

In All Their Singularity

by Alain Policar

We need to rebuild universalism, not as an overarching model to be applied to all regions of the world, but on the basis of their own singularity – laterally, not from above.

Reviewed: Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Universaliser. « L'humanité par les moyens d'humanité »*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2024, 176 pp., €12.

Universaliser ("To Universalize: Humanity Through Ways of Humanity") begins with a quotation from Léopold Sédar Senghor, which gives us an idea of the task that Souleymane Bachir Diagne set himself, with as much obstinacy as talent: "The possibility of real dialogue between human beings and cultures does not lie in the solemn and often pompous public declarations of a hypocritical, because colorless, universality; rather, it lies in a patient and sustained effort at 'conciliatory agreement' in which each people, measuring the pride of being different against the happiness of being together, will make its contribution to building the Civilization of the Universal". Diagne's ethical and political approach can be defined thus: denouncing the misuse of universalism, but not renouncing the universal.

Leibniz's influence

His works—at least since the book he co-authored with Jean-Loup Amselle¹—have been devoted to determining the conditions for reinventing the universal. His last two books, *Ubuntu* and *Universaliser*, shed light on the origins of his thinking, and clarified its scope. In fact, the philosopher's most important commitments can be traced back to the very beginnings of his intellectual life, as evidenced by his interest in George Boole and the laws of thought, as well as in the truths of reason championed by Leibniz—the same Leibniz who, in a draft letter to Peter the Great, wrote: “I am not one of those men who are passionate about their homeland or about any nation, but I strive for the benefit of the whole human race, because I consider heaven to be my homeland and all well-meaning men to be my compatriots”². And yet, while the influences of Mohammad Iqbal, Bergson and Gaston Berger on Diagne's philosophy are often cited, as well as those of postcolonial authors (Fanon, Césaire, Glissant, etc.), Leibniz's influence is seldom mentioned. In our opinion, however, it is the one that most aptly expresses the nature of his plea for the universal (to borrow the title of Francis Wolff's wonderful book, *Plaidoyer pour l'universel*).

This hypothesis is based on Leibniz's rejection of the Cartesian thesis of the creation of eternal truths. The German philosopher held that their foundation must be sought in the divine understanding, in the truths of reason or intelligence, which he contrasted with the truths of feeling: “I believe that the truths of intelligence are universal, and that what is true of them is also true of the angels and of God himself. These eternal truths are the fixed, unchanging point on which everything hinges³.” The “eternal truths” of which Leibniz speaks do not require human judgment: beauty, for example, possesses a value whose existence does not depend on its effects on human sensibility. It is a value in itself, detached from subjective human responses⁴.

As we know, Leibniz posits both the radical singularity of the monad and the fact that each communicates with the other: all, from their own point of view, express

¹ *In Search of Africa(s). Universalism and Decolonialist Thought*, Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA, Polity Press, 2020.

² Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, draft letter to Peter the Great, Jan. 1712, in Louis Alexandre Foucher de Careil, *Lettres et opuscules. Inédits de Leibniz, Fragments divers*, Paris, Librairie philosophique de Ladrange, 1854, p. 514.

³ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz in Louis Alexandre Foucher de Careil (introduction), *Lettres et opuscules. Inédits de Leibniz, Fragments divers*, Paris, Librairie philosophique de Ladrange, 1854, p. 250.

⁴ As Ronald Dworkin writes, values are real and fundamental, “as real as trees or pain”, *Religion Without God*, Cambridge, MA and London, UK, Harvard University Press, 2013.

one and the same world. Yet it is by acknowledging singularity that we can arrive at a universal that escapes the hegemonic claims of Western universalism. It is also by refusing to confine ourselves to the singular that we achieve the universal. The universal must not be assigned to the historical conditions of its appearance. The fact that the subject and knowledge are situated in space and time by no means implies the adoption of a relativistic particularism that would invalidate the very project of a science tending by nature towards objectivity. Surely we should want our statements to be valid independently of their conditions of enunciation, that is, without being bound to the person we are? In other words, valid in all possible worlds, or at least in all states of the same world, namely this world? As Diagne puts it, we must “sing in unison the hymn of science to the singular”⁵.

Let us be clear: reinventing the universal (the title of the introduction to *Universaliser*, but also the subtitle of the 2023 exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly, on “Senghor and the Arts”) requires the deconstruction of its counterfeits.

Deconstructing universalism

In his brilliant book, Markus Messling asks whether it is possible to think about the universal after universalism⁶. His question, “What remains of the universalist ideal after its distortion in the colonial adventure?” is not very different from Immanuel Wallerstein's in *European Universalism. The Rhetoric of Power*. Both acknowledge the end of the overarching form of universalism and seek to treat it as a beginning that would enable us to think of it in terms of the plural of the world, as Diagne so aptly puts it. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty reminds us, we must distinguish between Europe's claim to embody the universal—a claim he describes as hyper-rational—and the rational claim that there is a universality. This is also the approach taken by Susan Buck-Morss (in the wake of Pierre-Franklin Tavares, as Diagne reminds us), when she describes the Haitian revolution as the moment when a universalist European philosophy of history shifted to a new consciousness of humanity: the army of freed

⁵ Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Le fagot de ma mémoire*, Paris, Philippe Rey, 2021, p. 89.

⁶ Markus Messling, *L'universel après l'universalisme. Des littératures francophones du contemporain*, Presses Universitaires de France, 2023.

slaves sang the Marseillaise as they marched against the French occupying troops (themselves revolutionaries)⁷.

The West has all too often justified its colonization policy by asserting its “civilizing mission”, while ignoring singular cultural forms. This covering-law *universalism*, to use the expression coined by Michael Walzer in 1989, is based on the idea that the doctrines and laws of the dominant powers will one day be universally accepted. While this evolutionary premise is opposed to the fixity of differences between groups, characteristic of racism, it clearly in no way distances itself from ethnocentrism, since it makes Europe the civilizational model towards which all other societies must strive.

Conversely, the lateral universal suggested by Maurice Merleau-Ponty⁸, and echoed by Diagne, takes account of reiteration, i.e. of the singularity that characterizes each experience of liberation from oppression. In other words, the idea is to jointly produce the universal by reiterating it. Diagne insists that the lateral universal is a (multi)lateral practice before it is a statement. This is why he considers (p. 125) that the desire for the universal is best expressed by a verb: *to universalize*.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out that we acquire the idea of a universality that, instead of being overarching, would be lateral or oblique, “through ethnological experience”, described as “an endless testing of oneself by the other, and of the other by oneself”⁹. Instead of a universalism based on prescription and which presupposes universality, Diagne proposes a critical instrument that protects us against the temptation to establish a model (European, in this case) as the truth of history, a theme also developed by Jack Goody: “One of the most disturbing myths in the West is the belief that we must distinguish between the values of our ‘Judeo-Christian’ civilization and those of the East in general, and those of Islam in particular”¹⁰.

⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haïti and Universal History*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019.

⁸ See “Rapport de Maurice Merleau-Ponty pour la création d’une chaire d’Anthropologie sociale” (Report by Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the creation of a Chair of Social Anthropology), Collège de France faculty assembly, November 30, 1958, reproduced in *La Lettre du Collège de France*, special issue, 2008, pp. 19-23. Maurice Merleau-Ponty also speaks of oblique universality in relation to the variations in human relationships with being, which, he writes, “shed light on ourselves” (cited by S. B. Diagne, *op. cit.*, 2024, p. 100).

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 193-194.

¹⁰ Jack Goody, *The Theft of History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 240.

The universal as a beginning

Despite being acutely aware of this usurpation, however, Diagne considers—and rightly so, in our view—that the Enlightenment belongs to no one, and that the universal cannot be dissolved in colonization. We must therefore resist the narrative that Europe produces of its own history. According to the original title of Mohamed Amer Meziane's book, quoted by Diagne, there are “empires under the earth”¹¹. And one of the best examples of the misleading nature of the European narrative is the history of philosophy.

Far from being the exclusive concern of Europe, as Hegel proposes, Diagne points out that *translatio* (the transmission of knowledge) “passed through the Islamic world and through Arabic, which became the philosophical language of Avicenna in Persia, of Averroes, of Ibn Tufayl, but also of Maimonides in Andalusia, of Ahmed Baba in Timbuktu [...]. It has known other twists and turns than the Athens-Rome-Heidelberg route, having also traced a path from Athens to Nishapur, Baghdad, Cordoba, Fez, Timbuktu...”. (p. 35). The “company of philosophers”, as Roger-Pol Droit happily dubs it, is not limited to a single geography¹². But the imperial narrative of European universalism is “in need of acknowledgement, of becoming a legend, that is, ‘something to be read, taught and repeated’” (p. 29).

Not surprisingly, the aim is to ensure that “the gaze that Europe casts on the rest of the world from the central position of its universalism is returned to it”—that it experiences, as Sartre puts it, “the shock of being seen” (pp. 112-113). And Europe has thus remained lucid when confronted with the attempts of certain liberal theorists to justify the dispossession of land on the basis of contractualist theory: as Charles Mills¹³ has shown, there was no deliberation, and non-European peoples were relegated to the status of objects of history, installing an ontological racism at the heart of modernity, “maintaining outside the community of humans who can bind themselves by contract those whose humanity will then have been denied” (p. 142)¹⁴.

¹¹ Mohamed Amer Meziane (2021), *The States of the Earth. An Ecological and Racial History of Secularization*, London and New York, Verso Books, 2024.

¹² Roger-Pol Droit, *La Compagnie des philosophes*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998.

¹³ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1997.

¹⁴ Diagne aptly reminds us that Mills' model is inspired by the one proposed, nine years earlier, by Carole Pateman and her hypothesis of a *sexual contract* in which the patriarchy originated, and which excludes women from the benefits of the social contract. See Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Redwood City, CA, Stanford University Press, 1988.

Consequently, the cosmopolitical project, which is based on the principle of equal respect due to every human being, regardless of nationality or membership of any sub-group of humanity, appears as the vision that the human race should strive for. Simone Weil, often quoted by Diagne, saw the meaning of cosmopolitanism in the universalization of citizenship. The end of colonialism through its emergence as cosmopolitanism, observes Diagne, is “that of the great division between the world of civility, where rights can be considered universal, and the world of subjugation (because it is barbaric), where these rights barely acclimatize, which would justify behaving differently, even though we come from the civilized world” (p. 52).

Ultimately, as Bruno Perreau writes, borrowing the notion of *co-appearance* from Jean-Luc Nancy, each of us “embodies something of others and *appears* on the social scene *with* them”¹⁵. In co-appearance, the simultaneity of the presence of oneself and the other must be understood as an experience of disorientation. It differs little from that of translation, which, if understood correctly, as Diagne reminds us, is the act of opening up one's own language to what has been thought and created in another language. Souleymane Bachir Diagne often uses the concept of *ubuntu*. He says that we can only be ourselves through others, in a kind of *co-humanity*.

A captivating interview with Françoise Blum, aptly entitled *Ubuntu*¹⁶, deals with the experience of co-humanity. With a preface by Barbara Cassin, the book gives us an even deeper insight into the circumstances that made the child of Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal, to our great benefit, a man of “unparalleled sensitivity” (in Cassin's words), as well as one of the leading thinkers of our time.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, October 14, 2024.

Translated by Susannah Dale with the support of Cairn.info, and published in booksandideas.net, July 10, 2025

¹⁵ Bruno Perreau, *Spheres of Injustice. The Ethical Promise of Minority Presence*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2025, p. 16.

¹⁶ *Ubuntu. Entretien avec Françoise Blum*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS, 2024.