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# Community and Individual Autonomy: Genealogy of a Challenge

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► **To cite this version:**

Dardo Scavino. Community and Individual Autonomy: Genealogy of a Challenge. Potency of the Common, pp.127-138, 2016. hal-01999030

**HAL Id: hal-01999030**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01999030>**

Submitted on 4 Feb 2019

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# Potency of the Common

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Intercultural Perspectives about Community and  
Individuality

Edited by  
Gert Melville and Carlos Ruta

Editorial Manager  
Laura S. Carugati

**DE GRUYTER**  
OLDENBOURG

# **Challenges of Life**

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Essays on philosophical and cultural anthropology

Edited by  
Gert Melville and Carlos Ruta

**Volume 3**

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Dardo Scavino

# Community and Individual Autonomy: Genealogy of a Challenge

I

In order to deal with the challenge that the community presents to individual autonomy, we will start by recalling a familiar text from the fifth century AD: *The City of God* by St Augustine. The Latin title is actually *De Civitate Dei*, which not only means *About God's City* but also *About God's State*. It might be useful at this stage to remember that the exact title of the book is: *De Civitate Dei contra paganos*. For some obscure reason, the reference to pagans is often neglected and gets deleted from the title, perhaps because the translation of this term is difficult. Everyone knows that a pagan is an “infidel” or a “polytheist”, but this meaning was barely known when Saint Augustine wrote his text. Furthermore, if this term managed to prevail it was due to the popularity of Augustine’s treatise.

It was one of Augustine’s teachers, Gaius Marius Victorinus, who used this term for the first time when referring to those who refused to adopt Jesus Christ’s religion. He did so while he was writing a comment on the Letter to the Galatians. When referring to the Greek gentiles, Victorinus wrote: *apud Graecos, id est apud paganos*<sup>1</sup>. The term *pagus* not only referred to one’s country or region, the pagan community, as we often recall the tough resistance of the rural regions of the Empire to the missionaries of the new religion. A *Pagus* was also one’s folk or tribe, that is, an ethnical group or population sharing the same ancestral customs. As a matter of fact, such expressions as *mi paisano* in Spanish or *mon paysan* in French are still used to refer to a member of one’s community. Hence, *pagus* was the opposite of *civitas* because a *paganus*, as opposed to a *civis*, was a person who abode by the customary rules of their community. But this did not necessarily mean that the *paganus* and the *civis* were two different people. It was rather two aspects of the same individual: the member of a community, on the one hand, who complied with the customs and traditions of a community; and the citizen, on the other hand, who abode by the laws of the State.

In this sense, *Pagus* was a usual translation of the Greek *ethnê*, the term used by Saint Paul when referring to Gentiles, that is, those who were neither Jews

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1 Caius Marinus VICTORINUS, *In Epistolam Pauli ad Galatas*. In *Opera exegetica*, 105.

nor Christians. A *paganus* was an individual considered to be a member of an ethnic group. That is the reason why Christians never talked about a *Pagus Dei* but a *Civitas Dei*. Christianity brought the good news to the Gentiles, and that good news identified with no particular ethnic tradition. Christianity claimed to be universal.

Having said that, Gaius Marius Victorinus used the term *paganus* with this new meaning while he was commentating on a very precise passage of the Letter to the Galatians. Recalling the context in which this letter was written, between the years AD 47 and 48 Paul had converted the Galatians to Christianity. However, no sooner had the former left the region than some Jewish preachers succeeded in converting them to Abraham's faith. Once he found out what had happened, Paul sent them that letter in which he explained why Jesus's religion should not be mistaken with Judaism, even though Jesus was actually a Jew and the self-same Messiah expected by the Hebrew people: with his coming this Messiah had abolished all traditions and taboos in force until then, thus liberating his followers from Moses' tutelage and from Judaism itself. Those who observed the rituals of Judaism were called Jews, but they ceased being Jews with the coming of the Messiah whom they themselves had been expecting. Paul had a similar idea regarding the Gentiles although they had not been anticipating a Redeemer.

In order for the Galatian churches to understand that conversion to Judaism meant, from a Christian perspective, a regression, the apostle resorted to a legal concept common to Greek and Roman law:

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under tutors and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Gl. 4, 1–5)

As it is still the case today, no minor could dispose of their inheritance until they came of age. They depended for this on the decisions made by their tutors and trustees. But once the "fullness of time had come", they were freed from tutelage. In this way, evangelization resembled a minor's emancipation, and the latter was comparable to a slave's liberation, as they both used to live under the *mancipium* of a *pater familias*. Until the promised coming of Christ, Jews had lived, according to Paul, like children under the tutelage of their Father –of their Father and his Torah. However, the Son of God would have come to redeem them from that tutelage that had once been necessary, certainly, but then became outdated. They would be able to dispose of their due inheritance. The past tutelage had thus been replaced by an "adoption" (*huiiothesía*) whose aim would no longer be to keep the

Jews as minors but, on the contrary, to emancipate them from all those childish duties and prohibitions. By getting circumcised, observing *Shabbat*, eating *kosher* or submitting themselves to a series of rituals and prohibitions dictated by tradition, the Galatians would never reach redemption. According to Paul, they would be regressing to the condition of minors which, while it lasted, did not differ much from slavery, even if that slave was paradoxically the “owner” of their inheritance. In the same way as Moses had freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, Christ had emancipated them from Mosaic harshness: the Messiah had come to abolish ritual obligations, replacing them with love for one’s neighbor and for God and thus freeing the Jews from the dictates of tradition. Messianic time would be precisely the lapse between their adoption of the Christian faith and emancipation or redemption. That is the reason why, in his epistle to the Corinthians, this apostle once again says that in the end Christ would restore the kingdom of God, once he had “destroyed all dominion, authority and power” (1 Co 15, 24). Therefore, the coming of God’s kingdom, what St Augustine would later call *Civitas Dei*, coincided with the emancipation of believers, that is, their coming of age.

When Caius Marius Victorinus referred to pagans, he was suggesting that Greek polytheists were in the same situation as the Jews in Paul’s passage: they were still under the tutelage of tradition, and as long as they did not accept to convert, they were like children who refused to become emancipated or come of age. This meant that they preferred to carry on living and thinking under someone else’s guidance, *alieni iuris*, instead of by themselves, that is, *sui iuris*. Christians became emancipated by abandoning *ethnê* or *pagus*, which explains a great deal the popularity of *xeniteia* or *peregrinatio* in ancient Christianity. One was supposed to retreat not only materially but above all spiritually from local habits: conversion meant precisely that.

The controversy started by Alasdair MacIntyre about the importance of the *agraphoi nomoi* - of customs and customary law - in Aristotle’s ethical thinking will not be dealt with here<sup>2</sup>. However, when the Greek philosopher established a distinction between those who governed themselves and those who were governed by others, he did not believe that respect for the *agraphoi nomoi* in a community transformed an individual into either a slave or a minor. Christianity, on the other hand, modified this position: pagans were not exactly slaves in their community but they lived under its tutelage, and in this respect they were in a similar situation to slaves or, more precisely, minors. It is clear that for Saint Paul and his followers, redemption, that is freedom from slavery, then appeared to be closely related to emancipation from communitarian tutelage or respect of the *agraphoi nomoi*.

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2 Alasdair MACINTYRE, *After Virtue*, 2007.

## II

There is an episode at the origins of modernity in which both the Letter to the Galatians and *De Civitate Dei contra paganos* acquire vital importance for us all. When the Spanish conquered America they were confronted with the lack of a legal concept to regulate the new colonial domination. A jurist from Salamanca University, Francisco de Vitoria, resorted then to tutelage, a concept of private law, and explained that the relationship between the Spanish and the Indians resembled that between a tutor and a pupil<sup>3</sup>. Vitoria even invoked that very passage by Saint Paul in which he refers to tutelage. Indians were like children, he said, incapable of ruling themselves, and as minors they needed an adult, capable of ruling themselves, who would manage their property until they came of age in Christian education. Colonized peoples were thus associated with pagans and *alieni iuris* individuals according to Roman law. Colonizing peoples, on the other hand, were more like missionaries or Roman tutors, that is, *sui iuris* individuals, adult men, independent and rational.

This concept of colonial tutelage invented by Vitoria would keep its validity until the mid-twentieth century. Reproducing the Spanish jurist's position almost literally, article 22 of the 1919 Covenant of the League of Nations would continue to defend the "sacred mission of colonization" claiming that there still existed "peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world", whose "well-being" and "development" were part of the "sacred trust of civilization"<sup>4</sup>. This article concluded that "the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it"<sup>5</sup>. Even the 1945 United Nations Charter would still ask its members to assume "responsibilities for the administration of territories whose peoples have not yet attained a full measure of self-governance", recognizing "the principle that the interests of the inhabitants of these territories are paramount" and declaring as a sacred trust that these States were to promote the capacity of such populations "to develop self-government". They would take due account of "the political aspirations" of the peoples, and to assist them in the "progressive development of their free political institutions."<sup>6</sup> It was not until 1960, after the Bandung Conference and under the pressure of national liberation movements in Asia and Africa, that the UN added an annex recognizing for

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3 Francisco de VITORIA, *Relección de indios y del derecho de guerra*, 49.

4 *Covenant of the League of Nations*, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/leagcov.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/leagcov.asp)

5 *Ibid.*

6 *United Nations Charter*, <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/un/unchart.htm>

the first time the colonies' right to full self-determination on condition that these were territories geographically separate and distinct linguistically and culturally from the metropolitan state administering them. And only thirty-two years later another UN resolution required that its member countries respect the languages and traditions of their so-called "minorities".

However, the notion of this "sacred mission" of civilization, of Christian *civitas* or of European imperialism would not have persisted as late as the twentieth century if another Catholic priest, the French Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, had not written his *Discourse on Universal History* in the late XVII century. Bossuet recalled there that Jesus Christ had put forward to his sons "new, more perfect and pure ideas of virtue" which would pull the peoples away from their barbarian habits and absurd taboos<sup>7</sup>. Universal History was therefore the long process chosen by Divine Providence to convert, and as a consequence, redeem the peoples of the world, that is, to build the *Civitas Dei* which was none other than the Great Universal Empire submitted to the one and only Emperor. This character would be a sort of representative, and equivalent, of God on Earth as he would put an end to the disputes between the peoples and bring the yearned-for long-lasting peace to all of humanity. Bossuet wrote that towards the end of history we would see the birth of "the kingdom of the Son of Man": "All peoples are subjects of this kingdom big and peaceful", he wrote, "the only one whose power will not pass over to another empire"<sup>8</sup>. For this French priest, if Europe had succeeded in prevailing upon the rest of the peoples, it was because God had chosen it to carry out his purpose.

Throughout four centuries the shift made by Francisco de Vitoria from private law to colonial law had massive repercussions upon western thought. For a start, it introduced the idea that peoples were like individuals with a childhood, youth, middle and even old age, and in this sense he associated history and progress. Savage peoples would no longer be compared to animals but to children, to the extent that a "primitive" mentality would end up being confused with childish thinking. Civilized peoples, on the other hand, would be perceived as those who had reached the so-called "age of reason". Primitive peoples would not be able to think by themselves and would always follow tradition and authority. Civilized peoples, instead, would be those who, as Kant put it, did not need anyone's supervision in thinking and were able to make decisions by themselves.

Furthermore, Vitoria's shift also transformed emancipation and self-determination into two main concepts of modern political thought. In the same way as a mature individual can rule themselves, an independent people is capable of dic-

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques-Bénigne BOSSUET, *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*, 172.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

tating its own laws. The difference between major and minor peoples coincides with the distinction between peoples with and without a State. Immature peoples would carry on living under the tutelage of their ancestral laws. Grown-up peoples would deliberate about their rules for living and would create the appropriate institutions for such purpose. An individual from a primitive nation is a *homo alieni iuris* as they do not decide for themselves which rules they want to live under: they follow the habits of their ancestors. On the other hand, an individual from a modern nation is a *homo sui iuris* because they can reflect upon the laws which rule their life and decide whether or not they wish to change them. Or better said in modern terms: minority corresponds with moral heteronomy whereas majority corresponds with autonomy.

“The history of a single world-historical nation”, Hegel wrote in his *Philosophy of Right*, “contains the development of its principle from its latent embryonic stage until it blossoms into the self-conscious freedom of ethical life and presses in upon world history”<sup>9</sup>. A nation”, he added, “does not begin by being a state. The transition from a family, a horde, a clan, a multitude, etc., to political conditions is the realization of the Idea in the form of that nation”<sup>10</sup>. If a nation does not achieve this formal realization, he continued, if it does not pass its own laws, if it does not achieve self-determination, other nations will never recognize its sovereignty or its independence and it will always be considered as a minor population prone to colonization. Hegel was thus repeating the interpretation that Vitoria had made of Saint Paul: nations without a State are ethnic groups composed of minor pagans, whereas nations with a State are civil societies made up of fully-grown citizens.

In order to explain the causes of this inequality between barbarian and civilized peoples when all humankind was supposed to be equally rational, Hegel resorted to the old Aristotelian distinction between potentiality and actuality: although everybody might have that potential rationality, only a few, as he saw it, would exert it effectively, whereas for everyone else it would appear as a more or less remote possibility. So as to illustrate such distinction, the German philosopher also evoked the concept of the Ages of Man: a “child only has capacities or the actual possibility of reason” but, as he does not put it into practice, “it is just the same as if he had no reason”<sup>11</sup>. Only as from the moment when “what man is at first implicitly becomes explicit”, that is, only when rationality shifts from potentiality to actuality, or from what is possible to what is real, we can say that “man has actuality”, as he starts living according to reason and no longer needs

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<sup>9</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL, *Philosophy of Rights*, 343.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>11</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich HEGEL, *Lectures on the history of philosophy*, 21.

someone else to guide him<sup>12</sup>. A man has actuality when he becomes a *homo sui iuris*. According to Hegel, the difference between child and man, or between a minor and an adult, would at the end of the day be the same as “between the Africans and the Asiatics on the one hand, and the Greeks, Romans, and moderns on the other”<sup>13</sup>. Furthermore, this difference is that “the latter know and it is explicit for them, that they are free, but the others are so without knowing that they are, and thus without existing as being free”<sup>14</sup>. Although they are rational and capable of rational actions, reason does not rule their lives yet.

For Hegel, the difference between a child and an adult resembled the gap between sense-perception and reason, and as a result, the evolution of humanity from primitive peoples, bound to the particularities of their senses and feelings - that is, to idols, figures and myths-, to civilized peoples, who deal with general things due to their use of understanding and reason and hence prefer argumentation and concepts. “Man’s ends and objects”, he said, are “abstract in general affairs”, such as “in maintaining his family or performing his business duties”, and therefore he “contributes to a great objective organic whole, whose progress he advances and directs”, whereas “in the acts of a child only a childish and, indeed, momentary “I” prevails, as he is taken by sensory immediacy and attracted by a multiplicity of different and diverse stimuli<sup>15</sup>. When the youth are not acting “randomly”, they are between childhood and adulthood as their “main aim” is their “subjective constitution” or education, a personal goal that transforms them nevertheless into individuals capable of assuming general aims.

For Hegel, the adult man is still an *oikonómos* and a *politês*, an *actor* and a *civis*, the administrator of the home and the city, the one who takes responsibility for public and private matters. The child, on the other hand, is a savage who has not yet managed to rise above his immediate desires. Hegel concludes that a people “is always rooted in history”, at some stage of its evolution, progress or maturation. He goes on to explain that “in the same way as an individual is educated within a State” and “in the same way as they are raised as individuals to a general level”, through this raising the child becomes a man. “In that same way also”, he concludes, “the whole people is educated: its state of childhood or barbarism is thus exchanged for a rational state”.

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12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 22

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 437.

### III

According to Hegel, communities evolve in a similar way to individuals. At either pole of their evolution are savage peoples, without a State, and civilized peoples, with a State. An individual's relationships with both are not the same either. In order to understand this difference, it would be wise to leave Hegel aside for a moment and recall an article published a century later by Cairo magistrate René Maunier. Maunier denounced the supposed mistakes made by certain European journalists and intellectuals on the North African anti-colonialist rebellions. According to him, such nationalist revolutions were neither revolutionary nor nationalist because their nation and revolution, on the contrary, arose from the colonial tutelage they were rebelling against, from that civilizing process they were resisting through ignorance<sup>16</sup>.

Tutelage was, to start with, a “revolution” as it had introduced that “profound and radical change” which might have “abrogated or altered” “the aboriginal inhabitants’ conceptions and traditions”. Such alteration of traditions arose from the institution of a “laic or written law” which ruled “everyone no matter their religion”, and without which no modern nation could exist<sup>17</sup>. Hence, colonial tutelage introduced “two true revolutions in aboriginal life” given that “the inhabitants’ right used to be religious and customary”, traditional or ancestral. Due to the “abolition of traditions” and the subsequent modernization of these regions of the globe, colonial occupation for the first time introduced the idea of a nation. This was understood not only as a group of individuals submitted to the same laws, but also as individuals, that is, independent legal subjects, more precisely, now emancipated from their family, their tribe or their clan.

In tribal or family law individuality was “always submitted to the community” whereas colonial occupation would have fulfilled the mission of “emancipating” the individual, separating them from their “relatives and neighbors”, hence embracing “two new feelings which are the true source of yearning for freedom: the individual’s independence, the individual’s vindication.<sup>18</sup>” According to Maunier, children had been submitted to the patriarchs’ political authority until they would be able to replace them, and to their ancestors’ moral authority for the rest of their lives. The reason why it was then possible to talk about “emancipation”, was that “from now on every individual has become a legal subject” with “rights and duties as individuals”. For this reason they were different from

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<sup>16</sup> René MAUNIER, “L'autonomisme aux colonies”, 25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

“the father or the chief, who represented or symbolized their group”<sup>19</sup>. Hence, the law of the state freed individuals from patriarchal tutelage. This French magistrate added that even colonial censuses counted individuals and no longer homes or families. This was always resisted with indignation by the chiefs and patriarchs, similar to the leaders of the Jewish resistance to roman censuses. According to them, the true unity, the genuine social cell, was the family or the tribe.

In the same way as a young person became a *cives* when they came of age, for Maunier peoples reached adult age when they no longer were composed of disperse clans and tribes and became *civitates*, which has meant nation states since the nineteenth century. The national *civitas* ended up liberating the individuals from communitarian duties. According to him, that is why a *civitas* was not composed of a multitude of minorities but was a fragmentation of such minorities. This was a widespread point of view in those years in which European national states were formed. As far as Rome is concerned, German thinker Theodor Mommsen celebrated the “necessary transition from cantonal particularism, where the history of all nations begins, to national unity, where the revolution of its progress ends or must end”, whereas his countryman Max Weber considered the passage from an ethnic nation to a civil nation – from *ethnos* to *polis* or from *pagus* to *civitas* – as the result of a “rationalization” process due to which national patriotism substituted atavistic tribal or family honour.

Maunier had no prejudices about presenting colonial intervention as apostolic “preaching” which aimed at the “conversion” of all pagans. “Between us french people, since the beginning we have tried to convert locals religiously and morally, politically and socially”, propagating “our way of thinking, our feelings” through their instruction, french-frying the locals by teaching them our state of mind”<sup>20</sup>. For this magistrate, Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt had not only been “ethnographic” but also “democratic”, since he had decided to “reform and educate the locals” as well as to “indoctrinate the Egyptians so as to transmit our customs to them”. Napoleon might not have invaded Egypt only to get to know its *folk* but also to establish a *civitas*. This was thus “the missionary role of dominant nations”: “between us”, as concluded Maunier, “to colonize is to teach”, and for that reason colons are “all missionaries of progress” who even in trivial café talks fulfill the function of “mentors”, since they operate a “big change of mentality among the inhabitants” of the colonies. This gives the locals, through their example, “a taste for freedom” or a desire for emancipation of the individuals from the tutelage of retrograde tribes and patriarchal bondages.

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

Maunier believed that there was no conflict whatsoever between individual and State, because individuals were emancipated from family tutelage, and came of age when they became citizens, due to the substitution by the State of customary traditions for the civil code or the substitution of religious obligations to ancestral customs for citizen subjection to a laic law. Hegel had referred to this emancipation operated by the State in the paragraphs devoted to the emergence of civil society in his *Philosophy of Right*. In his opinion, the civil society or the association of citizens was not composed of an accumulation of families or local communities. It was made up of individuals emancipated from the tutelage of their families or their tribes, that is “private persons whose aim is their own interests” and act accordingly. However, the emancipation from family or tribal tutelage, the passage from minority to majority, from childhood to adulthood, or from being a child to being a citizen, would not be possible without the State mediation, in such a way that an individual’s “selfish aim” would only come true thanks to the social aim of the State. In this aspect Hegel relied on the incalculable ambiguity of the German term *Bürger*: *oikónómos* and *politês*, *actor* and *cives*, the one that looks after their own private interests as well as general interest. Hobbes or Locke’s “possessive individualism” had not existed, according to him, before the creation of Leviathan, but afterwards. Before the creation of the State, there were no selfish individuals but families and tribes; there was no absence of law or a natural state but customary law; there was no civil society but family or communal solidarity; there was no rational judgment but mythical narration. Hegel thought that the radical difference between the East and the West relied on this contrast.

The end of the 20th century debate between Communitarians and Individualists, or between Particularists and Universalists, would repeat thus the old Augustinian dichotomy between *Civitas Dei* and pagans such as was interpreted by modern colonialism. Partisans of individual moral autonomy such as John Rawls or Jürgen Habermas, would defend the nation state as opposed to ethnical minorities and universalism against community particularism. Communitarians such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel or Amitai Etzioni, would defend ethnical minorities, moral heteronomy and communitarian particularism against illusory individual autonomy and supposed state or imperial universalism. In other words, whereas the former continue to adhere to a secularized version of *Civitas Dei*, the latter vindicate pagans and minorities. For Communitarians we are still like children who live and think under someone else’s guidance, and there is no way out of this moral heteronomy: an individual who does not abide by the moral dictates of their community becomes simply amoral. Only communities may aspire to a certain degree of autonomy, that is to say, independence of their values and private practices. Communitarians consider that state or hege-

monic cultures ought to respect them. But it would be a mistake for them to relate ethics or morals with individual autonomy, that is, with their emancipation from communitarian tutelage as suggested by Paul's soteriology. For Universalists, on the other hand, to sacralize such particularisms and force individuals not to profane or criticize a minority's values would mean to condemn them to live under the community's tutelage, denying their autonomy and critical thought. Communitarianism would mean, for them, discarding the project of modernity and renouncing to the Kantian concept of man coming of age.

When defending minority cultures, Communitarians implicitly opposes the parallelism set forth by Saint Paul between an individual inserted in a traditional community and a minor under tutelage. That opposition to Saint Paul's tenacious metaphor suggests to what extent Communitarians is a symptom of the crisis of modern colonialism during the second half of the 20th century. Besides, the disagreement between Communitarians and Universalists carries on reproducing a contradiction inherent to modernity: the search for universal human values and the criticism to any universalization, considered as an imperialistic generalization of individual values or an ideological naturalization of historical practices.

Two recent attempts to solve these paradoxes stand out. Explicitly opposing Anglo-Saxon communitarians, Alain Badiou finds universality to be separate from imperialism in a remarkable interpretation of Saint Paul's texts<sup>21</sup>. On the other hand, Toni Negri and Michael Hardt think that universality is ineluctably associated to the project of a world empire, but this new empire is no longer one people's domination over others but the replacement of the different peoples with the planetary cooperation of the multitude<sup>22</sup>. In order to confirm their thesis they suggest a materialistic interpretation of Saint Augustine's *The City of God*. In this way, they both seek to solve the contradiction of morality by returning to its sources.

Translation: Cecilia Beaudoin

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