

Disentangling a False Dichotomy: Politics, History and the Universal Legacy of Europe

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One might start by acknowledging that the praise of particularity (and difference) has long gained the upper hand over the privilege of universality in the ideological landscape of late capitalism (which in a way amounts to say, as Agamben has recently reemphasized, that controlling disorder, rather than preventing it, has become the most important operation of present-day biopower). By the same token, it also means that the political valences of universalism might be reappraised today under a new light, in which case Europe's philosophical legacy – whose universalism has been dismissed on account of its implicit complicity with political totalitarianism – might be given a chance to reinvent itself not in spite but thanks to its universalist trait. Against the backdrop of multiculturalism's failure – so argues, for instance, Žižek – Europe's universal project would give us the opportunity to rethink *common* issues, problems and struggles, rather than simply – and often in merely a formal fashion – to respect others.

Europe's recent history, however, seems to prevent the promotion of Europe to anything but an example – “Auschwitz”, “Stalin”, “Hiroshima” being three names under which the failure of Western modernity's emancipatory project could be grasped. The question thus arises whether one is bound to minimize the memory of such events in order to reaffirm a politico-philosophical universalism as it were in the face of the blackmail of history...

Against this assumption, which entails a false dichotomy between political universalism and historical awareness, I will argue that both the dismissal of history (for the sake of politics) and the deflection of politics (for the sake of history) should, and can, be avoided for different though compatible reasons. Alternatively, according to my proposal – which I intend to discuss in dialogue with Adorno, Agamben, Badiou, Žižek among others – the proposal of an anti-totalitarian philosophical universalism would go hand in hand with the formulation of a historically informed politics.