universals are murky references. They evoke rather than define. Just do an Internet search on words like *democracy, international community,* or *globalization* and you'll understand what I'm suggesting. In this sense, popular evocations of North Atlantic universals work best in negative forms. We have a stronger sense of what modernity may mean when we point to the naysayers, such as the Taliban of Afghanistan, a tribe in the Amazon, or whatever figure temporarily plays the good or bad savage. We do not have a clear idea of what it actually means to be modern, only what it means to reject the modern. Again, seduction and confusion are related. Dreams of a democratic future, practices and institutions of democracy at work, and claims to join or defend international community vary in time and space. More seriously, attempts to conceptualize North Atlantic universals in the scholarly literature reveal little unanimity about their scope, let alone their denotation. It's fascinating to see how long academics have been disagreeing about what modernity may or may not be.

So far, I have insisted on the relativity of substantive universals and on the fact that they mask as much as they reveal. I suspect that most academics, especially most academics who see themselves as progressive or as part of the Left, are willing to accept this relativity, are willing to accept that concepts such as modernity, development, and modernization should be relativized and that they have a particular history. The extent to which politically progressive scholars may question North Atlantic universals depends, however, too much on immediate political sensibilities. That is, we are willing to question progress, development, modernization, or modernity as objective transhistorical categories largely because they come to us within a political package already held under suspicion. Our immediate instinct is to question these categories exactly because of the political package. But if development can (and should be) historicized, why not property? If property, why not money? This is the move that Marx starts to make in *The Poverty of Philosophy.*

> Economists express the relations of bourgeois production, the division of labor, credit, money, etc. as fixed, immutable, eternal categories. . . . Economists explain how production takes place in the above-mentioned relations, but what they do not explain is how these relations themselves are produced, that is, the historical movement that gave them birth. . . . [T]hese categories are as little eternal as the relations they express. *They are historical and transitory products.* (Marx 1955 [1847], 104, 110)

I will make three remarks about these passages. First, I wrote that Marx starts making this move in *The Poverty of Philosophy* because at least one reading of the entire Marx corpus is that all his theoretical work is a continuation of that project which culminates in *Capital.* Remember that the subtitle of this work is "*A Critique of Political Economy.*" Second, from the beginning, although Marx's attention is fixed on what I call substantive universals, notably property and money (which are the two major categories about which he questioned Proudhon's views in *The Poverty of Philosophy*), the list and the analysis both include categories that are obviously relational, such as the division of labor or credit. Third, the categories that receive the fullest treatment are those that are substantive rather than relational, such as property, which Marx wished to convert into a relational category, but that is for another discussion.

Clearly, most academics do not go as far as Marx went in relativizing categories. Yet, I want to be provocative and ask: Why should we stop where Marx stopped? Should we not extend a critical evaluation to relational categories, something he did not do, and therefore the words that I call *classificatory universals* starting with the classificatory universal that he himself helped to develop the best—class? That is, if property,

why not class? If class, why not race? If race, why not gender? In the chapter on ground rent in *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx writes these lines:

> In each historical epoch, property has developed differently and under a set of entirely different social relations. . . . To try to give a definition of property as of an independent relation, a category apart, an abstract and eternal idea, can be nothing but an illusion of metaphysics or jurisprudence. (Marx 1955 [1847], 154)

What I suggest today is that we turn the program that Marx applied only to the categories of classical political economy to all North Atlantic universals and all categories that pretend to describe the world. Furthermore, I insist that we pay particular attention to classificatory universals—class, race, and gender.

Why do they matter perhaps more than property? My answer is simple: Classificatory universals have an impact on methodology, and thus on the production of knowledge about the world in a greater, yet more difficult, way than substantive universals. Why? I'm going to take a quick detour, provide some background, and make a few basic claims with which you may or may not agree. I contend that the social sciences, notwithstanding the claims of individual authors, are underpinned by a naive empiricism derived from their congenital tendency to mimic the natural sciences, or more correctly, to mimic a certain vision of the natural sciences held by social scientists. The strategies of expansion, even expansion of perspective, often primarily rely on the alleged discovery of new objects and new topics. This tendency is present even in France, where it's largely taken for granted that the object of study has to be constructed and cannot be reduced to the object of observation. This unfortunate tendency reaches its apex in the Anglophone world where the influence of empiricism is more prevalent and where the object of study is often reduced to the object of observation. What you see is what you get. Anybody trained in history, economics, or anthropology, particularly in the United States, has a sense of what I'm talking about.

What does this have to do with the study of the world-system in the age of so-called globalization? It has a lot to do with it if we consider the longue durée of concepts. One consequence is that we often take the empirical expansion of our material for theoretical growth. That is, when we want to become global, or better yet, universal, we add facts and figures from elsewhere, empirical data from outside the North Atlantic. But is adding facts about the rest of the world the same as studying the world? I'm not even sure that it's the same as studying the rest of the world, let alone studying the world.

Is not the issue how we theorize the world and produce greater knowledge about that world, and how we do research within this theoretical framework? In that sense, I am sorry to say that I do not share the optimism of others. To borrow Bruno Latour's famous title, "We Have Never Been Modern," I will counter that we have never been universal. At least, we have rarely been universal, and, appearances to the contrary, we try quite hard not to be universal. Janet Abu-Lughod commented in chapter 11 of this volume (quite rightly, in my view) that one of Immanuel Wallerstein's most significant contributions in *The Modern World-System* was his insistence upon the world as a fundamental unit of analysis. It is telling that this aspect of his contribution may have generated less discussion than other aspects of that work. The methodological consequences of that claim have not been exposed or explored, at least not to my knowledge, outside the rather limited circle of world-systems analysts. It seems to me that if we want to be global, let alone universal, which are not necessarily the same thing, methodology broadly conceived (I'm not talking about research techniques, which I don't think of as methodology), that is, the construction of the relation between the object of study and the object of observation becomes crucial. Therefore, classificatory universals need to be problematized, which of course brings me back to race, class, and gender.

Wallerstein noted that these three words gained prominence in mainstream social science in the 1970s. But look at their career since then. Although inherently classificatory, they quite quickly became essential and fixed in their contents. They started as concepts and they quickly became topics. But even this is a generous description to the extent that class, certainly in the United States, was quickly ignored, even as a topic. There have been a few studies of the lower classes, but they have been exotic, and thus quickly severed from the very relations that make the class concept meaningful—that is, a relevant classificatory category in the first place. But if class quickly became irrelevant, race or gender did not necessarily fare better. Both became topics, solidifying respectively in Black studies and women's studies. They became, to use Marx's words, "fixed, immutable, eternal categories" (Marx and Engels 1967 [1859]).

Just as Marx says of property, one only has to identify their manifestations. If you look at the majority of mainstream women's studies, we're looking for either gender or something actually less than gender to the extent that it's not relativized at all in particular societies. This is what I mean by empiricist strategies. Or we're going to look at race in Brazil basically to satisfy ourselves that the Brazilians are either more or less racist than the Americans, end of story. This is, of course, a silly exercise if it weren't for the hegemony that it keeps reproducing. I argue that we

should actually historicize these very classificatory categories, although I'm not entirely sure how to do it.

I'll end by sketching not even a history of the race concept in its deployment, but what such a history could look for. I don't think I have reached a point where I can do this work, but I'll tease you with a few points of a longue-durée analysis of the concept of race. Interestingly, there is no widespread concept of race, and here I'm summarizing several ideas. There is no widespread concept of race in the Renaissance, that is, at the beginning of the secularization process that gave birth to social theory as we know it. It's not that the word was not there: The word is there, but it's not an essential word in conceptualizing social theory. It takes one in, as Sepúlveda did in arching back to Aristotle to justify enslavement of the Indians giving us the first hint of race as a social theory category. But even in the debate between Sepúlveda and Las Casas, the concept has no explanatory value, neither for Las Casas on the one side nor Sepúlveda on the other. This is, in part, because polygenesis is the strong ideology of the day, so there is no need to separate races. They were created somehow differently in the mind of Latin Christendom. But even then, the emphasis was on peoplehood in a sense, different peoplehood. That's the spirit of Montaigne's letters and his treatment of cannibalism among the Incas. That's the spirit of Montesquieu. Montesquieu doesn't need a concept of race, in that sense. With the African slave trade, and the first description of the Antilles, race starts having explanatory value. In fact, I argue against dominant international history that it's in the Caribbean and the southern plantations of the United States that scientific racism was born—not in Europe. It was then shipped back as a newer product to Europe, via the practices of plantation slavery.

This brings to mind what Brackette Williams calls the "overlap" between the intellectual, political, and lay life of concepts (1991). It seems to me that if we need to historicize categories, we need to keep in mind the fact that they are never just academic categories. They always have lives outside of academia, and their life in academia overlaps with their life outside of academia. With the African slave trade and the first description of the Antilles, race starts having explanatory value. If you read Labat, Du Tertre, or any of the early visitors of the plantation slavery in the Caribbean, you can see how race started to have explanatory value. The Blacks do it this way, the mulattos do it this way, the Europeans do it this way. It's a very different kind of thing from what you see barely a century earlier, for instance, in Jean de Léry's voyage through the land of Brazil (otherwise known as America), where de Léry describes the beginning (in a sense of what Du Tertre calls the "first technological text" (1667–1671) and where de Léry describes the life of savages

in the Amazon (1975 [1580]). He doesn't need a concept of race, he doesn't need race to do it; he can do it without racialization. By the time the first French and Spanish travelers, and later, British travelers, describe the Antilles in the late 1690s, they need a concept of race for the description to work.

Therefore, the increase of race is couched as phenotype. It has explanatory value, but it is phenotype. It doesn't rest on biology; it rests on appearance. It will take the work of biologists (or better said, naturalists of the time) to biologize race, at the very same time that the rise of a category of "mulatto" both in what is now the South of the United States and also in Brazil and the Caribbean genderizes race. So, I also argue that it's not as if we can take race and gender and put them together. We need to look at the ways in which these categories intertwine.

These increased features are going to be objectified by scientific racism in the eighteenth century. Race is fully biologized in the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. It has now become a scientific concept that reenters academia, supposedly with the weight or value of biology. By the late nineteenth century, biological inheritance, rather than simply race, becomes an explanation of behavior across group boundaries—not just in the Americas, not just in Europe, but throughout the world. You can see this shift. I'm arguing that race is not always race. The concept of race has different kinds of contents and different kinds of modes of production. The concept of race as biological inheritance of behavior is dated in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. But then it takes on a life of its own, particularly with racism and the Reconstruction in the United States.

This is the way in which Franz Boas is going to discover race as the concept of biological inheritance and build the foundation of American cultural anthropology on the questioning of that concept of race. Boas does not attack any concept of race; he attacks the concept of race as biological inheritance of behavior. In response to this concept of race as the biological inheritance of behavior, American anthropology invents a concept of race as culture. I argue that part of what the concept of culture in American anthropology does is to allow American anthropologists to have their cake and eat it too. That is, they can talk about behavior without challenging racism, because the race-as-culture concept is actually an anticoncept.

To understand the emphasis on culture in the United States, you have to understand the impossibility of having a serious and open debate about U.S. racism. What we call multiculturalism, for instance, has nothing to do with culture. The idea that somehow a Black, inner-city Chicago kid is closer culturally to a Kalahari Bushman than to his northern White, middle-class counterpart is nonsense. But this nonsense al-

lows us to be polite and avoid talk about racism. In this sense, culture is an anticoncept. It doesn't have any validity from within, but it allows us to escape another kind of conversation.

In the longue durée of the world-system, what worries me is that this culture, built upon the boundaries solidified by biology, is now being exported to the rest of the world from the United States with the "globalization" of consumer culture, particularly the movie and sports industries. We're selling Michael Jordan as culture to the rest of the world, from Brazil to Nigeria to South Africa, and I'm not sure it's a good thing. I suggest that concepts matter—in particular, contexts of deployment. These contexts of deployment require (I'm taking Immanuel Wallerstein very seriously) that we think of the world as a unit of analysis. To think of the world as a unit of analysis does not mean that we can't conduct particular studies, such as studying how the concept of race and culture intertwine in Boas and anthropology. But if we do this, we need to do it within the context of a deployment which itself is historical and universal in the sense of universal history. To treat race, gender, and even class as historicized categorical universals is, in Marx's own words, to fall into an "illusion of metaphysics or jurisprudence" (1955, 154).

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