

Keynote address:

Dinner with MPhil students and stakeholders,

6 July 2019

THE POLITICS OF UNIVERSALISM VERSUS PARTICULARISM
- REASON VERSUS FEELINGS IN A CHANGING WORLD
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The Politics of Universalism versus Particularism – reason versus feelings in a changing world

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Mandela School of Public Governance, UCT Cape Town

The River Club, Liesbeeck Parkway

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I would like to talk about something topical today but couch it as a friction between universalism versus particularism.

I will try and map out some of the issues and put forward a framework as to how we may want to grapple with recent developments in popular politics, science, policy-making and economics. Treat this as work in progress – a working hypothesis in which you can also fill in the missing pieces. Or for that matter contest the entire framework.

I use the word universalism to describe a lasting peace following WWII that fostered an enabling climate for the dominance of universal liberal values that have been first shaped during the enlightenment and beyond.

They are this link between reason, individual liberty and democracy as an ideal political motif for arranging our politics, statecraft and many other things we take for granted today but are at the core of modernity or modern civilization.

Particularism refers to the pre-ponderance of the politics of feeling which we have caricatured as national or racial populism, identity politics, and other names we have given to describe the rise of a new discourse and politics that seeks to sweep aside the age of reason and universalism.

The South African Constitutional framework shares in this ideal of universalism and is the basis of our own democratic tradition as troubled as it may be today.

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Particularism is not new and does not come after universalism. They co-exist within the same world but the reigning ethos of an era tends to tame the 'animal spirits', as Keynes would call it, that has made the advent of particularism less bold and strident as it is today.

You would agree that this is no longer true and this is why you have people like Steven Pinker writing about the prosperity reason and humanism has brought to modern civilisation and Peter Jordan defending particularism crying out for traditional values, nation first before the cosmopolitan world and many other things we would rather close our ears too.

The confrontation between two symbolic narratives of what the world ought to be is now in the open. I say symbolic because we largely governed by guiding narratives that sort of give meaning to the various actions and outcomes we seek in the real world. In some respects they are useful fictions that guide worldviews and actions in the real world.

But, let me describe some factors or trends that are contributing to the rise of Particularism and what it may mean for Universalist ideas.

Let me couch the first as one of feelings matter more than facts. These days it is not the reasonableness of the argument or evidence that is presented but rather whether the facts or evidence conforms to a specific view.

Social media has been the main enabler of the rise of feelings mediating the form of reason and evidence based decision-making that policy makers have to confront on a daily basis. In a polarised society like South Africa how people feel about the treatment of themselves in a new South Africa is bound to put feelings first before fact.

The more there is unresolved friction the more feelings takeover reason or reasonableness. Social media is conducive enabler for feeding the instinctive reactions and feelings rather than the needed for considered and reflective politics.

Globally though the dismissal of factfulness (to borrow from Hans Rosling's book) for feeling is not an occurrence that came suddenly but it has been aided and abetted by the growing trust deficit in the centers or institutions that held -if you want- the central ground and voice on matters of science and public policy.

Today, trust in this center has been eroded I would argue largely because of the incestuous and often corrupt relation between forces of the market, independent scientific institutions and regulatory bodies.

Some great scholarly work has been done by people like Naomi Oreske which has led to a famous documentary called Merchants of Doubt - showing how corporate interests have come to weigh on important public policy issues whether it is the harmful effects of tobacco, Opioids, Exxon's suppression of scientific evidence from its own researchers that global warming is linked to increased emissions and many other examples that do not readily come to mind but illustrate the main point I am trying to make here. Most recently, there have been numerous class action suits that have been won by ordinary citizens that have shown how Monsanto for years has used their corporate power to obfuscate, deny or simply discredit any evidence that showed their herbicides were the cause of numerous cases of cancer in instances where the herbicide Roundup was actively being used.

It took vigorous civil action and legal measures to force the truth out.

This state of affairs which is one of the causes of public mistrust has seen the central authority(s) over facts or the products of reason shift from this center to more decentralised authorised or unauthorised agencies largely driven by the availability of information and scientific material on the internet. Pseudoscience and often fringe science co-habit this cyber-world and is there for whoever wants to use it to mount an attack on any form of scientific authority. The loss of the center if you want has created a vacuum and that vacuum can be filled by both good and bad causes.

Of course this it is a good thing that scientific knowledge is more available but it also has an untameable side effect: anybody can proffer sought after facts that confirm their own bias or cast a doubt on the truths of established institutions creating a cacophony of doubtfulness and distrust -even if it is solid evidence from sources we have long regarded as credible. Where the center no longer mediates, is trusted or has authority over truth a certain world of multiple truths/truthmakers compete with each other that makes decision-making a much tougher process to engage. Who does one believe with so much contestation?

It is a good thing that information and knowledge is more and more decentralised because we can see what citizen science has done to help the people of Flint to defeat the claims of the Flint local authority that said nothing was wrong with their water. According to their tests and experts everything was okay. This case is yet another example of corrupt authority turning scientific evidence as a weapon against public interest. In response citizens gathered their own facts and systematically confronted authorised central bodies that for so long had sway and mediated scientific opinion and policy-making.

It is a bad thing if we take for instance the observations by Global Monitor of the alarming rise, with parents in advanced economies, not wanting to vaccinate their kids which has led to a rise in measles cases in Europe as these parents are contesting established authority that vaccines are safe and not the cause of autism. Again, the perceived collusion or incestuous relations between pharmaceutical companies and health authorities is one of the causes of mistrust that interferes with the ability of public authorities to implement health programmes meant to serve the long-term interests of the general public. We have had our own history in South Africa of the confrontation between mainstream science and heterodox views around the question of whether HIV causes AIDS or not. I do not need to go into this rather troubled past and its impact on the roll-out of ARVs and other preventative measures to deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa.

Policy-makers are confronted with crowdsourcing and swarming effects of the new ways to manufacture science or at least use science that fits your bias to inform public policy, if I may steal from Noam Chomsky's book title called Manufacturing Consent, in that the pretense of evidence under the label of science is beside the point. We have to consider are new innovations in institutions and policy-making to confront these challenges of established institutional versus street science if scientific fact and rigorous methods of gaining evidence are to be accepted in order to reach some form of acceptable consensus and collective action on issues that affect us all.

Let, me turn my attention then to the conflict between universalism and particularism around the question of national politics and democracy.

The politics of feelings is largely a canvass of public politicking to lodge claims against the establishment and the elite as it seeks to displace reason, experts and any form of institution of authority reliant on reason and science as the

basis for public discourse and debate. In fact it places feelings at the forefront of public debate. Experts are seen to be at the distance of the people and those who play the card of popular feeling are seen to demonstrate being in touch and authentic in the representation of the interests of those marginalized by mainstream society.

It unashamedly opened the door for caricature and in some places even actively delegitimises evidence or argument of opponents based on their identity, race, national origins or language. If, anything this type of politics that places enormous weight on the momentum of popular feelings as a harbinger of a historical moment that should not allow anything to be placed in its way making room for violence as a means to an end. They are filled with utopian views of the end game which paper over contradictions and realities that may set back such promises.

In any case the politics of feeling is about power and any truth that serves its end is good enough, even if it is a lie.

One of the abiding virtues of Mandela was that he was bold enough to shape a new South Africa built on a universal humanism. This is one of the things that he has left as an imprint of South African exceptionalism on the continent. This is no longer true – given the fact we have had nine lost years under Zuma.

Universalism is now being fractured and slowly displaced by forms of humanism with stronger national orientation – it is about the insiders versus the outsiders.

Be that as it may we have a Constitution founded on universal aspirations that espouse both first order and second order rights. We have as a result a rights based Constitution that protects individual liberties but also obligates its citizens to pursue and defend second order rights which are socio-economic rights.

Mandela's universalism was also fostered through a powerful symbolic narrative **The Rainbow Nation or at least the use of this narrative to foster a multiracial society**. For a long time it was pregnant with promise but the symbolic narrative also papered over other hard truths and realities: the deepening inequality and the deepening divide between black and white in this country.

Symbolic narratives that seek to reign over a national ethos do not live in perpetuity or are uncontested. They can be fictions in their own right and if they perpetuate it for too long fictions can live a very short life and promise.

Without being grounded in reality given that the lived experience for the majority tells them other truths about their own reality and their place in the Rainbow Nation no doubt casts doubts and suspicion about universalism and Ubuntu.

The failure of Universalist aspirations to break the back of inequality and poverty has played right into the hands of the politics of feeling and identity that particularism is very good at using.

Particularism has many shades, forms and narratives the world over but their effect is to turn democracy not as a platform for universal aspirations but rather exclusion and narrow interests. In the end chauvinistic versions of populism will eventually erode and displace the existing system by something new.

There is nothing sacrosanct about democracy as an institution. And, as we can see here and elsewhere it can often simply be a means- to-an end. If, Universalist aspirations enshrine a democratic tradition then democracy will only be protected from particularism if universalism succeeds to bear fruit. Indeed, the conflict that liberals have with populism is precisely that it is no longer seen to speak to the needs of ordinary men and women.

The rise of nationalist populism in South Africa manifests as race but its underlying cause is economic and the inability of institutions to maintain focus over a multitude of friction points that have allowed a slow gnawing away at the promise of the Constitutional ideal. In a sense, in the minds of the majority of the people liberal values are perceived to be Eurocentric and the economy continues to be dominated by a white minority.

Let me then move to universalism and particularism in economics.

Globally, after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union a certain *fait accompli* was declared: democracy will blanket the whole world and the free market will be the dominant economic system.

Of, course the proponent of such a prediction (Francis Fukuyama) – who also happened to use Hegel- as the basis for his thesis of universal inevitability of liberal universalism did not learn from Marx – history has no inherent laws that are so deterministic that the triumph of an idea means that it has settled things once and for all.

Given that none of this liberal internationalism has materialised in the way Fukuyama predicted he is these days writing about identity politics and particularism. Maybe it is the end of history for Liberal Universalism?

One of the most important shifts in modern economics is the desire to universalise economic theory and practice. Economic theory seeks to live in scientific form and narrative but yet assumes that its prescriptions and observations have no political outcomes or for that matter is politically informed. This is one of the dangers of economic universalism in which the supposed independence of theory can pretend it is independent of politics. It is one of the important revolutions in social sciences that have in my view had significant impacts on many developed and developing countries as it has allowed the market to creep into every nook and cranny of social life by making the market the end itself rather than the common good of society.

The idea that markets can be independent of society or the state is a misnomer as the economic system is system of power and common responsibility. Political systems and markets are intertwined. The way in which power is shared or distributed in that system -which is entirely a political process – determines the ultimate outcomes of such an economic system.

Economic universalism proposes that human nature is one-dimensional. Modern economic theory has been very successful in creating, based on a narrow heuristic about human nature, something that embodies a time immemorial form of representation that we are only governed by the attribute of self-interest and nothing else.

It posits that rational choice as a heuristic prescribes three things: firstly, at the core of economic prediction and hence turning economics, certainly in its stylistics, as a sort of science of economic man and woman because rational choice induced by self-interest is the best predictor of economic outcomes, secondly the link between rational choice and self-interest as something dictated by nature and so immovable and thirdly, if self-interest is given freedom it chimes with the broad narrative of the humanist tradition that for

rational choice to govern economic agency protection of individual freedoms must be at the core of any political system. The only system most conducive to harnessing the power of self-interest and rational choice is the capitalist system.

It is certainly the underlying assumptions and basis of various schools of thought like the Chicago School, the Austrian School of Economics and the German Tradition of Ordoliberalism and others.

There are of course lots of problems with this – they are philosophical in nature – which relates to the boundedness of reason, there are questions of the relation between psychology and reason where advances in behavioural economics is suggesting that we are not so rational. There is no better depiction of the herd instinct and animal spirits than in the financial markets. And, the failure to predict the 2007 financial crises has put a dark blot on mainstream economics.

More importantly if you create a universal model of economics governed by rational choice theory it is automatically assumed that capitalist system is the best form of economic organization to address the many challenges we face around the world as far as underdevelopment, poverty and inequality goes.

Theory may turn experience into understanding – itself a scientific process – but decision-makers are not only faced with the problem of economic facts but also interests. Economic theory cannot always assert pure economic evidence in the hope to dislodge strong held beliefs that the economy is only working for some people and economic theory and evidence is lending a helping hand to these positions of economic advantage.

The fact-based world of economics is not convincing enough to deal with the wicked problems that political lobbying and special interests present. Sometimes the problem of economics is not theory but rather the problem of economic power that different organized forms of economic agency have to shape the distribution of rewards and the workings of the system to their advantage. For policy-makers these are not factfulness and insights that economic theory throws up but markets and economic agency serving the common good. The question here is the how too not the what is.

We are familiar with some of these debates here in South Africa regarding Independent Power Producers, the issue of the effects of minimum wage on

jobs, the role of monetary policy and the unbundling of Eskom. All of which have come under attack either by the right or the left. When economists argue in favour of the private market it is taken to mean to favour private enterprise, individuals and the capitalist system where profit and the interests of a few are placed above the collective good.

When somebody seeks to argue against economic liberalism and more state intervention they are accused of being socialist and Communist.

In the context of these debates ought we to separate economics as a professional science from economics serving or being tied to a particular system?

The problem with modern economics and how economic reason and evidence is often placed is that it too easily makes the slippage between the scholarly work of studying the nature of economic agency and behaviour as part of systematic thought (which is where economics' universalism ought to be placed) to being the system itself or what the preferred system should be.

Economic universalism is not only limited to the scholarly and scientific work of economics but it has also sought to shape national decision-making so that national models must fit the prevailing consensus – the Washington Consensus, the rules of the game set by the IMF, Credit Rating Agencies or prevailing orthodoxies on monetary policy. In reality most countries are faced with their own unique context – their own political economy that might require novel political and economic solutions rather than the plug-and-play models which countries are often forced to adopt if they seek support from international markets and other states to support their own economic development. Context often breeds unique circumstances.

This is currently playing itself out in Ethiopia. During the era of the late Meles Zenawi, where the Washington Consensus was displaced by the Beijing Consensus, as Zenawi tried to shape Ethiopia's economic future by drawing on China's development state model. With Abiy, the new and current President, he is talking a different tune and recipe, pushing Ethiopia more and more into the Washington Consensus as a way to attract more investment from the western world.

Economic planning and policy cannot always be dictated by straightjacket of economic universalism which the modern economic profession wants every

country to emulate as if economic theory and practice are universal truths. I would argue that in fact economics needs more particularism – in a sense that national aspirations have to be the driving force and context behind economic policy and thinking.

Of, course there are lessons to be learnt from elsewhere and the science of economics has to help us understand economic agency but when we have a society that is contesting different views about the common good deft economic policy is more about managing the politics of interests than just economic theory. And, this politics is not limited only to national interests but also arrangements with those who shape and have a hold over the character of global economic power and have the ability to influence, quite significantly, economic prospects of national economies dependent on this global system for its own survival.

Let me then conclude:

We have come a long way with the power of reason being the basis by which we govern ourselves and to have wrestled such authority from higher powers – be they religious, Monarchs or grand figures of revolution – to empowering ordinary individuals to shape their own destiny. Reason is a valuable attribute that must be nurtured because it is better than the power of feelings as a way for society to build social capital and bind its members to achieving common goals. Feelings separate us from truth and make us more inwardly focused. Reason, hopefully, makes us see the far reaches of new possibilities beyond our own narrow interests.

The promise of universalism which the Mandela era ushered in for the new era liberal values are merely seen as an instrument for empowering an elite. Particularism will take advantage of vulnerabilities and frictions in our young democracy to pursue more chauvinistic goals if liberalism means nothing to the majority. As, they say, liberal values do not put food on the table.

We are no longer limited to reason and facts mediating public discourse. We have to get use to the politics of feelings and not underestimate the power of identity politics to recast liberal values, the very nature of reason, science and the once healthy relation that existed between evidenced-based work and public policy making into an untameable form of policy-making. You can only agree on things if you are from the same camp and not across the divide.

Public governance and administration which the Mandela School is seeking to shape is entering a new era – in some respects new, disorientating and in which fact, fiction and fake claims are all going to play a role in public discourse. We are in-between the world of universalism and particularism. We are in an interesting and challenging time. We have no recourse but to embrace these new times and re-establish the ideals of universalism that has been the bedrock of modernity for a new modernity that reinvigorates humanist aspiration, the power of reason and science, democracy and an economics that serves the common good of all and not only a few.

The End