

Existential present: The moment as a threshold to humanity

The soothsayers who queried time and learned what it had in store certainly did not experience it as either homogeneous or empty. Whoever keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance—namely, in just this way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from inquiring into the future: the Torah and the prayers instructed them in remembrance. This disenchanting the future, which holds sway over all those who turn to soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future became homogeneous, empty time. For every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (B)¹

Benjamin's thoughts on the philosophy of history were born of dire necessity. They mark the violent destruction of universalism under Nazi rule and a desperate hope for historical justice and salvation. And yet, it was at the moment of Benjamin's exile in France that he gave up on grand progressive narratives of the future in favour of a remembrance in which justice can manifest itself in any single moment of time. This dedication to an existential present resembles Erich Auerbach's idea, formulated during his own exile in Istanbul, that arbitrary moments of ordinary life, independent of the contested and wavering world order over which mankind struggles, evidence the most elementary, commonly shared aspects of humanity.²

For us, this concept of a universality born out of a crisis of modernity is paramount. If globalisation entails a mighty fragmentation, certain narrative moments have the potential to condense forms of life and a divergent consciousness of world, realised in the practice of conversation. As a specific constellation, it allows for doubt and return, a meandering search for ways of saying, styles of expression and

1 Benjamin, Walter. "On the Concept of History". [1940] *Selected Writings*. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds. vol. 4, 1938–1940. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. 389–400, on 397.

2 Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*. [1946] 10th ed., Tübingen, Basel: Francke, 2001. 513f. See also: Blättler, Christine. "Strumpf, brauner (engl. reddish-brown stocking)". *Trajekte. Zeitschrift des Zentrums für Literaturforschung Berlin*. (special issue *Auerbach-Alphabet. Karlheinz (Carlo) Barck zum 70. Geburtstag*). 2004: no pagination.

thought, and thus generates a voice that can—at any moment—bring forth an existential present, an affective pause in general discourse, a threshold to universality.³

Ironically enough, our work on these conversations began as a response to an unwilling necessity, a forced halt with uncertain consequences. No sooner had we managed to complete our team for the project *Minor Universality. Narrative World Productions After Western Universalism*, overcoming stubborn obstacles in obtaining visas, than we witnessed the very foundations of our project falling apart. The COVID-19 pandemic would shatter everything we thought we knew about international cooperation. We had been determined to collaborate from the outset in formulating the questions, objects, and methods of our research, through meetings we had planned with our partners in Hong Kong, Mexico City, and Tunis. We wanted to avoid launching a predefined research programme that would be conceived in Europe and then realised with European money solely in Western institutions. We hoped that the project would transform travel itself into a form of knowledge, into a critical examination of what we take for granted and the ways we find to take a step back—from each other, from what we study, and not least from our own perspectives and from ourselves. But now, travel had become completely impossible. We were stranded on our little island in Saarland—unable to set out, with nothing to be seen on the horizon. The opening we had hoped to foster—not just in the design of our research but in so much more—was completely out of reach. Meetings, workshops, and field studies were frozen; organising anything beyond the borders of Europe was entirely out of the question; and it was unclear whether and when the ability to travel, at least as we had known it, even with all its existing limitations and forms of discrimination, would ever be conceivable again. Movement itself—much like urbanity, a constitutive moment within a modern awareness of the world—had come to a halt, while working from home and homeschooling became two hallmarks of life during this public health crisis. Or at least to the extent that even our admittedly privileged positions as academics permitted continuing our work. Yet the shift into a more digital world also brought new limitations and social exclusions, contributing to a deep exhaustion that soon spread everywhere. Our attempt to launch a multipolar project to investigate the emergence of a contemporary consciousness of the world seemed to have failed just months after it began. To us, the palpable and widely scrutinised exhaustion and collapse of globalism almost seemed itself like a commentary on our search for the beginnings of a

³ In this way, we build on Frederic Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism*. New York: Verso, 2015. 27–44, here specifically for the concept, p. 43. On the importance of the existential present for a reflection on universality, see Messling, Markus. *Universality after Universalism. On Francophone Literatures of the Present*. With a foreword by Souleymane Bachir Diagne. Transl. Michael Thomas Taylor. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2023. 25ff.

new universality.⁴ After testing hyperlocal strategies of *bricolage* within our social bubbles,⁵ our optimism threatened to fall into a Great Depression of a societal long-COVID.⁶ We were in a sense belatedly experiencing this collapse of the social fabric—this much soon became clear—that we shared, albeit under markedly more fortunate conditions, with societies and research colleagues worldwide, and for whom this experience was not new. Given the circumstances, we chose to make the most of the (un)ease the situation had presented us by reading and discussing texts, and by having digital conversations with their authors. These were texts about problems bound up with our question of how it could be possible to formulate and legitimise a new universality *after* Western universalism—texts that interrogate both the legacy of universalism and its many critiques, narrative texts that construct a more differentiated kind of minor universality that we can see emerging in the ongoing crisis attached to dreams of progress. In this dire state of necessity, the consciousness of the world appeared all the more brightly as a central problem of globalism. Networked supply chains and social media notwithstanding, the phenomenon of globalisation does not fully coincide with a consciousness of humanity: The interchangeability of everything with everything does not necessarily represent an earnest engagement with difference, and theoretical accessibility has created a more just world society in ways that are modest at best, as Arjun Appadurai emphasises in his conversation with us in this book. When the proverbial butterfly flaps its wings in one part of the world (one could also say: the virus breaks out) in ways that materially affect us all, it reveals the interconnectedness of the world. But this is no guarantee for any sense of solidarity.

The pandemic itself and the world political events it seems to have begot undoubtedly reflect the real-world delegitimisation of a specific form of universalism that had elevated itself to the norm, and that defined its own universalisation as the essence of humanity itself.⁷ In the tradition of colonial empires, it appeared to

4 As Achille Mbembe has suggested in “The Universal Right to Breathe”. *Critical Inquiry* 47.S2 (2021), <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/711437> (last accessed 19 December 2023).

5 See Barthes, Roland. “Sociologie et socio-logique : À propos de deux ouvrages récentes de Claude Lévy-Strauss”. *Œuvres complètes*, vol. I. Paris: Seuil, 1993 [1962]. 967–975.

6 We were thinking here of a wider observation expressed, for instance, in the responses of the Depression Era collective, founded in 2011 “in order to articulate a common discourse and take a stance against the extreme social, economic and political transformations of the past few years.” Depression Era. “Kunst und Krise: europäische Bilder”. *Fluchtpunkt: Das Mittelmeer und die europäische Krise*. Franck Hofmann and Markus Messling, eds. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2017. 370–390. For more information, see <https://depressionera.gr/about>, last accessed 12 October 2023.

7 See Hofmann, Franck and Markus Messling. “On the Ends of Universalism”. *The Epoch of Universalism/L'époque de l'universalisme (1769–1989)*. Franck Hofmann and Markus Messling, eds. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2020. 1–39.

obscure the distinctions between universalism and globalisation.⁸ And yet arguments based on the experience, validity, and legitimacy of universality in fact serve—in ways that are much more profound, and only apparently contradictory—as robust elements for a *critique* of “flaccid globalism”.⁹ This also makes them the most pivotal arguments we have to counter the radical-relativist regression that has been globally amplified for years now by the “antiglobalization alliance” of nationalists, identitarians, and peddlers of ethnonationalist propaganda.¹⁰ The explosive controversies and the implosion—accompanied by empty affirmations—of a specifically Western universalism makes it all the more relevant to contemplate the emergence and claims of a new ideal of humanity whose historicity and end became thinkable with the beginning of the nuclear age, as Maria Stavrinaki explains in our conversation with her for this volume. This is an ideal of humanity fashioned out of concrete, diverse contexts and narratives¹¹—because even before and while it took shape as the ideology of European superiority, European universalism also emanated from concrete struggles for emancipation, in localised political movements fighting to critique and change existing conditions.¹² We consider it crucial to maintain a sense, a musical sensitivity, for European universalism—even if only as a “local” toolkit of arguments—because its ideals can still serve our world as a backbone for human rights. It is not without reason that we find such universal rights defended today by so many intellectuals in countries who had no choice but to bitterly wrest their liberty from the universalism of European empires.¹³ Despite all

8 One thinks here, for instance, of US exceptionalism.

9 Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London, New York: Verso, 2013. 7; on this point, see also Messling, Markus. “Differenz und Universalität”. *Gebeugter Geist: Rassismus und Erkenntnis in der modernen europäischen Philologie*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2016. Esp. 437–440. See also Levi, Giovanni. “The Others Are Not There, and That’s Something Terrible ...” Conversation with Giovanni Levi. *Rhinozeros: Europa im Übergang 3* (on dreaming). Franck Hofmann, Markus Messling, and Christiane Solte-Greser, eds. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2023. 188–213.

10 See the contributions in *The Great Regression*. Ed. Heinrich Geiselberger. Cambridge/UK: Polity, 2017.

11 See Messling, Markus. *Universality after Universalism: On Francophone Literatures of the Present*. Transl. Michael Thomas Taylor. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2023 [2019].

12 See Lilti, Antoine. *L’héritage des Lumières: Ambivalences de la modernité*. Paris: Seuil, 2019.

13 See, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s arguments for the intellectual “weapons of criticism”, a term he borrows from Karl Marx, forged in nineteenth-century Europe, which he develops in the introduction to the German volume *Europa als Provinz: Perspektiven postkolonialer Geschichtsschreibung*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2010. 9–16, here 12. Note that this is not a translation of *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), but a separate compilation of texts. For the philological background to the important remarks that Chakrabarty makes in the introduction to the German volume, see Markus Messling, *Universality after Universalism*, 12n40.

the accusations of European hypocrisy, demands for socially concrete dividends of freedom, in situations that are anything but abstract, remain as urgent as ever. We saw this especially clearly when we were finally able to leave for Tunis, in the waning days of the lockdowns (and coincidentally the waning days of a democratic Tunisia) and at that place in the Mediterranean where the Arab revolutions and a new call for a different human and existential narrative began, as Leyla Dakhli emphasises in her conversation. Defences of a “true universalism” against one driven by power, be it Pauline,¹⁴ radical,¹⁵ or dialectical,¹⁶ are worth further consideration; as the legacy of modern claims to emancipation, they remain a potential political force. Nevertheless—and perhaps precisely for this reason—it seems paramount to us that we now abandon any “universalism from above” in favour of a “lateral universality of translation”, as Souleymane Bachir Diagne insists in his writings and in this volume. This lateral universality of translation—and not only of languages and literatures—arises from a multilateral effort to mediate between diverse life realities, religious practices, and ideas.¹⁷ Only such multilateral forms of justification can yield the kind of universalist legitimacy that is indispensable for justice and freedom in our fragmented world. Concepts cannot serve as a tool to grasp a world that appears, in light of the imperatives placed upon us by our humanity, as both shared in common and divided among us. And this means that experiences of universality which can be expressed in language—and which thus shape an awareness for new ways of narrating the world and our humanity, of an “us” in a social sense, of difference and community—are indispensable. Such experiences allow us to see new paths to universality, to feel losses and fears; they are able to reorganise the access to reality provided by our senses and thus disrupt and restructure our perception of the world.¹⁸

Searching for such moments, for moments that give rise to a minor universality in this sense, was thus always our core concern. And it was accordingly important for us to shift from an understanding of universality as an effect of the universal in particular worlds, to the epistemological proposal made by *microstoria* that

14 Badiou, Alain. *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*. Transl. Ray Brassier. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003 [1977].

15 Boehm, Omri. *Radikaler Universalismus: Jenseits von Identität. Universalismus als rettende Alternative*, Transl. Michael Adrian. Berlin: Propylaea, 2022.

16 Schor, Naomie. “The Crisis of French Universalism”. *Yale French Studies* 100 (2001): 43–64; Christ, Julia. *L’Avenir de l’Universel: Hegel critique du libéralisme*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2021.

17 See Diagne, Souleymane Bachir. *De langue à langue: L’hospitalité de la traduction*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2022.

18 Messling, Markus. *Universality after Universalism*, esp. 1–30.

inverts this relation, as Giovanni Levi expounds in our conversation. In doing so, we suggest and elaborate the concept of a *minor universality*, which we use to describe the genesis of a universal consciousness out of concrete contexts.¹⁹ We devote our analysis to a wide variety of media, spaces, and narrative practices: to language and translation theory and to books, to biographical testimonies and cultural journals, to literary festivals and to museums with their curatorial practices and architectures. The conversations printed here—distinct from interviews in that they are a form of reflective practice—augmented our interest in thematic topics with questions about the stances we each take in the process of our research: What motivations, what fundamental aspects of our lives, might spur a reflection on universalist consciousness? What are the cultural archives and social experiences that push us to examine how we think about what we have in common and what binds us together? What does it mean to balance ideals of humanity against notions of diversity and difference, or against local horizons—in a moment that David Scott has called a “Gramscian interregnum” situated “after postcoloniality”, where concepts such as society, law, and truth are facing intense political and epistemological pressure?²⁰ And how does our disciplinary background structure the questions we ask? We were fortunate to speak with colleagues who gave significant time and attention to our far-reaching, occasionally even unmanageable questions. These conversations prompted members of our team to develop new queries in the context of their own research, which now run like red threads throughout the book. We returned to these guiding questions again and again in working together, with the result that they became more and more tightly interwoven as we prepared and digested each new encounter.

During the COVID crisis—which now seems to have morphed into a kind of PTSD—the conversations documented in this volume appeared to be an emblem of total pause. They were strange moments of remembrance, of speaking and listening, interruptions amid a continuous rumble in which the looming hysteria was already taking shape on the horizon. Of course, the digital format raised questions. This medium hardly allowed our conversations to heed the laws of hospitality—to explore concrete, situated encounters as we had planned—or to have any subtle sense for a shared space or the way an argument *sounds*. So we asked questions as a group that didn’t turn on quick rhythms or any quick and shallow back-and-forth. Those

¹⁹ As developed in preliminary research and in the conception of the ERC project. See also, in particular: Messling, Markus and Jonas Tinius. “On Minor Universality”. *Minor Universality: Rethinking Humanity After Western Universalism/Universalité mineure: Penser l’humanité après l’universalisme occidental*. Markus Messling and Jonas Tinius, eds. Berlin, Boston: de Gruyter, 2023. 321–339.

²⁰ Scott, David. *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. 10.

responding had time to unfold a thought, take a position, get lost, or be interrupted by a new idea, a different question. The process uncovered new paths for action, styles of thinking, ways of approaching the truth through narration, and it generated other forms and genres of narrating (the self) and producing knowledge that resemble epistolary exchanges, constellations, and storytelling more than they do literary texts. A conversation, David Scott underscores, always also comprises—in its recursive dialectic of speaking and listening—an exploration of form, of the relationship between representation and the focus of intellectual, political, and artistic contemplation: “Its dynamic hermeneutic structure is that of the unfolding of question-and-answer; its motivation is more tentatively exploratory, clarifying, and reconstructive than explicitly critical or even analytical; and its medium is first and foremost that of voice”.²¹ The inherently linguistic quality of this knowledge extends beyond the truthfulness of any individual act of speech.²² Putting something general into words—as one does, for instance, by describing freedom in specific historical contexts—requires a language that can no longer simply rely on any universalistic terminology we can simply stipulate. The contested concept of human rights offers a striking example in this regard. Rather, this way of speaking must also justify and give plausible reasons for the very terminology it employs.²³ This an effort that also includes silence, breaks in the exchange, mutual incomprehension; and its principles apply equally to cultural productions and movements and to their analysis.

The earnestness characterising all of these discussions makes clear that truth does exist and that it functions as the centre of historical and cultural discourse, but also that it is always partial, that there always remains a task to search for it, to argue with plausibility for it. Speaking from a particular point of view does not mean, as Gisèle Sapiro insists with reference to Pierre Bourdieu, completely abandoning ourselves to relativism.²⁴ Hence these conversations express individual attempts to find a critical language that would move beyond the discourses of identity and counter-identity. Consciousness has not exactly been at the forefront of recent cultural and social debates; the tendency has rather been to discard the notion as a naive remnant of an idealist philosophical-historical age. Yet what becomes clear in all of the conversations in this volume is just how critical it is to have a consciousness of the contemporary moment. Presence and the act of making

21 Scott, David. *Stuart Hall's Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity*. Durham/NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 5.

22 See Hofmann, Franck. *Aus dem letzten Zimmer: Eine Ästhetik des Abschieds*. Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2017.

23 See Cassin, Barbara. *Éloge de la traduction: Compliquer l'universel*. Paris: Fayard, 2016.

24 See also Sapiro, Gisèle. “Le décentrement épistémologique conduit-il au relativisme?” *Minor Universality. Rethinking Humanity After Western Universalism*. 57–71.

present become more significant when we can no longer unwaveringly rely on promises of salvation or progress, and when the task we face is to open up a new horizon of possibility. Granted, we may have stopped believing in any “pure”, disembodied form of consciousness that does not emerge from life experience, and thus cannot be said to be socially and materially structured. Adania Shibli’s evocation in our conversation of a figurative and literal “light switch” that both disperses a fear of darkness and reveals this fear as unfounded, is one way of describing the subcutaneous connection between our consciousness of the world and the conditions of our existence. This is not a switch you can just flip on or off. But what all these conversations do share, thematically and performatively, is a belief in the necessity of figuration, of sketching out a vision, draft, idea, or intention; they all remain committed to the critical and formative resistance of consciousness.

Video recordings of the conversations in this volume are also available online.²⁵ We publish them in written form, as well, so that they can be engaged in the medium of the text—with all the slowness this can bring and the mode of analysis that defines philological hermeneutics. Still, we encourage readers not to forget the originally oral character—the voice—of these lines. All the more so since we have edited the texts to suit a published form. We extended this work furthermore to opening up various ways of entering into the conversations through thematic keywords; literal entries rather than a mere index. In the book, each conversation is also paired with an object that has been personally chosen and explained by our interlocutors in a brief introduction. As we see with the medal Napoleon Bonaparte sent in 1821 as a legacy to the soldiers who had followed his campaigns from 1792 to 1815, a “last thought” and reminder of glory and freedom, chosen here by Giovanni Levi, these are objects from history or everyday life, artworks, photographs, or motifs that serve our guests as guiding clues in rethinking humanity. The way into a consciousness of what it means to be human that we find in an experience of the existential present—today more of an emergency exit than any gateway to somewhere else—is to be opened up, in tentative exploration, from such personal moments within each life, and from images and stories in which they unfold.

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²⁵ For an overview of all our conversations, visit <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPo0xNietPvK6djfUbxSwA>, last accessed 18 September 2023.