

A new quarrel of universals

Étienne Balibar, *Saeculum. Culture, religion, idéologie*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 2012. 118 pp., €22.00, 978 2 71860 874 7.

The new millennium has not been kind to the partisans of a radical Enlightenment. The sundering of temporal and spiritual authority, the suspicion of piety, the virtues of profanation, not to mention atheism itself – all of these have been laid claim to by the organic intellectuals of present-day imperialism. Conversely, critical theorists attuned to the postcolonial condition have subjected the ideals of secularism to the corrosive effects of genealogy and deconstruction. The upshot is an unsettling and unwilling convergence around the thesis that secularism is a Western value – cause for celebration among the partisans of (Judeo-)Christendom, and for unsparing suspicion among those who think it is high time that Europe, Christianity and the West be provincialized.

Balibar's opposition to those who have instrumentalized the secular to prolong projects of class, race and gender domination is a matter of record. In *Saeculum*, which expands on a talk originally delivered at the American University of Beirut in 2009, he revisits the highly symptomatic *casus belli* in the quarrel over French *laïcité*, the 2004 ban on the veil (and other 'conspicuous signs' of religious affiliation). The ensuing quarrel cut through the very heart of 'progressive' opinion, in a manner unmatched in any another European country. Balibar passionately argues that a law that exclusively compels women, who have been represented as the victims of religious oppression, either to unveil or to be ejected from state education cannot have 'the least liberating effect, the least educational value'. The young Muslim women targeted by the law are not framed as citizen-subjects, or if they are it is only inasmuch as their full citizenship is conditional on being *subjected to* an imposed standard of freedom and equality.

It is all the more noteworthy, in light of Balibar's rejection of the ideological state apparatus of *laïcité*, that these remarks are made in a section principally devoted to a critique of Joan Wallach's Scott's *The Politics of the Veil*. Though recognizing the incidence of a racist, colonial legacy in the actions of the French state, Balibar seems uncharacteristically defensive about what he perceives as the reduction of

the contradictions of *laïcité* to a postcolonial frame, an unease which is carried over in his critical considerations concerning Talal Asad's genealogies of the secular. The two foci of his criticism, however, are suggestive. The first is that in depicting a kind of convergence between *laïcité* and the exposure of (female) bodies to the market and its spectacle (in a manner that echoes Badiou's bracing intervention in the debate), Scott's critique doesn't sufficiently distinguish between two 'abstract universalisms': that of equality before the law and that of equivalence in the commodity. The functional harmony between law and market is not a given. Second, Scott's diagnosis of the 2004 measures, as the sign of republican *laïcité's* denial of sexual difference as a political problem, and its juxtaposition to a Muslim 'psychology of recognition', comes under attack, with Balibar faulting Scott's 'extraordinary blindness to the way in which a patriarchal and monotheistic social order invests sexuality and sexual difference with a symbolic function which is stunningly effective in the reproduction of its own structures of power'. This passage, qualified by a long note acknowledging the profound equivocity in uses and meanings of 'the veil', segues into a reflection on the double bind confronting women whose bodies are the objects of strategies of power by competing (if not symmetrical) 'phallocratic' groups – though the young women's own subjectivity or resistance does not receive substantial comment. Comparison with the relevant passages in Scott suggests that the polemic is somewhat overstretched, and that perhaps Balibar's critique of secularism's national form could have engaged more with Scott's suggestion that the 'preservation of a mythical notion of "France" in its many aspects was a driving force in the *affaires des foulards*'.

The critique of Scott encapsulates the guiding principles of this essay – above all, to *complicate* the debate over secularism. The heading under which Balibar presented his *soutenance*, the 'infinite contradiction', hovers over these pages too. The splitting of abstract universalism between state and capital, or the double-bind structuring the politics of the veil, is accompanied by several other dialectical figures:

the unstable co-implication of secularism and cosmopolitanism, the mutual incompleteness of religion and culture, the sacralization that haunts secularism, the changing borders between public and private which define 'the anthropology of *homo duplex*'. In all these instances, a dialectic without guarantees risks constantly devolving into aporia, antinomy or differend – all recurrent entries in Balibar's lexicon. But the theoretical intervention regarding the veil also signals the centrality of the question of *anthropological difference* to Balibar's efforts, as well as the claim, critical to this essay, that a specifically *philosophical* perspective can point beyond the disciplinary commonplaces and political deadlocks that plague the debate over secularism.

In *Saeculum*, philosophy becomes the very name for traversing frozen oppositions in a universalizing direction: a 'vanishing mediator' along the lines of Fredric Jameson's essay on Weber. No doubt, under various rubrics – from transnational citizenship to equaliberty – universalism has been Balibar's abiding preoccupation over the past two decades. Secularism (Balibar pointedly opts for this over *laïcité*, for reasons both political and philosophical) is a privileged domain in which to prolong this inquiry. Above all because, as he rightly notes in one of the essay's few unequivocal theses, what is at stake is not – as certain partisans of *laïcité* might have it – a conflict between the universalisms of the secular state and the particularism of religion, but a *clash of universalisms*, which by definition are potentially incompatible.

But how is the philosopher, figured here as on the side of an expansive democratic politics, not to end up enlisted to one side in this clash, be it in praise of the state or in apologia for religion? Here Balibar makes use of a kind of regulative ideal, which we could term a recursive or reflexive universalism. It is expressed in the watchwords 'democratize democracy' and 'secularize secularism' which jointly structure Balibar's proposals, and which could also be summarized as 'universalize universalism'. To start from contradiction and strive towards an inevitably incomplete and partial universalization is the recurrent gesture.

If, as Balibar contends, secularism demands an acknowledgement of the very cosmopolitanism (and globalization) that both drives and impedes its territorialization in the nation-state, just as a non-secular cosmopolitanism would be inconsistent, then these are limits internal to democracy – limits, we could add, which have to do not with the persistence of particularism but with contradictory vectors of

universalism, which cannot be unproblematically synthesized. Underlying this dialectic of universalisms is also an implicit rejoinder to critics of secularism like Talal Asad or Gil Anidjar, for whom it is inextricable from a Western and imperial history. While not denying the links between universalism and domination, Balibar seems to believe in a de-provincialization of the Enlightenment (perhaps even its decolonization), not as an achieved position but rather as a perpetual work of self-criticism.

The core of *Saeculum* is taken up by a confrontation with the dominant dyad in the debate on the secular: religion and culture. Balibar first surveys different variants of the contention that 'religion' is a *faux* universal of sorts – an imposition of *mondial-atinization* on incommensurable traditions (Derrida), a category whereby Western Christian thought has sought to subsume its others (Asad), or the obfuscation by belief of a *more* general category of belonging, *communion* (Debray). Yet he does not himself abandon or relativize the category. The reason seems to be twofold. First, the identification of religion (or indeed of secularism, as in Anidjar) with the Christian West would be an insupportable fixation of the notion's contradictory universality, bringing the paladins of a Christian Europe into unexpected agreement with its postcolonial detractors. The Christian West is not a univocal code, and it can be unsettled by thinking through the contested character of the 'regime[s] of translation through which collective subjects represent themselves to one another'. Second, to provincialize or historicize the category of 'religion' without remainder would entail that there is *another code* which can serve as the platform for deconstructing the disavowed power of the Christian Western code. The anthropological critique, of the kind offered by Asad, would suggest that this code is culture or tradition.

It is thus to the necessary incompleteness of the reduction of religion to culture and its obverse, the pre-eminence of religion over culture, that Balibar then turns, indexing these positions to Clifford Geertz and Max Weber, respectively. Erudition and insight are here present in a necessarily compressed and allusive form, and the many notes give an inkling of the vast scope of the underlying debates. Balibar's defamiliarizing gesture might seem familiar enough: rather than opting for either camp, we need to stress the *difference* between these categories, religion and culture, and it is only this difference that can allow us to grasp concrete conjunctures in the clashes and skirmishes over universalism. But the mutual excess

of these categories, their interference – which could devolve into the dialectical parlour game of, say, deconstructing Weber with Geertz and vice versa – does not get the last word.

Religion and culture may be grasped in their asymmetrical commonality. They have a common object, ‘man’, or rather anthropological difference, understood in terms of those differences that can be neither avoided nor fixed once and for all – sexual difference and the difference between human and animal in particular. Difference is here a kind of real for which culture and religion can provide only unstable answers, though their form may be peremptory (*this* is man, *that* is woman). In light of his dispute with Scott over the politics of the veil, it is perplexing that Balibar does not give much consideration here to race as a crucial vector of anthropological difference, and one that in both overt and surreptitious ways has impacted heavily upon the conflict over secularism – especially when racialized populations that fail to



ascribe to it are de facto ‘denaturalized’ from citizens to pathological denizens.

We should also note that Balibar’s turn to the anthropological is not a turn, as one may encounter in Agamben or Virno, to notions of potentiality; it is much less confidently ontological, and indicates instead that the human is always over- and under-determined. In this attempt at determining the undetermined, religion and culture are not symmetrical. Balibar proposes an ‘allegorical’ hypothesis: while culture’s relation to the problem of anthropological difference is to regulate, religion is to revolutionize. Jointly, they contribute to the ‘historical institution of the human’. But where the forms of life that comprise culture seem to require necessarily non-generalizable, if plastic, elements, religion is an operator of a kind of abstraction, which can, depending on the case, rigidify or radicalize the elements on culture, just as it can, in a manner critical to reflections on

contemporary cosmopolitanism, ‘travel’ with greater ease. But Balibar does more than unsettle each pole of the religion–culture dyad.

As *Saeculum*’s subtitle announces, there is a third term, and that term is *ideology*. That Balibar should again return, in a modified key, to this Althusserian motif, is hardly surprising. The theory of ideology, after all, is so enmeshed in both the critique of religion and religious criticism (just think of the theological disputations over iconoclasm and idolatry) that its relevance to an argument about secularism should be self-evident – if it weren’t for a faddish allergy to the term itself. But though echoes of Althusserian distinctions remain, Balibar does not approach the matter here as a historical materialist, strictly speaking. The turn to ideology is warranted by the incompleteness of the reduction of religion to culture, and vice versa, as well as by the imperative to gesture from within these conceptual disputes to a ‘real’ of the quarrel over secularism – a real which

has already been partially named as ‘anthropological difference’.

This thesis further grounds the idea that there is no such thing as a purely religious conflict, or for that matter a culture clash unsullied by other determinants. Balibar proposes a curious formula to signal a real excess over the domains of culture and religion, which is also a structural deficit at the very heart of the notion of ideology. That formula is *Culture + Religion +/- x = Ideology*. But what is

x? Not trespassing his philosophical remit by making unmediated claims about the social infrastructure of belief, Balibar lists production (for Marxists), power (for Foucauldians), domination (for Weberians), practice (for Bourdieuians), the real (for Lacanians). But can one afford to be so eclectic in naming this ‘internal exteriority’ within the field of ideology?

I think Balibar’s foregrounding of the problem of cosmopolitics, as that of a conflict of universalism in and against and beyond the nation-state, suggests otherwise. After all, it is difficult to gainsay that the crises and mutations of planetary capitalism (and of imperialism, a concept and reality that unfortunately is not addressed here) constitute a critical factor for the issues articulated in *Saeculum*. Balibar himself observes that the locus of the problem of ‘secularism’ is an interminable ‘transition’ otherwise known as ‘globalization’ in which *extensive universality*, relating to the communication of human beings

within one institutional space, is no longer isolated from *intensive universality*, 'relative to equality, that is to non-discrimination and non-hierarchization of individuals and the communities in which they live'. Beneath the problem of the cosmopolitan and the secular we can thus discern the conflict between the equivalential logics of commodification and the egalitarian impulses of the kind of democratic politics espoused by Balibar, as well as the productions of difference that both entail.

Surely, if both religion and culture are thought to constitute adaptive symbolic responses to the instability that marks anthropological difference, this is a situation that is only intensified by the increasingly 'dispossessive' character of contemporary capitalism? Here we could supplement Balibar's inquiry with attention to how conjunctures of *crisis* have historically provided, and continue to provide, occasions for the very clashes of incompatible universalisms *Saeculum* highlights. Modernity and millenarianism, as the likes of Hobsbawm and Worsley noted half a century ago, are far more closely entwined than one may initially surmise. Ideology, as Balibar himself theorized in the 1960s and 1970s, is also the domain of social reproduction, and it would be worth thinking beyond the symbolic efficacy of religion and culture as competing and overlapping codes for the handling of anthropological difference to the material reasons for the 'returns' of religious and cultural affiliations as the socializing dimensions of the state are globally eroded.

This matter of reproduction, along with that of the specificity of capitalist abstraction – which Balibar indicates at various points in his text, including in his critique of Scott – should be not only of sociological but of philosophical significance. To Balibar's unanswered question as to whether we should make room for a kind of commodity universality that is not civic-bourgeois universality, the answer has to be yes. The hypothesis that we should determine the variable *x* in Balibar's formula as capital (not *qua* production, but *qua* social totality) is only sustainable of course if we treat this 'reduction' as one that complicates rather than simplifies the problems at hand. One way it can do so is by allowing us to reflect on the dialectic between the global and the national, in other words the way in which a certain secularism has served as a vector of defensive reterritorialization of the state, and in Europe of a partially disavowed racial-civilizational discourse which tries to parry the factual erosion of popular sovereignty, displacing it onto 'the immigrant'.

To do justice to the task of complexity would also mean really 'universalizing' the problem of secularism itself. The perilous confessional arrangement of the state, Lebanon, in which Balibar first presented *Saeculum* might give pause to the idea that the categories of Western political philosophy can contain the practical meanings of this term. As Raz-Krakotzkin has recently elaborated in an incisive intellectual history of Zionism, the latter's articulation into 'secular' and 'religious' camps also problematizes European commonplaces about the entanglement of religion, culture, *ethnos* and state – a predicament he provocatively captures in what he sees as the credo of 'liberal' Zionism: 'God does not exist, but he gave us the land.' The intense conflicts over the politics of secularism in India would again complicate the picture, expatriating the problem beyond the intertwined histories of monotheism and the state.

As affirmed at the outset, Balibar's is an openly *philosophical* intervention, and the task of philosophy is depicted not just as the conceptual or dialectical complication of the demarcations that make up our political common sense, but as an agent of universalization. Unlike the universalization offered by state secularism or by religious observance, this cannot be a subsumptive universal, spiritually encompassing particulars or neutralizing them through its sovereign 'indifference'. It also cannot ally itself to the universality of the capitalist value-form. Prolonging the approach rehearsed throughout this essay – to excavate the differential semantics of concepts in order to tease out their contradictions, excesses and deficits, in order then to gesture towards a more expansive, if precarious, universality – Balibar tries to reposition philosophy, in the midst of cosmopolitical clashes of universalisms, as a kind of vanishing mediator or a-religious supplement which would allow for what he calls, in an overtly Spinozist call, *generalized heresy*. The reference to Spinoza also expresses the desire for a kind of transformative or emancipatory secularism that would transcend the absolutization of sovereignty that marks Hobbesian secularism as well as the regulative tolerance implied by Lockean models (though Balibar retains a qualified sympathy towards the latter liberal variant, from the French vantage of a republican Leviathan). This self-critical secularism is not only opposed to the coercive dimensions of the state; it becomes indistinguishable from a (modestly) prescriptive view of philosophy itself.

Considering the panorama of contemporary European philosophy it is undeniable that the secularization of secularism is an interminable project.

There is a dialectical irony in religious categories being repeatedly employed by philosophers to confront the public life of religion today, and in the melancholy acceptance among many philosophers that we are fated never truly to transcend religious notions and traditions. It might be tempting, then, to complicate Balibar's intervention further by asking whether philosophical *atheism* – a position absent from the proceedings – should really be reduced to a 'heresy', and whether this doesn't depend on a presupposition about the continuity of religious content through conceptual forms which relies on a profoundly contestable image of secularization.

Considering the ambient piety that marks contemporary philosophy, it may also be worth bending the stick in the direction of those anti-clerical Enlightenment materialisms which were intensely suspicious of the sincerity and coherence of claims to universalism. Perhaps resorting to a somewhat less sophisticated understanding of ideology, many of what philosophy might generously depict as clashes between universalisms may appear, from a more political or sociological vantage point, as exclusive particularist struggles which enlist universalizing vocabularies. Or as projects whose universal extension is in the final analysis devoid of the intensive universality that Balibar connects to emancipation. In this respect, Balibar's illuminating formula of ideology should also be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the endemic character of religious and state ideology alike as manipulation, domination and hypocrisy.

Balibar's understandable suspicion towards a philosophy that would declare itself able to speak from the standpoint of the universal – with a sovereign indifference analogous to that of the state – should also not divert us from reflecting on the way in which philosophical radicalism, from Spinoza to Marx and beyond, has meant a separation from or termination of the universalizing pretensions of religion and culture. While the debate around secularism often acknowledges the pressures of capital on belief, there is less recognition – including in *Saeculum* – of the enormous role that the defeats of socialist and anti-colonial 'cosmopolitics' had in making possible a clash of universalisms in which the parties seem primarily to be parliamentary capitalist states on the one hand and religious movements on the other. Balibar's objections to the anthropological critique of secularism should in this respect be complemented by a recognition of the politically insupportable claim that secularism is per se an imperial imposition – something that would traduce the history of communist

and national liberation movements from Palestine to India.

Balibar's call for a critical refoundation of secularism is certainly worthy of philosophical and political consideration; whether its political counterpart can really be something that takes the name of 'transnational citizenship' is perhaps more disputable. Even more than secularism, citizenship is still conceptually bound to a certain transcendence of the state, the very body whose capacity to contain the problem of religion and culture – that is, the problems of *ideology* – Balibar is calling into question. Any emancipatory practice that breaks through the arrested dialectic of religion and culture, and the state's claim to serve as their impartial regulator, might need to leave these names, if not the problems that they crystallize, behind. Politics too will require heresies.

Alberto Toscano

Do the monster mash

David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*, Historical Materialism and Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2012. 296 pp., £20.00 pb., 978 1 60846 233 9.

It is no longer necessary to begin, as it might have been ten years ago, by pointing out that we live in Gothic times, and going on to detail the Gothic's many and various manifestations in contemporary culture. Even the bluntest of critical responses have moved beyond 'mankind's deepest fears' – though often not much beyond them – to recognition of more than an idea of unchanging human nature. Part of the problem lies in the sprawling category that Gothic has become, perhaps always was, in its blurry designation of architectural form, novelistic subject matter, visual effect, subcultural style, musical genre and metaphorical trope. Because of the jumbling together of different phenomena, Gothic is everywhere and nowhere. Indeed, this is partly the point of David McNally's book: that, as he says, 'the essential features of capitalism, as Marx regularly reminded us, are not immediately visible ... we are left to observe things and persons ... while the elusive power that grows and multiplies through their deployment remains unseen, uncomprehended.'

Monsters of the Market is part of the now fairly substantial Gothic Marxism that has grown in the two decades since Margaret Cohen's *Profane Illuminations*,