

CONCRETE UNIVERSALITY AS A CRITICAL TOOL: HEGEL, ADORNO, CÉSAIRE

by Charlotte Baumann*

Abstract. *Abstract and concrete universality denote two ways of uniting elements. Abstract universality unites by ‘abstracting’ from/denying differences, concrete universality does so by establishing ‘concrete’, i.e. differentiated and mutually supportive, relations. While Hegel proclaimed the specific structure a concrete social whole and a concrete way of thinking ought to have, Adorno and Césaire made Hegel’s concept more flexible and used it as a critical tool. They show that the abstract/concrete universality distinction can serve to a) show how society hurts individuals by making them fit pre-determined, abstract roles, denying and repressing their different characters, identities and needs, and b) highlight the abstract way universal values like freedom and humanity are defined by law, and contrasting this definition with what those concepts could mean concretely. It is undeniably important to have the (abstract) universal, legal status of a free and equal human being. And yet, to truly and concretely actualize the humanity and freedom of each, human beings also need to be treated differently, depending on their group histories, circumstances, and their position within the social system. While Adorno primarily analyses the way abstract, economic concepts hurt individuals, Césaire seeks to collectively fill the abstract universal notion of humanity with the help of the experience of oppression.*

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The concrete universal refers to a ‘rich whole’, a way of uniting people and/or entities by affirming their differences rather than

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denying them. And this uniting can be material and social, or merely epistemic in the sense of a unity of determinations in thought. Hence while an abstract universal subsumes everybody under the same laws (e.g., the market mechanism), a concrete universal serves to imagine a better society, that is more attentive to the diverse realities, identities and needs of different people. Additionally, the concrete universal points toward a better usage of concepts that is required for such a better society. Adorno and Césaire do not agree with Hegel's optimism regarding the existence of concrete universals, in particular in modern society. Yet, they completely agree with Hegel that abstract universal concepts and laws can be painfully repressive of or inattentive to difference. A better society would require more concrete, mutually affirmative social relations, and a re-evaluation of what universal concepts like humanity and freedom ought to truly mean.

In this paper I want to show how Adorno and Césaire have received Hegel's thought. As we will see, they salvage and improve upon key Hegelian insights: First, the universal and the particular can be in tension with each other. This can be so both in the social sense that society is repressive toward individual personalities, identities, and needs, and in the epistemological sense that universal concepts do not fully apply to particular people or bodies. (For Adorno and Césaire, the epistemological failure to grasp individuals is systemically linked to the social repression of difference). Second, a reconciliation of the universal and the particular is desirable. And third, such a reconciliation cannot take the form of the particular turning itself into an instance of the universal. Rather, reconciliation must take the form of the universal incorporating and expressing the specific differences of the particulars that it contains. In other words, the social whole ought to be reappropriated by individuals and ought to support and be expressive of particular needs and interests. And, epistemologically speaking, universal concepts ought to be flexible and concrete enough to ensure a differentiated understanding of what such concepts require for different people and conditions. A concept like humanity or freedom should not only be a label applied to every human being, nor a legal standard that is identical for everybody. This abstract universal right to freedom and humane treatment is important and valid, but it ought to be

only part of the picture. To truly and concretely give meaning to concepts like humanity and freedom, we need to think of the specific differences between groups and people and which relations would be required for each to thrive and be fulfilled in relation to all others.

After presenting key aspects of Hegel's account of concrete universality, I shall outline how Adorno and Césaire pick up and improve upon this notion, in order to finally sketch what the concrete universal concept of humanity could truly mean. Adorno's focus lies with the painful difference between the universal and the particular; he outlines what universal concepts miss out on and how capitalist society hurts individuals by forcing them to fit into pre-established categories. Adorno is of the firm opinion that freedom and humanity ought to mean more than what is practiced under this name in capitalism. But he believes that this 'more' can only vaguely be hinted at, if we retain the mental capacity to desire something beyond the capitalist reality. Césaire by contrast, while also noting tensions between the particular and the universal, is more optimistic and proposes a collective process by means of which concepts can become more concrete. He argues that his blackness and experience of oppression will allow him and others to overcome the abstractness of universal notions like humanity, freedom and equality.

1. *Hegel on Abstract and Concrete Universality*

For Hegel, abstract universality unites many particular instances, by excluding their differences. Hegel explains this by referring to the use of concepts as labels:

When people speak of the concept they usually have abstract universality in mind [...] these concepts [like colour, plant, animal] are supposed to arise by omitting the particularities through which the various colours, plants and animals are distinguished¹.

¹ Abbreviations of works by G.W.F. Hegel:

E1 = *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1970; Eng. trans. by T.F. Geraets,

If you think of «communality or allness, you are still thinking of abstract universality that stands outside and in opposition to the individual»². The abstract universal is basically the common denominator, the shared quality of many things. Everything that fulfils the minimal requirements of counting as a plant, falls under the concept 'plant'. When I use the word plant, I make no effort to capture this particular plant in front of me, its smell, its development, its living conditions, its coexistence with other entities, its life etc. This is why the individual plant 'stands outside' the concept.

Hegel is of course speaking of concepts or words and their usage in these two passages. However, he clearly thinks that abstract universality can occur in other contexts outside of language as well. For example, Hegel says:

W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, Indianapolis – Indiana, Hackett Publishing Company, 1991. Here *E1* § 163, addition 1.

PR = *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, ed. by E. Moldhauer and M. Michel, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1970; Eng. trans. by H.B. Nisbet, ed. by A.W. Wood, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

VGP II = *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie II*, ed. by E. Moldhauer and M. Michel, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1971.

VLM = *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik. Heidelberg 1817. Mitgeschrieben von F.A. Good*, ed. by K. Gloy, Series: Hegel Vorlesungen, vol. 11, Hamburg, Meiner, 1992.

WL2 = *Wissenschaft der Logik, Band II*, ed. by E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1969; Eng. trans. by A.V. Miller, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, New York, Humanity Books, 1969.

Hegel's works are cited by 'Abbreviation, page number German edition/page number English edition' (e.g. *WL2*, 150/220). If there is only one page number, it refers to the German edition (e.g. *VLM*, 120). If the text is divided in paragraph numbers, I cite by 'Abbreviation, § number' (e.g. *E1*, §163).

² *PR*, § 24.

The Roman world is the abstract world – one rule, one ruler over the educated world. The individuality of peoples was repressed; an alien power, an abstract universal weighed heavily on the individuals³.

Roman rule functioned as an abstract universal, because and insofar as the differences between the peoples were repressed. Everybody was subordinated to the one emperor; the different peoples could not express their different customs and beliefs in their social relations, but had to abide by the same rules as everybody else. Roman rule was ‘alien’ not only or primarily because Romans came to govern people in a different country. Rather, Roman rule was ‘alien’, and an external imposition, primarily because of the way it was carried out – without any regard for pre-existing local links, interests and customs.

What is a concrete universal then? Hegel often does not speak explicitly about concrete universality. As already suggested in the first passage quoted above, Hegel distinguishes between words, concepts, or notions and those concepts insofar as they function in a way that is adequate to or displays the structure of the logical ‘Concept’. The logical structure Hegel calls the Concept is an internally differentiated whole, with each elements enabling the existence and particular character of all others; the relation between organs is a standard example. Concrete universality – as well as particularity and singularity – are relational aspects of this whole.

Let me start by specifying the first aspect, namely concrete universality. In contrast to an abstract, empty whole or universal, true (i.e., concrete) universality refers to the «simple whole»⁴, which is «most rich within itself»⁵ and «utterly concrete»⁶. A whole with the structure of the Concept is concretely universal in the sense that it is ‘internally rich’. How or why is this structure concrete, rich and full, as opposed to abstract and empty? Hegel writes: «The Concept

³ *VGP II*, 252.

⁴ *WL2*, 240/571.

⁵ *Ivi*, 275/602.

⁶ *E1*, § 160.

must be considered as a form, but it is a form that is infinite and creative, one that encloses the plenitude of all content within itself»⁷.

This passage makes two things clear: first, a concrete universal contains all content. Second, it does not do so like a receptacle that contains the mass of all entities. Rather, it is on account of its form that all content is contained in it. Earlier in his *Logic*, Hegel explains the term 'form', saying that «[t]he determination of the form [...] is the relation of elements as distinguished»⁸. The distinguishing of a thing's aspects is its «determining form»⁹, in the sense that the aspects become distinguishable and nameable. The content without the form would merely be an undefined bulk. The structure Hegel calls the Concept is a concrete universal, and it contains everything because and insofar as it is the «determining and distinguishing»¹⁰ relation between everything and it «differentiates itself»¹¹.

Hegel says that a concrete universal whole is like love and does not «violently» subsume its other¹², he means to say that the unity of the Concept is not imposed on its elements. Rather, as Hegel explains in related passages: «[E]xternal determinateness [of finite things] has now further developed into self-determining»¹³. The definition of things in relation to other things comes to be their own self-determination. This is not a «determination that is external to/for it»¹⁴. Rather, «[t]he object must spontaneously (out of its own impetus) unite into the unity of the Concept»¹⁵. A whole that has the form of the Concept is concretely universal, rather than abstractly so, because it is nothing but the relations that the elements establish 'out

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ WL2, 89/451.

⁹ Ivi, 90/452.

¹⁰ Ivi, 273/600.

¹¹ Ivi, 240/571.

¹² Ivi, 277/603.

¹³ Ivi, 444/740.

¹⁴ Ivi, 457/750.

¹⁵ Ivi, 451/746.

of their own impetus'. The organism is nothing but the relations that organs establish to each other due to their own particular characters. And organs are only what they are within this organic interrelation.

Universality, Particularity, and Singularity are hence three aspects of this relational whole. Universality refers to the whole as an internally rich, but «simple whole»¹⁶ – an entity that is an organism, for example. In particularity this internal richness is considered to be the manifold of «the distinct or determination[s]»¹⁷ – distinct organs, each one already displaying its necessary connection to all others. Singularity is «likewise the whole, but posited as the self-identical negativity: the singular»¹⁸. Singularity refers to the whole insofar as it is an internally differentiated system of relations – complex interrelation of all organs.

It is thus clear that concrete universality is an aspect of the structure Hegel calls the Concept. More precisely it is the richness of a whole that is nothing but the differentiated relation between all its elements. Hegel's discussion of *the* Concept (note the singular), is not primarily about concepts or words. Hegel does not primarily have concepts in mind when thinking of a whole with the structure of the Concept (rather the notion is modelled on his concept of absolute subjectivity)¹⁹. I hence disagree with Robert Stern who takes Hegel to be making an argument about how substance universals and property universals must be interrelated to properly define something²⁰. I also disagree both with interpreters like Terry Pinkard and Robert Pippin, who link the Concept to a totality of actual concepts and norms that arise historically and imply one another²¹. A

¹⁶ Ivi, 240/571.

¹⁷ *E1*, § 164.

¹⁸ *WL2*, 240/571.

¹⁹ K. Düsing, *Das Problem der Subjektivität in Hegels Logik*, Bonn, Bouvier, 1995, pp. 109 ff., 233 ff. See also Id., *Subjektivität und Freiheit*, Stuttgart, frommann-holzboog, 2002.

²⁰ R. Stern, *Hegelian Metaphysics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 157.

²¹ T. Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 246-265; cf. R. Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 232 ff.

concrete universal whole is not just any totality or interrelatedness of elements. Rather something is concrete universal if and only if it is nothing but an «absolute form»²² – nothing but the relations between its elements that express the particularity of each. One may of course try to think of actual concepts whose interrelation has the structure of the Concept – yet, they will necessarily be rare. «Marriage» and «promiscuity», which Dean Moyar offers as an example²³, certainly do not do the trick: the two concepts are neither completely and exclusively defined against one another – there is more to marriage than its being the opposite of promiscuity – nor do they constitute a new whole, a third that has a meaning in its own right (as the heart, lung and other organs form the organism).

Hegel considers the concrete universal as a structure that can both be realized in a social order and in the way we know objects²⁴. The ‘understanding’ is a mistaken and abstract form of knowledge that divides things up and subsumes entities under fixed labels. True and concrete knowledge would try to express in words the living and changing interrelation and differences between the objects of knowledge in a flexible and attentive manner. And the concrete universal is a blueprint for a good society for Hegel, and the best form of knowledge. This is at least what we have to assume if we take Hegel’s logical structure of the organism and collective subjectivity to specify and expand upon concrete universality²⁵. Society is the universal or whole with regard to its members. In a concrete universal society, social relations would be expressive of the different identities and needs, social mechanisms would ensure that the interests of each (group) are coordinated to the effect that each social group mutually supports the self-actualization of everyone else. In this social order, social groups reappropriate and shape their social

²² *WL2*, 298/620.

²³ See D. Moyar, *Hegel’s Conscience*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 30.

²⁴ C. Baumann, *Adorno, Hegel and the Concrete Universal*, «Philosophy and Social Criticism», XXXVII (1), 2011, pp. 73-94.

²⁵ Ead., *Hegel and Marx on Individuality and the Universal Good*, «Hegel Bulletin», XXXIX (1), 2018, pp. 61-81.

relations according to their respective needs and ‘out of their own impetus’²⁶. Hegel believes to be describing such a social model in his *Philosophy of Right*, particularly in the chapter on Ethical Life.

2. Adorno, *Suffering, and the Particular Exceeding the Universal and Vice Versa*

Adorno rarely discusses explicitly Hegelian notions of concrete and abstract universality. And, like Césaire, he has little patience for the exact complex structure Hegel means by this expression. However, the tension between the universal and the particular occupies centre stage in his philosophizing. The notion that there are wholes that miss out on particulars or contain them in a painful way is key to his thought. Adorno explicitly thinks about this both in terms of concepts and in terms of social relations mediated by these concepts.

Capitalism is a society that is abstract, uniting individuals via prices or the abstract law of value; and the concept of value is real and socially powerful, and also the abstract universal par excellence.

Abstraction [...] is the specific form of the exchange process itself, the underlying social fact through which socialization first comes about²⁷.

²⁶ WL2, 451/746.

²⁷ Abbreviations of works by T.W. Adorno:

ES = *Einleitung in die Soziologie*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 2017; Eng. trans. by E. Jephcott, ed. by C. Gödde, *Introduction to Sociology*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000. Here *ES*, 58/31.

GS = *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected Works], Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1997, cited by ‘*GS* volume number, page number of the German edition’.

ND = *Negative Dialektik*, in *GS* 6 7-412, Eng. trans. by E.B. Ashton, *Negative Dialectics*, London, Routledge, 1973.

VND = *Vorlesungen zu Negativen Dialektik*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 2003; Eng. trans. by R. Livingstone, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*, London, Polity Press, 2008.

The concept [of value] is the sufficient reason of the thing insofar as the exploration of social objects, at least, becomes flawed, where [...] you ignore the determination by the totality²⁸.

The concepts of value and price are the reason why most things have been made (namely for sale), have the shape they have (namely the most profitable) and why human beings interact as they do (when buying, selling, employing each other etc.). Human beings interact in an 'abstract' way, based on prices and pre-determined roles such as buyer, seller, worker, and employer. They do not relate to each other as concrete individuals with specific needs, feelings, desires, life stories, the capacity to find novel solutions to shared problems.

Some may object that any social interaction is guided by concepts, not only those within capitalism. This is of course correct. And since humans always relate to each other based on roles and concepts, human interaction is always somewhat abstract in Adorno's sense. No amount of social concepts or roles will ever capture each and every complexity of the people that are interacting. However, the problem is exacerbated under capitalism. In pre-capitalist Europe there was more space for adapting personal interactions to specific, changing needs and interpersonal agreements. For example, the 'tithe' or tax that peasants had to pay to their noble could be lifted or reduced if the harvest had been bad. By contrast, in capitalism abstract concepts like price (and I would add: race and gender) completely determine our interactions. Buyers and sellers do not know each other enough to adapt their actions to the special situation the other may be finding herself in. They only and exclusively look at the price when making their decision to buy and sell.

The pessimistic crux of Adorno's thinking is that human beings not only interact abstractly, but slowly turn themselves into instances of those abstract concepts, thereby undermining any possibility of (and need for) a better society. Adorno calls this a

These works are cited by abbreviation, page number German edition/page number English edition.

²⁸ ND, 167/164.

«false identity between the constitution of the world and its inhabitants»²⁹. The particular (human being, event or thing) «has become a function of the universal»³⁰. Everyone is, as a matter of fact, defined by the capitalist system and tries to fit into pre-determined roles and categories. However, it is a *false* identity between the system and the individual, both in the sense that there is something (ethically) wrong with it and insofar as the claim to identity is not (yet) completely correct.

Rather, Adorno claims the particular still exceeds the universal – and the universal also exceeds the particular (and not only in the negative sense of capitalism extending its reach beyond human actions, but also in a positive sense, as we will see).

So in what sense does the particular exceed the universal for Adorno? Adorno says, for example, «no philosophy can glue the particulars into the text»³¹. And he expands on this in a lecture saying:

If I subsume a series of characteristics, a series of elements, under a concept, what normally happens is that I abstract a particular characteristic from these elements, one that they have in common: and this characteristic will then be the concept, it will represent the unity of all the elements that possess this characteristic. Thus, by subsuming them all under this concept, by saying that A is everything that is comprehended in this unity, I necessarily exclude countless characteristics that are not integrated into the individual elements contained in this concept. The concept is always less than what is subsumed under it³².

Individual objects are always more complex than the word that is used to denote them. A concept like dog refers to a relatively small animal with four legs and a tail, living with humans. Obviously, any specific dog is much more than that, has a history, a character, friends and people the dog is close to etc. Hence, we always miss out

²⁹ GS8, 369, my translation.

³⁰ ND, 307/313.

³¹ Ivi, 11, my translation; this expression is missing in the English version.

³² VND, 17-18/7.

on many aspects when we simply apply the label 'dog' to Bella. This in itself is lamentable but necessary for Adorno, since it would be impossible to describe in complete detail every single item we want to talk about.

The main problem is, however, the social and ethical one that arises as a result of this epistemological challenge. Adorno writes for example: «The universal compresses the particular until it splinters, like a torture instrument»³³. The universal, here in the sense of capitalist society, functions by treating human beings as instances of universal concepts, people, consumers, buyers, sellers, workers, employers etc. Karl Marx famously called these «character masks»³⁴ to indicate that these are social roles similar to the ones an actor plays in the theatre. They mask the actual individual behind them, their real thoughts, feelings, needs, and life story. When Adorno says that 'the particular' (i.e., human being) is compressed until s/he splinters, he means to say that society forces us to try to make ourselves fit into these pre-given categories. We are pressured to eliminate the individual behind the mask, to stop being 'non-identical' to the roles we play. Movies suggest that we ought to be happy making money and buying things as consumers; and employers expect workers to do their work as if this were their true fulfilment; private law requires a person to remain one and the same throughout her life, take responsibility for each past act and never change her mind once a contract is made. But trying to fit into this system hurts; trying to become a coherent person and complete *homo economicus* means mutilating oneself – until s/he 'splinters'. «Suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject»³⁵. «Society becomes directly perceptible where it hurts»³⁶.

³³ ND, 399-400/346.

³⁴ K. Marx, *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 23, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1962, pp. 91, 100.

³⁵ ND, 29/16-17.

³⁶ ES, 65-66/36. For a detailed discussion of abstract capitalist practices and painful non-identity, see C. Baumann, *Adorno and Marx: The Capitalist System and the Non-identical*, in *Oxford Handbook for Adorno*, ed. by M. Shuster and H. Pickford, online first: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190932527.013.1>.

But not only is the particular human being more than the universal concepts s/he instantiates; also inversely, Adorno believes that universal concepts exceed the particular in a positive sense. How so? Adorno writes:

On the other hand, however, in a sense every concept is at the same time more than the characteristics that are subsumed under it. If, for example, I think and speak of 'freedom', this concept is not simply the unity of the characteristics of all the individuals who can be defined as free on the basis of a formal freedom within a given constitution. Rather, in a situation in which people are guaranteed the freedom to exercise a profession or to enjoy their basic rights or whatever, the concept of freedom contains a pointer to something that goes well beyond those specific freedoms, without our necessarily realizing what this additional element amounts to³⁷.

For Adorno, it is clear that concepts like freedom and humanity have to mean more than what is lived under these names in late capitalism. It even has to mean more than what any legal system could ever stipulate in positive law. Freedom cannot simply refer to the arbitrary choice between the consumer products one can afford, the freedom to choose between different jobs neither of which fulfils the individual, and the freedom to vote every four years for a party that only vaguely relates to one's interests and experiences. Equality cannot just mean aspiring to be as anxious and stressed as the next person.

This is not to say that equality and freedom are not important values, even in the abstract sense of everybody having the same formal rights. Their full meaning – and indeed hypothetical actualization – exceeds those rights; paying attention to this difference would be a requirement for a better society. As it stands, we are deprived of truly experiencing what these concepts mean, precisely because liberal capitalism is such an abstract, formal system, inattentive to particular histories and needs.

³⁷ VND, 18/7.

3. Césaire, and Filling Universality with the Particular

Césaire and Adorno do not reference each other; and yet, they are aware of similar problems with universals, partly due to an influence by Hegel. And like both Hegel and Adorno, Césaire is deeply aware that abstract universality is not just an epistemological problem. Césaire analyses universal concepts in order to analyse a society that functions by means of them. As I will show, Césaire advances further on the issue than Adorno, whose views tend towards pessimist nihilism. Césaire writes:

Hegel explains that we should not oppose the singular to the universal [...]. We had been told in the West that in order to be universal, we should have started by denying that we are black. To the contrary, I told myself: the more we are black the more we will be universal³⁸.

Don't get lost in a disembodied universalism [...]. There are two ways of getting lost: through segregation walled up in the particular or by dilution in the universal [...] [the universal is] rich in every particular, rich in all the particulars, the enhancement, and coexistence of all the particulars³⁹.

Césaire wrote the latter passage to oppose a Eurocentric Marxism. As Grosfoguel rightly points out, Eurocentric views, concepts and values are abstract in that they present themselves as «disembodied»⁴⁰. Liberal universal concepts like personhood, humanity,

³⁸ A. Césaire, *Une Arme Miraculeuse Contre le Monde Bâillonné* (Interview), cited from J.M.H. Mascot, *Hegel and the Black Atlantic: Universalism, Humanism and Relation*, in *Decolonizing Enlightenment: Transnational Justice, Human Rights and Democracy in a Postcolonial World*, ed. by N. Dhawan, Leverkusen, Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2014, pp. 93-114, p. 96.

³⁹ A. Césaire, *Culture et colonisation; lettre à Maurice Thorez*, cited in English trans. from J.M.H. Mascot's *Hegel and the Black Atlantic*, p. 101. Trans. amended based on R. Grosfoguel, see fn 40.

⁴⁰ R. Grosfoguel, *Decolonizing Western Universalisms: Decolonial Pluriversalism from Aimé Césaire to the Zapatistas*, in *Towards a Just Curriculum*

and property are abstract universals, and so are Marxist concepts like ‘worker’. They appear to be ‘disembodied’ and colour-blind, applying to all particular bodies in the same manner. But this is false both theoretically and in terms of the way concepts are applied. As Aura Cumes rightly points out, Western so-called universal concepts usually presuppose a hierarchy. Plurality is thought in terms of a hierarchy between, say, who fully embodies humanity and those who do not⁴¹. Furthermore, it is a historical fact that when most Europeans were formally free workers, the very same capitalist system required other people to be enslaved, in bondage and in quasi-feudal relations on the other side of the globe. Human rights systematically had to (and arguably still have to) be violated in order to protect the well-being and rights of Europeans and North-Americans. The supposed ‘dilution’ of the particulars in the universal is illusory. Even supposedly critical universal concepts stemming from Marxism not only hide real differences, but systematically misrepresent processes and relations of colonial oppression, as liberation philosophers like Julio de Zan have pointed out⁴². And yet, as Jamila M.H. Mascat notes, citing Césaire, «communitarian solipsism or in resentment»⁴³ is not an option. Segregationism is not the solution. Rather, «according to Césaire, it means rehabilitating one’s own inheritance and one’s own history, reactivating the past in view of superseding it in a movement that looks very much like Hegel’s well known ‘sublation’»⁴⁴.

Theory: The Epistemicide, ed. by J.M. Paraskevam, London, Routledge, 2017, pp. 88-104, p. 95.

⁴¹ A. Cumes, *El Mundo del Uno que coloniza para existir y las epistemologías de la coexistencia*, in *Caminos hacia la emancipación. 25 años del movimiento feminista en Guatemala*, Ciudad de Guatemala, Ediciones laCuerda, 2023, pp. 123-130.

⁴² J. de Zan, *La Dialectica en el Centro y en la Periferia*, in *Hacia una Filosofía de la Liberación Latinoamericana*, ed. by O. Ardiles *et al.*, Buenos Aires, Bonum, 1974, pp. 105-117.

⁴³ Mascat, *Hegel and the Black Atlantic*, p. 101.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*; original citation from A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 2000, p. 92.

Césaire, hence, says something similar to Adorno, and at the same time something much more concrete. For Adorno, as cited above, we ought to look for, but we may not «necessarily realiz[e] what this additional element amounts to», the one that is required to truly define freedom⁴⁵. In fact, as I have outlined, Adorno believes that the abstract universality of concepts like value function as a self-fulfilling prophecy, slowly turning human beings into nothing but value-producers and -consumers. This is the «false identity between the constitution of the world and its inhabitants»⁴⁶ – in the sense that it ought not to be. But it also means that there are ever fewer resources for saying what freedom, humanity and equality should truly mean. Everybody tends to identify increasingly with the ways those concepts are lived under capitalism. I hence take Adorno to implicitly agree with Césaire when he writes: «The need to let suffering speak is the condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject»⁴⁷. However, for Adorno, we have been forced into capitalist concepts so completely that we are almost comfortable; we are almost numb to the pain. Or at the very least, we cannot easily express what is wrong and why and how things are hurting us or how they should be different.

Césaire, by contrast, is very much aware that his own particularity will never go away. The history of enslavement, exploitation and discrimination is present in his everyday life as much as it is so in economic, political, legal, literary and other realms. Césaire proposes to «reactivate the past», Mascát also speaks of «reappropriation» in another passage⁴⁸. The past is present already as colonialism shapes contemporary economic and political relations. But Césaire demands to use the past as a practical guideline for action and an intellectual resource for improving universal concepts. I hence completely agree with Doris Garraway's analysis, when she says: «it is only when blackness is embraced as a particular

⁴⁵ VND, 18/7.

⁴⁶ GS8, 369, my translation.

⁴⁷ ND, 29/17-18.

⁴⁸ Mascát, *Hegel and the Black Atlantic*, p. 100.

historical experience that black people can be recognized as human subjects as opposed to predetermined essences»⁴⁹. Césaire's concept of *négritude*, the historical experience of blackness, is meant to fill the concept 'humanity' with meaning. The aim is to find the 'more' of a concept like humanity, what it ought to mean, what conditions would have to be in place for such a concept to be actualized. And it is his experience and history that enable Césaire and others to address and answer these questions. Du Bois famously calls this insight into the falseness of the white world 'second sight'⁵⁰; and Fumi Okiji writes «black life, whatever the intention of a particular actor, cannot help but be lived as critical reflection»⁵¹.

But this is not only or primarily a theoretical task for Césaire (in contrast to Adorno, I dare say). We certainly need to fill the universal concepts with concrete meaning, experiences and differentiated demands. «To arrive at the Universal one must immerse oneself in the particular»⁵². But arriving at the universal is not a solitary theoretical act by a lonely intellectual. Filling the universal is practical. Daniel M. Scott⁵³ argues that «violence creates as it destroys» for Césaire, and Gary Leising⁵⁴ and others partly agree, also given his

⁴⁹ D. Garraway, 'What Is Mine': Césairean Negritude between the Particular and the Universal, «Research in African Literatures», XXXXI (1), 2010, 71-86, p. 77.

⁵⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁵¹ F. Okiji, *Jazz as Critique: Adorno and Black Expression Revisited*, Stanford – CA, Stanford University Press, 2018, p. 26.

⁵² From personal communication between Césaire and Nick Nesbitt, cited in N. Nesbitt, *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2003, pp. XIV.

⁵³ D.M. Scott, "Cahier d'un retour au pays natal": La Poétique de la Violence, «Romance Notes», XXXIV (2), 1993, pp. 143-154, p. 143. Trans. and cited by G. Leising, see fn 53.

⁵⁴ G. Leising, *Aimé Césaire and Gestures Toward the Universal*, «CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture», III (4), 2001: <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1135>.

links to Fanon⁵⁵, who is often read as advocating some type of violence. However, this violence does not necessarily have to be taken literally. It may well be taken in the Hegelian sense of negation. Negation always involves some kind of destruction. But it is an intelligent destruction of stark distinctions and unquestioned certainties, a destruction that learns from past mistakes and creates something better with the parts that are left over. And while this conceptual revision may well have material consequences, this does not necessarily imply carnage.

For Césaire, filling the universal is a collective, discursive process, that involves a collective reappropriation and re-shaping of relations. He writes: «Haiti is where *négritude* rose for the first time and stated that it believed in humanity»⁵⁶.

And his colleague Confiant writes:

Young blacks today don't want to be either subjugated or assimilated [...]. Subjugation and assimilation resemble each other: they're both forms of passiveness [...]. Black youth wants to act and to create [...] to contribute to universal life, to the humanization of humanity⁵⁷.

The meaning of universal concepts like humanity must be scrutinized, undone, created, adjusted, and revised in collective deliberation and practice. It must be fought for, tried out, and continually improved and revised in its application. The revolutionaries in Haiti fought for what so-called European values should truly mean for everybody.

⁵⁵ For concrete universality in Fanon, see: K. Ng, *Fanon and Hegel on the Recognition of Humanity*, «Hegel Bulletin», XCIV, 2024, pp. 1-27.

⁵⁶ A. Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2001, p. 15.

⁵⁷ R. Confiant, *Aimé Césaire : Une traversée paradoxale du siècle*, Paris, Stock, 1993, p. 328, Eng. trans. from J.M.H. Mascot, *Hegel and the Black Atlantic*, p. 98.

4. *The Concrete Universal of Humanity – Via Hegel, Adorno and Césaire*

Which social arrangements would actualize the concrete universal notion of humanity? And what does the concrete universal of humanity actually mean? Well, the former is not for me to say. It is not likely that there will ever be a stage in human history when the ideal of humanity and actual lived reality completely coincide. And yet, concrete universality clearly points toward a whole that is not based on hierarchy or repression, but on mutual support, gratitude, respect and recognition of difference. The concept thus gestures toward social relations that Aura Cumes describes as ideals in Mayan culture⁵⁸.

More precisely, drawing more closely on Hegel I would say: For the concept of humanity to be actualized there would have to be social relations in which each and every individual human being is empowered, supported, and able to express herself and satisfy all her needs of psychological and material nature. Since this notion was too idealist even for Hegel, he proposed to empower historically formed social groups or professions in his vision of the best state. Césaire rightly points out that groups in terms of race and post-colonial geography should occupy centre-stage – I dare add, in conjunction with groups based on gender and economic positions like worker, capitalist, semi-independent peasant, land-owning neo-feudalist. Improving Hegel via Césaire and Adorno hence leads me to assume that the concrete universal concept of humanity could only become real in social relations that: a) redress systematic imbalances, b) empower and c) ensure the well-being of all big social groups defined by race, gender, and economics. This is what Adorno means by the ‘reconciliation’ of the particular and the universal, here in the sense of society. Rather than stripping human beings of their differences, (all, or at least the most important) differences ought to be acknowledged. And they ought to be acknowledged not only in a theoretical sense, but also in the material sense of making sure everybody’s specific needs are being met. Of course, this social change would have to address particularly the interests, history, realities, wishes and identities of those that have been systematically ignored

⁵⁸ See, for example, Cumes, *El Mundo del Uno*.

and exploited, as Césaire rightly insists. When the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) demands reparations from the EU, calling for investment in health care, education, culture as well as technology transfer⁵⁹, they stand in this tradition, I believe. And so did Derrick Bell, Mari Matsuda and others, who fought for new legal concepts and methods in the US, and black feminists when they expand and challenge the demands of womanhood and female solidarity. Concepts like womanhood have to take into account and further the concrete living conditions, desires and needs of each group of women. And legal equality and legal procedures ought to include social differences. Legal practitioners have to accept that granting everybody the same treatment is not equally responsive to their respective needs and realities.

A concrete universal humanity is, in a way, the opposite of Habermas' notion of a direct dialogical relation without power or social structures. Hegel's implicit point was that it is useless to deny social structures and power differences or to wish them away⁶⁰. Adorno and Césaire are more than aware that power structures, histories of oppression and exploitation are real and cannot be bracketed to reach so-called 'true humanity' – or, indeed, a direct human interaction free of power. The solution that Hegel suggests with his notion of concrete universality is to fight the social structure by more structure rather than less. This is why Mascát's demand to 'reappropriate' or 'reactivate the past' is on point. Social structures that have emerged historically need to be analysed and changed to the effect that every human being is supported in his or her humanity (i.e., material and psychological well-being, social power, independent expression, etc.). Such a concept of humanity would truly be concrete and a society that actualizes such a notion would truly be humane. This concrete universal of humanity is intentionally formulated as an unreachable ideal, or at the very least an ideal that requires constant collective revision and testing out in practice. But it is an ideal worth striving for. And it is up to those

⁵⁹ See on this point: G. Bhabra, *Decolonizing Critical Theory? Epistemological Justice, Progress, Reparation*, «Critical Times», IV (1), 2021, pp. 73-89.

⁶⁰ Cf. Baumann, *Adorno, Hegel and the Concrete Universal*; Charlotte Baumann, *Hegel and Marx on Individuality and the Universal Good*, «Hegel Bulletin», 39 (I), 2018, pp. 61-81, pp.71 ff.

who have suffered most from abstract humanity to tell the rest of us which exact changes ought to be put into place.

5. *Conclusion*

Thinking in terms of concrete universality counteracts the repressive moment in universalism and unidealistic pragmatism. Pragmatists assume that norms or concepts simply mean what people use them for in a given society at a given moment in time. But what can you do if you want a concept, say humanity or freedom, to mean something else than what is lived under this name at the moment? What if one feels hurt or excluded by the way the word is defined or applied? In this case, one simply does not have the words to say what s/he means and certainly not the voice to be heard. Pragmatist Hegelians have used this reasoning; Hegelians and other Enlightenment thinkers have also invoked repressive universalism to justify this thought. If someone does not fit the concept of humanity that is current at the moment, then this person ought to overcome his or her particularism and come to see herself as a rational, self-actualizing subject. The particular people, the oppressed, the excluded, are wrong because they do not manage to identify with the correct part of themselves that would make them feel part of the human community. Admitting that a person is not a rational, self-actualizing subject precisely because other such subjects have made this impossible for her, is too complex, too concrete for this kind of universalism. And so is any reference to colonial history. But universal norms are only truly normative (as opposed to descriptive) if they mean more than what is currently being lived. Freedom can be used in a descriptive sense to refer to all the formal freedoms citizens of a particular state supposedly enjoy. But freedom is meant to be normative; freedom is meant to formulate an 'ought' not an 'is' – and as such the meaning of this norm by definition needs to exceed the meaning it currently has in positive law.

Hegel introduced the notion of a concrete universal or whole that contains all its elements in their particular character and complex relation. He recognized that wholes can be reductive and so can be concepts. But Hegel focussed on proclaiming the specific structure a concrete whole does or ought to display. Adorno and Césaire, by contrast, picked up on the concept of a concrete universal and made it

more flexible and dynamic, using it as a critical tool. And yet, I believe they retain the basic notion that the concrete universal of humanity would only become reality in supportive social relations, within which each social group is empowered, self-actualized and happy. This is the ideal that the word 'humanity' stands for when understood concretely. It still remains to be seen which exact institutions and legal norms would come closest to making this ideal reality. The moral necessity of some changes like reparations for slavery and colonialism may seem rather obvious. But the actualization of humanity will require many more fundamental socio-economic, legal and other changes. And it is up to those that have been excluded from abstract humanity to tell the rest of us which exact changes are most useful; and it would be a matter of trying out, discussing, revising and improving.

I am too much of an Adornian to believe that any number of concepts or legal statutes will ever capture what is necessary for freedom, equality and humanity to be truly actualized in human relations. Even if there were the political will to make humanity a reality, it can never fully be reached – and ought not to. It is important to keep the notion as an ideal that we ought to try to actualize but that always also exceeds actuality. As human beings change so do the relations that can possibly be most supportive of their individual identities and needs. It is an ongoing task to define and redefine, practice, institute and revise the meaning of those words and the social relations that promise a taste of them. While I sympathize with the Adornian notion of the concrete universal as an ideal, I follow Césaire in assuming that this ideal can indeed be filled with content. We can improve upon the abstract universal of humanity collectively, drawing on experiences and realities of oppression. People can demand and have put into practice many important legal and political changes that are required for the concept of humanity to become actual. Adorno is mistaken to assume that the concretization of universal concepts is important but ever less likely to occur. Adorno's limitation stems from looking at the white, Euro-American reality of capitalism only. As Césaire and others show, universal concepts have been concretized in Haiti in 1791 and by the CARICOM in 2013. There are historical resources and collective processes that enable concretizing the concept of humanity; all we have to do is listen, try out and learn.