

New Nationalisms and Identity Politics: Minorities, Majorities and Universal Emancipation

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A defining feature of new nationalisms, with their right-wing populist rhetoric, is the way they exploit the regime of truth prevalent in liberal democratic societies. Their use of the language of democracy, human rights and identity is sometimes hard to differentiate from the mainstream convention. Despite being majoritarian in the way it seeks democratic legitimacy, new nationalist discourse consistently advances demands framed in terms of minority protection. This is done by presenting the existence of ‘our’ nation as threatened by overwhelming forces of neo-liberal globalisation (embodied in the EU, the West or even in ‘the Washington establishment’). By using the *Pussy Riot* case as an empirical example, this article argues that there is no way of preventing the language of minority protection from being hijacked by ‘predatory identities’ unless one foregrounds the universal dimension of equality and emancipation, as opposed to rights and entitlements associated with particular identities. The key political question today, as always, is how to navigate between the totalitarian disregard of the local and the parochialist concentration on the particular.

In the context of the debate on the upsurge of right-wing populism in Europe and North America, nationalist and xenophobic attitudes of the populist critics of the liberal world order are often seen as a threat to minority rights. There is no doubt that this threat is real but, as this article will show, right-wing popular discourses are far more sophisticated than many of their opponents suggest. They do advance an agenda that is, potentially at least, oppressive in relation to certain identities, but they do not abandon identity politics, nor the emancipatory pathos that comes with it. On a more general note, these discourses are very adroit in exploiting the regime of truth established in liberal democratic societies. Their use of the language of democracy, human rights and identity is sometimes hard to differentiate from the mainstream convention – and it is this mimicry of the use of liberal democratic vocabulary that makes them hard to resist.

One might even argue that the democracy they strive to establish is not quite illiberal: in some respect at least, it is a hypertrophied version of liberalism which turns into its own negation. This concerns, in particular, the obsession with identity and recognition, which is so typical of late twentieth–early twenty-first century liberal politics. Even more paradoxically, this obsession was originally promoted by the left-wing forces (more specifically, by what used to be called ‘the cultural left’). An important aspect here is that despite being majoritarian in the way it seeks democratic legitimacy, new nationalist discourse always makes use of the rhetoric of minority protection. This is done by presenting the existence of ‘our’ nation as threatened by the overpowering forces of neo-liberal globalisation (embodied in the EU, the West or in ‘the Washington establishment’). I argue that there is no way of preventing the language of minority protection from being hijacked by ‘predatory identities’, unless one foregrounds the universal dimension of equality and emancipation, as opposed to rights and entitlements associated with particular identities. The key political question today, as always, is how to navigate between totalitarian disregard of the local and the parochial concentration on the particular.

The problem that the liberal ideology of human and minority rights faces here has less to do with the specificity of the populist challenge than with the idea of universal values as such. These values are a product of hegemony – more specifically, of Western hegemony. In the neo-Gramscian paradigm on which the analysis in this article is based, any practically conceivable universality is hegemonic. However, hegemonic universality is flawed, or at least imperfect. Right-wing populism feeds on this imperfection by inverting the hierarchies and presenting majorities in whose name it speaks as oppressed minorities. Global context is extremely important here; this is why I illustrate my conceptual argument with a brief example from recent Russian history. As I will demonstrate, the prosecution of the *Pussy Riot* band members in Russia in 2012–2013 was an early case of conservative identitarian politics employing emancipatory rhetoric and directing it against the Western hegemon.

In what follows, I first explore the imperfections of hegemonic universality at the conceptual level, by presenting the neo-Gramscian understanding of hegemony and showing its value in making sense of the political struggles around identities and minorities. In particular, as the second section shows, this value consists of highlighting the flaws inherent in hegemonic universality, which always retains traces of particularism. I then illustrate this conceptual point by examining the debate around the *Pussy Riot* case. In the final section, I discuss the implications of my analysis for political practice and present a set of normative observations which, in principle, could serve as broad guidelines for political practice.

Limits and Effects of Hegemonic Universality

The statement that universality of human rights is a product of Western hegemony as such does not contain any moral judgement, although it has normative implications.

In my approach to this problem, I draw on the conceptual apparatus of poststructuralist political theory, in particular on the works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1996, 2005). Hegemony is defined here as a political operation through which a particular identity is elevated to a position where it can represent the whole. It goes back to the classical Marxist critique of capitalism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued (see, for example, Marx and Engels 1970, 66) that liberal bourgeois ideology presents formal legal equality as genuine emancipation, which obscures the material inequality and exploitation resulting from private ownership of the means of production. The particular liberal capitalist order is thus portrayed as embodying the universal good: individual freedom all humans strive for.

It was Antonio Gramsci who conceptualised this relationship as hegemonic. In his view, hegemony is a form of rule that does not directly rely on violence, but instead is secured with the dominant class successfully establishing its own interest as the interest of society as a whole (Gramsci 1971).

Poststructuralist theory broadens this definition even further and treats hegemony as a relationship that can exist between any political identities at any level, from local groups to global forces. The central idea is still that hegemonic domination is always contingent and the boundaries that separate the antagonistic forces are unstable (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 136). While the hegemon's identity remains particular, there is a credible claim to represent the social totality. In a stable hegemony, this claim is simultaneously accepted and challenged. Other social forces present in the situation (classes, nations or any other groups) would partly identify with the hegemonic articulation of the universal good. However, a full identification would mean a change of the game from hegemony to identity, where all politically significant difference is eliminated. Conversely, a total lack of identification would imply a rule by coercion only or pure antagonism, which does not allow for any shared identity between the antagonistic forces.

The shared identity which lies at the core of hegemonic universality emerges if and when the subaltern starts speaking the language of hegemony: when, for example, the colonised adopt the discourse of 'civilisation' imposed by the coloniser, or when non-Western actors use the language of democracy and human rights, which they borrow from the West, to express their dissatisfaction with what they see as Western dominance. Indeed, as a recent comparative project has revealed (Morozov 2013), none of the most outspoken critics of the Western unilateralism (such as the Chinese, Russian and Latin American leaders) are capable of framing their criticism in any other language than that of democracy and human rights. This indicates a critical degree of normative dependence on the West, but also a typically postcolonial ability to subvert and vulgarise the hegemonic norm (Mbembe 2001).

Hegemonic universality is flawed. By definition, it operates in the domain of identitarian politics, 'in which particular differences struggle for recognition of their positive predicates, organize themselves into groups, defined by these predicates, and face potential antagonists, organized in similarly particularistic ways' (Prozorov 2009, 222). As Sergei Prozorov demonstrates in his analysis of Carl Schmitt's concept

of the political, identitarian politics is inevitably antagonistic. This is due to its being constituted around difference, which produces ‘vigilant receptivity to the existence of the Other’: “man” is neither good nor evil but simply dangerous because of being different’ (Prozorov 2009, 221–222, emphasis in original). Thus, empirically, identitarian politics does not have to always unfold in a violent mode, but ‘[w]hat is foreclosed in Schmitt’s logic is the disappearance of the “most extreme possibility” [of war] *qua* possibility, i.e. the formation of a political entity in which the problem of difference would not arise’ (Prozorov 2009, 221–222, emphasis in original).

The problem with hegemonic universality is, however, not only its propensity to generate antagonism and violence – indeed, it might be the case that antagonism is a necessary element of politics as such. A more critical issue could be that the obsession with difference precludes genuine universality and makes achieving it possible only through the establishment of a hierarchy. It is possible to speak about ‘our shared humanity’ in abstract terms, but as soon as this supposedly unproblematic humanity is politicised (e.g. when there is a choice between two conflicting norms), it can only be established on the basis of a particular view of human nature, which has to be culturally specific.

In the liberal paradigm, this leads to the (pseudo-)Hegelian end of history argument, maintaining that the West has reached the best form of social organisation that is practically possible (Fukuyama 1992). Western liberal democracy in this view is not perfect, but it continues to develop and move ever closer to the ideal. Most importantly, this very ideal itself is a product of the empirical reality of the West, and thus asserting Western hegemony as the end of history is almost tautological.

It is not surprising that Western particularism in the pursuit of the universalist agenda has opened the way to a wide range of counter-hegemonic projects that expose the flaws of hegemonic universality by asserting ‘the right of the particular’ (Kapustin 1996). Projects like the Russian sovereign democracy or Bolivian ‘plurinational democracy’ share with the European and North-American radical right the emphasis on the organic identity of the nation that is seen as superior to the morally decadent West (Morozov 2008; Morozov and Pavlova 2018). However, what all these projects also do is claim that this organic identity is under threat from the expansionist cosmopolitanism of the West, which is allegedly trying to dissolve all particular identities in the melting pot of neo-liberal globalisation. In presenting this argument, the critics of the West continue to use the hegemonic language of liberal democracy, thus widening the gap between the practice and the ideal even further.

The *Pussy Riot* Case: Inversion of the Norm

As an illustration of this trend, the *Pussy Riot* case is particularly instructive. It is one of the earliest prominent examples where the hegemonic norm of Western democracy was mimicked by an outside actor. At the time, this mimicry looked sinister and cynical, but limited in its significance to the Russian context. As subsequent developments demonstrated, it actually presaged a much wider global discursive turn.

Pussy Riot is a Russian feminist punk-rock group, which used to be based in Moscow. It achieved global fame on 21 February 2012, when five of its members staged a performance inside Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour. The women said they were protesting against the Orthodox Church leaders' support for the then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as a presidential candidate in the March elections. Three of the group members were later arrested. On 17 August 2012, they were convicted of 'hooliganism motivated by religious hatred', and each was sentenced to two years imprisonment.

Pussy Riot's own politics and continued prominence in the media is an important topic, but it is not directly relevant to my argument. Rather, what I am interested in is the position of the prosecution, which was also supported by the wider apparatus of state-controlled media. Despite the fact that the three members of the band who went on trial were convicted of hooliganism, the argumentative part of the verdict was largely built around the charge of having insulted religious feelings (Gazeta.Ru 2012). The latter line of reasoning was absolutely dominant in the discussion around the case and the new measures initiated in its aftermath, such as legislation against blasphemy and sacrilege (RIA Novosti 2013) and multiple moves de-facto violating the principle of the separation between the Orthodox Church and the state (Verkhovsky 2013a).

This context makes the *Pussy Riot* case part of a long sequence of incidents arising from a clash between two norms – the freedom of expression and the rights of religious communities. However, in the vast majority of such cases the conflict was about the rights of religious minorities. As such, they fell within the scope of original dilemmas faced by liberal democracies, with their in-built conflict between individual and group rights, as well as between particular interests and common good. In the *Pussy Riot* case, we are dealing with a revealing play with the democratic concept of majority rule and the liberal principle of minority protection that results in an almost complete inversion of hegemonic universalism.

It is evident that the multiculturalist norm invoked by the prosecution (the rights of religious minorities) was used in this case to protect a group dominant in the Russian society – Orthodox Christians. It was often explicitly alleged in the debate that the band offended the majority of Russians. This claim could be problematic as a statement of fact, since far from all ethnic Russians are practising believers (Kochergina 2017). Nevertheless, it is symptomatic of the overall situation and foreshadows one of the main rhetorical devices used by the new nationalists: they postulate a particular identity as universal, shared by everyone, and then make claims on behalf of this identity. Broadly speaking, this is a typical authoritarian populist move, and as such it is not new.

What is new is arguing the case on the basis of a liberal norm, instead of using more the explicitly populist vocabulary of the twentieth-century populists (Laclau 1977). Instead of serving to defend disenfranchised minorities, as the original multiculturalist idea certainly did, it is now inverted to reaffirm the hegemonic position of one particular cultural group (and a corresponding political platform). However, what happens next is even more interesting.

When confronted with the above objection (the norm is intended to protect disenfranchised minorities, not the majority), Russian opponents of secularism immediately took a defensive stance by referring to the global context in which their struggle takes place. They argued that even though they constitute a majority within Russia, Orthodox Christians still remain a minority in the globalising world, a world where the aggressive presence of the West plays a defining role. *Pussy Riot*'s action would be presented as only one, even if particularly aggressive, manifestation of pro-Western secularism, which undermines local cultures and thus threatens the existence of non-Western communities (Verkhovsky 2013b, 22–23). Consequently, in their eyes, the *Pussy Riot* incident demonstrates the urgent need to protect Orthodox Christianity, along with other religions considered as organic to Russia, against malevolent atheism.

In a further step, paradoxical but not at all inconsistent, cultural protectionism would appeal to the Western norm by saying that similar laws guaranteeing religious rights also exist in the West. In the *Pussy Riot* case, Germany was the most frequent example. Thus, when the West criticised the Russian State for its handling of the *Pussy Riot* case, it engaged in its typical practice of applying double standards. These references serve a dual purpose: on the one hand, they reaffirm the universality of the norm protecting particular identities, on the other, they reiterate the thesis about moral insolvency of the West. In this interpretation, Western leaders and media use the universal norm in the most instrumental fashion, with the overarching aim of subduing non-Western nations.

The latter two points quite clearly demonstrate the significance of the flaws in hegemonic universality in peripheral discursive spaces. The logic of hegemony establishes an essential link between universal humanity and the West (as suggested above, what makes this link an essential one is not some sort of necessary relationship, but rather the absence of alternative definitions of the universal). As a result, Russian society faces the perennial choice between Westernisation and defending a particular identity at any cost.

The latest round of Westernisation in Russia had already failed in the 1990s, but the search for an authentic version of universal values has been equally unsuccessful. Recent sociological studies confirm that, at the level of everyday practices, very few changes in the traditionalist direction have taken place and they are counterbalanced by ongoing modernisation and secularisation (e.g. Magun *et al.* 2015; Temkina 2016). The only option left is to use the language of hegemony, while simultaneously denouncing the hegemon as such. The conservative turn in Russian politics since 2012 consists almost exclusively of the negation of the West while ignoring the fact that a negative identification still reaffirms the centrality of the Western Other for national identity (Morozov 2015, 103–134). It intensifies that very 'vigilant receptivity' to the presence of the Other and thus reinforces its position as an indispensable reference point – which, in turn, perpetuates Western hegemony. In sum, the effect of hegemonic universality lies in substituting the problem of universal emancipation with the question of preserving a particular cultural identity in the face of the omnipresent and intrusive West.

Oppressive Inversions and the Failure of the Left

Additional, and more recent, examples from the East and West European context are easy to find. Many Poles and Hungarians see themselves as oppressed minorities within the EU-ropean empire and rally behind the politicians claiming to be able ‘to take our country back’. Trumpism in the US would be a special case from this perspective, closer to the ‘classical’ American populisms of the twentieth century. However, its paranoia about immigration still allows the drawing of important parallels. The Brexit vote in the UK also makes those parallels particularly evident: the Leave vote was a move by a former empire fighting back against the overwhelming forces of globalisation, but it was also imagined as an act of decolonisation. The European Union was featured in the campaign as an invader, a supranational polity that is culturally and historically alien yet increasingly taking over the right to decide for the Brits – in other words, as a colonial power.

Coming back to the conceptual discussion, these examples suggest that the embrace of the cultural agenda by the left in the 1970–1980s was an enormously risky move. Starting from the 1970s, Marxist theory faced, and to some extent is still facing, two formidable, and related, challenges. The first one was the fact – obvious to most – that global class structures were undergoing a profound change. This, in turn, rendered the classical Marxist scenario of universal emancipation through proletarian revolution highly implausible. The search for ways of coming to terms with the first challenge produced the second one: the proliferation of ontological pluralism in what used to be a relatively solid ground of Marxist theory. As Nancy Fraser (1995) demonstrated quite persuasively, while the workers’ movement demanded redistribution, the new social movements that emerged after 1968 called for recognition, and despite the fact that the two types of demands were related, it was impossible to reduce one to the other. As a consequence, instead of an ontology based on the relations of production, the ‘cultural left’ saw the world as a patchwork of disparate overlapping struggles rooted in the domain of the ideational as well as the material.

The politics of recognition has been astonishingly successful, and there is no denial of its profoundly progressive contribution to the cause of universal human emancipation. It gave voice to subaltern groups that had been completely ignored in the classical – white, patriarchal, heteronormative – theory and practice of the Left. However, this agenda itself contained a conservative kernel, which, as long as it was not reflected upon, ultimately burst out and contaminated the entire discursive field, opening it up for the colonisation on the part of the Right.

This conservative kernel consisted precisely in defining the subject of emancipation in cultural terms. In the final analysis, the mission of such a subject is to defend, or recover, a fullness of being associated with blackness, or womanhood, or indigeneity, or gayness – a fullness that has allegedly been lost, or at least impaired because of slavery, patriarchy, colonisation or homophobia. Regardless of the reason, the complaint is that one’s identity has been violated from the outside. This complaint is a particularist one, and at some stage, if pressed too hard, it inevitably parts ways

with the universalist demands for human emancipation. The popular identity it strives to defend is framed in organicist terms: it imposes on the body politic a matrix according to which certain elements are classified as belonging on the inside, while others are associated with the oppression and therefore antagonised as alien.

As a consequence, the culturally defined subject of emancipatory politics is itself oppressive: it tends to invert colonial, patriarchal and other hierarchies instead of destroying them in the name of equality. In Hegelian terms, it is an ideology of the Slave who wants to kill the Master and take his place, becoming himself an oppressor. It does not necessarily mean that no progress is achieved: for example, in the Baltic States, where the representatives of the imperial nation themselves became a minority (Hanovs 2016), the resultant hegemonic regime has become much more inclusive. Similarly, it is not just conservative Republicans and Trumpists who complain about the threats to the freedom of speech as a side-effect of minority protection, especially on university campuses. In spite of the fact that in both of these cases the degree of the 'new oppression' is strongly exaggerated by either the external forces (such as Russia) or the privileged classes eager to protect their power, it would be counterproductive to dismiss these complaints as having no ground in reality. At the same time, the concern with the excesses of multiculturalism and political correctness easily transforms into denunciation of minorities as such and serves to justify restrictive measures in such fields as migration, cultural and religious politics (Razack 2004; Haritaworn 2012). This leads to double alienation of minorities within minorities: in 'their' cultural space they are discriminated against as women, gays or nonbelievers, while the larger society harasses them as representatives of the very minority they have trouble identifying with at the local level.

In all these cases we are dealing with identity politics, ultimately rooted in particularism. In spite of the genuine emancipatory impulse that often motivates such politics, its ultimate horizon is the reversal of oppression rather than universal emancipation. And it is this horizon that is reached, in practice, by right-wing populists. In his analysis of the Kemalist hegemony in Turkey, Laclau (2005, 212) notes that in that case, 'homogenization of the "nation" proceeded not through the construction of equivalential chains between actual democratic demands, but through authoritarian imposition'. It is important to emphasise the role played in this imposition by the externalisation of conflict. This is only possible if the majority, constructed within, is simultaneously presented as a minority in a larger global context. This enables authoritarian leaders, as in the *Pussy Riot* case, to pretend that they speak on behalf of the oppressed rather than the privileged.

Towards People's Politics

In his theory of populist politics, which he introduced in his first major book in 1977 and developed through the rest of his life, Laclau puts the emphasis on the political demand as such, as a self-grounded political move that invokes the universality of 'the people'. This position is grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis, where the

authentic, unchangeable truth of the Real remains forever beyond reach: ‘With the fullness of the primordial mother being a purely mythical object, there is no achievable *jouissance* except through radical investment in an *object petit a*. This *object petit a* becomes the primary ontological category’ (Laclau 2005, 116–117). Similarly, in politics ‘the fullness of the community’ is ‘that which is denied and, as such, remains unachieved’ (Laclau 2005, 106).

Hence, the people as a political subject cannot be rooted in the materiality of ‘production’, ‘culture’ or ‘nature’, because any such materiality presupposes a society reconciled with itself and, as such, is no more than a fiction. The only foundation for popular subjectivity is the material force of a demand which the current institutional order, for whatever reason, is unable to accommodate. The demand thus remains frustrated. As such it can be related, through a chain of equivalences, to a potentially unlimited number of other demands which, regardless of their specific content, share the same essential characteristic of being unfulfilled. Establishing such an equivalence requires an act of radical investment, which is the essence of Laclau’s definition of populism: the equivalence can only materialise in a particular identity which, by virtue of becoming an object of such investment, sheds its own particularity and becomes hegemonic. It becomes an *object petit a*, it comes to represent, in the concrete world of politics, the abstract universality of the people.

This is also what right-wing populism does, but instead of focusing on the demands as such and their eventual satisfaction in a more just political order, it foregrounds the particular identity which all those who make the demand supposedly share. It then presents this identity as threatened by an external hegemonic force. Therefore, if and when a right-wing populist force comes to power, it does not address the frustrations that brought it there. On the contrary, it cultivates them by continuing to blame the external force: the former colonisers, the European empire or the domineering West. The political programme of right-wing populism can be summarised by the Gramscian concept of passive revolution: it proclaims the need for change but in fact does everything to keep things as they are (Morton 2007). It is a voice of the privileged that usurps the voice of the subaltern and makes them voiceless.

There is no way to fight this formidable opponent other than by prioritising the universal over the particular, and equality over identity. Caution is advised while listening to demands made on behalf of particular identities: if the subaltern keep speaking only in their own name, they remain voiceless. They have a chance of becoming oppressors themselves by inverting the relationship of oppression, but more often than not the privileged will simply usurp their voice. Progressive politics cannot consist of constantly affirming one’s own identity. What is required instead is building broad popular alliances between diverse political forces, ready to accommodate new demands as these emerge from the bottom up. Progressive politics must remain concrete lest it degenerate into authoritarian populism, but it also must foreground equality for everyone and oppose particular privileges. If there ever was a time for women’s politics, black politics or native politics, this time is over.

All these noble causes can be advanced only by equating women's politics with black politics with native politics with workers' politics and so on, eventually arriving at *people's politics* as the only genuinely democratic solution.

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