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## How Can Contemporary Political Philosophy Become Applied Philosophy?<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

In this article the author reflects on the idea of “double responsibility” of political philosophy – as responsibility towards reason and towards practice. Such analysis is presented with the challenge of neoliberalism as dominant world-view and therefore addresses the question of meaning of political philosophy as applied philosophy today. In the second part of the essay, key issues of contemporary political philosophy are articulated: political subjectivity, democracy, the future of the international law, the question of state sovereignty and the relation between ethics and politics. In conclusion, a critical examination of both contextualism and universalism is presented.

Key words: political philosophy, responsibility, reason, liberalism, political subjectivity, democracy, international law, state sovereignty, ethics.

### The Role of Political Philosophy: Double Responsibility Challenge

On the one hand, when we say that political philosophy is distinct from both political science, as well as from other areas of philosophy, it is as if we have marked a common place and declared

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a statement that hardly anyone will seriously argue against. The *autonomy of political philosophy*, however, as well as its *extraordinariness* – to paraphrase Kalyvas’s account of “extraordinary potential” of democracy (See: Kalyvas 2008) – has been either challenged or misunderstood in recent times in numerous ways, up to the point that it is far from plausible today to say what political philosophy is, let alone what its greatest concerns are and how it can be legitimized as applied philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Let us begin with the idea that the task of political philosopher implies what I name as “double responsibility” challenge. Political philosopher answers to the strictest demands of reason – which includes responding not only to decisive formal principles as that of non-contradiction, for example, but no less significantly also argumentation as the leading trace of and for justification and legitimization. This is to say that there is no – and no potentiality for – previous acceptance of any political “content”, let alone political ideology of any sort that would precede a political-philosophical investigation – inasmuch as it is *philosophy* and not politics.

The other responsibility of the political philosopher lies in his perplexed relation towards political practice in local and global contexts. The mentioned “reason responsibility” would certainly seem empty and completely formalistic, and uninteresting in terms of its political “non-interest” – it would be a somewhat radicalized form of the famous Mary McCarty’s question posed to Hanna Arendt, namely, “What the political and political philosophy is then about?” (See: Hinchman & Hinchman 1994: 319) – if it were not for *the responsibility of political philosophy for political practice*.

This does not mean to say that philosophers shape the world or that theory entirely governs and directs politics, rather, on contrary, it means to say that – if politics is to be considered as more than a blind sequence of contingent events or more than a mere implementation of techniques of governing<sup>4</sup> – then the *reasonability* of its happening is what is a matter of political philosophy *par excellence*.<sup>5</sup>

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3 This is the paradoxical result of simultaneous “specialization of knowledge” and “expert division” that took place in the Academia in last decades, the outcome of an all-encompassing process (which by default included philosophy), and which implied either the loss or politization of its internal potential and sense.

4 These attempts can be found in very different theories, all the way from postmodernism to utilitarianism.

5 To recognize such “reasonability” does not *ipso facto* mean to neglect or exclude, say, the role of “political emotions” in politics.

Here we come close to what I would call both a position of an *objective spectator*, a *legitimate witness*, and a *creator and participant* of the *political discourse*, as the *extraordinary potentiality of the political philosopher* – as a *simultaneously irreplaceable and a “double responsible” position*. To take an example, let me turn to liberalism<sup>6</sup>, as it has been articulated in theory and applied in politics in the last two decades. *Liberalism*, and what was named as *Western political liberal democracy*,<sup>7</sup> in recent decades, has been the exclusive non-negotiable idea, the “final inflexible truth” that can not be brought into question. That is why it was often accompanied and followed by the idea about the “end of history”, which meant something as “freezing liberalism in time”, and indeed, in a way, freezing time.

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has turned out that the belief in liberalism *per se* has been a huge mistake. What has been a mistake was precisely its *sacralization*, that led to simultaneous subsumption and production of concepts, ideas and their application in accordance with the (neo)liberal world-view. The result of this was, on the one hand, a forgetting of the role and double-responsibility challenge of political philosophy and the dissolution of its extraordinary potentiality, on the other.

This is precisely why we are faced today with a missing framework for political-philosophical analysis. Instead of the objective spectator and legitimate witness, and a creator of the political discourse, we are for the most time confronted either with “outdated”, almost *passé*, uncompromising defenders of liberalism (which certainly remembers much better days) or perhaps with equally non-negotiable representatives of other and different ideologies. Moreover, political philosophy as *applied philosophy* encounters these challenges in an intensified way and with multiple implications, for theory and even for world politics of present and future. Simultaneously, this is a challenge for what I name as *three fields of political philosophy as applied philosophy*, and as engaged philosophy: (1) state politics and

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6 Some have accepted the term “neoliberalism” in such sense. From the 1990-tis the term “neoliberalism” has been mostly associated with global market economy and free trade, and related to institutions such as the World Bank, the WTO and IMF. Neoliberalism, however, does not appear in exclusively economic setting, but attempts to articulate itself as political, social and moral philosophy and, moreover, as a synthesis between the economical and the political.

7 Anne Marie Slaughter, for example, has made the differentiation between “liberal” and “illiberal” democracies, a discourse where the exclusivity and “truth” of democracies belongs to the first.

the government (2) NGOs and (3) the Academia. It is in these fields that the responsibility of political philosophy today emerges in a clear way and where the political philosopher as applied philosopher can reintroduce the sense and contribution of political philosophy.

Such discourse, a new discourse of and on political philosophy, would be, beyond all, a discourse that places forward major contemporary issues, argues and questions without ideological constraints - while at the same time staying on the other side of relativism. If it is to be led by something, then it would be the very value of human and political freedom – value which no serious political theory ever brought into question. Such discourse on politics would be, in a way, *on the political without being political proper*.

### **What are *par excellence* Issues and Extraordinary Challenges of Contemporary Political Philosophy – Five Questions?**

In a sense, there are something like *par excellence* matters of and for political philosophy, partly coming forth as matters that appear in every time and each context and partly emerging from the political urgency surrounding contemporary political practices. To recognize such matters, in and by taking a critical, open and non-ideological stance, would be similar to bringing political philosophy back to itself, and possibly at the same time would mean creating an environment in which political philosophy as applied philosophy would have a more visible and significant impact in world events.

#### **The Question of Political Subjectivity and Political Identity**

This is the first question of and for political philosophy *en general* and in contemporary sense as well. This is to say that the consideration of *who is the political subject*, to whom it is that the political movement, creation and participation belongs to - who is, if you want, the *author of the political* – has always been a matter beyond all matters of and for political philosophy, and says something about its extraordinariness, potential and responsibility of an exclusive kind. Linked to it is the very issue of “political identity”, or rather of multiple political identities through which the subjectivity of the political – in the sense of autonomous practice – presents and manifests itself.

However, the issue of political subjectivity and political identity – although conceived as “always already” and ever present riddle – appears as especially important in contemporary transforming world where the multiplicity and multipolar character of political power states, political representatives and political actors emerges in a clear way. Post-globalized world is beyond all a world of multitude, a world of “many” – and precisely as such can be understood as a potentiality for democracy. But for that purpose the very irreducible character of political subjectivity and forms of political identities needs to be explored.

If *political subjectivity* is the name for *autonomous, independent and legitimate political agency*, what are *political identities* that can be called *subjectivities*? Can civil society still maintain the idea of multiple identities in a movement toward postglobalized cosmopolitanism or do local and singular identities always emerge as “politics of difference” and in that sense in a leading role of biopolitics? How can *multitude* and *democracy* be *present* and *representable* in *political subjectivity*, without the risk of difference becoming the key political category? And *vice versa*, would it not be the case that abandoning the idea about multiple political identities is what precisely enables totalitarianism to enter the scene?

The question of political subjectivities, therefore, simultaneously arises as the question of both national and supranational identities and political communities in contemporary world and as such presents a major challenge to be encountered.

### The Question of Democracy and Publicity

The idea here is to say that the question of democracy and publicity can be considered and analyzed regardless of any ideology. In such sense, democracy can perhaps appear exactly as the “proper name”, around which it is possible to gather the multiplicity and diversity of political subjects, a name for a lacking consensus – and of and for a consensus – regardless of other existing political differences, ideas and images. The crisis of liberal democracy, recently often *substituted for crisis of democracy per se*, has revealed that the concept of democracy is something that lacks clarity and requires more intensive exploration. At the same time, this has been the reason and argument for some authors, such as Žižek and Badiou, to claim that democracy has been abused to the point that we should take the risk of abandoning the name of democracy altogether.

Democracy in a significant sense can be comprehended as the question of *political participation* and *political creation*. Simultaneously, this is the reason why I tie the question of democracy and publicity as one single issue. If, as Jeffrey Edward Green articulates it, contemporary democracy “in the age of spectatorship” (See: Green 2010) faces multiple obstacles, then - if it is to be counted as democracy with future and of future - a rebirth of its potential is what is the need in contemporary societies. The question of democracy, this way, appears as both a question of advancing “*democratic institutions*” and a question of sustaining and developing the growth of “*democratic publicity*” and “*democratic participation*”.

The concept of “publicity” should be differentiated from its common pair, namely, “public sphere”, precisely in reference to the issue of forms of expression and manifestation, and especially considering the role of media worldwide and the fact that in previous decades it has not contributed much to enchantment for democracy. The *desire* for democracy, human expression and creation is what constitutes not only the concept of democracy but its very much present condition in societies as well (the example of European societies is paradigmatic here, although this goes for other both Western and non-Western societies). In that sense, it emerges against “control” and “power” - against every life-form of contemporary biopolitics - and expresses itself, in Foucauldian terms, as the moment that “society needs to be defended”.<sup>8</sup>

In a sense, such a task would be a rethinking of democracy, of the “will of the people” - and doing so precisely in terms and consideration with the ideas that “*liberty and justice consist of giving back all what belongs to others to the ones who are entitled to it*” (French Declaration of 1789, article 4).

### The Question of Future of International Law and the Issue of “The International Community” of the Future

Today the very sense, structure, purpose and the role of international law is seriously disturbed. In a certain sense, never was law, and precisely as international law - the international order established after World War II - brought into question, relativized, marginalized and exceptionalized as it has been the case in

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8 In a similar fashion, one can remember Foucault’s statement that “he is a pluralist moved by the passion for the system...” (See: Lotringer 1996: 237).

our recent human history. Without in advance normatively judging such an outcome and its following implications – and with all due respect towards multiple attempts to theorize and rethink how contemporary framework of international law can be supplemented and advanced – one must admit that the meaning of international law, and the concept of “international community” is very much at stake in present politics. This makes it an unavoidable and, moreover, an urgent issue that demands a response. This is why the question about the future of international law and international community - if these concepts are to be preserved in any way at all - is a *par excellence* issue of contemporary political philosophy, and in a way that it has not been before.

### The Question of State Sovereignty

This issue is partly interrelated with the question of international law but cannot entirely be reduced to it. Political practice in recent years, followed by debates on sovereignty, suprasovereignty and post-sovereignty, has confirmed that these issues are very much alive and, moreover, that the entire political landscape of states as major representatives of sovereignty is still far from being clear and defined. It is not only the matter of the future and structure of the European Union, for example, but rather a question that transcends its borders and reaches far beyond in the specter of contemporary politics.

It is the question about *the role of the state today*. As such, it appears in many forms and ways but, above all, and in most proper way, I believe, it emerges as an issue and a strategic matter of responding to the question *how and in what political forms can “democratic sovereignty” be best expressed and articulated*. It means, therefore, rethinking whether supranational and “beyond-state” conceptions of sovereignty - such as, for example, presented in the idea of the EU – are sustainable and most appropriate on the long run, and what forms of democratic potential, participation and creation are achievable in it? In other words, it is the question about what are the implications of the idea that democracy is primordial in respect to sovereignty, both for theory and for emerging dilemmas in practice and future of international relations? Are the states to be regarded as ultimate carriers of political sovereignty and what other forms of sovereign expression are both available and desirable for strengthening the democratic moment in and of

the political? Moreover, it is the question who is the sovereign in contemporary reflections and in politics?

### The Question of the Relation between Politics and Ethics (and the Extraordinariness of the Contemporary Context)

Where do politics and ethics meet and why they are both irreducible and non-exchangeable fields? On the one hand, this has been a dilemma for centuries, explicated throughout the entire history of political philosophy, from Aristotle's unity of politics and ethics, to Machiavelli's conception of autonomy of politics, and then to multiple modern and postmodern turns. In contemporary context, however, the relation between politics and ethics has become ambivalent in numerous ways. One flip of the coin reveals an exemplary trend of *reduction of politics to ethics* – and this can be recognized in different theoretical versions of the so-called “humanitarian approach”<sup>9</sup> – while the other sheds light on an exactly opposite movement i.e. on a thinking that perhaps, and the other way around, “*the ethical*” has no place in *Realpolitik*, where the relation of forces as power relations are what politics entirely consists of.

Doubtlessly, this course of contemporary theoretical and practical events has led to many confusions and misunderstandings, and, in a certain way, to radicalization of the issue, again, often accompanied by ideologization of “the place” of the ethical in politics. Leaving aside for the moment the debates and disagreements about what the political is, the relation between the political and the ethical articulates itself, first and foremost, as the relation between politics and reason, which is to say that it arises, or rather, is the implication of the moment of “acting in accordance to reason”, and the same goes for world political practice as well. That is the case if one does not think that “war is politics continued by other means”.<sup>10</sup> War is a human activity that violates almost every human right and

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9 Concerning the issue of human rights in this context see, for example, Douzinas 2007 or Mutua 2002. Mutua, in a radical way, writes that “international human rights fall within the historical continuum of the European colonial project.(...) Salvation in the modern world is presented as only possible through the holy trinity of human rights, political democracy, and free market” (Mutua 2002: 2).

10 In this sense Amartya Sen was right in reminding that the G-8 states are the biggest producer and dealer of weapons on the world market. With such foreign policy of “double-morality” they clearly undermine “freedom and individual rights” in other, non-western countries (See Sen 2007: 109).

disturbs the very potentiality of the ethical. And this is pretty much the case with every war.<sup>11</sup>

Taken together, all of these issues - articulated as our “five questions” - disclose that what is at stake with *contemporary political philosophy as applied philosophy* is the very sense of what the political in 21<sup>st</sup> century is. And if these are *par excellence* issues of contemporary political philosophy – and about the political in our time - then responses to such extraordinary challenges are a matter for a new theory and a matter of the possibility of its implementation.

## Two Paradigms and Beyond: Between Contextualism and Universalism

If, therefore, the “double-responsibility” challenge of political philosophy today – which signifies a rethinking of its role and articulation – comes forth in rethinking of its major issues, and hence the methodology arises as deeply involved with the “content”, the “how” with the “what”, it becomes more convincing to comprehend that a response to such a situation has a *en general* potentiality, meaning that precisely due to interrelatedness of fundamental questions of contemporary political philosophy, as applied philosophy, we can attempt to search for a leading trace.

The leading trace of such an undertaking unfolds, and can be articulated, between the idea of application of general principles, on the one hand, and contextualism in politics, on the other, which is to say *between universalism and contextualism*, as two radical paradigms that shape our thinking most of the time. It seems that a radical defense of exclusivity and ultimate superiority of either paradigm faces multiple obstacles in both theory and practice – that is, remaining either empty of the *sense of practice and creation in politics* or reducing political action to *political technique and/or contingency*. What is wrong with contextualism is its missing on the reasonable character of political practice and action and on the very moment of “the common”. What is wrong with radical universalism is its lack of understanding otherness and differences, at the cost of disabling the recognition of political events and specificities of local contexts.

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11 And that is where the pseudo-universal “just war” theories simply fail the test of legitimacy.

However, the idea here is to say that both the concept of “contextualism” and the concept of “universalism” can be conceived in different terms, and still without either of them losing the power of their meaning and the strength of their arguments. To think, therefore, “in between the context and universal principles”, would not be, as it may sound at first, a way of weakening of their positions, in order to open up a *third* stance, but rather articulating and unraveling their *own internal potentialities and the point where they meet* – a point that emerges precisely from the *responsibility of the response*, where the political and the ethical come together. *Contextualism* does not *per se* imply *exceptionalism*. Moreover, contextualism does not *per definitionem* and by its concept imply in any way that “there is no objective truth” in theory and the political. But what *contextualism* does imply is the concept of *pluralism*.

What is, therefore, a task for rethinking is how the idea of *pluralism* – that remains sensitive to the implications of potential abandoning of the universalistic appeal in its entirety – can respond to, or rather, preserves in itself, the very moment of political and ethical responsibility. For a case for “exceptionalism” and “relativism”, to turn thing around, would, beyond all, present a movement towards global scale anarchy, destruction and self-destruction of politics. That would be, in final implication, the decision whether we want to have politics as a world dialogue or politics of anarchy, for which I am convinced it would lead literary nowhere.

On the other hand, the concept of *universalism* does not *per definitionem* imply *absolutism*, that is, the very search for principles and the tendency to reach a consensus about these principles is not in itself “absolutistic”. Moreover, one could claim precisely the opposite, that “politics of absolutism” lays in disagreement with a search for consensus, which is often also a matter of compromise and – in last implication deals precisely with how *pluralism is encountered*. If, therefore, it is not sensible to claim that the concept of “universalism” *per se* is, as it were, “always already” hegemonic, that both theoretically and practically it cannot appear otherwise than as such – on the other hand, what the concept of “universalism” does imply lies in its “other name”, an idea of *objectivism*.

It is in this way that the idea “in between”, beyond and yet in the very heart of both “contextualism” and “universalism” grows. The very potentiality of opposing what is named as “hegemonic universalism” on the one hand, and

“fundamentalistic pluralism” on the other - *and doing these coming from their own structure* – is the potentiality of the emergence of *moderate and deliberative forms of universalism and pluralism*. In other words, such an undertaking would present a way of embracing a rich and unexplored potential of a *pluralistic universalism*, as an objective and legitimate - as non-ideological and yet deeply and radically political - way of responding to growing challenges.

A *pluralistic universalism*, in such way, would be structurally differentiated from both an uncritical manner of implementing and reinforcing, for example, the premises of postmodern constructivism and any attempt to posit fundamental uncompromising universalistic tendencies. The response to both hegemonial universalism and fundamentalistic pluralism present itself, therefore, coming from the idea that there is on truth which does not need empirical verification, that is, that there is no rupture between the conceptual and the empirical, such that would entail a schizophrenic gap on either side. It is precisely the empirical verification, and the link between the empirical and the conceptual that enables an articulation of an objective and *par excellence* political approach<sup>12</sup>, and a potentiality for consensus and agreement. Types and forms of arguments and the entire methodology of such political-philosophical investigations – and of political philosophy as applied philosophy - are to follow up to the empirical cases and examples and to attempt to articulate *the conceptual link between particular empirical events* in order to construct a sustainable framework. That would simultaneously be a way for re-legitimizing *the very idea of legitimation* and of unleashing the potentialities how answers given to the decisive questions of political philosophy today can and do significantly impact *world political practices*.

In conclusion, let us turn once again to the most recent example of a form of hegemonic universalism – its liberal form and to the form of contemporary postmodern constructivism, on the other hand. What is a characteristic of the first is, beyond all, *ahistoricity*, exemplified in the theoretical belief (and consequently, practices), in the “eternality” of certain ideas, which are found as

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12 In terms of what such idea would mean applied to concrete cases, a moderate version of universalism/pluralism would begin with descriptions of the actual situation, of “what is” the present state of things, following causal explanations (bio/psycho/social/cultural), including theoretical and moral interpretations and values of their representatives. Such examination would be critical and self-critical, open to revision in light of new empirical evidence.

binding and unquestionable. From this, it was possible for a “*quasi-Schmittianism*”<sup>13</sup> to emerge and for a division between the “uncivilized” and the “barbarian”, the “friend” and “the enemy” to take place. Such a moment produced not only uncritical and deeply problematic absolutism (See: Bernstein 2005) in the West, as a theoretical “mainstream” thinking, but, more significantly, often emerged as contrary to its own claim, namely, not as proclaimed universalism often but rather as a form in defense of particular interests.

In such a way, both postmodern constructivism and liberal globalism appear as self-contradictory in their own attempts - when theorized and applied in a radical way, or rather, when instrumentalized for different and external purposes. In encountering the challenges that emerge, by a creation of politics of “pluralistic universalism”, the role of permanent critique and self-critique is indispensable. Critical examinations here go hand in hand with two other ideas of which one can be referred to as *politics of dialogue* and the other as *politics of compromise*. Perhaps someone will be inclined to call it a “politics of third way for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”. I would prefer to call it a “*politics of open concept*”. As such, politics of “pluralistic universalism” represents an “unfrozen” politics, that is, politics of movement and politics in permanent state of self-creation.

Rethinking new politics, beyond and on the other side of still existing divisions, would at the same time mean rethinking a new common universal reference point, a consensus on principles coming forth in new pluralistic universalism. This would require paradigmatic and structural openness – a chance for political philosophy to engage with very specific and constantly changing historical and political contexts, while at the same time striving for a degree of universality, professional autonomy and moral accountability. In a certain sense, I would argue, paraphrasing and building on the idea about “the return of history” (Kagan 2008) that *time has returned to politics*. Let me conclude then in saying that it is on engaged intellectuals, as applied philosophers, to present its flow and recognize its potentialities. That would exemplify the role of political philosophy today.

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13 I borrow the term “quasi-Schmittianism” from Simon Critchley (See: Critchley 2006).

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