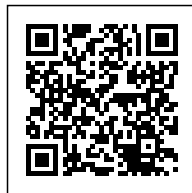


THE END OF UNIVERSALISM

Posted on June 1, 2022 by Jean-Baptiste Noé



Europe believed in universalism. It believed that cultural, religious, human, political borders were chimeras that could be erased. It believed that outside Europe the others were other selves, with the same wills, the same passions, the same objectives. Other selves that aspired, in their secret desires, to become like Europeans. It believed that values and ideas could be exported, that it was enough to formerly colonize, to normalize today, and if necessary, by means of war.

The World: a European Reflection?

Universalism was not without ambiguity. By seeing in the other a being still in the state of nature, which had to be "developed" in order to transform him into a complete and accomplished man, universalist thought was the bearer of wars and tragedies. The first colonial period (1880-1960) was an attempt to export universal values. Then, in spite of its failure, Westerners continued to try to paint the world in their own image. This was the great era of achieving development, of an intellectual colonization to which elites lent themselves, flattered to enter the Western world and to be invited to world conferences. Modernization was to follow the path of Westernization.

But there was a hitch, first in 1979, when the Iranian mullahs claimed that they wanted to modernize their country without westernizing it. This was probably an accident of history, which continued with Gaddafi and Saddam Hussein. But democracy, which was no longer just a political regime but a political ideology, had to be the strongest. Universalism, so sweet and syrupy in its language, provoked bloody wars whose wounds have not yet finished damaging the world. Yugoslavia (1991-2001), Afghanistan (2001-2021), Iraq (2003), Syria and Libya (2011-) for the main ones. Democracy was to be exported with bombs and thus reshape the faces and peoples of these countries. Political planning on an international scale failed. These countries rejected the West and its universal values. At the same time, former empires, which had been destroyed, woke up and wanted to influence the world scene: Russia, China, India; they too had technological modernity but without Western values.

In the West itself, universalism was rejected in favor of a return to indigenism; Latin America and Africa were the laboratories for this. Africa, which was supposed to advance at a forced march with elections, democracy and public aid for development, experienced an unprecedented fragmentation. In Europe itself, the assimilation and integration of non-European populations is becoming more and more complex; far from wanting to adopt European ways of life, they wish to preserve their cultures and their specificities. Universalism is being defeated within Europe itself. Thus, we have a world that is

increasingly united by globalization, increasingly technologized and connected, but also increasingly fragmented and diverse because universalism has failed.

Accelerate when Failing

The characteristic of an ideology is not to recognize its failure and never to lay down its arms—when it fails, it accelerates. The end of universalism therefore means the acceleration of its defense; hence the passive or active interventions in Syria and Libya, while the failure of Iraq was obvious. Hence the refusal to see the world as it is, to think about empires reborn, to understand the motivations and ideologies that underlie the actions of other countries and peoples. To recognize the failure of universalism is to recognize the failure of nearly two centuries of world politics.

Yet this end of universalism is good news. Because it is a sentimentalism and an idealism—it has led to war; it has upset regions; it has weakened Europe. By systematically putting the debate on the level of values and morals, it has prevented any understanding and conciliation. Universalism is an intellectual break with the classical vision of man and of the relations between nations, based on human nature and the relations of forces.

The end of universalism is not because the idealists recognized their failure, it is because other peoples rejected it, because it is contrary to their cultures and their interests. Because it was born in Europe and exported to the areas held by the West, Europe is in the front row of its disappearance. The external and internal wars that Europe is now experiencing signal the end of universalism, even if many do not want to recognize it. The very project of the European Union, based on the dissolution of nations in an imperial bureaucracy, is a failure, as nations, notably Germany, are taking back their power interests. The new century that has begun is therefore at odds with the two previous centuries because of this disappearance of universalism.

School of Realists

For France and Europe, another path was possible. Far from the systematic adherence to universalism, the French school of political economy and then the school of geography proposed a realistic study of exchanges between nations. The world vision conveyed by François Guizot, Frédéric Bastiat and Alexis de Tocqueville was in opposition to the thinking of the idealists, particularly in their opposition to

colonization. During the colonial period, Marshal Lyautey knew how to take into account the cultural differences of the peoples and to rely on the specificities of Morocco to ensure its economic development without undermining its historical identity.

The French school of geography, initiated by Paul Vidal de la Blache, anchored its research in the primary study of the geographical terrain and human occupation; a realistic and critical study that has never ceased to exist despite the pre-eminence of the idealist strand.

The end of the monopoly of the dollar, the establishment of a Chinese monetary zone, the fight against American legal norms, the desire of some to build an Islamic empire, the rejection of European cultures for the rediscovery of local cultures are all manifestations of the end of universalism. We thus return to the beginning of the 19th century, when the world had several empires and Europe had not yet conquered it, but with the technology and technical modernity of the 21st century. The end of universalism is therefore not a return to the past but a continuation of history.

Jean-Baptiste Noé is a French historian, who has authored of [many books](#) and articles, and is the editor-in-chief of the journal [Conflits](#). We are thankful to the [Institut des Libertés](#) (Paris) through whose gracious generosity we are able to bring you this article. Translated from the French by N. Dass.

[Featured image](#): "The Artist Moved by the Grandeur of Antique Fragments," by Henry Fuseli, ca. 1778-1779.

