Real Universality as a Challenge to the Cosmopolitan Ideal

We now turn to an evaluation of Kant's speculative effort. As we have said, he has provided an extremely powerful expression of the telos of history. We shall call that expression, as stated in the eighth thesis of his “Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” the “Cosmopolitan Ideal.” Its strength, in my view, is that it recognizes and articulates the historical, unfolding context of the full development of human capacities. Indeed, that it is the point of suggesting this “Idea of a Universal History,” because it is only within such a speculative context that the realization of those capacities that we recognize ourselves as possessing can be given their fullest sense.

The weakness of Kant's account, however, lies in the way in which he articulates this Cosmopolitan Ideal with his understanding of the speculative dynamics of history. As it turns out, Kant is not overly impressed with what goes on in a history that can so often be so destructive of human life, “an idiotic course” that, on the face of it, makes little sense. Indeed, as we shall see, even if Kant seems to be engaged in articulating a speculative philosophy of history, he is much less concerned with the historical process itself than he is with the rationality or the exercise of reason that it nevertheless permits, despite appearances to the contrary. It is this commitment to expressions of reason and rationality that underlies his particular reference to the historical process as a whole as revealing a “secret plan of Nature.” Nature (with a capital N) meaning for Kant the lawful regularities that human intelligence can grasp. Through his idea that the intelligibility of the historical process as a whole should be grasped as revealing a “secret plan of Nature,” Kant actually betrays, if not disdain for, then despair at, what actually goes on “in history,” which, if human
beings did not also show themselves capable of rational thought, could only be characterized as "this idiotic course of things human." A consequence of this is that Kant's speculative effort does not sufficiently consider how the attempt to articulate the telos of history combines with an understanding of the dynamics of history, of what moves history towards this end.

What is Kant's understanding of the dynamics of history? Kant restricts his consideration to the articulation of the dynamics of social life as such, and he appeals to an abstract notion of conflict and antagonism to which he gives the memorable title of "unsocial sociability." His basic idea is that the capacities of human beings develop, and thus serve social life, through the conflicts that otherwise characterize social life. His fourth thesis states:

The means employed by Nature to bring about the development of all the capacities of men is their antagonism in society, so far as this is, in the end, the cause of lawful order among men.

Thus, for Kant, the motor or the dynamics of social life may be discerned within the dispositions of Nature. History per se is merely the stage upon which Nature, through human interaction, acts out its "plan," the rational development of human capacities.

Kant then expands upon the fourth thesis and allows himself to write, with a certain flourish:

Thanks be to Nature, then, for the incompatibility, for heartless competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess and to rule! Without them, all the excellent natural capacities of humanity would forever sleep, undeveloped. Man wishes concord; but Nature knows better what is good for the race; she wills discord. He wishes to live comfortably and pleasantly; Nature wishes that he be plunged from sloth and passive contentment into labour and trouble, in order that he may find means of extricating himself from them. The natural urge to this, the sources of unsociableness and mutual opposition from which so many evils arise, drive men to new exertions of their forces and thus to the manifold development of their capacities.

Thus, in Kant's speculative account, it is an abstract "unsociableness" that drives social life forward towards its end. I say "abstract" because this unsociableness does not arise out of social life, but is always already there within social life, as though it were put there by Nature as part of its plan for the full development of human capacities. At least, this is the speculative response proposed by Kant, in order to make sense both of the dismal spectacle of human conflict, and of the gains in rational understanding of nature and the idea of lawfulness itself that consideration of history as a whole reveals to him.
Now, it is important to note that, in attributing the realization of the telos of history to a natural process (unsocial sociability), Kant is not saying that this is something that just happens on its own, without the concerted and intelligent effort of human beings. We must remember the point and function of speculative philosophizing. It is to give us some sense of the whole so that we may direct our efforts to more effect. As Kant states in the ninth and final thesis:

A philosophical attempt to work out a universal history according to a natural plan directed to achieving the civic union of the human race must be regarded as possible and, indeed, as contributing to this end of Nature.

Indeed, as a possibility, its articulation is a cogent, even inspiring response to the question of where we are headed. The problem with this way of articulating the possibility with the telos meant to direct it is that the conception of the dynamics that are to get us there is insufficiently worked out. To put it another way, the problem with Kant’s approach is that the dynamic principle does not match the teleological principle.

It is important to understand that from Kant’s perspective this is not really a problem, because he is not really concerned with attempting to articulate a telos that is to be realized in history. Indeed, Kant is not especially concerned with history. He is concerned with rationality. The principal purpose, perhaps the sole purpose, of articulating a telos and engaging in speculative philosophy of history is to safeguard and to promote the use of reason and rationality, and the appeal to lawfulness that is the ground of that reason and rationality, when thinking about human affairs, even if that is not always easy given the dismal spectacle of our history. The “secret plan of Nature” that Kant proposes as the heart of the historical process, and which is meant to structure it as a whole, is meant to encourage us in the use of our rational faculties and to guard against giving in to despair. The telos it articulates is meant to serve asymptotically as a goal that we forever seek to approach, knowing full well that we shall never achieve it. It proposes a regulative ideal that is meant to guide our rational appreciation and evaluation of our combined efforts.

The problem with this approach, however, is that the telos espoused is not adequately articulated with, or grounded in, the dynamics that are meant to bring that telos about. It appears that our rational faculties cannot wield sufficient power to order conflict in the way that the telos suggests.

Kant was certainly aware of this. In his fifth thesis he states:
The greatest problem for the human race, to the solution of which Nature drives man, is the achievement of a universal civic society which administers law among men.

Again, the articulation of the telos, now expressed quite succinctly as "a universal civic society," is clear, but its achievement is set up as a problem. Indeed, the sixth thesis states: "This problem is the most difficult and the last to be solved by mankind."

It is presented as a "problem" because what moves us towards the goal is conflict, which Kant rearticulated as "unsocial sociability." Why does Kant say that this "problem" is "the last to be solved by mankind"? What does he mean by "the last" problem? The reason that the realization of the telos is the "last problem to be solved by mankind" is because, in a sense, the problem is mankind. When the problem of creating a "universal civic society" has been solved, we will have, in effect, transcended the condition of humanity itself. Why? Because, for Kant, what makes human beings the creatures that they are is that they are willful, that is, they are not directed to their ends by anything other than themselves—they must will themselves towards the ends that present themselves. What this means is that human beings always tend to be self-interested, directing themselves to those ends that they believe, for whatever reasons, best serve their own interests.

That in itself is not the principal problem, however. Kant speculated, as we have seen, that Nature "herself" had willed this in human beings because it is evident that the pursuit of self-interest has yielded a paradoxically productive context for developing human capacities. It is in my self-interest to work harder to achieve better results for myself, which at the same time, through that which is produced by the harder work, ameliorates conditions for others. Indeed, it can quite easily be seen that the creation and sustenance of a lawful social order can be in one's self-interest, even when that social order places limits on what one is allowed to willfully do. Paying taxes limits my disposable income, but my taxes pay for the police who protect me. The problem here is the dependence of "mankind" on willfulness itself. Because human beings are willfully directed towards their ends, they are just as likely to fail to appreciate what is truly in their (longer-term) self-interest, and to direct themselves to particular interests that merely satisfy passing whims and fancies or, worse, to submit that willfulness to the passions of the moment. Human beings are capable of rationality, although again this, for Kant, means understanding the lawfulness that governs the general processes of nature. However, this is a capacity that needs to be exercised, and human beings tend not to exercise it when other more forceful and/or enticing ends attract their attention. In other words, the willfulness of human beings,
instead of being directed towards their own good as well as the good in general, often merely allows itself to be guided by inclination, by unreflective desire and attraction, or submits itself to its passions.

It is not my intention to get into Kant's general moral theory here. My concern is strictly with his speculative philosophy of history. Specifically, I am concerned with evaluating the way in which he links the telos he articulates so forcefully with the dynamics he develops much less seriously. In other words, while many still hold today to the telos that Kant articulated, namely, the constitution of a universal civic society, they have abandoned his attempt to connect it with the dynamics of social conflict generating the increased development of human capacities, and instead concentrate their energies on articulating as clearly as possible the normative framework that will help us deal with the world and the conflicts that flare up within it.

Like Kant, many believe that the articulation and implementation of such a framework will take time and effort on the part of individuals and nations across the globe. These efforts find expression in such instruments as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose purpose is, as Axel Honneth says (in his paper "Is Universalism a Moral Trap?", p. 173), to place "the prohibitions and precepts codified in international law ... above the basic rights codified in the individual nations," in an attempt to articulate the telos of a universal civic society. That such a universal civic society is still far from being realized in actuality is not something that deters those cosmopolitans who insist on the ideal. Without explicitly referring, as Kant does, to a secret plan of Nature that is moving us towards that ideal, they do claim that something like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as Honneth puts it (p. 170), "initiated an uninterrupted endeavour to make universal rights legal rights by creating internationally recognized instruments of complaint, control, and sanctions."

In terms of speculative philosophy of history, we might still ask how we are to understand the historical dynamics that are to draw us, albeit asymptotically, to the ideal. What do contemporary cosmopolitan idealists put in the place of Kant's "unsocial sociability"?

Different candidates might be considered, but a key feature in the developmental picture of contemporary cosmopolitanism—and here too they continue to follow Kant—is the emphasis on education. There is a conviction that the kinds of conflicts that tear the world apart, rather than those that foster further development, will be attenuated with the spread of education. We are not speaking here of an education into a particular doctrine or cultural point of view. Cosmopolitanism, because it seeks to grasp the world in its entirety from a universal point of view, needs a more abstract conception of education. It finds one in the idea of literacy, or education for literacy, or the elimination of illiteracy.
Emmanuel Todd, for example, has predicted in his *After the Empire* (p. 25) that the planet will achieve "universal literacy" by the year 2030. (*After the Empire* is an especially interesting work, given the objections raised to the way in which, in Todd's view, the United States, in its interventionist policies, is flaunting the cosmopolitan ideal. Todd argues that such "imperialist" ambitions, and indeed the notion that a single superpower can reign supreme, cannot be sustained.) For Todd the spread of literacy across the surface of the planet has had and will have important consequences. It even suggests to Todd a kind of "end of history" inasmuch as he predicts that global literacy will promote global stability through more balanced demographic development, evidenced in the spread of lower birth rates, which Todd claims will lead to an increased number of political regimes tending towards liberal democracy. His basic argument (pp. 45-46) runs as follows:

Learning to read and write brings each person to a higher level of consciousness. The fall of birth rates is a prime system of these deep psychological changes. Thus, given the universal tendency toward complete literacy and demographic equilibrium, it is not illogical to witness a rapid proliferation of more democratic political regimes. One could advance the hypothesis that individuals who have been made conscious and free through literacy cannot be governed indefinitely in authoritarian ways; or, what amounts to the same thing, the practical costs of exercising authoritarian rule over a critically aware population render the society in which they live economically uncompetitive.

Todd thinks that both the increase in literacy and the spread of lower birth rates, largely as a function of increased literacy, will of themselves create a more stable world on the model of contemporary liberal democracies. The link between literacy and lower birth rates is explained quite simply (p. 27): "Once man, or more precisely women, know how to read and write, birth control can begin." Once birth rates are stabilized, then, in combination with literacy, human lives can move beyond the necessities of basic survival, and people can devote increased energies to different forms of spiritual and material development.

This should not be conceived as a smooth process. Literacy also can be seen at the heart of demographic displacements. As Todd observes (p. 27):

We must keep in mind the importance of education when it comes to understanding the present wave of migration to Europe and the United States. Individuals who are rushing to get through the guarded gates of the richest countries are no doubt trying to escape from the material misery that still exists in the world's poorest countries. But their desire to flee this misery also reveals a higher level of sophistication in their aspirations that is the direct result of substantial increases in basic literacy attained in...
their home countries. The consequences of education are innumerable. One of them is the psychological disorientation of populations.

Such "disorientation" itself can appear to be very disruptive of the otherwise "uninterrupted" progressive process of development that cosmopolitans point to and celebrate. As Todd acknowledges (p. 33):

Progress is not, as Enlightenment thinkers may have believed, a pleasurable linear ascent on all fronts. Being uprooted from one's traditional life—from the well-trodden routines of illiteracy, pregnancy, poverty, sickness, and death—can at first produce as much suffering and disorientation as it does hope and opportunity. Very often, perhaps in a majority of cases, the transformation of cultural and personal horizons is experienced as social and individual crisis. Destabilized peoples behave violently both among themselves and toward others. The move into modernity is frequently accompanied by an explosion of ideological violence.

We may leave aside for the moment the unnecessarily uncharitable description of "traditional life" as well as the simplification of "Enlightenment thinkers." (We have seen that Kant, for one, could not be further from the view that progress should be understood as a "pleasurable ascent." On the contrary, the point of trying to think this notion of progress requires seeing the ascent despite the appearances that suggest otherwise, which is exactly what Todd is doing here.) Todd is pointing to an important feature of our societies that demonstrates the relevance of considering the wider framework of a developmental whole emphasized by speculative philosophy of history.

We have already discussed what Todd is here calling "the psychological disorientation of populations" when we mentioned the particular characteristic of a world that is "becoming increasingly multicultural" in terms of presenting both familiarities and "unfamiliar familiarities," that is, ways of living that might be strange or unfamiliar to me, but nevertheless share a social space that I remain committed to. (Remember the distinction between a "foreign" language spoken by someone who is considered a "foreigner" and the same language spoken by someone who is considered a fellow citizen.) The cosmopolitan idealist will insist that dealing with such "psychological disorientation" requires—you guessed it—more education.

That is fine and good, but considerations of education cannot forever stay at the abstract level of rates of literacy, the capacity to read and write. As Todd himself writes near the end of his book, the spread of literacy and the decline in birth rates, while they may point to the extension of democratic institutions and structures, do not produce an "education" that necessarily points to an
increasing egalitarianism, or a greater recognition of the equal worth of all. Indeed, when Todd looks at industrialized and industrializing democracies alike, he concludes (p. 196) that they are being

encroached on to varying degrees by a tendency towards oligarchy—a phenomenon that has emerged with the development of educational stratification that has divided societies into layers of “higher,” “lower,” and various kinds of “middle” classes.

Apparently unperturbed by this, Todd immediately goes on to say that:

we must not exaggerate the anti-democratic effects of this inequitable educational stratification. Developed countries, even if they become more oligarchical, remain literate countries, and will have to deal with the contradictions and conflicts that could arise between a democratically leaning literate mass and university-driven stratification that favours oligarchical elites.

We have here an expression of the cosmopolitan’s “faith.” Both Parts Two and Three of this book will try to address a little more systematically the reasons for thinking through such “contradictions and conflicts,” rather than merely affirming one’s faith in the face of them. What we need to address is how the “disorientation” that is the result of the mixing and mingling of populations and provenances requires a “reorientation” that goes beyond, or deeper than, the promise of the “stability” of a liberalized world order.

To put it in the terms of speculative philosophy of history—and in terms of the question of where we are headed, given the increasingly multicultural character of the world—what we need to do is look more closely at the dynamics of the historical process, both in terms of the “disorientation” it provokes and the reorientation that those dynamics may be effecting in concrete terms, as these are illuminated by the explicit telos of a single shared world. In other words, cosmopolitans have successfully argued for the relevance of the telos of history, a universal civic society, but the account of the dynamics that animate the realization of the telos in concrete terms needs to be considered more carefully. Otherwise, we run the risk ultimately of banishing the telos from the real historical process, holding it up merely as an ideal to be either admired or reviled. To do so is a mistake, arising from having paid insufficient attention to the concrete dynamics of history, thus far identified as conflict and the attempt to resolve conflicts.

If the point of speculative philosophy of history is to make sense of the historical process, considered as a whole in terms of its telos and its dynamics, then we need to draw closer together the articulation of the telos and the understanding of the dynamics of history. Indeed, it can be argued that the
telos needs to be seen as arising out of the dynamics of history, as opposed to being postulated as an asymptotic ideal meant to guide our understanding, or at least our appreciation, of those dynamics. This will be the essential move made by Hegel’s speculative philosophy of history.

Before we turn to Hegel, we need to be clear about what has been achieved by considering Kant and the cosmopolitan point of view. Kant enables us to see the extent to which thinking about human development within the context of a “universal history,” history considered as a whole, means thinking about human beings as essentially willful creatures; that is, as creatures who do not exist in the world as guided by instinct, but by their own appreciation and understanding of what the world is, given the way it presents itself to them. For Kant, that willfulness should be guided by a rationality capable of expressing the world in terms of *laughfulness*, both in nature and in the moral maxims that should govern one’s conduct. Yet it must be remembered that even such rationality, or the exercise of such rationality, rests on our basic and essential willfulness as human beings. (Such willfulness is usually expressed by pointing to the freedom of human beings, their free will, but I shall reserve for the moment the use of the concept of freedom.) We may exercise that willfulness badly, allowing ourselves—our wills—to be pushed this way or that, with little resistance or thought on our part. It nevertheless remains the case that it is our wills—ourselves as wills, as willful—that are pushed and prodded in this way. It is this willfulness that is both the subject and object of history, considered as a whole. History is both that which our willfulness produces, those particular ways of life as opposed, and sometimes in opposition, to these other ways of life, and that which produces our willfulness. Each of us, as a natural being, is born into a cultural world and is either recognized and brought up into it, becoming a willful being and contributing in however small a way to the overall historical process, or left to die.

What Kant has also allowed us to see is that to truly understand this process of history understood as a whole we need to see it as governed by a telos, which he articulates in terms of our willfulness being guided by the regulative ideal of a “universal civic community,” or, to cite his eighth thesis once again, “a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed.” Kant has made us focus on the *universality* of the historical process. However, that universality, articulated “from a cosmopolitan point of view,” has been affirmed quite abstractly, especially as far as the dynamics of history are concerned. Whether it be a basic “unsocial sociability” or the spread of literacy, such conceptions do not give a firm enough grip on the dynamics of the historical process. No wonder, then, that it slips away from us, and all we are really left with is our faith in our guiding telos!
Fortunately, we do not have to leave things at that. We do not need to remain content with a merely abstract universality. What we need to recognize in dealing with cosmopolitan thinkers and speculative philosophers of history is that there is reason to think that we all belong to a single intelligible process that encompasses the whole of the world, and, that despite appearances, that process describes a progressive development. For those who still “instinctively” balk at such an idea, and in particular for those who think of the dismal history of violence, this development is not to be understood as a necessary one. Within the terms of the modal square (discussed in the Introduction to this book), we need to understand such progressive development as possibility inherent in the real as we encounter it.

However, as critics of cosmopolitan thinking point out, no one actually lives “in” the whole world. Human beings live lives in particular localities, even when they spread those lives out over different localities. Nevertheless, our contemporary cosmopolitan world does display increased mobility and much more flexible ties to particular localities. This increased mobility is relatively recent. Eric Hobsbawm expresses this quite well in his *The Age of Revolution: 1789–1848* when he writes (p. 25) that in 1789 the world was,

> for most of its inhabitants, incalculably vast. Most of them, unless snatched away by some awful hazard, such as military recruitment, lived and died in the county, and often in the parish of their birth: as late as 1861 more than nine out of ten in seventy of the ninety French departments lived in the department of their birth. The rest of the globe was a matter of government agents and rumour.

The point is even more powerfully stated by Michel Serres in his *Hominescence*: that the cosmopolitanism evidenced by our mobility, and by the detachment from the localities of our births that characterizes the way we now inhabit the Earth, is manifest in what Serres calls the greatest and profoundest change in humanity since the Neolithic era, the biotechnological transformation of agriculture resulting in the evacuation of the “countryside.” Because Serres is as much a poet as a philosopher, I shall cite him in his own words (p. 111, my translation):

*Here then is the greatest event of the twentieth century: the end of agriculture, inasmuch as it modelled conduct and cultures, the sciences, social life, bodies, and religions. No doubt farmers will continue to provide nourishment to their contemporaries; however, their gestures and their existence no longer steer humanity, no longer incite a humanism, no longer permit a framing of space and time. The West has just changed worlds. The Earth, understood as the planet photographed in its entirety by astronauts, takes the place of the earth, understood as this patch of*
land laboured daily. This break separates the end of the last century from the whole of the past to Neolithic times; it has already transformed our relations to fauna, flora, the seasons, passing time, passing weather, bad weather, to the spaces we occupy, and to our habitat and displacements. It has changed our social ties: we no longer live together in the same way once we have effaced the nourishing ties linking the fields, resources, pastures and beasts, our occupation of a space, our defending it and going to war. We no longer even die in the same way, given that, preferring to burn them for lack of space in our cities, we no longer bury our dead in the soil mixed with the sweat of our labour.

We now live in cities and move between them, and it is within cities that one experiences in a very concrete way the basic idea of cosmopolitanism, that of all of us belonging to one world and of the world being one. Yet, at the same time, what this one world reveals to each of us, in a very concrete and immediate and quotidian way, are the differences that traverse the unity of the world.

In order to make sense of both the unity and the diversity of the world, we need to move beyond the affirmation of an abstract universality. If we are to speak of a “universal civic society,” we need to ask what we mean by “universal.” Étienne Balibar, in a paper entitled “Ambiguous Universality,” addresses this question by distinguishing different modalities of the concept of universality. If we relate this to the observation that is at the heart of this book, namely that the world is “becoming increasingly multicultural,” then Balibar enables us better to grasp concretely the paradox that an increasingly multicultural world exhibits itself increasingly as one world.

Balibar defines one kind of universality as real universality, or universality as reality—in my terms, universality as experienced in contact. Balibar says (p. 48) that this real universality manifests itself in the actual interdependency between the various “units” which together build what we call the World: institutions, groups, individuals, but also, more profoundly, the various processes which involve institutions, groups, and individuals: the circulation of products and persons, the political negotiations, the juridical contracts, the communication of news and cultural patterns, etc.

This interdependency needs to be understood both extensively, as applying, increasingly, across the globe, and intensively, as different parts of the world are increasingly dependent on the other parts. More important for our discussion here is that, for Balibar,
this intensive aspect could be expressed by saying that interdependency is reaching
the individual himself/herself in a direct manner, not only through the institutions or
communities to whom he/she belongs.

What Balibar is saying is that it is increasingly the case that the interdependency
of the world is being felt directly in the ways in which individuals actually
experience their own lives. He uses as examples (p. 50):

when every individual's wage and skill become dependent on competitors anywhere
on the world market, but also when educational curricula must include the learning
of international languages, or sanitary regulations must control the individual's food
and sexual habits because of the spread of world-epidemics (AIDS) . . .

What Balibar is pointing out, and it is a point I wish to emphasize, is that
there is a concrete sense in which the telos of the cosmopolitan idealists, the
realization of a “universal civic society,” has already taken place. We already do
live in a “universal civic society,” in the sense that we all depend on one another
in very real terms, as the arguments around the positive and negative impacts
of “globalization” constantly remind us. To recognize this is to recognize the
limitation of the cosmopolitan idealist point of view that postulated its telos
asymptotically, as an end forever approached but never actually achieved. Of
course, the cosmopolitan ideal of a universal civic society was meant as a moral
ideal that would enable us to measure the real, and this required preserving
the ideal from the real, which cosmopolitans understood as being in need of
improvement. What they did not and, indeed, could not count on was that
the real would catch up with the ideal, effectively creating a “universal civic
society” in real, concrete terms. That is, as Balibar insists (p. 50) against what
he considers to be the “utopian” thrust of the cosmopolitan ideal, we need to
acknowledge

that real universality, or globalization, already achieves the goal which was conceived
as “the unification of mankind,” albeit certainly not implementing most of the moral
(or “humanistic”) values which utopias believed should be either a pre-condition or
an immediate consequence of this unification.

This is to acknowledge that this real universality is not all that it has been
cracked up to be. The world is far from realizing the conditions that would
enable the full development of all human capacities, which, along with the
realization of a universal civic society, also describes the telos of history as
articulated “from a cosmopolitan point of view.” In other words, the real has
not completely swallowed up the ideal. There is still a need to distinguish a “real
universality," which has in effect taken place, and in which the dynamics of history have caught up with its telos, from our remaining sense of a better world to come, which fuels a different sense of universality, called "ideal universality."

I fully recognize that many people actually give up at this point and give in to a sense of the "real" as exhausting any possibility of realizing ideals. They call themselves "realists" in order precisely to oppose "idealists." Clearly, I think that one should not succumb to such a temptation, otherwise I would not be writing this book. More importantly, I think that such a move towards a "realism" that opposes itself to an "idealism" is actually a mistake, both a logical and an existential mistake. It is a move that does not fully appreciate the modal square within which our lives unfold. In that sense, it is similar to the mistake of projecting the necessities of the past onto the future. There are no necessities in the future, since, by definition, the future is possibility because it is grounded in the contingency of our being faced with it. Remember, none of us had to exist, but we do, and in the particular ways that we do. We cannot change that which has contributed to those particular ways, because they are past. Those contributions are therefore necessary, but they remain grounded in the contingent fact of our continued existence in the present that faces the possibilities of the future. What "realists" are right to insist on is that those possibilities are structured in very real ways that cannot simply be wished away or ignored. Yet this is to say that possibilities are formed against the backdrop of impossibilities, themselves arising out of a structured past. If we are to think in terms of ideals and the realization of ideals, then we must take into consideration the impossibilities that the world presents to us, given the necessities of the past. That, however, is just another way of saying that only real possibilities realize themselves, which, of course, is redundant. Articulating the ideal should be understood as the attempt to make sense of these real possibilities of the world as it contingently exists for us.

We have reason, then, to maintain a distinction between the real and the ideal. However, we should not be too quick to relate real universality and ideal universality in a way that would merely repeat the cosmopolitan idealist view that the ideal should be preserved from the real in order to measure it. This would be to ignore the historical process, which has had real universality take over that ideal. This is Balibar’s point: history shows that we now already do live in a "universal civic society." It is not the ideal society that we once upon a time wished for, but that is not surprising given that that ideal was set up as a (perpetual) wish, to inspire us. Now that that ideal has been overtaken by the real, what are we to do? That is the question that we need to address and that I have formulated in terms of responding to the question of where we are headed.
In order to address this question we need to be clear, or as clear as possible, about what is meant by the notion that "the real has overtaken the ideal." We have said, following Balibar, that the world manifests a real universality through both extensive and intensive interdependencies. The different parts of the world depend on each other for their development, and our own individual lives develop and unfold interdependently. What Balibar enables us to conceptualize is our sense that the world is "becoming increasingly multicultural" in a more systematic way.

To say that the world is becoming "increasingly" multicultural is another way of expressing the increasing interdependence of cultural realities. In order to get clear on what is meant by interdependence, we can again follow Balibar and contrast this notion of interdependence with that of a more familiar relationship of straight dependence between cultures, described in terms of majority and minority. It is probably easier to do this if one adopts the point of view of a minority culture. Anyone who has grown up in what is defined as a minority culture understands quite clearly the dependent relation that one's culture has with the self-defining majority culture. This relation of dependence is less evident for the majority culture, which, because it is self-defining, tends to view itself merely as a "culture," at least when things are running smoothly. Dependence is precisely what defines it as a minority.

If I take myself as an example, belonging to the French-speaking minority in the province of Manitoba was a consequence of being defined, and identifying myself, as depending on the surrounding majority English-speaking society for the continued conditions of my existence as a French-speaker. I was not a member of the French-speaking minority because there were relatively fewer French-speakers around me than English-speakers. In fact, on any given day, despite the fact that French-speakers formed only about six percent of the population of the province in which I lived, the great majority, not to say the totality, of the persons around me were French-speakers (for example, in school or in church). The fact that most of the people who surrounded me in most of my activities were nevertheless identified, and identified themselves, as a minority was a function of the way in which those activities were sustained both by and against the "majority." This is precisely what describes a relation of dependence. The dependence expressed itself in myriad institutional ways, but if we take the example of schooling, schools for French-speakers in the province existed only out of a sustained struggle to maintain the "minority rights" that were originally recognized in the Act of the Canadian Parliament establishing Manitoba as a province.

Another, more subtle, way in which this dependence was expressed was the fact that most of the French-speakers also learned to speak English at a fairly early age and in a way that rendered the speaking of it almost indistinguishable...
from the way the majority spoke it. This ability to switch from one language to
another, which occurred either more or less unselfconsciously in the schoolyard,
or illegitimately within the school, where official rules prohibited it, only
accentuated the minority status and dependence of French-speakers on the
unquestioned status of the English-speaking majority. Thus, there came into
being the situation, a strange one on its face, of French-speakers who both were
and were not English-speakers as well, where the ability to speak a particular
language was not in itself sufficient or appropriate for one to consider oneself a
speaker of that language.

It is this last point that is the most interesting for our discussion here. Of
course, it was, and is, not uncommon for French-speakers-who-also-speak-
English-but-are-not-English-speakers to gradually abandon the speaking of
French in order to become English-speakers. In order to be recognized as an
English-speaker one cannot also be a French-speaker (thus demonstrating
the dependence of the minority of French-speakers on the English-speaking
majority). While, from the perspective of French-speakers, those who abandon
French-speaking in favour of exclusive English-speaking are deemed to be
"assimilated," from the perspective of English-speakers such former French-
speakers are recognized merely as members of the majority, with a particular
ethnic history and background, but they are no longer recognized as a
"minority" in any kind of substantial sense. From the perspective of the former
French-speakers themselves, one sees oneself neither as a (former) member of
a "minority" nor especially as a member of the "majority." One merely regards
oneself as independent, something like a Member of Parliament who leaves his
or her party without crossing over to another party. Of course, the children of
former French-speakers, themselves having never spoken French, quite easily
regard themselves, and continue to be regarded by others, as members of the
majority.

I am, of course, describing a relation of cultural dependence that has defined
(for a time) a particular context (the province of Manitoba within Canada).
However, this context, like the rest of the world, is "increasingly becoming
multicultural," which means that the relations of dependence established
between minorities and majorities are being destabilized, not only through the
multiplication of minorities, but also through the mixing of minorities that
issues from the increased coexistence of minorities. That is, the increasing
interdependence that characterizes the relations that constitute the world has as
a consequence, to borrow Balibar's term, "blurred" the distinction between the
majority and its minorities. This expresses itself in the fact that, as Balibar puts
it (p. 53), "a growing number of individuals and groups are not easily inscribed
in one single ethnic (or cultural, linguistic, even religious) identity." Indeed, as Balibar also points out, part of what it means to say that the world is "becoming increasingly multicultural" is to say that

more individuals are not classifiable: marrying partners from different "cultures" and "races," living across the fictitious boundaries of communities, experiencing a divided or multiple "self," practicing different languages and memberships according to the private and public circumstances.

In such a context it is no longer clear what a "minority" is, given that there is no clear relation of dependence on a "majority."

Many people are prepared to celebrate this situation as a new dawn, heralding the day when the relations of dominance implied in the majority/minority distinction can finally be overcome. That would be premature. If increasingly multicultural relations do describe the "real universality" of the world, we should recall that it is far from ideal. As Balibar writes (p. 56):

Real Universality is a stage in history where, for the first time, "Humankind" as a single web of interrelations is no longer an ideal or utopian notion but an actual condition for every individual; nevertheless, far from representing a situation of mutual recognition, it actually coincides with a generalized pattern of conflicts, hierarchies, and exclusions. It is not even a situation in which individuals virtually communicate with each other, but much more where global communication networks provide every individual with a distorted image or stereotype of all the others, either as "kin" or as "aliens," thus raising gigantic obstacles before any dialogue. "Identities" are less isolated and more incompatible, less univocal and more antagonistic.

Another way to describe the implications of the "Real Universality" of our contemporary world is to speak, as Alain Touraine does in his book Can We Live Together?, of a process of demodemization, which is engaged now that "modernism" through globalization has spread and covers the entire planet. The universality that globalization has achieved describes a reality that does not model itself on the gradual expansion of the smaller local societies in which we grow up and get to know the "world." On the contrary, according to Touraine (pp. 1–2), the universality established by globalization is one that detaches itself from the lived world of a particular social organization, such as the network of families, schools, and church that organized my French-Canadian upbringing not so very long ago, into a variety of "flows" or "networks" that spread across the planet:
Globalization means that technologies, instruments and messages are present everywhere, or, in other words, that they belong nowhere. They are not bound up with any one society or culture, as we can see from the ever-popular images that juxtapose petrol pumps and camels, Coca-Cola and villages in the Andes, jeans and royal palaces. The divorce between networks and collectivities, the indifference of the signs of modernity to the slow work of socialization that was once undertaken by families and schools—or in a word, the desocialization of mass culture—means that we live together only to the extent that we make the same gestures and use the same objects, but we cannot communicate with one another except by exchanging the signs of modernity. Our culture is no longer in control of our social organization, and our social organization is no longer in control of technological and economic activity [my emphasis]. Culture and the economy have become divorced from one another, as have the instrumental world and the symbolic world.

Touraine does not mean merely to note this “divorce” between culture and the economy, he aims to describe it in terms of its particular dynamics. It is the dynamics of an increasing separation between cultural self-understanding and economic activities that Touraine calls a process of demodernization. As we have seen, certain people are wont to declare “the end of history,” in the sense that the world has become one world through a singular system of economic exchange whose workings promote increasingly democratic systems of government. We also saw that this one world is, for others, a world that will increasingly become one wracked by conflicts generated by the clash of cultural or “civilizational” differences. Touraine takes up these two competing views and summarizes them (p. 25) as follows:

On the one hand, a unified economy with a unitary institutional framework;
on the other, the fragmentation of cultural identities. It is impossible to choose between these interpretations, not only because they both jump to conclusions, but mainly because they both fail to see what is really happening. Two worlds are being dissociated: the world of technologies and markets and the world of cultures, the world of instrumental reason and that of collective meaning, that of signs and that of meanings. What lies at the heart of our experience at the end of the century is the dissociation of the economy and cultures, of exchanges and identities.

The idea of understanding our contemporary world and its “Real Universality” in terms of such a process of “demodernization” nearly captures the claim I made earlier that what our contemporary world reveals, from the point of view of speculative philosophy of history, is that the dynamics of history have effectively taken over the telos. If, on Kant’s view, the dynamics of history were to be understood as a kind of productive “unsocial sociability,” and the telos
of the process of history considered as a whole was to be understood as the progressively defined realization of a “universal civic society,” then what the actual course of history has brought about is the universal extension of that productive unsocial sociability, thus creating an effectively universal society that, because it is driven by such unsocial sociability, can sustain a telos only by preserving it from that universal society. The ends to which we direct our lives are separated off from the economic activities that otherwise constitute our shared world.

Thus, one way to see the contemporary world is to see it as a worldwide sphere of economic activity, in which we all participate and compete, and from which we retreat in order to sustain frameworks of meaning and significance, more sociable networks structured around shared values, commitments, and mutual recognition. A consequence of this is that the world we live in, the world as we experience it, what is sometimes called the “lifeworld”, according to Touraine (p. 41):

no longer has any unity, not because contemporary society is too complex and is changing too fast, but because its members are affected by centrifugal forces which draw them, on the one hand, towards instrumental action and the attractive symbols of globalization and a modernity which is increasingly defined by desocialization and, on the other hand, towards an “archaic” membership of a community defined by the fusion of society, culture, and personality.

Thus we come back to Balibar’s statement, quoted above, that within Real Universality “identities” are less isolated and more incompatible, less univocal and more antagonistic.

However, all of this is from the limited point of view of Real Universality. Of course, we cannot ignore this reality. It is what we live in contact. However, if we remind ourselves of the framework in which our lives unfold, that is, the past-present-future complex, then that contact with the reality of the present, defined here in terms of the Real Universality of the world, is structured by our knowledge of the past and the necessities it confronts us with—if we use Touraine’s language, a process of demodernization that splits those lives into contributions to communicative and economic activities, and retreats into spheres of meaning and significance— as well as our future anticipations, understood as the possibilities that are filtered through existing impossibilities.

Our focus on our present world as Real University has been a focus on the present as structured by the past, in the attempt to give more substance to what it means to say that the world is “becoming increasingly multicultural,” but we have not yet found a satisfactory answer to the question of where we are we
headed. That is, given this increasingly multicultural world structured in terms of Real Universality, what are our expectations and anticipations of the future? What are they and how do we fold them back into our lives?

I said above that, if we stay within the parameters of Kant's speculative philosophy of history, then we can say that the dynamics of history have effectively taken over its telos by actually achieving a "universal society." This was never supposed to happen in Kant's account, because the whole point of articulating a telos was to provide an ideal, a standard with which to judge what we are trying to do in history and to enable us to evaluate our accomplishments as either successes or failures. This has led most thinkers to abandon Kant's speculative philosophy of history and to focus their attention on formulating normative frameworks with which to evaluate our varied attempts to live out our lives together.

However, in abandoning Kant's speculative philosophy of history, they have also abandoned his attempt to think the dynamics of history in terms of the telos by showing how they are linked. Given the Real Universality that characterizes our world, I think that this is a mistake. We are in great need of understanding how the dynamics of history are linked to the telos of history. Rather than completely abandon speculative philosophy of history, we should entertain the possibility that, having set it up in a very fruitful manner, Kant nevertheless got the relationship between the dynamics of history and its telos wrong. The particular way in which he got it wrong was to insist that the ideal as articulated in the telos serves only to guide and to judge what happens within the unfolding of the real, and is not itself a function of the real. What the actual unfolding of history has revealed to us, however, is that the real has overtaken the ideal, in that ideals themselves get folded back into our particular lives, while the universality they were meant to uphold actually belongs to the historical development of the world.

What we need now is not an abandonment of a mode of thought that attempts to think the relation between the dynamics of history and that which guides it, but a speculative philosophy of history that will enable us to make sense of the way in which that relation has developed, so that we can see the telos emerging from the dynamics themselves. This is the way in which we shall characterize Hegel's speculative philosophy of history, which actually owes a great deal to Kant.

Real Universality as a Challenge to the Cosmopolitan Ideal