© Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research. 2019. 11(2):174–178
DOI: 10.25285/2078-1938-2019-11-2-174-178

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John Roberts. The Reasoning of Unreason: Universalism, Capitalism, and Disenlightenment. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 224 pp. ISBN 978-1-350-01584-5.

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John Roberts, a leading figure in studies of artistic modernism, has published a book of political theory. This is not as surprising as it might appear, since the aesthetic writings of Roberts (e.g., Roberts 2015) were written from a leftist, critical theory perspective and pondered the relationship between avant-garde art and politics. The question of universality played an important role in those writings, too. Roberts approached the subject dialectically, in a Hegelian way, by identifying the universality of art with the telos of a double negation: the negation of art's increasingly banal critical and subversive stance toward all social institutions (itself included), which would push art out of itself into a revolutionary praxis. Roberts's new work raises the question of universality even more thematically, in trying to reaffirm it in the present circumstances, against the reign of monetary abstraction and legalistic uniformity—which is not quite the same thing as the universal. The true, "emancipatory" universal is "reason-in-struggle," an infinite project of grounding all human practices in reason and contesting its irrational limitations.

The political occasion of Roberts's book is his preoccupation with the rise of conservatism and reaction: in Europe and the United States (the "New Right"), as well as elsewhere (Islamic fundamentalism and authoritarian nationalism, for which Russian president Vladimir Putin also gets a mention). It is these movements and ideologies that he calls the "reason of unreason" and the "universalism of the particular." Contemporary conservatives are not purely visceral and brutish; they are well-educated people emerging with their elaborate programs in the deliberative space of liberal democracies and neoliberal international organizations. The defense of localized and traditional "ways of life," as well as the xenophobia, is frequently well argued with references to democratic values, feminism, and progress. However, one of the targets of these conservatives has been the reign of "abstraction."

Roberts's argument is, however, more subtle than an ordinary liberal panic against a reactionary takeover, like the one currently developing around Donald Trump, president of the United States. He understands that the reactionary trends emerged in response to the *false* or, at best, *limited* universalism of the liberal establishment. Currently ruling neoliberal elites are, in their own way, conservative, too. Their abstract values and norms are implicitly anchored in the model of a bourgeois educated, propertied individual (previously male, now simply "nice"). Therefore, the New Right does not only subvert liberal cosmopolitan ideology but also exposes its hidden particularism.

Theoretically, Roberts traces the current reactionary tide back to actual reactionary intellectuals. Some of them are the usual suspects like Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt, Leo Strauss, and, more generally, the Nazis. Others are, however, less often listed as conservatives, but their inclusion makes sense as they are godfathers of neoliberalism/libertarianism: Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls, and Friedrich von Hayek. In their works conservatism relates to form rather than to content, but their antagonism to socialism in all its shapes—and their ardent defense of market and capital—makes convincing their enlistment into the camp of archreactionary "particularist universalists."

The book endeavors to trace the intellectual genealogies of rational particularism historically, back to the medieval debate on *universals*. It is fourteenth-century Franciscan friar and theologian William Ockham, says Roberts, who, with his "nominalism," stood at the origin of the particularity defense. He debated against the prevalent "realism" of Thomas Aquinas: this famously universalist stance and an ideology of a broad empire founded on natural law. Ockham, even though he was an even stronger proponent of secular power than Aquinas, is depicted by Roberts as an inventor of the irrational, faith-based subjectivism characteristic of the Reformation and European reaction. But Aquinas's universalism is not a model: it was a regime of restricted esoteric rationality defending a hierarchical, unfree world against what it called "heresies." As in the case of contemporary neoliberals, the radical opposition to the establishment only expresses more openly what this establishment does itself. A truly universalist revolution only happened during the Renaissance, when Nicolaus Copernicus and Nicolaus Cusanus defended a decentered, infinite, and egalitarian universe.

Further in, Roberts continues to trace the genealogy of particularism into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or what he calls "Enlightenment." Here, strangely, he is less interested in the actual "dark" Enlightenment of Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre than in the arch-Enlighteners John Locke and Immanuel Kant, with their restricted and faith-based universalism. In Locke's case this included a defense of slavery in the Americas; in Kant's case, a hierarchy of races. Locke, with his ideology of property-in-oneself, thus opens the gallery of (neo)liberal conservatives. Kant shifted toward a more open universalist position toward the end of his life. In any case, most Enlightenment thinkers preserved space for faith and religion, and even the French Revolution tended to be mystified as irrational by its own participants.

Roberts speaks of the dialectic of the enlightenment and disenlightenment. He glosses the recent studies of Enlightenment (Israel 2012; Lloyd 2013; Munck 2013; Barnett 2014), but the general meaning of this concept remains traditional: enlightenment appears to have been a promise of emancipatory rationalism that has not stood up to its task. The growth of popular literacy and the emergence of democratic ideas stand against the entrenchment of nobility and colonial racism. Roberts argues that most Enlightenment thinkers (Diderot and Montesquieu excepted) "find good universalist reasons for limiting the powers of reasons to all" (p. 105). The "dialectic" that Roberts describes consists precisely in this tendency: rationalism here ac-

tively searches for moments of self-limitation. Why? The book explains this sociopolitically, by the class interests of the bourgeoisie. However—further on this below—I would add an immanent analysis of the argument. Enlightenment rationalism perceives the inherent antinomies of rationality as such but does not have a metatheory to integrate them and thus holds on to a *unilateral* view, where the subjective is the rational and the realm of affect and of nature's reflexive logic is often presented as irrational or mystical. This was actually the critique of the Enlightenment by the German idealists, but they are largely omitted from the book, probably because most of them were political conservatives. G. W. F. Hegel is mentioned only as a proto-Marxist of a sort, and it is Karl Marx who emerges as one of the book's very few "positive" protagonists. The proletariat, even though it would appear to be one particular category among others, is actually not one, because in Marx it is based on nonidentity and the universal as dissimilar to itself.

In the twentieth century, Nazism predictably emerges as a pinnacle of modern universalist irrationalism. But even its defeat does not bring emancipation: the Cold War takes over, the economy gets financialized with few constraints on capital, and antisocialist ideologies prevail. Strauss and Hayek ultimately carry the day. Bourgeois society dissolves, and the particularity of class gives way to consumerist "desires-as-reasons" and to individualized identities.

> In the name of a new individuated freedom from "abstraction"—my desires-as-reasons define my individuality and rights as a consumer—the would-be constitutive "irrationality." The "limits-of-reason" and the acceptance of anti-intellectual and premodern ideologies of the unlearned-learned and intuitive become "progressive" correlates of a new democratizing regime of knowledge.... Race and nationality become the universal markers of cultural self-individuation as opposed to their unambiguous use as racist signs of civilizational order. The reasoning of unreason finds such a profusion of new forms out of race, nationality, and religion—and their intersection—inasmuch as the construction of individuation is subject under disorganizing forms of the limits of reason to an increasing identification with the powers of reason itself. (pp. 151–152)

The question remains whether individuality and existentially understood subjectivity would not represent a valid ethical alternative to rationalist "identity." In any case, this is the only place in the book where the particularism of identity politics is addressed. I would have given it more space, because the book's rhetoric and span of attention mostly target tribalist and class-based particularisms, in an age when libertarian personalism and left-liberal identity politics are far more influential.

Fortunately, the Left, predominantly post-Marxist, survives and usefully raises the banner of "universalism." Roberts usefully discusses the recent debates between Ernesto Laclau (1992), Alain Badiou (1999), and Slavoj Žižek (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000) on this subject. Clearly, true universalism must be open, emancipatory, and set on *negativity*. Against the reign of "desires-as-reasons," the "reason-in-struggle" is affirmed as a response: an infinite endeavor to fight injustice, to understand the world without recourse to fatalism or religion, and to construct a new ra-

tional egalitarian one in the struggle against entrenched elites. Contemporary French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (2010) is briefly mentioned, and not by chance, since the insistence on the infinity of reason, here applied to politics, unites our author with the program of "speculative realists."

The book is admirable in its thorough erudition and scholarship, as well as for its fidelity to the Marxist critique of liberalism, even as circumstances push the author to focus on the rise of the neoconservatives. The discussion of Locke, Rawls, and twentieth-century American philosopher Robert Nozick as essentially reactionary authors who are apologists for the status quo is a fresh reminder of the obvious, in the unfortunate climate of mainstream academia where they remain central points of reference.

It is in the genre of the review, however, to add some critical comments. The book is written by an engaged intellectual who defends "Enlightenment" and "emancipatory universalism" against the "bad guys." The "dialectic" of reason and universalism that is often mentioned but never defined is apparently one-sided: reason is reflected in unreason, to detrimental effect, while reason itself can somehow overcome its dependence on its correlate, the irrational. Apparently, this may be done through a double negation and sublation in a Hegelian way, but this is evoked nowhere in this book.

However, dialectic is about internal contradictions, ironies, reversals, and paradoxes. German idealism, which reinvented dialectics and first drew a sharp distinction between the universal (*allgemeine*) and the general (*gemeine*), already saw the danger, not only of the ideological use of reason for arbitrary purposes but also of reason's immanent fascism (the legalism of abstraction, its suppression of personality, its banalization of high spiritual endeavors). It is reason, not unreason, that today frenetically divides and subdivides humans into ethnic, class, race, gender classifications and corners them into their identities through negative or positive discrimination. It is reason that teaches neutralized tolerance and destroys the universal authority of knowledge. The historical Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was, far from being the propaganda of scientific materialism, the first attempt at criticizing this abstract reason through reference to lived experience and intelligent sentiment. Following the Enlightenment, German speculative thought aspired to rescue reason through its self-overcoming. Reason was subdivided into "understanding" and properly "reason" (or "spirit"): a reflexive theory of contradictory totality centered in utopian praxis, in mystical entities, or in both. I am not sure that "reason-in-struggle" is an adequate substitute for this grand project, which, to be politically valid, must become a *concrete* universal, get *institutionalized*, in a party, revolutionary state, or the like. The complexity and counterintuitive nature of its higher rationality require *Bildung* which goes against the plea for egalitarianism and horizontalism at all costs (yes, the egalitarianism of access to knowledge, but not at the expense of the authority of truth). I would further remind readers that many of these dialectical systems were mystical and politically conservative. Some, but only a few, were revolutionary (Friedrich Engels, Herbert Marcuse, maybe Evald Ilyenkov, who else?). Rationality, to become truly rational, even infinitely rational, would need to

undergo an infusion of what, in the common academic mind, would make an impression of irrationality. Meillassoux (2010) knows this of the natural sciences, but the same would have to be true of any "universalist" institutions if realized in politics. Roberts's book does not expand on dialectical logic and does not expand on political alternatives; it targets political conservatism, not Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel, former US president Barack Obama, or the French president Emmanuel Macron, as an archenemy; it opposes "democracy" to "capitalist accumulation," so that there may rise a suspicion that its defense of reason-as-struggle is strategically aligned with "liberal democracy" in its mad proliferation of civil wars between progressive and regressive, in its ongoing offensive against life-worlds and existentially driven rationalities.

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