

Universal and Particular Persons and Places

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Introduction

There is an old story: The Lone Ranger and Tonto find themselves in a narrow canyon, where they are suddenly attacked by a hostile army of Indians. As they are forced back to the wall, the Lone Ranger looks at the overwhelming attack and says "Tonto, I think we are done for." Tonto replies, "What you mean, 'we', white man?"

The questions for this colloquium all relate to what we mean, "we".

When he disassociates himself from the Lone Ranger, is Tonto implying that there indeed was a truly universal identity he had been sharing with the Lone Ranger, but he is leaving it to rejoin a particular ethnic identity opposed to that universal?

Or is he implying that the supposed universal identity was merely a particular local identity enforced by imperialism?

Or is he implying that the universal had never been a single identity, but was a conjunction of local identities, white and red?

In summary, we might ask: if there is a cosmopolitan identity, is it a kind of universal, and how does it relate to particular local identities?

Or we might suspect that there something wrong with the way that the opposition of universal and particular is being used here, as if the two could exist as separated purely universal and purely particular identities? This is an ontological and a moral issue, but my concentration will be on the ontology. I will be claiming that universal and particular are better thought of as moments in a shared ongoing process of self-definition and communal reinterpretation that is internal to any identity. To be cosmopolitan is to make that process explicit and socially recognized.

Places

To refine the issues I would like to talk about *places*. Local places and their community norms are not the only kind of particular identity. There are plenty of non-geographical ethnic and community identities and values. But looking at places can provide a perspective on other particularities, and reinforce suspicions about such terms as "universal identity" and "global place."

By "place" I don't mean just a location in space, but rather a geographic area with an overlay of social norms and practices. A place, in this sense, is a spatial landscape that reveals a social

landscape of actions, possibilities, and norms. A courtroom, a bar, a park, a farm, a picnic spot, a dining room, a suburban neighborhood, and so on; these are places, each with its own choreography and zones with social meanings. A city or town is an assemblage of such places with its own further norms and assignments. Such norms and expectations may be very explicit in a highly ritualized place such as a church or a parliament building. Yet there are less explicit and looser norms applying to an American dining room or a French corridor.

The classic examples of social, normative places would be those native villages beloved of anthropologists. As the French anthropologist Marc Augé says,

These places . . . want to be -- people want them to be -- places of identity, of relations and of history. The layout of the house, the rules of residence, the zoning of the village, placement of altars, configuration of public open spaces, land distribution, correspond for every individual to a system of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts whose content is both spatial and social. (Augé 1995, 52)

The ideal, for an ethnologist wishing to characterize singular particularities, would be for each ethnic group to have its own island, possibly linked to others but different from any other; and for each islander to be an exact replica of his neighbors. (Augé 1995, 50)

We do not live in such places. In truth, no one ever did completely. Places have outsides and are open to other places. They are not unlocated locators.

Nobody has ever been unaware of the reality of other groups . . . and thus also of other gods; or of the need to trade and marry outside. There is nothing to suggest that, yesterday or today, the image of a closed and self-sufficient world could ever . . . be anything other than a useful and necessary image: not a lie but a myth, roughly inscribed on the soil, fragile as the territory whose singularity it founds, subject (as frontiers are) to possible readjustment, and for this very reason doomed always to regard the most recent migration as the first foundation. (Augé 1995, 47)

Today, our contemporary places have their own social codings, their permissions and prohibitions, their emplaced ideals. But today places are more different than before, and involve explicit "we"s that stand apart from particular place norms and communities.

Multiplicity

The condition of locality today is multiplicity. Even if traditional places were never totally closed, contemporary places are more open, less centered and less hierarchical, more internally multiple and contested.

soils and territories still exist, not just in the reality of facts on the ground, but even more in that of individual and collective awareness and imagination

[and yet] the intelligence of space is . . . [is] *complicated* by the spatial abundance of the present. (Augé 1995, 33)⁴

In today's world of mixed populations and rapid communication, the social meanings of landmarks and spatial patterns are no longer univocal (if they ever were). A geographic area with a diverse population can hold different, complementary or rival social places. These may coexist peacefully, as when groups use the same city park in ways following different social norms. They may conflict, as when a war memorial is perceived by some as celebratory and by others as oppressive, or when behavior on an ethnic holiday offends another part of the population. Or different place norms and structures may interpenetrate without much interaction, as when a swath of suburbia includes different archipelagoes of stores and services for different populations.

It is tempting to speak as if the multiplicity of social places in an area stemmed from well-defined and homogeneous communities. This is correct enough if we are speaking in terms of sets of accepted community place norms, but it overlooks how individuals and sub-groups within those communities may reinterpret and live their norms differently even while acknowledging them. Like all social norms, place norms are liable to reinterpretation and tactical usage. This adds to the internal tensions mentioned later.

Thin Roles

The multiplicity in contemporary places includes more than different coexisting place norms. There are some identities that cross the various groups. When people share a geographical area, they share its infrastructure: roads and highways, water, power grids, waste systems, product distribution networks, and so on. Even while living by varying social norms in different spatial patterns they are together as drivers, passengers, shoppers, efficient users of resources.

These activities provide shared "we"s that go beyond particular identities. We are all driving on this highway, shopping in this supermarket, flying out of this airport. But that common place and these shared "we"s offer only thin, stripped down social roles. In Hegel's terminology those social roles are "abstract" -- they engage only small functional portions of the self.

Augé calls airports, superhighways, and such thin places "non-places," by which he means places that do not share the classical anthropological function of defining rich tribal and personal identities. Entering a non-place such as an airport or a superhighway, we shed our detailed identity and interact with others only as passengers or drivers.

What Augé calls non-places are fully social places in my sense of the word. They have their social norms and rituals, thin though they may be. And that thin social roles can have local inflections. Boston and Montreal drivers have reputations for sudden lane changes. Ethnic groups may not only buy different products in the supermarket but may shop in distinctive rhythms and moods.

By their shared thinness, non-places reveal the multiplicity of more particular and substantive norms. While we are on the highway, richer social particularities may become spectacles along the way.

These thin roles provide "we"s that contrast with local particularities. What is significant for our topic is that these thin "we"s do not *conflict* with thicker social roles. They have no moral or value superiority; they coexist with thicker social places. Infrastructural thin shared "we"s arise *without* any appeal to universal moral norms or global citizenship.

It is true, though, that to the extent that the authority of thicker place norms depend on attempts to monopolize the social landscape, the thin roles and the consequent explicitly presented multiplicity threaten that authority, though without supplementing it with anything substantive or normatively universal.

Causal Connections

My second example of something beyond particular identities invokes the familiar distinction between normative and causal connections. Social places are constituted by sets of norms for behavior amid spatial distinctions. Place norms establish connections between behavior and locales, and across different areas of space, such as between two areas in a courtroom, or what is to be done in the front yard and what is to be done in the back yard, or between rituals in the head church and those in the local branch. Networks of normative connections and meanings get laid over space, stitching it into human places.

But there are other nets of connections that are causal rather than normative. They happen no matter what the social norms and intentions may be. The most obvious examples are environmental. If you run that smelter in the midwest, then no matter what your intention and no matter what the local norms, acid rain will fall on the east coast. If we dump pollution in this river, fish downstream will die.

Economic connections make a related kind of causal network. If you invest in China you will not invest in Guyana. If they build that highway, those land values will rise. While economic effects are mediated through institutional structures, economic, like environmental, actions have unintended results in despite of social norms, because the systems are more complex than any actor can know or control.

One difference between normative and causal connections has to do with internal conflict.

When multiple norms compete within a place, they can demand judgment and decision. For instance, the right of public access to an office may conflict with security concerns; a court may have to rule on what degree of access must be allowed.

When causal connections compete they come to a causal resolution. If one system is trying to cool a room while another admits sunlight that is heating the room, the temperature of the room may oscillate or it may be stable, depending on the details of the systems involved, but unless users intervene, the resolution will occur causally, without any normative judgment about the priority of one cause to another.

Causes and Norms

Causal patterns and norms are not the same. The interactions in a causal system are not the normative rituals of a place. Causal connections do not on their own create human places. But causal connections affect which norms are livable. They do not directly produce places but they alter the resources available and the effects of possible patterns of action. If the flow of investment capital from abroad dries up, social and place norms in Guyana will be affected.

Causal and normative connections do get intertwined. Social norms can be changed to influence the distribution of causal effects, as with laws about the environment. Economic agents can manipulate causal effects to put pressure on laws and social roles, for instance by shifting resources so that certain activities become possible or impossible.

Given such mutual interactions, it is important to remember that the global reach of a causal system is not the creation of a global set of social or place norms. Local places are under pressure from vastly accelerated flows of capital, of signifiers, of people and products and chemicals and environmental effects. But we are not in any of these flows as in a single place, though local places are deeply affected by these flows.

It is important that causal systems do not determine their normative reception. A group may traditionally farm a valley for wheat, but if global warming changes the climate, their way of life will have to be altered. Such changes come about not from any universal set of norms or practices, but as a causal result of activities elsewhere. The farmers must adapt, but while climate change puts boundaries on what is possible it does not of itself determine how they will reinterpret and reconstruct their traditional values and spatial practices.

Sometimes today it is said that local particularities are being neutered by a globalizing consumer culture that turns what had been distinctive local places, practices, and architecture into optional lifestyles, hobby identities, commodities, or spectacles on display. The tourist is everywhere, and we become our own internal tourists.

It is questionable whether there is such a thing as one uniform global consumer culture. Global markets and the mass media cannot be avoided; they change flows of people and information, altering the range of what is possible in a place. These effects, though, do not decide their own meaning and impact on place norms. That impact involves active local reception and reinterpretation and innovation. McDonald's may sell more or less the same products world-wide, but their social meaning and use varies in different locales (see Watson 1997). The anthropologist Arpad Appadurai remarks that

As rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or another way: this is true of music and housing styles as much as it is true of science and terrorism, spectacles and constitutions. . . . The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models (even those that might account for multiple centers and peripheries). (Appadurai 1966, 32).

The Local and the Larger

So far I have discussed two cases where particular local places and norms confront something larger. In the first case, shared infrastructure and thin roles, there are kinds of "we" that are more free of substantive content, but these are not normatively universal and have no priority over local place roles. The authority of traditional closed social formations may be weakened but no universal authority is proposed in its stead; what happens is not a takeover but an ongoing process of mutual accommodation and inflection.

In the second case, causal connections, there may be universal systems of causes and their global impacts, but, again, this produces no universal "we". It is possible to speak of "we" participants in the global market. But someone in the Sudan drinking Coca Cola participates in the global market in a different way than does a financial trader in London. One appropriates a global product into local standards of diet; the other lives something like one of Augé's thin roles, manipulating causal connections, but this is only a part of his life and is not normatively superior to his other activities, presuming he has any time for them.

So in neither of the cases considered so far is there a deep conflict between a universal "we" and a more particular "we".

Moral Conflicts

There is no denying, though, that conflicts do arise between local and more general norms. One community treats women, or children, or the aged in ways that go against the rights they are supposed to have as persons. Some local norms get judged as immoral. Here something is claiming authority to judge the local and the particular.

But is that something a universal "we", a purely global cosmopolitan identity?

As you can guess, I will try to fit those cases of conflict into the model of an ongoing process of reinterpretation. The cosmopolitan "we" is not a universal authoritative identity but rather the engaged and self-conscious process of bringing local identities and universal pressures and norms together.

In the conflicts relevant to our topic, norms are part of the dispute. The dispute might be phrased in terms of descriptions. Whether a community should continue its traditional treatment of children could be phrased as asking which description is to be given priority, the child as member of this community or the child as a bearer of universal rights. But such a linear ordering is misleading here because the universal and the particular are not the same kind of value. Kant would say that tribal mores are a different kind of norm from moral commands. Hegel would distinguish different kinds of norms and communities, and see them existing together in a mutual if tense relations. Utilitarians would subject tribal mores to judgment by standards that do not stem from any particular tribe.

Part of a cosmopolitan identity is an explicit recognition of the distinction between general rational demands and local traditional norms. Hegel would say this separation started with

the social and personal changes occurring in Greece around the time of Socrates and the Sophists. Non-European places will have their own narratives and turning points. What is distinctive of modernity, on this account, would be not the creation of the distinction between the rational and the local, but its institutionalization and public acceptance as part of the criteria by which one person and group recognizes another as human and free.

For this argument, grant that a morality of respect for persons does not depend on particular place or community norms -- it judges them. The moral demand stems from the necessary conditions for being a person at all, a person of any particular sort.

But then the question becomes: in a global society, can one be *a person of a universal sort*?

Pure Universals

Let me return to places again, this time for an architectural parallel. Many of the stars of the modernist movement in architecture wished to purify buildings and cities from what they saw as encrustations of historical decoration that covered nineteenth century architecture. The modernists wanted to remove those add-ons and expose the pure essence of building. They examined what they saw as the necessary functions a building had to provide (support, ventilation, circulation, lighting, and so on), and aimed to design structures that performed those functions efficiently while displaying that performance publicly without historical coverings. The theories of Walter Gropius and the curriculum he helped create for the Bauhaus embodied this ideal. Gropius thought, for instance, that once we had quantified the human need for illumination, we could design, world-wide, buildings that maintained the proper spacing between them to allow just that right amount of sunlight for a given latitude. Local cultural norms were irrelevant to that basic pure need and function.

Around the same time, the efficiencies of new modes and materials of construction were making it possible to build in similar ways in New York and London, Beijing and Buenos Aires. Cities full of modernist office buildings began to look much the same everywhere.

The buildings of Mies van der Rohe achieve the modernist ideal in a most beautiful way, most famously in his Seagram Building in New York. But note that the building's show of functional purity is a fiction. The elegant steel beams that climb the Seagram Building's outside so gracefully are in fact pasted on; the real supporting columns consist of other differently shaped steel beams encased in concrete for fire protection. The aesthetic effect is striking and satisfying, but it does not reveal the building's true support.

To speak of elegance and beauty and grace and aesthetic effects, as I have just done, is to put the building within a different discourse than that of function, with a different set of meanings and contrasts. And it is necessary to do so. Architects are always faced with bringing the causal and the aesthetic together.

For a building doesn't just do function. Pure function doesn't appear as such. A steel beam or a stone column may reveal the function of support, but it does so by having a particular shape, a color, a surface texture. Revealed ductwork is not just there. It must show itself in contrast

with other ways that ductwork might have appeared: other colors and textures, other turnings. Its particular color and shape will have unavoidable aesthetic -- not just causal -- relations with the color of the walls and the visual effect of the nearby steel beams. Its function will appear, but always *as* something particular. Mies had to decide *how* to reveal the function, how it would appear, what effects he would produce. He was doing just what the nineteenth century architects did, deciding among alternative appearances for the building. In that sense, decoration cannot be avoided.

You might claim, though, that Mies was still avoiding *historical* styles and decoration. But this would not be quite true. Some of the modernist office buildings that litter our cities are recognizably "from the forties" and others are "from the fifties" and so on. The styles of those periods, and they are styles, determined how the functions were shown: what materials were used, what colors predominated, what window patterns and roof lines. Those were choices about appearance, not about function. Modernist architecture itself is now a recognized historical style, as were the postmodern reactions to it, and as is the current fad for neo-modernism. Appearance is inevitably historical.

The modernists were not wrong to calculate general needs for lighting and ventilation and support, just as it is not wrong to cite norms of pure respect for persons. But the modernists were wrong to think those basic calculations could in themselves provide the appearance for a building inserted into daily life. Similarly, pure respect for persons may be a condition of rationality and modern community, but such universal demands do not on their own provide a structure for either a universal or a local community. To think the universal conditions are enough, that they provide a universal identity, is analogous to the mistake of the dogmatic functionalist architects.

Hegel made the point that the essential features of anything never appear purely on their own. It is not just that the essential features must be accompanied by other accidental features, but rather that the essential features will appear in and as contingent features. For example, agreeing with Aristotle, Hegel argued that mobility is an essential feature of animals. But animals do not just do mobility. They walk or swim or slither or fly, and whether they have legs or fins or wings is a historical contingent product. The essential appears in and as the historical.

Here is a social version of the point, mixing Kantian and Hegelian idioms: The conditions of possibility for being a person in a modern society, existing in mutual rationality, recognition, and respect, are not themselves the *content or terms* of mutual recognition and respect. Respect for individual freedom appears as local norms about who is to be mutually recognized as an individual and what counts as a free act. Universal human rights appear in local systems of law, and the universal declarations of those rights have their own histories and local vocabularies.

There is no pure, universal place or universal "we". There are only local places and identities that are articulated within universal influences, both causal and normative. What we might call universal roles (the autonomous citizen, the free decider, the bearer of rights, the market

participant) exist only as historically inflected and locally schematized.

Self-Criticism

There is another important twist, though. The modernist dream of a universal and purified architecture appeared in historically specific styles in the thirties or fifties or sixties. But the modernist dream was not futile. By its proclamation and practice modern architecture acknowledged a distance between any historical realization of building function and the ideal of a purer architecture. Styles and decorations could not be taken as natural and inevitable. This shut down the nineteenth century and earlier search for The Eternally Appropriate Style for various types of buildings, and even weakened the attempt to find at least The Appropriate Local Style for Our Community.²

Similarly, there is no universal "we" that speaks from the pure essence of personality and respect, and no historically uninflected structure by which pure mutual recognition of free persons can be done without any particularity. Nevertheless, explicit social awareness of the ideal of pure rational norms and pure mutual recognition means that the current ways people define and recognize each other cannot be taken as natural and inevitable. It means that moral demands can evaluate their own history and their own current local incarnation. This self-criticism does not come from a separated universal identity opposed to the particular; it arises within a particular local process that contains its own internal tensions between universal and particular.

At the beginning I suggested that there was something wrong with the invocation of separate universal and particular identities. The universal is not one identity among others; it is a component or moment within them. When that internal tension is socially recognized, there is more space for self-criticism, and for self-critical dialogue among different local identities. A cosmopolitan, then, takes into account more explicitly the universal component of the process of self-production within any identity.

I have tried to indicate an argument that universal norms appear only as locally incarnated in particular historical settings. It would be a more lengthy task to argue the complementary claim that all particular identities include a moment of internal distance that opens toward universal norms.

Briefly, the argument would hinge on the claim that social formations do not possess their norms and structures in the way a rock holds its form or a computer its program. Social norms and structures exist in experience over time, which requires an ongoing unity of self and community identification. That unity is actively maintained by processes of individual synthesis and social reproduction. Even those seemingly closed anthropologists' villages are self-conscious about their social norms and roles as they pass on etiological myths and build their codes into their architecture and landscape. Computers do not tell themselves myths about the origin of their programs. There is a self-relation inherent in the temporality of any place or social formation, and it provides internal distance for social invention and judgment, which can operate as self-conscious changes or as little-noticed adaptations even when a

social group may think that it is preserving its heritage unchanged. That openness is internal to the local scene, not some universal add-on.³

Some political and religious movements today reassert aggressively or defensively the particular norms and practices of their communities. Fundamentalism may seem to be a retreat to hard particularity that denies the universal moment. But such fundamentalists are actually asserting a too simple relation between universal and particular, claiming that one particular social form is universal as it stands, or that universal norms are only another particular that can be avoided or ignored. Such claims radically over-simplify the internal tensions between universal and particular.

Conclusion

Local places, selves and identities show themselves to be ongoing processes where social norms and roles and causal impacts are brought together in a process of reproduction and revision containing universal and particular moments in tension. In effect I have been arguing for something descended from Hegel's pair *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit* in their complex mutual self-constitutions and interdependencies, and in their modern self-awareness of those mutual relations. Like him I am claiming that there is no pure universal community divorced from particular forms. Unlike him I would not claim that the nation state is the appropriate particular unit. There are more kinds of multiple particularities today than are thought of in his philosophy. Just as there are more dimensions of internal tension than are thought of by those who try to simplify our complex inhabitation of the shared world, by isolating and exalting either the particular or the universal.

References

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Notes

¹ Here is the full version of the quotation given in the text in two parts: "For [the ethnologist's ideology] rests (among other things) on an organization of space that the space of modernity overwhelms and relativizes. . . . the intelligence of space is less subverted by current upheavals (for soils and territories still exist, not just in the reality of facts on the ground, but even more in that of individual and collective awareness and imagination) than complicated by the spatial abundance of the present" (Augé 1995, 33).

² Because it offered a discourse seemingly free from history, modernism led to the excesses of postmodern eclecticism that treated all history as neutrally available material. But the modernist dream then reasserted itself over the excesses of postmodern building, though now more self-conscious of its own historical location.

³ The text may make it seem as if any change in modern social roles is always toward lessening restrictions and moral progress. But what constitutes that direction is also under interpretation. Hegel would claim that the internal division and tension between the universal and the particular has been there all along as the condition of possibility of any social structure. This is true enough, but it does not guarantee that all changes that lead to greater recognition of that internal tension will be realized in freer social norms.