

Preface: The Vexed Universalism of Ethical Partisans

David Scott

I am a seething cauldron of peeves.
—Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Homestead, Homeland, Home*

1

In early March this year, I had the good fortune to visit Ghana for the second time. Formally, at least, I was there to give a seminar at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, Legon. As with my previous visit, in November 2022, this one too was facilitated by the Fanonian philosopher Chika Mba, to whom I am very grateful.¹ The seminar, affably and gracefully chaired by the political scientist Kojo Opoku Aidoo, was organized around my essay “Between Revolution and Repair: Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* in a Caribbean Intellectual Tradition,” published in 2023 in *Small Axe*.² Perversely, I feel obliged to say, publication has not secured the essay a restful sense of completion; it remains an open source of complex dissatisfactions and frustrations that seem only to demand further discussion, elaboration, and clarification. There is something in the essay’s itinerary, I fear, in its conceptual makeup and in the path it traverses, that draws a certain kind of disagreement. I won’t say much here about the essay’s ambition, only to underline that what’s at stake is to “reread” the text of Rodney’s book against its own idea of

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2 See David Scott, “Between Revolution and Repair: Walter Rodney’s *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* in a Caribbean Intellectual Tradition,” *Small Axe*, no. 72 (November 2023): 66–83. The essay is a contribution to a special section devoted to thinking about *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* fifty years after its publication.

itself and its time, out of the problem-space that constituted it and into ours (under some relevant description of “its time” and “ours”). I keep repeating in various contexts a prescient remark that C. L. R. James makes about rereading Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick*: “There is always, when reading great masterpieces of the past, a difference in emphasis between the author and the reader.”³ This is one way of stating my starting point, the idea of rereading for the present I want to practice: how to excavate a relevant “difference in emphasis” between the past of Rodney’s writing and the present of our rereading.

But truth be told, I had another agenda in Ghana besides the seminar, not unconnected, arguably, but nevertheless not identical with it. I had arranged to visit the distinguished political philosopher Ato Sekyi-Otu, now retired from more than three decades of teaching at York University in Toronto and living near Cape Coast. I had not seen him in more than twenty years. As is well known, Sekyi-Otu is the author of one of the founding texts of contemporary Frantz Fanon scholarship, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*, published in 1996, and of which, I am ashamed to say, I wrote a foolish youthful review.⁴ But it is his more recent work that now engages my attention, especially his books *Left Universalism*, *Africentric Essays*, published in 2019, and *Homestead, Homeland, Home: Critical Reflections*, published in 2023.⁵ These two books, written in the restless, disquieting absorption of his return to his homeland, Ghana, are fundamental meditations on two inexhaustibly vexed (and also interrelated) questions concerning our postcolonial time—namely, *universalism* and *home*. I want to think very briefly about some dimensions of the significance of Sekyi-Otu’s interventions, about why they are to my mind notable and inspiring—and *urgent*.

2

Now, my suspicion is that Sekyi-Otu may not always find me on the same conceptual page with him. I suspect that he might see in my work a disagreeable trace of postcolonial “poststructuralism,” an orientation he sees as a philosophical dead end (to put no finer point on it). In any case, *Left Universalism* is a militant statement of philosophical first principles; it aims, unapologetically, to retrieve the ground of *foundationalist* purposes without which, Sekyi-Otu asserts, we cannot begin to imagine an ethical politics beyond our common postcolonial malaise. The book, he says, is a defense of universalism thought of as a “formal” *metaethical* stance that justifies, a priori, certain substantive moral readings and conceptions and judgments.⁶ Strictly speaking, a metaethical position is typically presumed to stand back from the particular instances of practical moral reasoning in any given place and time. But here, notably, Sekyi-Otu demurs. For him metaethics is not simply an abstracted view from *nowhere*. To the contrary, in his perspective the metaethical stance of universalism is always-already *embodied* in cultural-historical particularities—the particularities, for

3 C. L. R. James, *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: Herman Melville and the World We Live In* (New York: C. L. R. James, 1953), 106.

4 Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). My review was published in *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 4 (1998): 1110–13.

5 See too the essays (including Sekyi-Otu’s) collected in Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Sofia Noori, eds., *Partisan Universalism: Essays in Honour of Ato Sekyi-Otu* (Wakefield: Daraja, 2021).

6 Sekyi-Otu, preface to *Left Universalism, Africentric Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2019), x.

example, of varied African worlds. Universalism is *immanent* to the specific forms of local knowledge in which they are experienced and articulated.

Universalism, Sekyi-Otu holds, is an “inescapable presupposition of ethical judgement” both in everyday life and in the life of reflexive critical practice.⁷ As I understand him, part of the point of his intervention is to discredit as spurious the claims of varieties of identity politics—inert cultural nationalisms of one sort or another—that see universalism as an *external* doctrine (a species of Eurocentrism; in effect, the cultural ideology of imperialism). Of course, needless to say, Sekyi-Otu does not dispute the existence of hegemonic modes of universalism or deny that Western colonial and neocolonial powers have consistently sought to impose these on the colonized and formerly colonized. But to critique Europe’s presumption of a singular universalism is no reason, in his view, to abandon universalism as a *project*. This is because for him universalism does not come from a cultural outside. The African need not stand around waiting for Immanuel Kant. Universalism, rather, is an ineluctable and ineliminable dimension native to *all* moral argument, without the assumption of which moral argument would not be cognitively coherent, humanly intelligible. This is why Sekyi-Otu sees no contradiction in being *both* a universalist in ethics and an Africacentrist in cultural ontology—he sees in their conjugation a generative *oxymoron*, an “intriguing paradox” that binds together familiar features of human being.⁸

The fact that *Left Universalism* was written (or “assembled”) on Sekyi-Otu’s “self-repatriation,” as he sardonically calls it, is especially crucial to its orientation, and in particular to the awakened sense of urgency with which it defends its idea of universalism. For, one of the lamentable features of our stagnant postcolonial era is a reactive culturalism in which the purported exclusivities of so-called local knowledge are set beyond the possibility of critique. To which Sekyi-Otu replies that nothing teaches the necessity of universalism better than going back home: “Nothing focuses the mind more compellingly on the essential tensions, requirements and possibilities of the human condition in history, on the irrevocable tasks of moral agents and the crucial imperatives of ethical reasoning everywhere than a return home.”⁹ It is here that the challenge of universalism takes shape most poignantly because it is where it seems most embattled.

And yet, as the aphorisms (witty and trenchant by turns) that constitute *Homestead, Homeland, Home* attest, home is scarcely a self-evident location. What is the relationship, Sekyi-Otu asks, between our homestead (where we sojourn), our homeland (where we come from), and our home (the place of final attachment, fellow-feeling, rapport)? What is home? Where? When? Home, Sekyi-Otu suggests, is a dreamland. It is always not-yet; it is never anywhere we can confidently identify. Home is neither a concrete presence nor an abstract absence. Home, rather, is a regulative ideal or animating *horizon* to which we are drawn as to an unnameable possibility.¹⁰ Home is always *to-come*. As Sekyi-Otu writes: “It is as if we are only ever permitted glimpses and intimations of

7 Sekyi-Otu, viii.

8 Sekyi-Otu, “Is She Not Also a Human Being?,” in *Left Universalism*, 12.

9 Sekyi-Otu, preface, x, xi, x.

10 It may not be surprising that much of the inspiration for Sekyi-Otu’s reflections on home come from, on the one hand, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), and, on the other, Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2000).

home from the dismal knowledge of what it is not, the blighted tapestry of places where at one point in time or another, by choice or happenstance, we lay our heads and dwell, the contingent homesteads of our fraught existence, beginning, alas, with the land of our birth.” Home, then, is a “lodestar,” a guiding principle, an incitement, a motivating force. “Nevertheless,” Sekyi-Otu continues, “that lodestar as lodestar endures. It can be described in stubborn spaces of refusal the world over, gleaned from the people’s murmurs and outbursts of discontent, prefigured in the aspirations and ends made manifest in their curses and demands, in so many insurgent practices presaging ‘this Africa to come,’ one local vision of the universal affirmation that another world is possible.”¹¹

3

Ato Sekyi-Otu describes himself as “a seething cauldron of peeves.”¹² I can identify with that. Provoked and exasperated by a hundred aggravations, large and small, near and far, ethical life maintains a mobile, combative intensity. Serenity here is a luxury. To Sekyi-Otu, there is no necessity to assume that, properly practiced, criticism should not be animated by the moral emotions of anger and discontent and resentment and, above all, *indignation*. On the contrary, in a world as callous and obdurate as ours, such aggrieved disquiets are not only natural; they are also indispensable, imperative. Reading Sekyi-Otu, one is reminded of the outraged voice of Stéphane Hessel’s poignant 2010 manifesto *Indignez-vous!*, calling on us to refuse the mindless indifference by which the powers that govern us seek to guarantee our conformity (his principal cause of concern, it is very relevant to remember, was the strife in Palestine).¹³ For Hessel (who died in 2013) indignation registers a tumult, an essential upheaval of the spirit, the animating ferment with which criticism ought to confront what is unacceptable, insupportable, in the current order of things. This too, I believe, is the transfiguring force of Sekyi-Otu’s dissenting attitude to critical moral thinking. The universalism he demands is vexed, a permanent work of redefinition and collective struggle grounded on the tacit assumption of our *given* universality. And what he calls us to is a community of ethical *partisans* whose only commitment should be to strive together *through* our differences (not in spite of them) for a home worthy of this common humanity.

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11 Ato Sekyi-Otu, “Epilogue: While I Am Still Old Enough to Dream,” in *Homestead, Homeland, Home: Critical Essays* (Wakefield, Quebec: Daraja, 2023), 252.

12 Sekyi-Otu, “The Argument,” in *Homestead, Homeland, Home*, i.

13 Stéphane Hessel, *Indignez-vous!* (Montpellier: Indigène, 2010); translated by Marion Duvert as *Time for Outrage!* (London: Charles Glass, 2011). I reflect on Hessel in David Scott, “Preface: Vous indignez-vous?,” *Small Axe*, no. 36 (November 2011): vii–x.