

# Is Universality in Jeopardy ?

## Universality

### Universality, an ambiguous concept

For universality to be threatened it must at least exist. The question of the existence of such a phenomenon arises since it is an extremely vague concept, close to the equally imprecise concepts of humanism, civilization, human rights and international community. General concepts of this nature allow for all kinds of ambiguity.

Is it an actual situation or a remote ideal, a common vision expressing a consensus on clearly defined values, the projection of the multiple views of the world, or only the degree of compatibility between these various or antagonistic views?

In order to identify the modern dimension of the term universality, one must place oneself within a historical perspective: the progress made by man in establishing a common vision of the world dates from the 16th century. Until that time there were several civilizations which ignored each other. European civilization-Greco-Latin and Judaeo-Christian, while itself undergoing far-reaching changes through its scientific, then technological, and then democratic revolutions has, by establishing its empire, achieved a certain unification at the world level. Not only has the "time of the finite world" begun, but the European view of the world and conception of life have been widely disseminated over a few centuries. The development of standardized education and prodigious collective enrichment have finally led to the "consumer society", which is captivating the whole planet, including those who have nothing to consume.

This modern and at the same time bourgeois view of the world has nevertheless remained limited to those who have received a minimum level of education, a level to which more than a quarter of the world's population do not have access. The essential phenomenon has been the splitting of this incipient universality between several antagonistic views.

Firstly, the emergence and strengthening of the various forms of nationalism have led to political fragmentation inconsistent with the underlying orientation of this planetary civilization, and rivalries between hegemonic ambitions have resulted in two world wars. At the same time, a fundamental antagonism established itself from the nineteenth century onwards and then in the twentieth century was reflected in separate geographical zones representing the liberal view and the socialist view in disagreement on the analysis of history, on the relative importance of the individual and the social group, and on the vision of the future of mankind.

In these circumstances, universality has become, whether knowingly or not, a camouflage for forms of imperialism, the projection of one's own culture and one's own view of the world at the global level: the "others" are people, but they must be civilized to my taste, according to my methods and my views. This stage of naivety or hypocrisy institutionalizes a continuing political conflict. But it is not sufficient to pose the problem in terms of mutual tolerance, to consider universality as the humanist dimension of politics and culture, and to say that what is involved is consideration of the existence of the "others", beyond the confines of the national, cultural or linguistic community to which one is aware of belonging. This recognition of the value of the human individual, his dignity and his rights itself leads to the condemnation and, if possible, prohibition of everything that might harm him. But it requires a distinction between what is absolute and what is relative. Excessive tolerance and respect for all cultures can lead to relativism and the acceptance of the unacceptable. For universality to exist in the best sense of the word, one must also know where the borderline between tolerance and intransigence lies and one must agree on the criteria which make the distinction possible.

In short, therefore, it is at the political level that the essential problem of universality arises. Although one must remember that this problem lies within the context of an enormous common cultural background, only by defining universality as a "political view of the world" is it possible to deal with it in a relatively precise manner. For universality to exist, there should be a common political view of the world, in other words, universal acceptance of the same values and of the institutions capable of guaranteeing them. In this sense universality does not exist: it has

never existed and remains a remote ideal. The only question We can ask is whether we are moving towards it.

A comparison of the situations existing in 1945 and 1985 shows that progress towards universality has been much greater than might appear at first sight, but that the paths followed in approaching it have taken some very curious courses. They have made detours away from the eventual destination and the route over the remainder of the journey is not easy to determine.

But the desire to reach the destination exists: the dramatic experience of the disasters and chaos caused by the two world wars has created a profound and universal need to control more effectively the evolution of world society. The fear inspired by nuclear weapons is giving universality its chance. It remains to be seen whether we shall be able to develop the necessary methods and mechanisms to ensure that this chance is usefully exploited.

### **The situation of universality in 1945**

By the end of the Second World War, the world political situation had in a few years become profoundly different from that which had existed previously owing to two complementary phenomena: the profound transformation of Europe and the emergence of a dualistic world.

The war had led to the absolute and relative decline in the economic and military power of Europe and a corresponding increase in the power of the United States and the Soviet Union; the preponderant world influence of the "major European Powers" had been profoundly shaken; and in addition, the very excesses of the war would induce these major Powers of yesteryear, which had now become medium-sized powers, to soft-pedal their past rivalries and display a spirit of co-operation. At the same time, the fact that the two super-Powers which had emerged from the war were spurred by opposing ideologies would give the world political scene a dualistic form which was to last and influence the evolution of the decades to come.

This profound and sudden transformation was temporarily concealed by the continuation of the European colonial empires, by the fact that the world at that time was still largely under Western domination—the socialist world amounting only to the Soviet Union and a few East European States. Moreover, for a few months immediately following the war, a great illusion remained, due to the common struggle and victory against nazism.

It was from this illusion that the United Nations was born, based on concepts which were to remain long entrenched in people's minds, especially in the West:

Idealistic concepts: human rights, the right of peoples to self-determination, peace and friendly relations between nations, social progress, justice and respect for international law,

Methodological concepts: the organization of the world into nations, the maintenance of peace by means of collective measures, disarmament, joint action to resolve international problems of an economic, social, intellectual or humanitarian nature, discussions and negotiations between "large and small" nations with equal rights.

These basic concepts of an ideology for international usage are in a number of essential respects at variance with the two main ideologies for internal use, the Western and socialist ideologies, at least to the extent that these two ideologies are deeply impregnated with nationalist sentiments.

In 1945, therefore, there were four ideological trends which were mutually antagonistic but were also mutually interpenetrative or variably superposed within people's minds: these were the socialist, liberal and nationalist trends and, lastly, a trend which, if not internationalist, was at least open to the international world.

The Western conception of universality comprises:

A Judaeo-Christian philosophical basis, plus eighteenth-century philosophers-in particular Montesquieu and Rousseau, plus human rights, civil and political rights, and economic and social rights

Insistence on the importance of individuals and their rights as opposed to the rights of the community

A liberal outlook: private property plus competition equals free enterprise

A Particular idea of progress, development and enrichment

An imperialist conception of this culture: the idea of "bringing" civilization through influence or trusteeship

Acceptance of the national framework as the basis for the international political regime.

For its part, the socialist conception comprises:

A Marxist basis, in other words, a different mixture of the ingredients of Western culture (German philosophy, English political economy, French rationalism)

The idea of the necessary state control of the means of production

A different conception of human rights which gives priority to economic development as the harbinger of future liberation and which regards as enemies those who diverge at the political level

Insistence on the community and the state, whose rights are regarded as more important than those of individuals

The idea that technical and economic progress must lead to social progress

An imperialist conception of this culture: revolution exported on a world scale.

These two conceptions of universality therefore differ in their priorities, their political vision, their analysis of behaviour and their attitude to the world organizations. The socialist conception has a more monolithic and official character than the Western approach, which admits nuances and even divergences between conservatives, social democrats or progressives, between Americans and Europeans, et al. On the other hand, the two conceptions resemble each other in that they accept technical and scientific progress as the basis for social development, in their imperialism, in their acceptance of forms of nationalism, and in the fact that each of them has its internal contradictions (between principles, institutions and practices).

In the two cases, therefore, the nationalist trend is dominant and the trend representing a willingness to adopt an international approach very limited. The idealistic concepts embodied in the Charter have a little more influence on minds in America than in Europe; they have very little influence in the socialist world. As to ideas on the techniques to be used in order to implement these principles-negotiations on the basis of equality of States, peace-keeping machinery, functional economic co-operation by sector, they would be applied with fewer and fewer illusions about possible results.

But attention should be focused primarily on the contradictions which existed in 1945 even within the two official ideologies, Western and socialist.

### **The internal contradictions**

In the case of the Western view, which extended over four fifths of the surface of the globe, the contradictions in 1945 were political, social and cultural. The most important political contradiction existed between the principle of the right of peoples to self-government and the existence of the colonial empires. Whereas Western Europe had begun to apply this principle to itself in the nineteenth century and the Treaty of Versailles had extended it to Eastern Europe and the Middle East by carving up the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish empires and establishing nation States whose frontiers endeavoured to delimit territories inhabited by specific peoples or groups of peoples who were close to each other, the rest of the world was experiencing a different regime: the empires of the European Powers covered almost the whole of Africa and a large part of Asia, while the United States, for its part, protected its prime sphere of influence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

There was a further political contradiction between the philosophy of collective security, which led to the establishment of the United Nations, and the continuation (and shortly afterwards strengthening) of national defence policies, opposing military alliances and the cold war.

The social contradiction, too, resulted from the differential application of principles according to geographical regions. Whereas, as early as 1946, social security policies (Beveridge plan, etc.) became widespread in the rich countries, solidarity was not expressed in the same way within that region. The recognition, in 1948, by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of not only civil and political rights, but economic and social rights (life, social security, education, leisure) had little practical or institutional impact in solving the specific situations of poverty and illiteracy in the various colonies. The colonial Powers, while exploiting the riches of those territories (mines, timber, agricultural products) without direct profit for their populations, no doubt made efforts in the areas of education and health, but those efforts were in no way comparable with those made in the metropolitan countries.

Lastly, the cultural contradictions derived from the naive identification of the culture and ideas of the various European States with "universal civilization": hence the failure to respect the cultures of the colonized peoples and the attempts at linguistic, cultural and other forms of "assimilation", albeit limited to the local "elites".

In the case of the socialist view the situation was different. Marxist philosophy admitted the need for contradictions between the analysis of situations and practice. In the socialist camp, the protagonists were perfectly aware of the necessary contradictions between official acceptance of certain positions (acceptance of the Charter, general and complete disarmament, human rights, recognition of the structures of existing political regimes, etc.) and the view that, for economic and social progress to be possible, political structures would have to be changed, especially in the Third World. Contradictions which were less easy to evade or assume derived from the fact that:

The socialist world formed part of the rich centre, as opposed to the periphery (Should the poor countries be assisted or be left to "sink into poverty" and thus led to revolution?)

The socialist world was authoritarian and bureaucratic, put economic progress before recognition of civil liberties, and did not have the same priorities as those which it made a pretence of accepting elsewhere

It was, like the Western world, deeply respectful of national structures (and before long even national forms of socialism) at variance with its original internationalist orientation.

### **Developments between 1945 and 1985**

Developments between 1945 and 1985 have not resolved the contradictions which have just been described. If anything they have aggravated them. However, the general configuration of the overall situation has undergone far-reaching changes. Whereas in 1945 there was every sign that opposition between East and West would be exacerbated, in 1985 there is every reason to believe that it is the differences between North and South which will dominate the future.

The only contradiction resolved during the past forty years has been that relating to the right of peoples to self-determination. Decolonization has done away with the political structures of domination (of which only a few, albeit serious and distressing, cases still remain). The phenomenon has occurred only because of Europe's loss of hegemony; it is the weakest link that has given way. But the phenomenon has remained very formal. Zones of economic, military and, indirectly, political influence have replaced empires. Methods of domination have become more sophisticated. The political scene has been rendered more complex because the way in which action has been taken has led to political fragmentation in a very large number of States, of greatly varying size, power and coherence. The form of political community chosen—the European conception of the nation State—has in a very large number of cases been imposed on societies which had not hitherto expressed the need for it and often with an arbitrary approach to the geographical form of the carve-up. The competing spheres of influence of the Northern countries and, in particular, the two super-Powers have helped to maintain insecurity in the South. The most important changes during the past forty years have been (apart from decolonization):

The enlargement and diversification of the socialist camp (China, plus Cuba, plus Viet-Nam, etc.)

The development of the cold war (accompanied by a few hot wars, in Korea, Viet Nam, etc.) and the nuclear arms race which imposes coexistence on the two camps

Considerable enrichment, as a result of the almost continuous expansion of the industrialized countries between 1950 and 1985: their GNP has increased at least fourfold in constant value; at the same time, the poorest regions (with the exception of a few "newly-industrialized countries") have stagnated or become more impoverished

The population explosion, which has caused a world population of slightly under 2.3 billion in 1945 to increase to over 4.5 billion today; in other words, the population has doubled, the increase having occurred mainly in the poorest countries

The increasing acceptance of the values of the consumer society; Recognition of the emergence of global problems, in other words, the existence of growing interdependence.

These phenomena have not had the same consequences for the North as for the South. The North has derived considerable benefit from these developments and, first of all, organized peace in a lasting fashion between the countries it comprises. The Western European countries have set in train a process of economic co-operation and gradual integration, which has undoubtedly been long and difficult but has forged such links among themselves that the very idea of an armed conflict between France, West Germany, Spain, England or the Netherlands, Powers which were rivals on a war footing for a thousand years, is today unthinkable. In the West as a whole, undoubtedly with the assistance of the military alliances, a vast zone of peace has also been established. The joint management of nuclear terror has also been organized between East and West, and in particular between the United States and the USSR. There is undoubtedly an arms race, but it is taking place within coexistence as accepted between the two super-Powers and in a system of armed but lasting peace.

The development of an awareness of the importance of world problems and of the necessary complementarity of economic strategies (despite or because of the competition between producers and the development of transnational firms), and the organization of a system of consultation on the problems of international trade, currency and credit have essentially concerned the rich Western countries and, through bilateral negotiations, the USSR. The feeling of belonging to the same world, which uses the same gadgets and is interested in the same everyday problems, is developing almost naturally among the rich, whether they be Western or socialist or belong to the "elites" in the developing countries. In short, the universality of the rich has made undeniable progress in forty years.

The poor countries, on the other hand, have been left on one side. As far as security is concerned, it is in those countries that practically all armed conflicts have occurred: wars due to decolonization, internal conflicts fanned by struggles for influence by the two super-Powers, direct intervention of Western countries, wars between developing countries made possible by arms supplies from the industrialized countries.

At the economic and social level, the combined effects of population increase and stagnation in archaic methods of production are (with very few exceptions) adding to the relative poverty of the Third World. At the level of participation in decisions relating to the solution of the world problems which influence the development of all countries (energy, currency, credit, international trade, use of labour forces and migration), the existing negotiating system leaves no room for the Third World. The world political organizations provide only forums for ideological debates of no great value and the financial organizations are used by the North as instruments of economic domination.

The links between North and South consist primarily of arms sales and military assistance, raw material purchases with no guarantee of price stability, sales of manufactured products accompanied by anarchic loans which increase the indebtedness of the poor countries, and limited technical and economic assistance delivered by competing bilateral organizations and by the too

numerous sectoral international organizations, in the form of small-scale projects, with no overall plan, no concerted development strategies and no coherent long-term financing system.

Lastly, the frontiers of the countries of the North are carefully protected against migration from the South. World society remains partitioned; it is the opposite of an "open", or universal, society.

### **The questions which arise in 1985**

The answer to the question asked above about progress towards a greater degree of mutual respect since 1945 and chances of further development might in fact be that the strong respect each other but continue to hold the weak in contempt. A certain form of universality has established itself among the rich, but the poor are not included in it. In these circumstances, the contradictions which exist in 1985 are even greater and more explosive than those which existed in 1945. The peculiar features of this situation may be characterized in the following manner: Progress towards a universal society appears inevitable. It is embodied in the philosophy which the rich society applies to itself, in the principles and rights recognized at the social level in both the West and the East, and in the Promethean character of a civilization which believes in science and technology and which is day by day causing the dimensions of the planet to shrink, conquering space, etc.

At the same time, the importance of the socio-political disasters which have so far marked this march towards the integration of world society is present in everyone's mind, as is the futility of the rivalries over world hegemony which led to the colonial conquest, the intra-European wars, the exacerbation of nationalism, nazism and the two world wars. A profound desire for peace, that is to say, a way of life which is protected against this kind of disaster and against the nuclear peril, spurs the peoples who enjoy the standard of living offered in the industrialized countries. Collective enrichment is their fundamental objective.

This sort of "wisdom" which the countries of the North apply to themselves is not, however, accompanied by a system for anticipating the socio-political risks of the future. Governments working under the pressure of immediate needs do not have the means to concern themselves greatly with the long term or to compare their information in this area. The failures experienced in over-hasty or over-ambitious attempts at future-oriented research or futurology have today led to a kind of disaffection towards long-term analysis. Scepticism prevails, quite rightly. In fact, about the ability of the international and world organizations to make a useful contribution to the forecasting and control of the future.

Everyone realizes that the integration of world society is encountering, and will continue to encounter, enormous obstacles. The classic pattern described by Toynbee of a civilization which has achieved a high degree of development and is threatened by its "external proletariat" largely corresponds to the present situation. But there are important differences in relation to the known examples of "universal empires" succumbing to the pressures exerted on their borders. The "peripheral" peoples admittedly have a population roughly three times greater than that of the "centre", but their method of production is essentially agropastoral and cannot be compared with that of a post-industrial society; their level of political awareness is very undeveloped because of their very low level of education; they are incapable of militarily attacking the centre on an equal footing; lastly, they are subordinated to "elites" who are largely assimilated by the dominant civilization. The types of sociopolitical dangers concealed by such a non-classical situation do not appear imminent and remain difficult to determine; they are generally underestimated.

Virtually the only thing which may be said today to disturb the offhandedness with which the industrialized countries have treated and continue to treat the Third World countries is the growing concern about two problems in North-South relations: the problem of the indebtedness of the poor countries, which have become practically insolvent, and the problem of South-North migration. These problems are causing thoughts to be turned to the inadequacies of the long-term development financing system and the impossibility of opposing South-North population movements, and to the complementary nature of these two phenomena.

Will the alarm signals prompt study of the present incapacity of the political system established by Governments and the international organizations sufficiently to master the

evolution of society to avoid catastrophes of the same magnitude (if not of the same type) as those which the initial integration of that society caused in the past ? All we can be sure about is that this kind of problem cannot be studied, much less solved, within the context of the present system of international and world organizations. This system does not have the necessary instruments for study, analysis and negotiation which will permit useful research in this direction. The deep malaise, felt by a large segment of opinion in the Western countries in particular, about the ineffectiveness of the existing organizations perhaps clumsily rejects this feeling of frustration at the inability to master the world's major problems.

From the combination of this malaise and the above-mentioned alarm signals about the unresolved problems which are beginning to give rise to justified concern may therefore emerge serious questioning and collective thought on the real purposes of the world organizations and their necessary reform. If there could emerge from such reform a more realistic world organization than the existing United Nations system, capable of identifying problems more accurately, organizing more effective co-operation for the speedy development of the poor regions of the world and providing a negotiating forum on serious questions where the large countries would agree to talk with the representatives of the smaller countries, then the long and difficult march towards a more universal society could continue with greater assurance and greater hope.

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