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Universalism and the Particular

Contribution to GTI Forum [Can Human Solidarity Globalize?](#)

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In his stimulating opening [essay](#), Richard Falk invites us to imagine the *possibility* of a global human identity. But skeptics will question not just the possibility of a universal identity, but also its *desirability*. This skepticism is commonly rooted in the legitimate concern that universalist aspirations don't properly recognize the role of particular identities and experiences in the constitution of individual and collective life. Indeed, while the tumultuous events of the last eighteen months have vividly amplified the need for a widely shared sense of human solidarity, they have also exposed the deeply fraught relationship between our oneness and our diversity. Here in the United States, we have readily seen, for instance, how universalist appeals can suppress the recognition of marginalized experiences, yielding damaging and distorted notions such as the fiction of color blindness, or the plea that All Lives Matter. The light of universalism, we rightly fear, can blind rather than illuminate.

But the problem is not that our diversity and our oneness are irreconcilably at odds. The problem is that our prevailing notions of universalism obscure the deeper confluence between our commonalities and our differences.

Whether in philosophy or public discourse, the concepts that have come to express our shared humanity are proving inadequate to the challenges we face. That words like “cosmopolitanism” and “universalism” trigger unease and resistance across the political spectrum, and in radically different clusters of contemporary society, is deeply revealing in this respect: how we understand and articulate our oneness as human beings requires urgent reconsideration.

In Western thought and practice, a universalist ethic is widely thought to be at its best when conceived as a commitment to the equal moral worth and dignity of all persons by virtue of their humanity. This is a fundamental basic value indeed. But as it stands, this vital and venerated expression of our oneness struggles to give our differences their due. By proclaiming our universal moral equivalence, it yields a recognition of our humanity that is ultimately generic—a commensuration of human beings that can blur the essential contours of our diversity, and obscure the divergent experiences those contours represent.

And yet, despite these limits, a rationally derived commitment to the basic equality of all is widely deemed the version of universalism most hospitable to difference. Its virtue in this respect is thought to lie in its leanness, abstractness, and rationality. By assuming an abstract and relatively slim concept of what we share in common, it avoids the risk of uniformly imposing the cultural or racial bias that a more concrete and full-bodied conception of our shared humanity might carry. By requiring only thin, emotionally sober bonds of connection between human beings, it avoids the volatile passions and thick identities that have made our differences oppressive in the visceral realm of blood and belonging.

Indeed, legitimate fears that universalism will erase rather than empower have pushed our universalist notions in a clear direction—away from the affective texture of identity, solidarity, and belonging, towards thinner and more abstract expressions of our oneness. But this is a mistake: the light of universalism will illuminate the particular only when it is allowed to shine fully in the emotionally rich realms of identity, solidarity, and love.

To appreciate why, think of those you love. You honor and protect the universal aspects and entitlements of their personhood, to be sure. But you are also moved to recognize meaningfully their distinctiveness. You feel compelled to understand the full texture of their experiences, and to give voice to their particular insights and perspectives. You are attentive to the singular burdens they have borne and the distinctive harms they have suffered. Thick, feelingful bonds are necessarily conducive to the appreciation of difference. Rationally derived recognitions of abstract moral equivalence are not. Paradoxically, to properly recognize the diverse realities that constitute the human experience—to protect and promote the vitality of our local and particular affiliations—we must lean more heavily into our oneness, not tiptoe timidly around it.

Far from threatening or erasing the particular, then, a genuine and thickly conceived universal identity is uniquely equipped to recognize, secure, and empower the manifold expressions of human diversity. On this view, the desirability of a globalized solidarity derives directly, if in part, from the desirability of our diversity as human beings.

This observation—and its marked divergence from the basic assumptions of our predominant intellectual frameworks—highlights an added point: realizing a vision of widespread human solidarity (or, indeed, any vision of profound social change) requires, among many other things, a rigorous re-examination of society's conceptual foundations. Given the collective experience of the last eighteen months, and the apparent inadequacy of our universalist notions to address the staggering challenges before us, our prevailing concepts of human oneness are a compelling place to start.

Richard Falk envisions a globally inclusive solidarity that “would not eliminate our differences, but complement them, while sustaining their separate and distinctive identities.” My brief comments here suggest that we can credibly stretch our imaginations even further. A universal collective identity would not only accommodate and complement our diverse bounded affiliations—it may well provide uniquely optimal conditions for the meaningful recognition, protection, and vibrancy of human diversity.

Of course, cultivating a globally inclusive identity alongside our bounded ones will not be easy, painless, or uncontroversial—but it's not utopian. As Richard Falk eloquently argues, progress has always rested on “the pursuit of the impossible.” A boldly reimagined universalism is the impossibility we must now urgently pursue.

About the Author



Shahrzad Sabet is Co-Director of the Center on Modernity in Transition and a Fellow at New York University's Institute for Public Knowledge. Her research and training span political science, philosophy, economics, and psychology. Her current book project explores how a reimagined cosmopolitanism can resolve the social and philosophical tensions around collective identity. She has held positions at Princeton University, the University of Maryland, and Harvard University, where she received her PhD from the Department of Government.

About the Publication

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