In a world populated by a diversity of voices and ideas, where does one turn for orientation? The question is one that continues to plague older, Western models of criticism and critical theory, which have been attacked for their complicity in constructing spaces of privilege that are bound up with the legacy of colonialism and racialized violence. What can those on the left who still believe in the project of immanent self-reflection do in the face of such contradictions?

Here, Helmut Draxler considers the critique of criticism along these lines, while refusing to settle for the well-trodden paths currently on offer. What can be salvaged, if anything, from the language and forms of criticism today?

Discrimination is unquestionably a defining feature of Western modernity as it manifests itself in institutions, discourses, media, and market practices. It is indeed harrowing to observe the consistency with which the same social mechanisms of exclusion operate, whether they have nationalist, classist, sexist, or racist motivations. No leftist politics is imaginable that could tolerate this fundamental challenge to the principles of equality and the hegemonic models of subjectivity and narratives of progress they reflect. Because discrimination is an indication of the profound contradictions within bourgeois society and the intrinsic violence that pervades its culture, it directly concerns the horizon of the emancipatory imagination that any leftist politics must set its sights on.

How could this be done better? That seems quite simple. We just need to close our anti-discriminatory ranks – as is often said today – to
activate a kind of “Transnational of others,” in order to prevent exclusion in any form,¹ and we must finally embark on the Sisyphean task of working through the historic wrongs wrought by our ancestors by repudiating the institutions and discourses, the media, and market practices that are their legacy.² In other words, we simply need to “begin anew,” as Hannah Arendt proposed.³ Perhaps we even need to “begin anew” every day or every hour, since only then can we permanently revolt against and decolonize bourgeois Western realities and relations. Pursuing this line of reasoning, however, we are apt to become entangled in self-contradictions as it is difficult to perpetuate the new; the permanence of change would collapse the same emancipatory horizon that motivated the desire for change in the first place. We have reason to doubt, too, whether such an emphatic “we” can ever really bridge social divides, and whether it is actually possible to conceive of a “we” absent any distinction from a “you” – which might feed suspicion that the “others” also cannot manage without the “others.”⁴

The problem seems to be that certainly much could be done better – but hardly everything really well. And “doing better,” moreover, scarcely makes everything better: it always also enmeshes the critical subject committed to doing better in the bourgeois Western web of institutions and discourses, media, and markets. Then again, large parts of this network are not altogether disagreeable to anti-discriminatory critique; rather, they integrate the latter into the existing rationale, allowing the network to carry out its public mandate even better. This enhances the legitimacy of the institutions and discourses, the media, and markets without compelling them to renounce their structural contradictions: it is no doubt impossible not to discriminate within this network. Any selection or decision implies demarcations, and therefore exclusions, of one kind or another. And any anti-discriminatory resolution, however comprehensive, can be accused of enacting its own kinds of discrimination. The question, then, is whether participation in this structurally discriminatory network should be regarded as an emancipatory goal at all. Does this line of anti-discriminatory reasoning ultimately exacerbate liberal democracy rather than defeat it?

The radical leftist answer to this question would naturally be to sweep such reformist minor issues (little problems) aside: rather than trying to do better, the proposal would instead be to put things right. The immediacy of a collective will and its universal sovereignty, it seemed, presented a tangible idea or hypothesis in which discrimination was no longer conceivable; revolution appeared to be the viable means not just of seizing power, but of unleashing a transformative potential to inaugurate this will. Unfortunately, even this amiable vision is necessarily proffered from a specific social position; at least before the revolution, it depends on the bourgeois network for its very articulation. Correspondingly, it has come under widespread critique as the revolutionary rhetoric mainly of old white men.

So it seems that neither the bourgeois-reformist nor the orthodox communist option offers a true solution to the problem of discrimination. Both inevitably rely on premises that are at odds with their objectives. In this light, the desperate search for other solutions is only too apparent. The recourses most widely discussed today are a universalism of the particular, of the sort that most postcolonial and neo-materialist positions are based on, and a particularism of the
universal in which universalism would merely need to multiply itself into particulars. Yet these positions again gloss over the structural problem precisely because they are so resolutely committed to devising a solution. Taken as symptomatic, however, they indicate that the only practicable perspective will be one that conceptually integrates particularism and universalism.

What is good about particularism, after all, is that it does indeed speak on behalf of social difference first and foremost. It appears “less good” when it idealizes the different particulars, in turn effectively undifferentiating or even essentializing them. In reality there can be no purely particular and thus absolute social position; no position that could not be defined by relations of difference and hence by power. Particularism does not enable itself to be universally spread, because the claim of particularity always presupposes an exclusion and simultaneously generates ever more new exclusions. A “mainstream of minorities” is no more than an indication of the culturalist and therefore apolitical attempt to sidestep the problem. Universalism, conversely, cannot be conceived of as the actually attainable positivity of a general inclusion of everyone, either before or after the revolution. In its impossibility and negativity, however, universalism indicates the inadequacy of the selective network, and it remains important on a conceptual level because it represents the premise of any anti-discriminatory critique. Without the universalist perspective there can be no radical challenge to discrimination. Premodern societies were inclined to regard discrimination as a positive sign of divine grace or election and social differences as grounded in a cosmic or divine order. Only with the development of a concept of universalism could the bourgeois world be comprehended as contradictory. Only a bourgeois world enlightened in its universalism — not a Calvinist, naturalistic, let alone a Darwinist world — can be judged by its contradictions.

The problems of pure universalism primarily stem from the fact that it can only be had as an impossibility and in strict negativity. Its particular premises defy sublation, as do its structural limitations, and so it cannot be the basis of a concrete politics. And yet it is indispensable in its very impossibility. Whether it is founded on Roman Law, on Pauline Christianity, or on the Enlightenment idea of universal human rights — or on Islamic jihad, Buddhism, or Sino-centricism — what is critical is whether universalism can be envisioned without violence and subjugation, because that is by no means self-evident. The European Enlightenment may be read as one such idea of a universalism without subjugation. That its reality looked completely different — not only from the colonial perspective — is beyond question, and this explains the highly justified critique of it. Nevertheless, we cannot jettison the idea of universalism without subjugation itself for fear of forfeiting the basis of any anti-discriminatory politics. That is why a vigorous defense of the Enlightenment from the particular/provincial European perspective must be undertaken, embracing its contradictions, lest a leftist politics from this position become unthinkable.

The problems of pure particularism, meanwhile, may be outlined by noting that it is capable of reflecting neither its own preconditions within universalism, nor its own enacted exclusions. That is also why the moralization of politics that is often bound up with particularism in the forms of both a claim to and a call for “correctness” is so questionable. As a pure ethics of conviction
recast as a politics, it is not only inclined to negate its own effects, blinding itself, for instance, to its share of responsibility for the disastrous political developments, for example, in the United States; it actually tends to be unethical itself in the sense that it seeks to make its own decisions and distinctions immune to critique of any kind. That is why the moralization of politics is prone to reproducing in its form what it seeks to critique in its content, such as in the fantastical notion of purity. Here as elsewhere, one can argue over tactical necessities or the specific benefits of framing conflicts in the starkest terms. But surely one should not forget the feedback effects that the moralizing position is itself incapable of reflecting on when it abandons any principle of proportionality in engaging its antagonists.

Any concrete politics or political struggle, by contrast, can only be grounded in, and justified with respect to, specific conditions and relations. For this reason, politics should not be moralized but rather held open in its ethical dimension. In this sense it would not be conceivable as a pure organ of enforcement or eradication vis-à-vis others, but approachable in its own fragility and inconsistency. Such an ethics of politics demands a certain exposure, an engagement in the political, cultural, or artistic struggle sparked by decisions and their implicit discriminatory exclusions. Critique, too, is called on to grapple with the ways in which it is not critical. In other words, it is impossible to combat discrimination everywhere and at all times; one must inevitably exercise it as well, or else one could not combat it. Anti-discrimination itself, as a specific social and cultural position, must be laid claim to again and again and, in being laid claim to, become itself amenable to critique.

That is why there is no avoiding the question of the relational form, and therein lies the need to interrogate the forms of politics and economics, of culture and art, of society and history. In their respective relationalities, these forms always already presuppose the difference of the individual categories. Social representation and aesthetic canons, that is to say, cannot and should not coincide. Rather, they ought to be worked on in their manifold interrelations and intersections. The guiding principle of this work cannot be the imaginary abolition of representation, canon, identity, taste, or art as a whole, but only the recognition of the history of these categories as a problem. There is no right life in the wrong one, as is commonly known, and certainly not when individual privileges are sacrificed in the march of anti-discriminatory rhetoric. What is called for is not the illusion that one can steer clear of all discrimination, but an actual art of discrimination: the art of preventing social discrimination from becoming entrenched in representations, or aesthetic discrimination becoming enshrined in the canon—of preventing, most vitally, social and aesthetic discrimination from entering lasting conjunctions that would let them establish themselves. Yet this work by itself does not cut it. Something must be established or solidified for it to become an object of critique in the first place. And this something cannot wrap itself up in pure particularity, where it would elude all critique and generate its legitimacy solely out of itself. There needs to be a state of the question on social as well as aesthetic matters, which presupposes a universalism as a horizon of what is shared that rests in the difference of the particularities while also operating as the unifying ultimate focus of all relational forms. Such a universalism of difference and aesthetic
as much as political form cannot be articulated from a place beyond all contradictions, but only from within them; from a place, that is to say, that is undeniably embedded in the bourgeois network yet must imply at least the vision of a different – logical as much as topological – form of political organization. Only from such a place, one that is utterly marginal and ultimately impossible, might an idea of a leftist politics be conceived that does not allow itself to be absorbed either by day-to-day reformism or by revolutionary fantasy.

Translation: Gerrit Jackson

Notes
1 That is how one might characterize the objective of projects such as Savvy Contemporary’s “We Who Are Not the Same.” See https://savvy-contemporary.com/de/projects/2019/ecologies-of-darkness/.
4 It follows that the we in whose name I write is hardly innocent. Then again, a leftist politics without such a we is inconceivable.
6 That is roughly how one might interpret the radical-democratic approach proposed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.