

We Will (Always) Need a Universal

Zaki Laidi

Let us begin with Richard Rorty's question: how can we speak of "us," how to invoke a universal and abstract "we," when the people of the earth are separated from each other by so many inequalities and injustices? This is a crucial question, and one that it is a direct descendant of pragmatic inquiry. The essential aim of this kind of analysis, Dewey said, was less to "reach ultimate reality" than to "clarify human ideas in relation to the epoch's social conflicts."

The question "Who are we?" thus becomes "In the name of what principle can we identify ourselves with others, thereby creating a community of destiny linking us to these 'others'?" The elements of an answer, influenced by pragmatism, can perhaps be discerned in the very manner in which this question is posed:

- there is no common "foundation" upon which a collective project could be constructed and which people and societies can identify with, because the concept of a foundation is based on a metaphysical vision of the world.
- there can be no claim to "universal validity and truth." Instead there are beliefs whose meaning is not measured by the standard of truth but by a principle of action. In other words, a conviction that is not followed by a gesture or concrete action is without great value or interest. It is not enough merely to articulate a principle. It must be possible to translate this principle into action.
- Finally, and to the extent that there is no "universal language-game," the most important thing would be to attend to the internal coherence of each language-game. Thus, for example, Western societies would be better served by trying to assure the internal coherence of the word "solidarity" within their own societies than in imposing this principle on others. Rorty very

clearly stresses the importance of internal coherency over the claim to external truth, pointing out that the moral foundations of this internal coherency are in no way weaker than those invoked by the partisans of an abstract universalism.

For someone like myself, who is interested in world politics, these kinds of philosophical hypotheses are refreshing since they are relatively easily transposed into the realm of world relations. This endeavor does not seem to be a primary concern of Rorty's. Nevertheless, it is one of several interesting extensions of his thought and represents, independently of Rorty himself, an application of pragmatism to the field of international relations.

The Dispersion of Truths

The existence of a crisis of foundation, which is inseparably linked to the loss of Telos, would seem to be incontrovertible. One result of this crisis is a rethinking of the meaning of the concept "we." It must be taken down from its pedestal and debated.

Having elsewhere investigated the hidden meaning of the Cold War, we are equally convinced that the end of the great ideological narrations signals the same exhaustion of the Enlightenment matrix, at least as regards its teleological aspect. The historical process by which religious meaning was transferred to the political realm has reached its end. This is why Rorty has hit upon a crucial point when he writes, in *Science as Solidarity*, that the Western world is evolving toward "a stage in which it will no longer worship anything," even if the "death of worship" does not entail the end of all hope. On the contrary, the crisis of transcendence, from a pragmatic point of view, has two interesting consequences. The first of these is that the retreat of the "logic of revelation" goes hand in hand, for example, with the affirmation of various expressions of civil society in relation to the State. We are currently witnessing, in all the world's societies, a process of *dispersion of authority*. In other words, all the carriers of collective revelations, all the carriers of meanings that defend a vertical vision of authority, find themselves, in different ways, called into question: states, churches, unions, large, centrally-run businesses, etc.

Even the rise of Islamic fundamentalism does not necessarily contradict this development: on the contrary, it may actually confirm it. Of course, the various Islamic movements claim to be the bearers of a revelation. They even aspire to translate this revelation into political, cultural, and social terms. However, we cannot hope to judge adequately the true meaning of Islamism on the basis of this kind of argument alone. In all the countries where Islamic values have spread, they have arisen as a reaction of society against the domination or deficiencies of the State. In other words, Islamism would appear to be more of a political and social phenomenon than a religious one. Religion is nothing more than a "call to arms." Of course, it is likely that the Islamic leaders envisage the Islamic project in totalitarian terms. Yet this in no way disproves the thesis that Muslim societies make use of Islamism to assert their autonomy and to pursue the cause of secularization.

In other words, Islamism is but a transitional movement in the slow and chaotic process leading to the emergence of various forms of civil society in the Muslim world. Although this hypothesis may seem optimistic or even gratuitous, it is certainly not mine alone. Indeed it is the standard approach used by many specialists currently working on Islam. I have brought Islam into the picture because of my belief that Rorty's concept of the "end of revelation" applies not solely to Western societies but is part of a universal process of growing individuation.

This retreat of revelation has had one potential consequence on world civilization that has been little discussed to date: once the distinction between immanence and transcendence disappears, there suddenly exists the basis for what has been called, to paraphrase Habermas, "world communicative action." Whether rightly or wrongly, it has often been said that Eastern societies are interested neither in cosmogony or teleology but only in efficacy. In this sense, they can be considered "pragmatic" societies even without having read Dewey or Rorty.

Once the relationship of transcendence to immanence ceases to be a relevant criterion for defining the cleavage between Western and Eastern societies, can we not then begin to see the germs of a "communicative action," a universal collective project? I will try to answer this question below. For the time being I raise it only to

emphasize that the end of “revealed truths” need not necessarily imply an exacerbation of the sense of difference.

This being said, there can however be no doubt that, as a result of the “end of the Enlightenment” in its teleological aspect, we find ourselves living in a world of greater relativity. Moreover, this relativity is neither purely philosophical nor abstract. Given that wealth is no longer produced exclusively in the Euro-American world, and that the centers of world power are being decentralized toward Asia, it should come as no surprise that claims to meaning, validity and truth are also being decentralized. What we must establish is the link between the redistribution of power and the redistribution of truths throughout the world.

Here too, in his emphasis on the relativity of universal language-games, and his insistence on the search for internal coherence for each individual language-game, Rorty underscores a line of development that a world political analyst can only find congenial. Through the emergence of what might be called “areas of world meaning” we seem to be creating a world whose values are more balanced. In other words, against a background of universalism and globalization – which do not necessarily go hand in hand – the societies of the world will be more and more drawn to seek some form of mediation between a globalization that is perhaps too broad but unavoidable and a nationalism that is too narrow but in some sense inevitable. The Europeans, Americans, Asians, and Muslims will be more and more drawn to think of themselves as Europeans, Americans, Asians, and Muslims. Obviously, these self-identifications will be neither impermeable nor totally exclusive. But they will nevertheless be at the heart of discourse. In Europe, the construction of a European political totality has been the source of many problems. However, the fact that this question is always raised also implicitly indicates that it is part of the solution. When Richard Rorty insists on the primacy of the “internal coherence” of the language-game over its universalization, one is tempted to translate his analysis in the following terms: a formula or formulation that guarantees cohesion rather than the enunciation of a universalist message. The two principles do not necessarily contradict each other; rather what seems crucial to me is the way that Rorty implicitly prioritizes them.

Truth, Validity and Efficacy

We now come to the second phase of Rorty's analysis. It is here that he links universality to efficacy and where he conditions moral identification to a cause (i.e. a habit of action): moral identification is without meaning when it ceases to be tied to habits of action.

Once again, the world political analyst finds this line of reasoning rather seductive. This is so because wherever such an analyst looks, he or she can not help but note the stunning gap separating the grand and eloquent speeches devoted to the principle of universal values from the petty, mediocre and mean-spirited political practices that contradict these beautiful flights of fancy at every turn. It would be too tedious and time-consuming to draw up a list of these vertiginous gaps. However, doubt about the principle of universalism is not only justified but in some sense indispensable in the face governments that use universalism as a justification for the closing of borders to refugees and that curry favor with public opinion with references to the specter of "migratory malthusianism." In order to limit the right of asylum, these governments hide behind the idea that only a person threatened by a State has the right to seek asylum; yet these same governments well know that one result of the deregulation of violence has been the spread of armed bands whose violations of human rights are more or less controlled but no less unspeakably barbarous. In virtually all the world's rich countries, complaints are simultaneously heard about the strain of immigration and the economic competition presented by countries with low salaries; yet it is no secret that it is simply impossible to close national borders both to men and merchandise. Still, who among today's politicians has the courage to say that we cannot simultaneously cut off the flow of immigrants and shut our borders to foreign products? If competition and immigration are "evils," then we must make a choice among these evils. This choice must be made not in the name of generosity but realism. Moreover, the choice is made especially urgent in light of the fact that the globalization of the media has fundamentally altered the parameters of the problem. Today, thanks to satellites and cable networks, citizens of poor countries have been able to gain an intimate knowledge of the wealth of the North. Of course, the rich countries

have contributed mightily to this knowledge by developing ever new satellite systems that can reach the most isolated corners of the planet. Yet, while globalizing their values, the rich nations have jealously endeavored to territorialize their wealth. In other words, these nations are only disposed to universalize their values under the expressed condition that there be no demand for reciprocation or material compensation.

In this way, universalism becomes an export product that lacks any kind of after-sales service. Universalism can be purchased by satellite like mail-order goods. However, the distance thus established is not only of a physical nature. It is also moral. This is why, when Rorty calls for a form of "solidarity in which the 'we' is particular and contingent in every instance," one is tempted to say that in this case the reality has far outstripped the hope. What we see everywhere are communities of interest based on distant and reversible emotions, without any long-term commitment. One emotion supplants another. However, this emotive tension has limits. Whenever a problem that has provoked a strong initial emotion begins to grow complicated and shows no signs of immediate resolution, the unleashed emotional potential either dissipates or implicitly requires new "sensations". The extremely fragile nature of this kind of solidarity is thus revealed: it is fragile precisely because its only foundation is emotion, its only vanishing point the immediately given.

Even if we accept the proposition that the only way for a universalist proposition to attain authentic meaning is by its translation into fact, does this necessarily require us to reduce the question of the universal to its immediate and instrumental "efficacy"? It would seem not. Why not? For one, because the value of a message can not be measured by its efficacy alone, and certainly not by its immediate efficacy. For another, those who deliver a message do not have proprietary rights over this message. Thus even when they think that the message does not directly concern them, it does concern them in the end. In other words, the universal is not a static principle but one that is constantly reappropriated by those who receive it. It is an interactive play of language between speaker and listener.

In this regard, what can we say about the French Revolution, the principles enunciated by Woodrow Wilson, the end of the Second World War and the Helsinki Accords? We can say that the

messengers were in contradiction with themselves. However, sooner or later they had to answer for these contradictions. Both the French and American revolutions exalted the concept of equality among citizens while at the same time they sanctioned slavery. Yet who can say that these two revolutions did not encourage the struggle to emancipate human beings from slavery? When, on May 8 1945, France celebrated the victory over Nazism, its colonial troops were carrying out reprisals in North Africa because many of them, former soldiers who were natives to this region, likened the liberation of France to the liberation of their own countries. A similar scenario was played out in Madagascar in 1947. Obviously, the brutality of the repression was in conflict with French universalist principles. Yet who can say that the events of May 8 1945 did not hasten the movement to liberate peoples from colonial domination? When the Soviet authorities signed the Helsinki accords in exchange for an acknowledgment of the territorial *status quo* in Eastern Europe, Western authorities were ridiculed *ad nauseam* because of the disequilibrium between tangible concessions (made on the Western side) and formal commitments (on the Soviet side). The Soviet commitment to human rights did not seem to balance the tanks and missiles that were to remain stockpiled throughout Eastern Europe. However, in retrospect, it is clear that this bean counter's vision of the world collapsed with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The most extravagant and stubborn dreams deserve to be taken seriously.

This is why, in my opinion, it is not only indispensable to remain attentive to the disparity between principles and reality, but that we not conceive of this comparison as having a mechanical or instantaneous character. For example, there is nothing to justify the belief that, in the middle term, the gap between principles and reality can be narrowed. However, it is equally necessary that the comparison not be conceived merely in accounting terms, i.e. that "meaning" not become a purely *notarial* value, that reality not be reduced to immediacy.

There can be no doubt that universalism is an invention of the rich. However, its reappropriation almost completely escapes their control. The moment that someone risks speaking of "us," the person who receives the message can always answer with, "yes, and

we too are included," or "what are you doing to us?" or "it's not only for you," etc. In other words, there is much more at stake in invoking the concept "we" than is usually thought. Indeed the history of the world is full of such unexpected reappropriations – reappropriations that are more than ever a source of hope for those who are suffering and overburdened.

Let's take another example: that of free trade. It is clear that the idea of liberalized trade policies was the brainchild of the richest countries, who would benefit most from them. The Americans are often more "liberal" than others because they're stronger. But can this kind of argument fully account for the dynamics of world relations? It would seem not, because in the end the logic of reappropriation applies to all the actors. The poorest nations can use the concept of the free market to contest the rise of Western protectionism. Of course it's true that the rich, as Rorty says, engage in a process of "triage" among those principles that suit them and those that suit them less. But in a certain sense this activity is not all that important, because the game is a dynamic one. It is evolving, and not always to the advantage of the rich. Pierce defined pragmatism as "the search for all the practical effects that we believe can be produced by an object of our conception. The conception of *all the effects* (emphasis by the author of the present article) is our total conception of the object." It could also be argued that implicit in Pierce's formulation is the idea that the reappropriation of a language by an interlocutor becomes an integral part of the meaning of this language.

Everyone talks about the rich and the poor. This expression is of course reductive. However, it is none the less real. The world is profoundly unjust and unequal. Moreover, this line of demarcation is quite tangible. The fact that wealth is moving toward Asia resolves nothing. However, when we bear in mind that in 1964 a Nobel Prize winner in economics could devote an entire book to the drama of Asia and its incurable problem of underdevelopment, one cannot help but believe in the existence of maneuvering room. There is nothing to be gained by thinking of inequality in static terms or as an unbridgable gap. Even less is to be gained by seeking to assail the very concept of universality on the grounds that inequality is an overpowering force.

To rely on a more “modest” concept of universalism would seem to me essentially pointless because this “we” could be asserted by anyone, including by those who are in reality excluded. In our desire to be “realistic” we become “unrealistic” because of the world’s real complexity and the inability to reduce the world to relations of material forces alone.

What is to be gained by going along with a reduction of our universalist demands? What is to be gained by cultivating a certain relativism? As I see it, very little. Clearly, the most important thing is to harmonize our actions with our intentions. Yet to the extent that our hopes will always be disappointed, and to the extent that the concretization of our desires will always fall short of our expectations, the reduction of expectations can only result in a proportionate decrease in our accomplishments. There would seem to be no way of stirring up a hope without basing this hope on a powerful and creative tension between an initial situation and an aspiration. By seeking something “greater” or even unrealizable we of course run the risk of teleological slippage. Yet the lessening of hopes can also lead to despair. In truth, if we overemphasize the need to assail the notion of foundation, we may very well fall victim to what Jonathan Rée has called the “anti-universalist fury” – an attitude which, in spite of what its defenders may say, is rather similar to relativism. In our assault on metaphysical illusion we inevitably neglect all the intermediate solutions that lie between a dogmatic and abstract universalism and cultural relativism. There is indeed room between the two extremes for a “contextual universalism” that would be enriched by the tension between the universal and the particular. Here we can see the continued relevance of Pierce’s concept of “convergence,” even when this quest for a middle way between “foundationism” and “contextualism” takes the form of a regulatory principle or a “necessary idealization.” In today’s international political arena universalism serves democrats and minorities as a weapon in the battle against ethnic and religious intolerance. These groups have a profound need for a universal principle in order to link their survival to a broader and more powerful ambition. In Bosnia, the people who are struggling for peace require us not to renounce the idea of a potentially harmonious coexistence between communities. For them, the idea of a

universal is a last life raft. If we contradict them with principles of relativity or contingency we do so only to justify our not coming to their aid. This is not the hour for the perfecting of “teleological deconstruction”: this is the hour for the construction of a contextual universalism. Moreover, I fear that the principle of “ethnic solidarity,” which is trotted out as an answer to all our questions, is but a philosophical avatar of Rawls’s procedural justice. The ethical realm, from this point of view, becomes but a procedure that can be used to identify an “overlapping consensus” among compassionate or difficult subjects.

It is hard to see how ethics can serve as the basis for a project. The ethical is more a matter of deontology than it is a project. Ethics is indispensable to the day-to-day functioning of our societies. But it seems to be utterly incapable of assuming the responsibility for questions of meaning, which are related to the crisis of identifying benchmarks for our societies. It is easy to understand how, for example, an “ethic of finance” could regulate financial affairs. But it is difficult to see how this procedural ethic could offer the foundation for any kind of project, unless – once again – we make procedure the basis for such a collective project.