

Chapter 2

Universalism in history, modern statehood, and public service media

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Abstract

Starting from a brief explanation of universalistic thinking, this contribution investigates the philosophical origins and dimensions of universalism and its historical development. It reveals contradictory implications of the concept and shows how it became a significant influence in philosophy about the state. It sketches the development from the Greek polis and the Roman Empire, via the philosophy of Enlightenment and the French Revolution to the twentieth century and the debate about universal human rights. The concept of universalism is presented as one of the grounds for welfare state policies. This establishes a background and framework for understanding the universal service obligation that remains fundamental to the legitimacy of public service media.

Keywords: human rights, Western values, Enlightenment, universal service obligation, particularism, welfare state

Introduction

“One Policy, One System, Universal Service” was the claim made by AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph) in 1907 (Lasar, 2011). In return for monopoly status, AT&T promised that every user of a telephone device would be able to reach anyone else with a telephone device. Universal access and service – for a price, of course. Use did not require membership in several networks. The rationale and approach has a background that points in two directions: to the past and to the future. To the past because the principle of universal service harkens back to a complex philosophical realm about the concept of universalism. In its practical and broadly statutory implementation, the universal service obligation became the role model for many services the modern welfare state provides citizens. The universal service obligation is both a challenge and an open question for today’s digital society.

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This contribution investigates the philosophical origins and dimensions of universalism and its historical development. It reveals contradictory implications of the concept and shows how it became a significant influence in philosophy about the state. The concept is one of the grounds for welfare state policies. This establishes a background and framework for understanding the universal service obligation that remains fundamental to the legitimacy of public service media (PSM).

What is universalism?

Universalism is derived from the Latin word *universalis*, which means “general”. This ideal indicates an assumption and claim that all the diversity of reality as a whole can be traced to a single principle or law of order. From this, it follows, that ideas, ideals, rights, and obligations apply in principle to all human beings. Universalism is therefore a perspective that prioritises the whole of an entity above singularity, and generality above specificity. The concept contends that some principles and norms are valid for all human beings.

In societal application, universalism is operationalised in rules and practices that have general widespread value. To work properly, these rules must be generally accepted by society and internalised by its members. When effective, universally applicable rules are a proper basis for the pursuit of justice and provide clarity about conditions and obligations that apply to each and all. Good relations are secondary to fairness and equity. Exceptions to the rules are resisted.

Universalism can be observed in individualistic societies, as is clearly the case for many Western societies. The prevailing emphasis on social justice, maintaining order, and being able to plan in a thoughtful, rational way are based on respect for values that are presumed to be universal and are considered positive and beneficial for the welfare of all. The disadvantages are keyed to degrees of inflexibility and rigidity in patterns of required adherence to values and rules. Defenders of universalism have been accused of ignoring cultural differences and promoting Western values, which indicate an attitude of ethnocentrism (Benhabib, 1994; Donnelly, 2003; Marko, 2012; Namli, 2018; Vattimo, 2007).

This brief overview of universalism hints towards a complex development of thinking about “the universal” that spans from ancient Greece to the French Revolution and beyond. The ideal that some fundamental things are universal and should be respected as such is cornerstone to significant codifications pertaining to the rights and liberties of free peoples. This is evident, for example, in the American Declaration of Independence that claims “all men are created equal”. Thus, the context of universalism has been usefully applied from the broadest and most fundamental claims of universal rights to technical systems

of communication, transportation, and other matters of social welfare. It is timeless in principle because universalism claims that, once identified, universal values are all-encompassing and always valid.

Today such claims are less often accepted as valid and are often challenged. The all-embracing pretension of universalism has been challenged by its conceptual counterpart: particularism – the attitude that underlines the specifics of single cases, the uniqueness of a given culture, or the individuality of a person. The degree to which universalism is universal is arguable. The claim has limits because in application the practice excludes certain groups – typically minorities – and the disadvantaged in various ways. The principle is more transcendent than the practice. As hinted in the American claim above, the universalism of human rights excluded women until they won their rights through struggle.

After this short explanation of the concept of universalism, we will see how the development of universalist thinking became an influential intellectual abstraction about the nature and value of the human being that has inspired political philosophers and the political shaping of societies.

How did universalism emerge and develop?

Universalism emerged not as a fact in the real world but rather as an intellectual reality or construct. The principle of *quod semper, quod ubique, quod omnibus* (Toennies, 2001) – forever, everywhere, for everybody – postulated that, from a distanced viewpoint, all human beings are equal. This thought became a manifestation of material power.

In their search for principles for the good conduct of living, Plato and Aristotle articulated guidelines for a fair and just government. These Greek philosophers were early advocates of universalism. They constructed views of an ideal state in which every free man (only) is empowered and appointed to discuss and decide public affairs in open debate. The Greek polis corresponds to this phenomenon that contains a germ of universalism.

The Roman philosopher Seneca addressed the tension between those included in the universal and those excluded: “Although everything is permitted against a slave, there is something that is not permitted by the common right of every living being against a human being, because he is the same nature as you” (as cited by Toennies, 2001: 66). Later in ancient Rome, there was a fundamental shift in their legal system. The legal rights of the *paterfamilias* – the head of a greater family – were extended to every Roman citizen, to the effect that every man was at liberty to act on his own rights. This grounds a point that Talcott Parsons stipulated: “Modern society originated only in a single evolutionary arena, the West, i.e. essentially in Europe, which inherited the legacy of the western half of the Roman Empire” (Parsons, 1971: 10). This aligns with the

views of Max Weber (1930) who, in his work on *The Protestant Ethic*, posited that cultural phenomena occurred on the soil of the Occident which were of universal significance and validity in a developmental direction.

This strand of philosophic history suggests a noble ideal, but also indicates good reason for associating universalism with the critique of imperialism. All too willingly, Western thinking has claimed for too long and too exclusively advances in human progress for itself, and has relegated other societies and cultures as backward and in deficit by its own self-acclaimed standards. While valid, any outline of the history of universalism requires acknowledging the significance of the Greek polis and the Roman empire.

Toennies describes the origins of universalism as endeavouring to legitimate the claims of a group (i.e., the particular and not all groups), amid competing claims by other groups in differentiating society (Toennies, 1995). This aligns with Schweppenhaeuser (1998) who claims that early stages of bourgeois self-knowledge were characterised by the will to assert oneself as a particular social group fighting for the preservation of their prerogatives against the central power of a community and the nobility of a given time.

The idea and ideal of unalienable individual rights emerged in the Enlightenment, which created the basis for the modern notion of universalism that is based on a recognition of the power of the human spirit. Since the reign of Cromwell in Britain, individual rights were articulated in this modern sense. Locke articulated an understanding of universalism as the constitutional right of all individuals. These and other philosophers of Enlightenment, including Hobbes, aimed to identify general laws for all mankind and to follow them as such.

All of this explains why universal is not manifest in the material world, but is an influential intellectual abstraction about the nature and value of the human spirit. The French Revolution converted these intellectual claims into a basis for real power in the timeless triad of “liberty, equality, and fraternity”. The proclamations of a revolutionary bourgeoisie, especially the Declaration of Human and Civil Rights of 1789 and the French Constitution of 1791, transformed the particular bourgeois interest into a universal human interest. The constitutions of modern societies almost universally believe *citoyens* in democracies have the same freedom rights and the right of self-preservation.

Nonetheless, the foregoing has already noted the persistent problem that universalistic thought, since its inception, has never referred to everyone in practice but always to select groups. Beyond this privileged selection, the same “universal” rights were not accorded to large groups of people: slaves, women, colonised peoples, children, and so forth. Societies have made corrective progress, however, and today the universalism principle is being extended to the idea of animal protection, the rights of animals, and also the rights of nature. The universal is becoming more universal than before.

But the underlying problem persists. François Noël Babeuf, an agitator during the French Revolution and founder of the Conspiracy of the Equals, was among the first to point out the inherent contradiction of universalism – a philosophic claim of rights for all that in practice excludes many. He took the French Revolution’s idea of equality to a radically serious degree and, with his notion that all people are factually equal and should enjoy equal rights and conditions also in economic terms, created the first attempt to realise the concept of a classless society in political practice (Buonarroti, 1909). Later socialists referred to him.

Karl Marx, author of the seminal *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* and of the political pamphlet *The Communist Manifesto*, defended the idea of a classless society in which no one should have privileges resulting from possession of the means of production. While he had claimed to turn the philosophical thinking of Hegel upside down – which means to ascribe to it a material base – we can state that Marx has turned universalism upside down, as he spelled out the material prerequisites of equality.

Universalism in the twentieth century

In the twentieth century, individual rights as a universal enfranchisement were codified in the International Declaration of Human Rights. This was the result of a long process in which the idea of human rights gained a symbolic and politically fundamental significance for thinking about how to create a more peaceful world order. The profound crises experienced in the international order during the second half of the twentieth century inspired reflection on how to create a fairer world order.

These crises include the devastation of World War II, independence for former colonies and the often messy aftermath, an awareness of the interdependence of states that spread in the 1970s, and the dissolution of Soviet power with the collapse of socialist states in the 1990s. Also important, after 1945, was the question of how to organise the Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals. This revived the debate as to whether there were inalienable rights that would validate the intervention of the international community. The judgments handed down in the Nuremberg Trials were based on the conviction that individuals – regardless of respective national legislation – had a range of universal rights that warranted the conviction of war criminals on this basis (Sands, 2016).

The creation of the United Nations (UN), whose founding documents include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was a grandiose step forward in the codification of universal rights and the confession that they apply universally to all individuals on earth. This did not emerge from a vacuum. In the 1920s, international law scholars and internationally oriented lawyers had given

thought to the meaning and possibility of international human rights. From 1948 onwards, the concept has been a persistent and foundational aspect of the human rights system that grounds the UN. This establishment of the UN was linked to the question of how more effective mechanisms of international security and peacekeeping could be established (Eckel, 2019). This was followed by the confirmation of a human rights regime in the Council of Europe, adopted as a corresponding convention in 1950.

The leaders of anti-colonial struggle relied on the promise of human rights to legitimate their cause, but did not shy away from noting the persistent problem of a hypocritical Western deception which they had experienced for centuries. Human rights were not universal in the practice of the colonial masters (Nkrumah, 1962). In the United Nations General Assembly, in which the former colonial states had the same voting rights as all members, past human rights violations were discussed. In escalations of the Cold War, the culprits of the most violent abuses of human rights were accused. This also contributed to the instrumentalisation of human rights discourse for respective international interests (Westad, 2007).

Significant advances are evident in the Declaration on the Grant of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in 1960, the inclusion of the right to self-determination of peoples in UN rules in 1966, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1965 (Jensen, 2016). These are milestones on the road to universal rights in the international order (UN, 1994). The attempt of the former colonial states to wrest the commitment to a new world economic order from the industrialised West in the 1970s was also based on the idea of human rights and their universality. Although this did not bring any immediate result, and was hotly contested by the US in particular, a right to development was proclaimed in 1986 (OHCHR, 1986).

In the 1970s, there emerged a new and growing awareness of environmental hazards caused by humans as a consequence of industrialisation. The importance of resource management and the need for sustainability has grown in the decades since, accompanied by the idea of a universal claim across generations to an intact environment (Kaiser & Meyer, 2016; Macekura, 2015).

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) process in Europe, the activities of opponents of dictatorship in Latin America, and dissidents in Eastern Europe, as well as the growing emphasis on human rights in the Global South, dramatically demonstrate the diversity of national, cultural, and historic contexts in which protagonists of universal rights operate. These also demonstrate the volatility and difficulty of advancing a unified political project. Nevertheless, universal human rights have become a persistent issue and is now a foreign policy reference point for many Western governments (and beyond).

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of dictatorships in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, the Philippines, and South Korea, as well as Greece, Portugal,

and Spain, and the fall of the apartheid regime in South Africa, have given rise to the hope that universal human rights could be enforced worldwide. At the 1993 UN Human Rights Conference, 171 states declared their support for the universal application of human rights (OHCHR, 1993). The question is not in the principle but rather the practice: How should and would this be implemented, and should international interventions to enforce rights be universally recognised? That is the subject of ongoing debates in the face of diverse conflict situations.

In postmodern thought, universalism is subject to a variety of criticisms. The most far-reaching critique is drawn from the impossibility of achievement because the world and its inhabitants are too diverse to be subsumed under a universal view. Another powerful critique from the cultural perspective links this to the problem of relativism. Perhaps less is universal than particular because everything is relative to varying degrees. Moreover, who are the protagonists of Western societies that they should be allowed to proclaim their values as having general validity? European human rights concepts arise from a specifically European civil, liberal, and secular historical project, as earlier indicated in our brief look at Greek and Roman philosophers. Therefore – so the argument goes – they cannot easily (or at all!) be “transferred” to other cultures.

Another serious critique stems from a multiculturalist perspective. As Juergen Habermas keenly observed, “behind universalistic legal claims are concealed the particular assertiveness of a particular collective on a regular basis” [translated] (Habermas, 1997: n.p.). Habermas believes the moral universe extends to all natural persons, however, and in that light has been regarded as perhaps the most famous living “universalist” (Koehl, 2003).

The fact that all existing societies do not grant universal rights to all people does not make the idea obsolete or invalid. The problem in the formulation of human rights, and especially in their establishment as rights for all humans, hinges on factors that prevent their realisation, and these are constitutively inscribed (Schweppenhaeuser, 1998). Property, security, and freedom are the central criteria of universal human rights but also equated with individual rights, especially in antagonistic competitive societies that do not question the appropriateness of a capitalist orientation. This creates a contradictory situation: The foundation of human rights – which has a universal claim to validity – and the worldwide establishment of social conditions that would not only permit this formulation, but almost require it, at the same time blocking their realisation.

The continuation of freedom and property rights based on universal human rights has enormous implications for the media sector in democratic societies and for democratic rights as such, which are also based on universalism but are in conflict. I address this next.

Universalism in modern statehood and its significance for public service media

The step from universalism as a philosophical tradition of thought to the universal claim of citizens to certain state services of general interest is enormous. It is generally explained with reference to the construction of a welfare state. The principle of equality, which is so important for democratic states, has never been fully realised, as noted above. This is mainly due to prevailing ownership structures and discrepancies between rich and poor citizens. In an ongoing struggle over conflicting ideas on how to reconcile freedom and equality, modern democracies have increasingly set themselves the task of providing at least equal opportunities for all citizens to live in dignity and have an essential degree of social security.

This is how the modern welfare state was created, with the essential task of subsidising certain meritorious goods that the market does not or cannot provide due to the need for profitability. Perhaps some degree of supply is provided by the market, but not to a sufficient extent in relation to the need for these goods. Such merit goods include education, security (including social security), public infrastructure, and culture. These are services that benefit everyone in a society, that is, the public at large. Hence, they must be provided as public services. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mediated social communication was defined as a merit good.

The principle that media are merit goods that can and should be made available to every citizen to the same extent and at the same quality is the core value of the universal service obligation. The obligation implies a universal human right and requires societies to provide an adequate infrastructure for their delivery and performance. Everyone should be reached by postal services, everyone should be supplied with electricity, everyone has a right to clean water and air, and all people need access to a telephone connection – and today, access to the Internet. People who are not able to access online media suffer a “digital deficit” that puts them, and their life chances, at risk, compared with people who have access. This is especially true for the citizen’s right to be informed. Golding (2017) argues that despite the abundance of information available online, there is a growing inequality of access to quality information. This deficit of access to high quality online services can, when it comes to deficits of quality of information, translate into a citizen detriment (Thomass, 2019).

The debate about the implementation of universal services has always centred on the scope and quality of service. Today, for example, the question in modern industrial societies is not only whether Internet access exists, but also whether it meets the requirements of broadband connection.

The invention of public service broadcasting (PSB) had its origins almost 100 years ago and was established in many countries that were structured by policy

and practice to provide universal services as social welfare states. This orientation recognises a valid demand for universality of infrastructure, culture, and social communication via media as an institution whose central characteristic and obligation is the pursuit of universality of service. In 1986, the then London-based think tank Broadcasting Research Unit defined PSB with the following characteristics, in which the notion of universality has a central place (1986):

- Universality (geographic) – broadcast programmes should be available to the whole population.
- Universality (of appeal) – broadcast programmes should cater to all interests and tastes.
- Universality (of payment) – one main instrument of broadcasting should be directly funded by the corpus of users.
- Minorities, especially disadvantaged minorities, should receive particular provision.
- Broadcasters should recognise their special relationship to the sense of national identity and community.
- Broadcasting should be distanced from all vested interests, and in particular from those of the government of the day.
- Broadcasting should be structured so as to encourage competition in good programming rather than competition for numbers.
- The public guidelines for broadcasting should be designed to liberate rather than restrict the programme makers.

Universal availability plays a central role and has social, technical, and economic components. Universalism is fundamental to the provision of broadcasting as a merit good in the public interest. The other essential element is a broad spectrum of different programmes, formats, genres, and so forth on a channel –in short, diversity (Scannell, 1992). In this light, the principle of universalism has four dimensions in broadcasting: 1) access and reach; 2) genres and services; 3) relevance and impact; and 4) financing with attendant obligations. Providing universal service has been and remains a legal requirement for PSB and, more recently, PSM. This has crucial importance for the potential of media to cultivate enlightenment, encourage social cohesion, and provide a fair, full, and equitable range of media services.

There is another line of important argumentation that still legitimates universalism in media that has significant implications today. This is the argument for media responsibility – the social responsibility of media – to strengthen democracy. Universalism is a prerequisite for realising that mandate as a project of addressing universal rights. From this perspective, citizens' communication and

information rights are the focus of discussion: “The logic is simple. Democracy needs citizens who are equally informed; thus, they must be guaranteed equal access to all relevant information” (Nieminen, 2019: 58). This makes the case for citizens’ communication and information rights explicit. The basic elements are derived from, among others, international treaties and conventions such as the UN Declarations of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Nieminen & Aslama Horowitz, 2016). Nieminen proposes five areas of communication and information rights, which all refer to the universalist claim of rights: rights to access, availability, critical competence, dialogue, and privacy (Nieminen, 2019: 58).

Mandates for mediated social communication via PSM that is accessible to all citizens acquires its special significance and legitimacy as a subsequent effect of the principles of freedom and property. The freedom – by no means given to everyone – to express and disseminate one’s opinion through the media has led, in the absence of effective media concentration regulations, to enormous media conglomerates dominating the content and flow of information and entertainment. This threatens comprehensive, freely accessible information from a wide variety of sources. PSM is needed as a counterweight and to enforce the principles of universalism in media supply.

Conclusion

PSM is not conceivable without the encompassing idea of universalism. The history of the concept is an ongoing attempt to determine what is universal for all people and to embed that in norms. Since the Enlightenment, universalism has been fundamental to Western state constitutions, later adopted by many countries around the world. Universalist claims to validity, however, have always been criticised because of the presumption of comprehensive applicability, especially when the application has excluded so many who are also entitled to claim the right. As articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, universalist ideas have become the model for the international order. An essential component of human rights, the freedom of communication has achieved decisive importance for the media order of pluralistic states. PSM are based on universalist ideas because they want to make the accessibility of information and social communication equally available to all citizens. However, as the promise of human rights freedom also refers to the right to property, and this right has enabled the emergence of media conglomerates in global media markets, PSM are also an attempt to preserve universal freedom of communication.

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