Western Universalism
in the Contemporary World

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Abstract

The process of globalization brings not only the creation of a single economic market in the world, but also the proliferation of different cultural influences. The contact with those who are somehow different from us increases, too. For this reason, it is necessary to find the appropriate way to this approach to otherness. The paper focuses on the exploration of the place of Western universalism in contemporary world.

Keywords: Western universalism, globalization, democracy, intervention, ethnocentrism, civilizing mission, human rights, intercultural dialogue.

El universalismo occidental en el mundo contemporáneo

Resumen

El proceso de globalización trae no sólo la creación de un mercado económico único en el mundo, sino también la proliferación de diferentes influencias culturales. El contacto con quienes son de alguna manera diferentes de nosotros se ha ido incrementando también. Por esta razón, es necesario encontrar la forma adecuada de este enfoque de la alteridad. El documento se centra en la exploración del lugar del universalismo occidental en el mundo contemporáneo.

Palabras clave: universalismo occidental, globalización, democracia, intervención, etnocentrismo, misión civilizadora, derechos humanos, diálogo intercultural.

Dictionary of foreign words refers to two important meanings of the concept of universalism. The first is to highlight the superiority of the whole compared to particularities. The second meaning refers to the

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effort to include everything, to generality, the total sum, or aggregate attitude (Ivanová-Šalingová, 1990: 910). However, this definition is not complete. The important meaning of this concept, which is necessary to mention, is the faith or belief in universal validity of certain rights, freedoms, values, norms, principles, and the like. This is related to the category of truthfulness, because universal principles claim recognition as the unconditional truth that should apply to all of the people without exception. Jurová (2013: 174) claims that compared to traditional societies, modern liberal society is characterized by the struggle for universalism. Especially in this sense, I want to focus on exploring Western universalism.

The above described universalism is, however, just one of many, and looking into the history, it is clear that almost every strong power-political department claimed its values as universal and often tried to "convince" others of its truth because it considered these values to be truly authentic and "unquestionable". Where does this "authenticity" of certain values and their claim to universal validity come from?

Immanuel Wallerstein points out two important "resources" of universal values in this context. The first is the "revelation". People were given the knowledge of the truth via prophets or other "God entrusted" preachers. The legitimacy of universal values is thus inferred either "directly from the source", which is God, or it is derived from the prophet who had the opportunity to "see" the truth. These revealed truths then form the basis of particular religions. Another way to realize universal values is simply to "discover" them as something that is "natural". Due to important people we come to the doctrines of natural law, which are the part of various moral and political philosophies (Wallerstein, 2008: 48).

Since there are many religions and many political and moral philosophies, there are also many views of what is universal. Political and legal equality can be considered as a typical example of the universal value in contemporary liberal society (Selznik in: Jurová, 2013: 173). But what is really universal? Are there any universal principles? What rules should govern the globalized world? These questions are now even more urgent than any time before because under the influence of globalization the world is increasingly "shrinking", getting "united", and different religions and cultures are brought into closer contact.

Globalization can make the impression that human affairs are progressing to some generally applicable model. Computers, gas stations, fast-food chains are the same worldwide. Why cannot the political institutions be the same, too? To a large extent the spread of modernization starts from the West, which can evoke the idea that its values are universal.

In Western civilization three main variants of universalism can be identified nowadays. The first is the belief in the universality of Western democracy, which is tried to be achieved and defended in a global dimension. The West here takes a stand of the defender of universal human rights and, "on behalf" of these ideals, it claims a right to intervene in several parts of the world. The second variant is the proclamation of the clash of civilizations, which, on the one hand, emphasizes the mutual differences and uniqueness of civilizations, but, on the other hand, there is the belief in the superiority of Western civilization, because "only" this civilization is founded on the universal truths. The third and final variant of universalism is the belief in the laws of neoliberal economics and market rules that have universal validity and therefore all countries should be open to the flow of goods and finances and they should comply with these laws (Wallerstein, 2008: 9).

For a long time the West has been facing a wave of criticism concerning his universalism and its behaviour to other cultures. This behaviour is often seen in terms of concerning the same as equal and the different as inferior. The "superior" attitude of the West to otherness is, actually, not just the question of the present, but it appeared also in the past.

In a number of publications the Valladolid conference convened by Emperor Charles V in 1550 is mentioned in this context. This conference was held in order to decide the dispute between the Aristotelian philosopher Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and the Dominican priest Bartolomé de las Casas. The dispute was about the attitude of Europeans to indigenous Indians and about the question whether and what is the right of Europeans to intervene in the original culture of Indians. I will briefly mention the arguments of both parties because in their testimonies we can find certain similarities with those which are now used for justification of various military interventions.

Sepúlveda pointed out the differences between Indians and Europeans and he regarded Indians as barbarians. He considered "dif-

ference" synonymous with "inferiority". He assumed that hierarchy, not equality, is the natural state of humankind. He further argued that Indians sacrificed people, were running naked, did not know money and knew anything about the Christian religion. They were considered simple-minded, ignorant and cruel and therefore they had to be ruled by the others. The intention was to avoid inflicting further damage to the indigenous population as well as to the population that comes to these "barbarians" and brings them the "real" values. Las Casas emphasized equality in the name of Christianity. In defence of Indians he regarded their positive characteristics such as friendship, traditions, and family values, which, as he believed, constituted a presumption of adoption of the word of God and thus adoption of Christianity. Las Casas also claimed that the nature of Indians is not different and therefore it is not inferior (in Beck, 2007: 386).

To a large extent this conflict between Sepúlveda and Las Casas goes on nowadays. Although both views have significantly different approach to otherness, universalist tendencies can still be found in both cases. The only difference is in the way both debaters argue. Las Casas seems to be the better one in the debate (and I agree with him), as he recognizes the equality of Indians, but his criterion to do so is his belief in the possibility of Indians to recognize the universal truth of Christianity. It means that he also failed to break the position of ethnocentrism and he saw Indians through the lens of Western values. Indians were equal for him because they are in a sense the same as Europeans.

As Ulrich Beck (2007: 387) points out, a barbarian can be baptized and he can participate in the universal truth of Christianity. This can be also worded in the terms of democracy: developing countries and traditional societies can be "modernized" and they can achieve the salvation of Western universalism by the means of free market and democracy. So, in these terms democracy is often discussed, too. Thinking about the democratic character of some states or their possibility to achieve democracy is often based precisely on the conviction of its universality. I will discuss the issues of democracy later.

Looking back to the European history, we can see that from the 16th century there prevails Sepúlveda's doctrine that allowed Europeans to intervene against "barbarians", so that they could also participate in the universal truth. This doctrine is even more significant

in the 19th century when in the European countries there dominated the belief about their "civilizing mission" or the role of the white man. "They considered themselves as the members of the 'higher peoples' and felt entitled to rule the 'lower peoples', so they made reference to their 'civilizing mission', whose aim and content was the responsibility to lead the peoples of occupied territory to civilization development so that they were able to rule their destiny on their own in due time" (Čáky, 2009: 7). For the sake of objectivity it is necessary to point out the fact that this "civilizing mission" also brought some positives to indigenous peoples, even though these were significantly disproportionate to the negatives. But I realize the related problem of the possibility to lay down the criteria (which would have universal validity) on the basis of which we could measure "true value" of the civilizing influences of the West (and not just the West) to other civilizations, and thus avoid ethnocentrism.

Since 1950s there has been a massive decolonization caused by national liberation movements in the subjugated nations as well as by the depletion of the major European powers under the influence of the Second World War. New sovereign states were established. Under the conventions of the United Nations and international law these states should have had sovereignty on their territory and also they should have been prevented from the interference in their internal affairs with other states. However, this did not happen and it was justified mostly by the protection of human rights. This therefore raises the question of the degree to which others have the right to intervene in foreign affairs. Those who intervene are often led by the belief in their moral superiority and the universality of their values. Since the late 20th century and especially in the 21st century this belief has been the basis for the right and duty to spread democracy. But who has the right to intervene? In Wallerstein's point of view, intervention is practically the right appropriated by the powerful. However, it is the right that is difficult to legitimize, and that is the reason why it often becomes a subject of political and moral resistance (Wallerstein, 2008: 33).

Every intervention should be sufficiently justified before others and therefore the intervening often refer to human rights violations which they want to avoid by their intervention. It is often very difficult to judge to what extent the above mentioned arguments are justified, and whether it is not only the media influence on public in order to

obtain approval of public for power ambitions of the intervening. Behind their "moral reasoning" there are often financial interests of the intervening. We also encounter many cases where the primary power interests are hidden under the guise of rights and values protection. In this context, the West is often criticized for "double standard" used to judge the violation of various rights. Noam Chomsky draws attention to the expression of Thomas Carothers (the vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the founder and director of the Democracy and Rule of Law Program), according to whom this "ambiguity" often relates to the promotion of democracy. Chomsky (2008: 105) claims that democracy is supported by the US in the places where it fits well with American security and economic interests. But where democracy clashes with other significant interests, it is downplayed or even ignored. Despite this "dichotomy" of the West, "the spread of democracy" is among one of the most important export articles of Western civilization.

But when we look at the functioning of liberal democracy more closely, it is evident that its principles are disputed. In order to function effectively, liberal democracies but also other political regimes need the existence of a particular political unit, within which political power is performed. This unit is generally a "national" state. The process of globalization entails a gradual calling into question the role and sovereignty of the state and its weakening. Several authors highlight this fact — Zygmunt Bauman and Eric Hobsbawm among others.

According to Bauman (2000: 77) legislative and executive sovereignty of the modern state had to sit down on a tripod of military, economic and cultural sovereignty. Right under the influence of globalization, all of these state pillars weakened noticeably. The result is that its material base is destroyed, its sovereignty and independence invalidated, and its political class suppressed. National state becomes then a mere security service for mega corporations (Bauman, 2000: 82). State power, which is in democracy understood as the will of the people, is gradually "torn off" from the state and hence the people and it gets into the hands of large multinational corporations.

It is necessary to note that this weakening of the power and influence is typical also for states which are not democratic. According to Hobsbawm governments of modern states are based on three important assumptions, which apply to them to a lesser extent. Hobsbawm

(2009: 83-84) mentions the following assumptions: firstly, the government has more power than other units that act on a given territory; secondly, the citizens of the state are more or less willing to accept the authority of the government; and, thirdly, people believe that governments can provide them with the services which they would not have been provided at all or less effectively under other circumstances than by the state.

The last assumption is very strongly undermined by the doctrine of *laissez-faire,* which has been advocated by a large amount of politicians and ideologists since 1970s. This doctrine says that state should intervene in the economic sphere as little as possible, and its role should be only to protect people and property, to defend nation, and to provide minimum of public goods (e. g. communication, ports, etc.). Economic activity should be left to the natural action of the market. Under the influence of that doctrine the impact and effect of the state is constantly getting constricted and economy is getting separated from political power. Hobsbawm claims that the ideal of market sovereignty is not a supplement but the alternative of liberal democracy. As a result the participation in politics is changed for the participation in market, and a citizen is in this way replaced by a consumer (Hobsbawm, 2009: 85). Recent global financial crisis, however, suggests that some regulation of the market is essential. But it is not clear by whom and whence these interventions are to be realized in a globalizing world.

More and more people retreat from politics, which is a threat to democracy and it is also visible in another sphere. It is proved by decline in the number of people who participate in the elections. This trend is reflected mainly in developed democracies. To what extent is it then possible to talk about the legitimacy of government if they are elected by one third or fifth of all potential voters? It is true that the decision not to vote is a choice, too, and this choice expresses certain opinion, but this "lack of interest" in public affairs weakens the very essence of democracy. As Jozef Lysý claims, this retreat of citizens from the realms of politics is also reflected by "decreasing interest in joining political parties that were the important measures which served to initiate the area of active citizenship in the recent past" (Lysý, 2006: 161). Consequently fewer people enter active politics, which means the reduction of the range of "personalities", from which the voter may choose.

One of the most mentioned shortcomings of liberal democracy is the reluctance to address some important issues and postponing their solutions to the indefinite future. As the access to the power of the state depends on the outcome of the elections, the solution of "unpopular" but from the long-term view necessary problems, is deliberately postponed because they can cause resentment among voters and this can mean "political suicide" for the politicians. Such topics include environmental problems but also issues concerning gradual "collapse" of social system which is caused by the decline and ageing of the population in developed countries.

Considering the functioning of democracy, I cannot forget to mention something we call "Balkanization" of society in which each group pursues its own goals. This does not mean that similar trends did not exist in the past or that various interest groups did not work either. However, relying on Tofflers' claim, I share the view that current information society is still more heterogeneous. For this reason, in the industrial society it was easier to create majority, which was later represented in a parliamentary democracy via elected candidates. Information wave is also related to the fact that "we overcome industrialism and become a demassified society rapidly. As a result, it is more and more difficult —often impossible— to achieve a majority or at least a government coalition" (Toffler & Tofflerová, 1996: 92). If the coalition in such a situation arises, it is often difficult to enforce certain political decisions because they can strike the resistance within the coalition itself as it often consists of political parties with very different political agenda. This does not mean that such a coalition cannot govern, but it is much more difficult to enforce certain political decisions in these circumstances.

One of the greatest threats to democracy is poverty. Samuel P. Huntington claims that the future of democracy depends on the future of economic development (Huntington, 2008: 298). Bauman also discusses this issue and he considers personal and political rights closely connected.

As Bauman claims, without political rights people cannot rely on their personal rights; but without social rights political rights remain just an unattainable dream, fiction and purposeless or cruel joke for most of those who have been ensured by the law. In practice, unless the social rights are ensured, the poor have no opportunity to apply

their political rights which they normally have (Bauman, 2008: 64-65). Provided that the state is unwilling or unable to guarantee the fundamental right to a dignified life, that is hardly imaginable without any social security, people are losing reasons for being "politically involved" —and they are unwilling to participate in democratic elections (Bauman, 2008: 65).

The last criterion I would like to mention is the influence of media on contemporary politics, which is huge obviously. Mass media have enormous effect on shaping public opinion, through which the pressure on political leaders can be exerted so that they either do or do not implement certain political decisions. Strong manipulative influence of the media is also quite common. It is implemented not only through various media "cases", but to a large extent it is applied when handling the voters. This is one of the reasons why political groups and their leaders, especially before elections, "confide" themselves in the hands of media professionals whose task is to offer their expected image to potential voters. Not only the electoral program but also "media image" presented to the voters can have great influence on the election result.

These arguments point to a specific threat to the current face of democracy. However, not only democratic systems but also other political regimes encounter these pitfalls as they follow from the change in the position of the state, which is related to the globalization process. So what is the future of democracy?

Assuming that we reject Western universalism, which is evidently unsustainable on a global scale, the following question arises: What are the principles a new global world should be built on? Are there any universal principles on which worldwide intercultural dialogue should be built? Although it is possible to find some similarities in the relationship to the others (e. g. the golden rule) in various cultures and religions, I agree with Wallerstein's opinion, that we are not given the universal values, but we gradually create them (Wallerstein, 2008: 34). We are therefore in the era of creating global principles that should be the basis of mutual communication in the global space, although it does not look likely so far, because the West and particularly the United States constantly endeavour to show their dominance. However, I think that the search for a common basis is the way we cannot escape if people want to live in (at least) relative peace, and sometimes it can

be a matter of survival of all humankind. Wallerstein claims, that such a global understanding requires different specific base, structure that is more egalitarian that all we have hitherto built (Wallerstein, 2008: 34).

This presupposes, however, not one-sided "dictate" of conditions, but the dialogue. To a large extent this development will also depend on whether the United States, having enormous military and economic power, abandon their hegemonic efforts. But, it is unlikely that "one day" the United States say that they do not want to be hegemonic and renounce their global power ambitions. Rather, it is questionable what Hobsbawm points out that this is the workable plan of global domination of one country, which is unprecedented in history. Although this state has an incomparably greater military power over others (Hobsbawm, 2009: 41).

It is highly likely that such a plan is not workable. It can be possible to control the vast territory militarily for some time, but on a global scale and in a long-term it is difficult to implement this goal. We also have to count with gradual decline of the West, strengthening the influence of other countries (e. g. China, India) or whole civilizations, and, power and geopolitical interests of Russia cannot be forgotten either. We may say that in the future, the US and the entire West will have to agree about general rules with the others, and participate in the search for certain commonly accepted universal values. The West cannot be the only "determinant" and "guardian" of human rights. As Wallerstein claims, the building of global moral restrictions against the criminal against humanity has little value unless these restrictions are applied against the powerful as well as against those who are subjugated (Wallerstein, 2008: 34).

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