

## Appropriating Borges: The Weary Man, Utopia, and Globalism

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In the story, “A Weary Man’s Utopia” (1978; 1998) by Jorge Luis Borges, a traveler finds himself in an unrecognizable world. He enters the home of a man clothed in gray who has no name. The man lives in a time of shared global achievements—poverty, wealth and illness have been eradicated; also gone is the diversity of particular peoples, languages, places, cultures and governments. With particular differences and attachments no longer standing in the way, the people of the future are able to realize universal human goals. This paper appropriates images from Borges’s story to explore assumed tensions between particularism and universalism. We grapple with the question of how, in an age of fundamentalisms, particularism can be understood to be “justifiable in universalist terms” (Nussbaum 13). This question has been addressed in the political science literature in the context of conversations regarding patriotism and cosmopolitanism; the former being assumed to correspond to particularist attachments and the latter to universalist ideals. Efforts to promote localism or globalism are understood as loosely representing popular outgrowths of particularism and universalism, respectively. We begin with a brief overview of that academic conversation and then move on to a discussion of how Borges’s fictional images lend themselves to a more nuanced understanding of the issues underlying that academic conversation. In particular, we argue that Borges’s tale makes vivid the ramifications of emphasizing the universal to the exclusion of the particular, thereby exposing the significant problems such an approach must confront.

One area in which the academic literature regarding particularism and universalism has manifested itself is in discussions of patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Accordingly, the conversation has been directed toward the need to reconcile, as one author put it, “the conflicting imperatives of political legitimacy and cultural inclusiveness” (Laborde 591).<sup>1</sup> How can the fierce attachments provoked by the particulars of one’s place—its history and political culture—serve overarching principles such as justice, liberty and democracy? Put another way, how can affect be made “safe” for democracy (Markell)? At the center of much of this discussion is Habermas’s development of the concept of *constitutional patriotism*, and his treatment of political affect accordingly. This conceptualization of patriotism grew out of Habermas’s participation in public conversations in Germany in the 1980s over how to reconcile contemporary German political identity with German history. Habermas perceived neoconservatives as attempting to soft-pedal German history in order to “normalize German identity” (Markell 42). In view of both German history and the more general history of nation-state development and the racial and ethnic intolerance and brutality that is often a product of such development, Habermas concluded that the only normatively palatable route to political integration is to direct political affect toward a set of abstract, universal principles that can unite diverse peoples and serve the interests of liberal democracy. According to Markell, Habermas’s constitutional patriotism, “unlike earlier forms of patriotism and nationalism, valorizes a set of universal norms rather than a concrete historical community” (44).

Because the universal principles intended to redirect political affect spring from particular historical contexts, however, there is an unavoidable and tensed relationship between the two (Markell). Subsequent theorists of constitutional patriotism often overlook this dependence on particular political context and history altogether. They contend that patriotism,

in order to be legitimate in the context of liberal democracy, must be removed from cultural particulars entirely, and solely oriented toward universal principles such as those put forth in constitutional form (Laborde 592). There must be, in brief, an “uncoupling” of “political loyalty and cultural affinity” (Laborde 593). Laborde contends that such an uncoupling begs the question of how abstract principles will invoke the sense of solidarity, mutual interdependence, and trust that are the foundations of liberal democratic governance. Accordingly, Laborde offers an alternative conceptualization—namely, *civic patriotism*. This civic patriotism, Laborde purports, is more “situated” than the various renderings of Habermas’s constitutional patriotism (592). Civic patriotism maintains that it is neither possible nor advantageous to reject political culture in an effort to bolster commitment to universal ideals. Civic patriotism

urges that existing political cultures be democratically scrutinized and re-shaped in an inclusive direction. It promotes a *mainly political identity*, whose political content makes it compatible with a variety of practices and beliefs, but whose thin particularistic form justifies citizens’ commitment to specific institutions and practices. (612)

Civic patriotism, Laborde argues, is intended to right the failure of constitutional patriotism to “take seriously the need for cultural mediations between citizens and their institutions” (592).

Rather than proposing an alternative conceptualization, Markell poses a significant challenge to Habermas’s constitutional patriotism, and offers a reading of Habermas that reconciles the matter. For Markell, the effort to redirect political affect to general abstract principles runs into problems because of its dependence upon particulars. In other words, because of its dependence on particular political cultures, constitutional patriotism is thus subject to the same worrisome wiles as older, less sanguine versions of patriotism. Moreover, universal

principles cannot be articulated in such a way that they are unchanged in the process. Markell concludes:

If normative principles always depend on supplements of particularity that enable them to become objects of attachment and identification but that also never are quite equivalent to the principles they purport to embody, then perhaps constitutional patriotism is best understood not as a safe and reliable identification with some pure set of always already available *universals* but rather as a fragile political culture that habitually insists on and makes manifest this failure of equivalence for the sake of the ongoing, always incomplete, and often unpredictable *project of universalization*. (57-58)

Could the “supplements of particularity” to which Markell refers serve a more positive, rather than a merely unavoidable role in the project of universalization? That is, might the particular attachments to, and identification with, one’s compatriots proffer a right posture toward shared institutions? Habermas’s notion of patriotism presumes that “vertical” attachments among citizens to universal principles take precedence over “horizontal” attachments between citizens (Markell 55). Markell suggests a reversal of this ordering.

Rather than only allowing our relation to the central imaginary object [shared institutions] to guide our relations to individual others, might we...*also* allow love, sympathy, indebtedness, or gratitude toward particular others to generate new and different affects toward the state, the constitution, or the political culture? Affects, perhaps, such as fear, anger, and shame? (55)

Markell uses an example, taken from Habermas, of a protest following the murders of three women in Mölln by neo-Nazis. In large part, the protests were directed at the German government in order to dispute its unwillingness to respond promptly and vigorously to earlier

violence. It is the compassion of German citizens for the victims and their families that fuels an outrage over, and ultimately correction of, state policy. The protest is a pertinent example because it suggests an unwillingness on the part of citizens to accept “the claim of the state to be a true or an adequate instantiation of the will of the German people” (Markell 57). It is a particular identification that generates the critique of state policy and actions. Particularistic attachments serve as a corrective to uncritical deference to formal political institutions. Markell thus proposes not a shunning of particularistic attachments, but rather a way of seeing them as a potential inroad to a more earnest commitment to the ideals of liberal democracy—as opposed to a mere commitment to the constitution, institutions, procedures or dictates of liberal democracy.

In an article written in the months following September 11<sup>th</sup>, Martha Nussbaum argues that such particularistic attachments are the basis of more generalized moral concern (2001). While her purpose in the article, “Can patriotism be compassionate?”, is to consider how moral concern might be extended beyond immediate others, she nevertheless suggests that without those local attachments we are not capable of a broader compassion for humankind. Care for others is learned first in small, immediate circles. Only with that foundation can human beings learn to extend such care to others beyond that circle. Attempts at developing an abstract, generic care for humankind without originating such care in concern for particular, known others will degenerate into care for no one. The question is how to ensure that such local care does indeed develop into a more general, universal care for humankind:

If we want our life with others to contain strong passions—for justice in a world of injustice, for aid in a world where many go without what they need—we would do well to begin, at least, with our familiar strong emotions toward family, city and country...Compassion begins with the local. But if our moral natures and our emotional

natures are to live in any sort of harmony, we must find devices through which to extend our strong emotions—and our ability to imagine the situations of others—to the world of human life as a whole. (Nussbaum 12)

Affect may not only be an inroad to the continuing development of universal principles of justice, mercy and care—it may be the foundation.

Drawing her arguments from Stoic writings, Nussbaum states that the cosmopolitanism that she advocates does not deny local attachments or their importance, rather it suggests that we understand those attachments as the center of a series of ever-widening “concentric circles” (9). The largest, outermost circle would represent the whole of humanity. Local particular attachments and the special care and attention that they encourage can thus be understood as “justifiable in universalist terms” (13). She explains:

Politics, like child care, will be poorly done if each thinks herself equally responsible for all, rather than giving the immediate surroundings special attention and care...To take one example, we do not really think our own children are morally more important than other people’s children, even though almost all of us who have children would give our own children far more love and care than we give others. It is good for children, on the whole, that things work this way... (13)

The task then, Michael Walzer adds, is not to deny the importance of local identifications, but to find means to open the inner circles of affection and attachment outward, extending our “sense of moral fellowship and neighborliness” to ever increasing groups of people, and ultimately, to all humankind (Walzer 126). Particularistic attachments can thus be understood as a necessary—but not sufficient—condition for the moral concern of which Nussbaum speaks.

The overarching concern in the academic literature, then, is how to move from particulars to universals—that is, how do we protect ourselves and others from the danger particular attachments pose to universal principles such as democracy, justice and liberty? Again, how can affect be made safe? One approach is to eschew the significance of particulars, or to deny them altogether in an effort to temper potentially dangerous passions. The story, “A Weary Man’s Utopia” (1975), depicts a future world in which this route is taken, where universal ideals are achieved by eliminating particularistic attachments. Thinking about this depiction, we argue, helps to expose the significant problems faced by this approach.

## II

Jorge Luis Borges’s fantastic stories offer “an allegorical architecture for philosophical and ideological concerns”, as Beatriz Sarlo puts it (5). While often noted for its exploration of metaphysical and philosophical problems, Borges’s fiction also explores questions of political philosophy, in particular, the idea of utopia.<sup>2</sup> Discussing several Borges stories that have often been considered from a philosophical point of view, Beatriz Sarlo concludes that they

can be read not only as philosophical but also as political-philosophical fictions. . . .

[T]his does not mean that they discuss a philosophical problem in a systematic manner, but rather that they present it in a narrative situation. Political philosophy is not to be learnt from Borges. But he does invent plots where a philosophical question is confronted by means of fictional devices and processes. There is no answer to the question. What we find, instead, is the literary development of the problem in the form of a plot built around fictional hypotheses that describe a utopian—or, in effect, a dystopian—order. (78)

“A Weary Man’s Utopia”, when read along these lines, is intensely useful to the prior discussion regarding the relationship between universal principles and particular attachments. The following paragraphs provide such an appropriation of Borges’s provocative story.

The story’s epigram, “He called it ‘Utopia,’ a Greek word which means ‘there is no such place’”—a line from Francisco de Quevedo—sets the theme for Borges’s meditation. This story narratively constructs a utopia realized by its inhabitants themselves becoming placeless. In our view, considering the allegorical architecture of this story helps us better understand the tension noted in the academic literature between passionate local attachments and universal human ideals. The story’s depiction of a world void of the former underscores the crucial role such attachments play in both human identity and culture.

In the story, Borges gives us what amounts to a travelogue of one Eudoro Acevedo, a native of Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century. Eudoro finds himself transported to the distant future, conversing with a frightfully tall, nameless man dressed in gray. Here Eudoro learns that many of the social ills of his own time—war, poverty, etc.—no longer exist. His conversation with the weary man reveals that this ‘utopia’ has been realized, and is sustained by, the systematic elimination of diversity. Facts of time and place are not of interest to anyone in this future. “In school,” the stranger informs Eudoro,

“we are taught Doubt, and the Art of Forgetting—especially forgetting all that is personal and local. We live in time, which is successive, but we try to live *sub specie aeternitatis*. There are a few names from the past that are still with us, though the language tends to forget them. We avoid pointless precision. There is no chronology or history; no statistics, either. You told me your name is Eudoro; I cannot tell you mine, because everybody calls me ‘somebody’ or ‘you’” (461).



Individuals in this future are educated to become not only placeless but also timeless. History and fact are “mere points of departure for speculation and exercises in creativity” (461). By forgetting the particularities of place and history—living under the aspect of eternity, or, detached fantasy—individuals have no grounds for either love or strife. Having forgotten everything, they are at peace.

Given this denial of place, cities no longer exist. Individuals of this strange future are self-reliant to the extent that they need neither *polis* nor family. Each person progressively rises out of his or her local and personal attachments such that by the time of their maturity they are “able to do without love and friendship” (463). Work is speculative, creative and solitary; the stranger mentions the arts, philosophy, mathematics, and one-handed chess as typical vocations. What is common to these pursuits is their abstractness, and with the inclusion of one-handed chess, perhaps we are meant to think their pointlessness as well.

Love and friendship have been typically thought to be what binds communities together. Aristotle thought, for instance, the bond of friendship is the chief social virtue, without it there could be no society. Even the ideal of self-sufficiency was unimaginable without friends and community, for Aristotle. But, in the weary man’s future there are no binding affections because such particularistic attachments are understood to engender enmity and strife. To have loved ones, it seems, implies having hated ones—enemies. Without deep passion for any others, people are free to be peaceable. It is a peaceableness that flows from a lack of care, rather than an abundance of it.

One might describe this as an extreme—yet strangely universal—individualism. The individual stands alone dislodged from time and place and people; she is every individual. Each one must make his own way; each must, as Eudoro suggests, “be his own Bernard Shaw, his own

Jesus Christ, and his own Archimedes” (464). There is no building upon the past; there is no shared cultural vision that unites. What unites, instead, is the very absence of culture and tradition. While each person is self-reliant, making “on his own the arts and sciences that he has need for”, he or she is not self-reliant in the Emersonian mode. The stranger has built his own house, yet it is “like all other houses” (464). Their creators bereft of particularizing passions, the works produced are homogeneous and bland: the house is described simply as “squat and rectangular”; the stranger’s paintings appear to Eudoro almost blank; his music barely audible.

The story hints at the political ramifications of such individualism. Early in the story, when Eudoro is trying to find a language to communicate with the stranger, finally settling on Latin, the stranger explains why this tongue has become the universal language: “The diversity of languages encouraged the diversity of nations, and even encouraged war; the earth has returned to Latin” (461). Here the diversity of tongues and peoples implies conflict—sameness, it is assumed, makes for unity and peace. Absent diversity, the danger of impassioned faction is no longer a threat. In fact, governments, according to the stranger,

gradually fell into disuse. Elections were called, wars were declared, taxes were levied, fortunes were confiscated, arrests were ordered, and attempts were made at imposing censorship—but no one on the planet paid any attention. (464)

This governmentless future is a result of forgetful individualism—the people simply forgot about their governments, ignoring them out of existence.

Moreover, this ambivalence—or, willful ignorance—extends far beyond matters of state. It has become existential ambivalence for the people of this future world, causing them to question the fundamental value of human existence. Having eliminated the natural and social causes of death, life ends when a person chooses to commit suicide. The people of his utopia

are, the stranger says, masters not only of their lives but also even their deaths. When Eudoro asks why they have just one child, the stranger says, “it is not advisable that the human race be too much encouraged” (463). He then goes on to mention that they are discussing the advantages and disadvantages of ending the human race by mass suicide.

As the story draws to a close, a tall woman and several men help the stranger empty his house of its contents and then escort him to a distant domed tower, which we are told is a crematory. One of those accompanying the stranger informs Eudoro that the death chamber inside “was invented by a philanthropist whose name . . . was Adolf Hitler” (465). In keeping with his casual agnosticism, the stranger shows neither fear nor hope in the face of death—only blithe indifference. It appears that his life, lived in dispassionate solitude, is not difficult to let go of.

Eudoro Acevedo stands in stark contrast to the stranger from the future. He is cosmopolitan in the typical 20<sup>th</sup> century sense of the term. Born in Buenos Aires in 1897, his profession is that of academic, his field the study of a literature and culture not his own. His life is immersed in other languages and traditions. (It is only his ability to speak Latin, for instance, that allows him to communicate with the stranger.) The questions he asks the stranger also indicate his broad interest in culture and tradition: he inquires about museums, libraries, and the like.

Eudoro clearly is critical of his own age and sympathetic to the stranger’s however. When the stranger says that printing has been abolished, being one of humanity’s greatest evils, “for it tended to multiply unnecessary texts to a dizzying degree”, Eudoro offers a reflection on his own age’s obsession with news, politics, and money. He notes that in his time, “The planet was peopled by spectral collectives—Canada, Brazil, the Swiss Congo, the Common Market” (462).

These “Platonic entities” were real only because of the texts that documented the least trivial detail of their actions. In his age, people believed whatever they saw in print; text defined reality, word preceded thing. So, Eudoro is no doubt impressed that the people of the future are no longer obsessed with money or dominated by abstract non-entities such as nations and markets. Yet, as an academic immersed in texts and a writer producing them, he must also find the ahistorical, acultural, mono-lingual conditions bringing this about disturbing.

Eudoro stands critical of the conflict and nationalisms of his own age. Yet, when he is presented with a future that has moved past these things, he sees a weary man’s utopia—a utopia in which people have gained peace and safety at the cost of individuality and diversity. Eudoro faces the same perplexing question we do: How does one overcome the ills of particularism and exclusivity without stripping human communities of the particularizing passions bound up in local histories and cultures? The weary man’s utopia depicts one way that diversity and thus potential conflict might be avoided, making evident the ultimate cost of this approach.

### III

Borges himself shares many characteristics with Eudoro: both are fascinated with American and English Literature; writers of fantasy; and, skeptical of governments generally, and patriotic nationalism in particular. The latter is notably important for our purposes. In a short essay of 1946, “Our Poor Individualism”, Borges argues that Argentine individualism might be what is needed to prevent the rise of such destructive states as the Nazi regime. “There is no end to the illusions of patriotism”, the essay begins (309). The state is “impersonal”; “an inconceivable abstraction” (309). As such, patriotic devotion to it tends to destroy one’s individuality. The Argentine, who tends not to identify with the Argentinean state, conceives of himself or herself only within a network of personal relations in a particular place. She is “an individual, not a

citizen” (309). Borges recommends this individualism, because it acts as a brake on nationalism, which “seeks to captivate us with the vision of an infinitely tiresome State” (310). The rooted individual is skeptical of governments and their attempts to interfere with his or her life. Consequently, this understanding of Argentinean individualism points a way toward minimizing the state’s ability to captivate its citizens with its own vision.

In keeping with this particular tradition of individualism, Borges seems to have viewed himself and his work as situated and concrete. In the author’s note to the *Book of Sand* (1978), in which “A Weary Man’s Utopia” appears, Borges says:

I do not write for a select minority, which means nothing to me, nor for that adulated platonic entity known as the masses. Both abstractions, so dear to the demagogue, I disbelieve in. I write for myself and for my friends, and I write to ease the passing of time” (8).

This situated individualism is radically different from the individualism depicted in “The Weary Man’s Utopia”. There, the individual becomes autonomous by rising out of local culture into an abstract global, or universal, culture. Borges’s Argentinean individualism on the other hand, finds its expression in personal and local relations. Both escape the volatile passion of patriotic nationalism, one by diminishing particularism, the other, through it.

We can extend Borges’s implicit critique of an abstract global—or universal—culture by looking at contemporary literature critical of globalization. Among writers and activists skeptical of globalization—as indicated by increasing trade liberalization and the attendant supportive political and corporate structures—not only has the fundamental commitment to trade liberalization as a panacea been questioned, but the possibility that it may fuel inequality within and between nations has been proposed (cf., Black; Dahrendorf; Sernau). A recent *World*

*Development Report* (2000), for instance, suggests that the incomes of wealthy and poor countries continue to grow more disparate alongside increasing trade liberalization. Global inequality, Dahrendorf contends, “builds paths to the top for some and digs holes for others” (24).

In their book, *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (1998), Esteva and Prakash present stories of grassroots resistance to the joint projects of globalization and modernization. The narratives depicted in the book spring out of an active affection for local culture and local practice, and a desire for greater local autonomy. If the best arguments for the neoliberal version of globalization tout universal human rights and ultimate prosperity as the end, these “sagas of resistance and liberation” (4) from globalization expose those ends as necessarily parochial, representing the “specific vision and interests of a small group of people”, or a small group of corporations (27). Similarly, McMichael warns that the key conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is likely to be “the conflict between the market culture that would unify the world and the popular cultures that differentiate the world as a mosaic of lifestyles” (xxx). Each of the two competing realms—i.e., the *global* and *local* respectively—is dependent for its continued existence upon “limiting the autonomy (or power) of the other” (McMichael xxx).

In short, perhaps a far greater concern than the particularistic attachments fueling the academic debate over patriotism is the non-particular and locally disinterested nature of economic globalization. Such globalization implies a fundamental denial of the importance of particular places insofar as it is predicated upon the mobility of capital. Accordingly, human communities are considered “primarily as a factor in transportation and transaction costs” (Gunn & Gunn 2). Wendell Berry writes:

The global economy does not exist to help the communities and localities of the globe. It exists to siphon the wealth of those communities and places into a few bank accounts. To this economy, democracy and the values of the religious traditions mean absolutely nothing. And those who wish to help communities to survive had better understand that a merely political freedom means little within a totalitarian economy. (Berry 29)

The increasingly global economy can be understood as dangerously ignorant of—or downright malevolent to—local peoples and their communities. While the social and environmental costs of the global economy are borne in local places and by the people living there (cf., McMichael), any given local community is an abstraction to global capital. By its very largeness the global economy cannot take into account the innumerable places and people that constitute it. Hence, some disparage the bumper sticker slogan, “Think Globally; Act Locally”; knowing as it does only statistically and from a distance, “global” thinking makes care for a particular place or a particular people difficult, if not impossible. When people and places are reduced to mere abstractions, it is easier to treat them as objects—as means to some greater, national—or *global*—end.

While Borges’s Argentinean individualism points us in a helpful direction and the story subsequently exposes both the pitfalls of universalism and detached individualism, neither provides an explicit answer to the question of how to negotiate the assumed tensions between particularism and universalism. “[P]olitical science,” Sarlo concludes, “is not to be learnt from Borges”. The value of the story, we argue, lies instead in its exposition of the cultural and political ramifications of abstracted universalism, suggesting that care must be taken to understand the important role of particular attachments. In this way, “A Weary Man’s Utopia” is

a narrative tool for extending and deepening critiques of globalization, and the many abstract and non-particular principles fundamental to that neoliberal project.<sup>3</sup>



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere the academic discussion has taken a variety of forms and semantic exchanges. For instance, it has been characterized as a matter of: patriotism versus cosmopolitanism (Nussbaum 2002); nationalism versus cosmopolitanism (Yack 1998); ethnic versus civic nationalism (cf., Xenos 1996; 1998); nationalism versus civic republicanism/republican patriotism (Viroli 1995; 1998); and, blind versus constructive patriotism (Schatz *et al.* 1999).

<sup>2</sup> James Irby explores this theme in Borges's fiction in "Borges and the Idea of Utopia". Beatriz Sarlo also notes Borges's exploration of order and utopia in her *Jorge Luis Borges: A writer on the edge*.

<sup>3</sup> Some of this material also appears in our paper, "Flying the Flag of Rough Branch': Rethinking Post-September 11 Patriotism through the Writings of Wendell Berry".

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