



Globalization and Liberalism: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Manent

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BOOK REVIEW

Globalization and Liberalism: Montesquieu, Tocqueville, and Manent, by Trevor Shelley, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 2020, 288 pp., € 53.64 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0-268-10729-1

Trevor Shelley has written a work in the tradition of History of Ideas on a hot button political issue. At issue is whether the most appropriate political form for us today is the nation-state or some form of a world-state. While at present there are institutions that embody both, globalization, Shelley notes, has become something of a 'ruling opinion' (p. 3). Crucially, he argues that this world-state would have the form of Alexandre Kojève's 'universal and homogeneous state'¹ (p. 9) with no distinctions and mediations 'drawing all particulars into [its] universal and homogeneous gaze' (p. 52). Shelley aims to counter this globalist vision with a 'fact' (p. 3) and a 'political science' (p. 14): the stubborn 'age-old' fact that the world *is* divided into different political bodies and a liberal political science that attends to the separations and differences that nourish political life. In the tension between the universal (globalism) and the particular (nationalism), Shelley wants to position himself squarely in the middle, *i.e.*, he wants to cultivate the tension and not solve it one way or the other.

The political science appropriate to this tension is recovered through the works of three Frenchmen: Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Pierre Manent. The three are appropriate to the task for they weave the warp of universality with the woof of particularity. They begin from the outward perspective by way of the 'external configurations' of space, geography, the body, and territoriality and move inwards (p. 88) to internal ones such as the mores or the *esprit* all the while careful to make room for 'chance' and 'accident' (p. 244). And, happily, their lives track the emergence and growth of the idea of universal humanity in modernity: Montesquieu witnesses the emergence of the modern state with a plurality of forms or regimes; Tocqueville lives in the time of the emergent democratic regime as the sole surviving form; and Manent beholds the full unfolding of the logic of that regime in the overcoming of the modern nation-state (p. 10). According to Shelley who here follows Manent, since democracy relies on the political form of the nation-state, this is a classic case of the scorpion stinging the frog.

I want to highlight two points here. First, the book carefully matches the subjects to its task; these are thoughtful men with a discerning eye for the concrete, the bodily, and the particular and a powerful capacity for the general, the spiritual and the universal. Their advice always involves 'mixing or balancing' (p. 87) the two and hence they appeal to the author's sense of moderation. Second, the very temporality of the account – from the eighteenth century to the present – presents a foreboding sense of the triumph of the universal. We may legitimately fear together with Shelley that what Tocqueville called 'the spirit of the city' (p. 94) may be stamped out from without by the weight, complexity, and distance of the administrative apparatus required by a world-state and from within by the reduction, negligence, and elision of the differences and distinctions between us by the globalist ideology that sustains it. We may fear, in other words, a universal humanity reduced to a singular mass – a *blob* Hannah Pitkin may call it – that wobbles about without effecting a thing.

Montesquieu first introduces the modern problem of the particular and the universal by standing at its moment of origin. His vision is remarkably lucid: it is simultaneously enchanted by the dawn of the new age with its capacity to correct nature's shortcomings

(p. 21) and enhance human liberty (p. 67) while the comparative nature of his perspective and the sharpness of his eye for particularities of time, place, and spirit bring to bear 'the spirit of antiquity' mindful of 'limitations and delineations' (p. 22) on that enchanting vision. He is responsible, therefore, for introducing 'traditional political science' (p. 27) with its care for the *esprits* of the different parts of the regime that usefully counter-balance the *esprit general*.

Tocqueville picks up where Montesquieu leaves off. He situates the tensions introduced by his predecessor in a 'world of growing equality, arguably well beyond what Montesquieu might even have imagined' (p. 80). Despotism, which we could confidently hope to avoid with Montesquieu, becomes the specter that haunts our *opération* or action (to borrow a term from Pierre Manent, p. 149). And this because our experience of similitude generates everything else: from the perspective in which we see ourselves and others to our laws and political forms. On the latter, Shelley crucially claims, similitude champions 'the most encompassing forms' against political forms 'that mediate and separate people' (p. 128); that is, over time we tend to move towards the universal and homogeneous state. Shelley is right to conclude that the experience of similitude favours the overcoming of the particular by the universal; the question, it appears to me, is whether that overcoming constitutes an annihilation or a sublimation, *i.e.*, negation, assimilation, and transformation, of the particular.

Shelley's answer becomes clear in his analysis of Pierre Manent: our contemporary *opération* is tantamount to 'the organization of our passivity' (Manent in Shelley, p. 178). The chapters on Manent are very eloquent indeed; they may easily serve as a stand-alone introduction to the thought of this fine contemporary thinker. But Shelley also demonstrates his independence from Manent when he argues in favour of an American exception to the general rush towards the universal: due to its peculiar constitutional structure America provides 'the greatest anomaly to this sentiment and situation' (p. 141) and perpetuates 'the Western dynamic of self-government' (p. 196). Shelley's argument on the American exception is an original contribution based on Manent's science of political forms.

The exception aside, however, Shelley's argument is that modern universalism signifies the annihilation of the particular and with it of the background conditions for political life. *This* is its uniqueness. If successful universalist projects in the past – and the book goes through a number of examples from Alexander the Great to the universal church – were 'extended through separations' (p. 161), the current globalist vision runs roughshod against 'the actual arrangement of things' (p. 36). This annihilation, for Shelley, goes all the way; should a world-state come into being, it would be a species of despotism because its power would be exercised 'without mediation and intermediate divisions' (p. 62). With Manent, Shelley concludes that universal humanity would be unable to act because in it 'subject and object are united' (p. 162). Thus, globalism is not merely a bad political idea for ignoring contingencies of place and time (p. 72) and existing institutions, traditions and cultures (p. 178) but, also a terrible and insidious proposition that would transport humanity in a post-political state of pure inaction.

One may imagine a globalist object to this argument with an injured sense of equality: if the classical philosophers could transcend their particular cities, then why can all of us not do the same now as Kant bade us to do in the *Idea for a Universal History*? The answer is gestured at in footnote 20 (p. 221): the universalization and democratization of the classical philosophical experience cannot happen *just so* because philosophers cannot act. Engaged as they are in 'abstractions and generalizations' (p. 31), they vitally depend on the particularity of the city. To complete this thought, Socrates testified to his radical dependency on Athens and its laws in speech in the *Crito* and in deed by drinking the hemlock in the *Phaedo*. That is why, at least

in the West, philosophy comes into its own only as *political* philosophy; remove the particular out of it and the universal evaporates as so much thin air.

These are eloquent words and we do well to take to heart the advice to '[defend] the integrity of distinct communities' and not be 'carried off toward universalism' (p. 9). But they rest, I think, on a confusion between the philosophical (universal and homogeneous state) and political (world-state) lines of the globalist argument. Shelley collapses the two into one [he depicts the universalist position somewhat confusingly as a 'phenomenon,' a 'logic,' a 'perspective,' a 'sentiment,' an insidious result of 'the democratic desire for unmediated equality,' (p. 122) economic forces (p. 3), and contemporary 'pantheism' (p. 128)]. The philosophical misconception has to do with the epistemic status of the idea of the 'universal and homogeneous state.' Shelley writes as if this is a political idea; one of his enthusiastic reviewers derisively refers to 'the partisans of the universal and homogenous [*sic.*] state.'² But there are, of course, no such partisans, just as there are no partisans of Plato's *kallipolis* although there is no shortage of Platonists. And that is because it is not possible to be persuaded by this idea; the idea does not operate at the political level because it lacks pragmatic reality. Incidentally, this is also the case with Tocqueville's idea of the new form of democratic despotism to come: 'The thing is new,' Tocqueville says, 'I cannot name it' and then proceeds to draw it for us in his imagination ('I want to imagine ...'; 'I have just done the portrait').³ Pragmatically, Tocqueville's vision is as impossible as Plato's best city or Kojève's final state; a painting with an air of unreality (*e.g.*, it 'molds men as it pleases'⁴). That is because it is not an idea to be embraced or rejected and not even a prediction in pragmatic history. Instead, it is an ideal-type – a pure theoretical construct in the original sense of *theoreia* – that views the future from a singular perspective in order to bring to light in a coherent manner some aspect of it.

There is of course also a separate political argument for a world-state. But Shelley, who demonstrates a careful and generous hermeneutic on his subjects does not extend that benevolence to his target: the globalist position in general and the argument for a world-state in particular. Leaving aside Kant who explicitly rejects a world republic in favour of a federation of peoples precisely for the reasons that concern Shelley, Jürgen Habermas who radicalizes Kant also seeks to accommodate precisely those concerns: it is possible, he argues, to thread a middle-way between a sovereign world-state and sovereign nation-states if we base it, unlike Kant, in the American rather than the French republican model;⁵ precisely the model that Shelley touts as the constitutional answer to the globalist drive in the last substantive chapter of his book.

Now whatever we may think of Habermas' success in accommodating these reservations, we do well to consider them for what they are. Instead, Shelley appraises them rather perfunctorily and inaccurately: Habermas, we are told, wants to move beyond the nation "and yet cannot imagine an altogether different 'model'" (p. 163) although that is precisely what Habermas attempts in *The Divided West*. While that book is mentioned in a footnote (fn. 47, p. 271) there is no hint at a direct grappling with its theses. Coincidentally perhaps, Shelley commits the sin he accuses the universalists of, *i.e.*, ignoring the particularities of his target.

The end-result is that a project that starts with the intention to cultivate the tension between the particular and the universal ends in favour of the particular (nation-state order) against the universal (globalist order). Shelley, therefore, must cover up, elide, or forget that the idea of the 'emergent unity of humanity' (p. 4) is engendered by a multitude of fully legitimate experiences – for example, different peoples today experience daily life in an increasingly similar manner despite the different kinds of political regimes, territories, and traditions they inhabit. These experiences are reality engendering and, therefore, they

require political articulation at the level of the universal. On the other hand, technological advancement alone creates new distinctions, differences, and separations among us (of classes, professions, identities etc.) which also require political articulation at the level of the particular. Shelley, of course, need not spell out these modes and orders, but he does need to acknowledge that ‘universal humanity’ is not a mere idea, or a political agenda but a political symbol and as such it evokes a part of the reality in which we live. It therefore kindles our hopes, guides our understanding, informs our discourse, and incites our associative actions. And symbols, like reality, are ignored at one’s own peril.

Notes

1. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).
2. Daniel J. Mahoney, “Giving Flesh to Democratic Abstractions,” *Law & Liberty*, October 20, 2020, <https://lawliberty.org/book-review/giving-flesh-to-democratic-abstractions/>.
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Historical-Critical Edition, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 1249, 1252.
4. *Ibid.*, 1252.
5. Jürgen Habermas, *The Divided West* (London: Polity, 2006), 128.

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