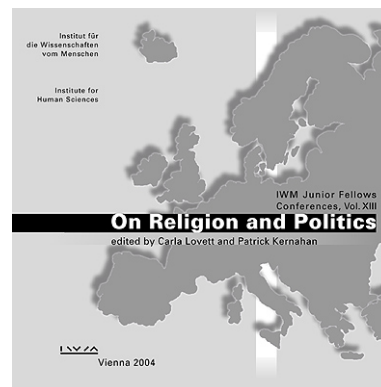


Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact Klaus Nellen at IWM, Spittelauer Laende 3, 1090 Vienna, Austria, e-mail <nellen@iwm.at>.

Preferred Citation: Meike Schmidt-Gleim. 2004. Enjoy Democracy. In On Religion and Politics, ed. C. Lovett and P. Kernahan, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 13.



Enjoy Democracy

Meike Schmidt-Gleim

Commenting on the events after the fall of the Berlin Wall Slavoj Zizek asked, “Why has the West been so fascinated by the events in Eastern Europe (after the collapse of the communist system)?”¹ Not expecting an answer by anyone else that would satisfy him, he gave one himself. “What fascinated the Western gaze was the *re-invention* of democracy.... ...it seemed as if democracy had been *re-discovered* in its entire newness and freshness. The real object of this fascination of the West is the *gaze*, the presumably naïve *gaze*, with which Eastern Europe stares at the West, fascinated by its democracy.”²

This reading of the interaction between East and West leads to the assumption that the East would be willing and tempted to copy or imitate Western democratic systems. But Zizek used the words *re-invention* or *re-discovery* and I assume that he did not choose his words by chance but selected them deliberately. For instance, the term “re-invention” seriously alludes to an autonomous process of creating something. So what happened to the naïve gaze towards the West?

¹ Slavoj Zizek, *Genieße deine Nation wie dich selbst!* in: *Gemeinschaften*, Joseph Vogl (ed.), Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 133

² *Ibid.*

The process proposed could rather be clarified as two distinct steps: first, the enthusiastic gaze towards the West, and second, the discovery of democracy within Eastern Europe itself. I do not want to insinuate that this is what Žižek believes; that is, that he believes in an autonomous discovery of democracy in Eastern Europe. I rather claim – and Žižek might follow me here – that the perception of a *re-invention* or *re-discovery* is absolutely necessary for the *jouissance* of another gaze, the Western gaze. Only autonomy of the East renders possible the understanding of democracy as an *universal principle*, a principle that exists outside of power relations, a principle each can discover in an autonomous process. The Eastern populations discover something and what they discover peculiarly enough turns out to be what we know it to be: democracy, liberal democracy, an universal principle. But what is that the West itself finds to recognize? Is it a copy of the West? Do post-colonial power relations leave their marks here?

I call what the West finds liberal democracy. So is liberal democracy what is equated with an *universal principle*, with what one discovers installing a democratic system? If this is correct, any democracy would be given a true kernel, *liberal democracy*. But if Žižek spoke of democracy in general, how could I possibly replace the broad term democracy immediately by liberal democracy? Let me turn this question around. Would we recognize something that is democracy but not at all similar to the actual existing Western systems?

Frankly, I would say no. We refer to democracy as an universal principle even while at the same time it is filled with specific, historically contingent content. We recognize it, exactly because whenever we speak of democracy we imply the currently hegemonic form, liberal democracy. It could be called otherwise as well, but of course my choice of liberal democracy is not at all randomly picked. Stuart Hall is not the only one to claim, “The ideas circulating within democracy’s wider frame have been condensed into ‘liberal democracy’ and liberal democracy has been reduced to the system which now prevails in the Western developed ‘democratic capitalist’ world.”³ So I found a name for the object of the gaze: *liberal democracy*. But this still does not answer the question, what is this “liberal democracy” that seems to have won the battle of competing democratic concepts? I claim that the relation between East and West in the specific description by Slavoj Žižek opens up a line of relations between several objects that tells us something about liberal democracy.

³ Stuart Hall, Globalization, Democracy and Difference, lecture, documenta Platform, Academy of fine Arts Vienna, 15.03.2001

Again, is liberal democracy only a copy of the Western system? Is it one democratic concept among others – parliamentary democracy, representative democracy, pluralist democracy etc.? Is it an accident that it is just “liberal democracy” that has won the battle among these concepts? And is the term “democracy” nowadays randomly filled with the content of liberal democracy? I would claim that liberal democracy is not just the actual existing political system that goes along with a capitalist economic system⁴ – in Derrida's words a ritual of conjuring the free market⁵. Although the power of economics is glaringly obvious, it is an urgent question whether the economy nowadays plays a primary role that gives politics only the role of its agent,⁶ or whether societies from the beginning with the twentieth century until now developed from a principle of democracy *and* capitalism, over democracy *in* capitalism, to democracy *as* capitalism?⁷ I would claim that the problem of liberal democracy is not its connection to capitalism regardless of what this relation might look like and however frightening it seems to be at the moment.

What I perceive as the specificity of liberal democracy is rather the specific relation it establishes between its claims, its realization, and “reality” based on a relation between the gaze, universal democracy, and liberal democracy. A seemingly compelling line of exchangeable objects is established: *liberal democracy is democracy is a universal principle* made possible by the gaze. The gaze constitutes the joy of perceiving the construction of democracies all over the world, the joy of perceiving any constitutional project that includes “free” elections or human rights as a construction of democracy and replaces the historically contingent with a general term and ultimately with a universal principle.

This very enthusiastic gaze dissolves the polemical situation of the political.⁸ Rancière defines the polemic as the claim of a common world, of a community, where some do not want to have a common world. He gives the classic example of the worker who claims to be in the same world as the capitalist, but where the latter does not want to be in the same world with the worker. The capitalist does not

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Marx' Gespenster*, Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt/Main 1995, S. 89

⁶ Vgl. Slavoj Žižek, *Ein Plädoyer für die Intoleranz*, S. 72: “...die kolonisierende Macht ist nicht länger ein Nationalstaat, sondern die globale Firma”, Passagen, Wien 1998.

⁷ Georg Seeßlen, Vortrag, gehalten auf dem Symposium: “Der Preis der Freiheit. Zur politischen Ökonomie von Zensur.”, Seccession, Wien, 24.02.2001

⁸ I refer to a concept of Jacques Rancière, *Postdemokratie*, in: *Politik der Wahrheit*, Turia und Kant, p. 106.

know such a common space, such a subject, and so instead pretends only to know the staff. A field of controversy is opened up. The polemic is a community of claims instead of one of congruency.

Now this seems to be twisted for liberal democracy is a community of congruency instead of one of claims. It constructs an object that is identical with it however lacking its realizations might be. For this reason liberal democracy is not any longer perceived as a system among others, but as democracy. Žižek can speak of democracy as such because he focuses on the gaze. What it perceives is democracy. Liberal democracy is what it constitutes. Hence, liberal democracy is not at all a copy of Western systems. On the contrary, it can function quite differently. As long as liberal democracy includes some roughly democratic institutions like elections it is perceived as democracy (which is equally true for the Western systems themselves). Therefore, by looking once more at Slavoj Žižek's report of the relation between East and West, one can come up with the blatant criticism that what presents itself as universal, the principle of democracy, is in reality a striking sign of Western hegemony. The construction of a naïve and fascinated gaze from the East is nothing but a post-imperialist gesture of the West that dreams of modeling the whole world according to its own eurocentristic principles.

In summary we face two classical, opposing conceptualizations of this very relation between East and West. When reduced to a schematization of the arguments to make palpable these two perceptions, they could carry the tags liberalism and Marxism: The first position is assuming free, competing individuals. The relation between East and West is hence conceived as being completely unproblematic. The second position detects a relation of domination where the latter does not recognize free competition, but rather force instead of freedom and suppression instead of competition. The Western claim of universalism is then only an effort to mask this glaring injustice. For the most part one can say that this criticism is skeptical not only about the content of the Western idea but of the category of universalism itself (with the exception of Marx himself). Universal claims are understood as a reification of Western European principles in themselves and therefore highly suspicious. Alternatively, the coexistence of differences and the multiplicity of particularities are propagated, concepts that find their expression in what is called "multiculturalism".

I am critical of both of the positions I just outlined. Yes, one can indeed detect a power bias underlying the relation between East and West, but I think that the conclusions drawn from this position are misleading. Let me depict the criticism again. The universality of the Western idea is detected as being a fraud. It has been said

said that what presents itself as universal is instead a particular position. Henceforth, this perception of universality is replaced by a multiplicity of particular positions. The problem is that in giving up on any claim of universality in general retrospectively renders universality in itself a Western idea. It conflates the two, the Western idea and universality, and therefore gets trapped in the very hegemonic rhetoric that – like, for example, the essay of Francis Fukuyama, “End of History?”, has haunted the media for the last ten years – claims universality and the “triumph of the West” to be synonymous.⁹

In mentioning hegemony I already imply that I think the discussion should be considered within the field of political conflict. As Ernesto Laclau wrote some years ago, “politics that reject universalism as eurocentric lead necessarily to an impasse, because they fix power relations (of the coexisting particularities) to the status quo.”¹⁰ What is not accounted for in the critique that rejects universalism is the logic of political conflict. Slavoj Žižek depicts it as the following: “...They, the excluded, those with no fixed place within the social edifice, thus paradoxically presented themselves as the representative, the stand-in for the whole of society, for the true universality.”¹¹ Having Žižek’s explanation of the logic of political conflict in mind, one has to conceptualize universality as part of this logic of political struggle rather than as eurocentric.

What the reference to the excluded depicts is equally true for the included, for the part of the hegemonic party. What is presented as universal is always the stand-in for a part. What claims to be the universal principle of liberal democracy (democracy) is always fundamentally particular. By following Laclau and Žižek then, universality and the Western idea have to be disentangled and challenged by a different signification of universality. Yet, one has to recognize that liberal democracy has been quite successful in claiming universality. And I am not very optimistic that the excluded can claim universality without referring to an already existing signification of it, since the claim for universality has to be inscribed in intelligibility.

To speak of universality as an “empty principle” does not mean that its signification is arbitrary. But what is claimed in the name of universality does not remain the same throughout its articulation. So what is claimed in the name of liberal de-

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?* in: *National Interest*, Summer 1989.

¹⁰ Ernesto Laclau, *Universalismus, Partikularismus und die Frage der Identität*, in: *Identität : Differenz*. Triton Verlag, p. 597

¹¹ Slavoj Žižek, *Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics*, in: *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, (ed.) Chantal Mouffe, Verso 1999, p. 27

mocracy is not always what was conceived of being liberal democracy before its most recent articulation. Instead, its articulation has to be thought of in terms of performativity. Therefore, speaking in the name of universal Western principles from the point of exclusion of a, let us say, non-Western position always includes a transformation of the claim. This is a process often called into mind for its emancipatory qualities but is equally possible as a reactionary shift.

Let me turn to an example to clarify this argument: Toni Negri and Michael Hardt report in their recent release *The Empire* the case of Toussaint L'Ouverture. In 1797 Toussaint L'Ouverture led the first successful independence struggle against modern slavery in the French colony of Saint Domingue (now Haiti). Negri/Hardt write, "L'Ouverture breathed in the rhetoric of the French Revolution emanating from Paris in its pure form. If the French revolutionaries opposing the Ancien Regime proclaimed the universal human right to "liberté, égalité, fraternité", Toussaint assumed that the blacks, mulattos, and whites of the colony were also included under the broad umbrella of the rights of citizens."¹² On the one hand, a relation of domination is too apparent in this case to deny it and still be able to speak of free competing individuals. On the other hand, referencing the rhetoric of the French Revolution does indeed legitimize the struggle for the sake of the enslaved people of Saint Domingue. Negri/Hardt criticize: "At times Toussaint writes as if the very idea of freedom had been created by the French."¹³ I would argue instead that Toussaint did not have a choice other than to pretend that freedom is a French invention, but he nevertheless could take advantage of this dependence. But whether Toussaint pretended freedom was a Western idea or seriously believed it he de-Westernized the idea in the very same step by using it. Taking reference to universality as a Western principle might be compulsory but nevertheless using it transforms it in a sense French revolutionaries would never have imagined, in this case for reasons of emancipation.

Transferring this setting into our context of establishing democratic regimes in the East (in the West), the relation becomes completely unproblematic, even a preferable site for emancipation. So what then is the problem of the question of a *re-invention* of democracies in the East? Doesn't it follow the same pattern of taking reference in a hegemonic system in order to transfer its emancipating capacities to the East and finally transform its concept? Let me ask again, what brought the po-

¹² Toni Negri, Michael Hardt, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 116-118

¹³ *Ibid.*

litical to the fore in the case of Toussaint? The political appeared in the very moment that it became apparent that there is incongruency between the universal claim of equality and the real existing inequality. Jacques Rancière described this occurrence of a distance between the claim of a community and its actual inexistence a *polemic situation*. It is a community of claims instead of one of congruency. The political now appears precisely in the appearance of the gap between the claim and the status quo.¹⁴ And this is what I would claim has vanished. This is what liberal democracy diminishes or even dissolves. Setting out to realize liberal democracy in Eastern Europe is already the *re-invention* of democracy, and identical with what it wants to create. Repeating Slavoj Žižek's definition of the political, now, I have to add something: "...They, the excluded, those with no fixed place within the social edifice, thus paradoxically presented themselves as the representative, the stand-in for the whole of society, for the true universality."¹⁵ They know that they are excluded, that they are no-part of all-part.

Let me come back to the Western gaze. What is it that the gaze perceives, that it is so enthusiastic about? I would claim that it is exactly the lack of a *polemic situation*. I wrote that the Eastern populations discover something and what they discover peculiarly enough turns out to be what we know it to be: democracy, liberal democracy, an universal principle. This does not mean that democracy is perfectly installed in the East or in the West, but that the distance between its claim and its correspondence with the status quo is not perceived. Therefore the very relation that is established between the claim, its realization and the "reality" of liberal democracy is one of correspondence. What the gaze perceives is what we know it to be, whether it is a presidential system, whether it is a system based on coalition building or on a majority vote system. As long as there is no fraud involved in elections the Western gaze enjoys what it perceives: the *re-invention* of democracy.

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Politik der Wahrheit*, p. 106

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, Carl Schmitt in the Age of Post-Politics, in: *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, (ed.) Chantal Mouffe, Verso 1999, p. 27