



# Afterlives *of the* Universal

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## Rethinking Law's Human

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Amherst College  
Department of Law,  
Jurisprudence  
and Social Thought, USA

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<https://research.kent.ac.uk/law-and-the-human-network/>

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"Afterlives of the Universal" will interrogate the legacies of the plural notions of universal humanity that have been central to modern legal doctrine, practice, and claims to legitimacy.

Foregrounding recent scholarship in biopolitics, political theology, and postcolonial theory, and with special attention to racial inequality, this two-day event will consider the contemporary situation of legal universalist conceptions of the human, as well as practical challenges and theoretical critiques those conceptions face today.

Call for paper proposals now open until 15 January 2020 - [LawandtheHuman@kent.ac.uk](mailto:LawandtheHuman@kent.ac.uk)

# Afterlives of the Universal

**The Universalist conceptions of humanity** that were forged in the Enlightenment revolutionised thinking about human life; its ethics and political organisation. Inscribed into the modern declarations that shaped the post-Enlightenment political project, these conceptions paved the way for the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Universalisms remain central to modernity's legal discourse and are indispensable to law's claim to legitimately and authoritatively engender normative understandings of the human and human life.

Yet what was once seen as the cornerstone of democracy, human rights, egalitarianism, and social justice, today is in serious peril. Universalisms of all kinds are denounced as culturally specific, utopian, reproductive of inequality and exclusivity, and impossible to realise in practice. At the same time, humanity as a general category has been tied to Eurocentric and colonial processes of domination, ordering and hierarchization, in which law and legal authority have been central mechanisms. Beyond these well-established critical discourses, the juridical categories of the universal, universality and universalism are also confronted by new challenges. Critical revisions to the figure of "the human" posed by current scientific, biomedical, economic and technological innovations seriously undermine law's accounts of a 'universal human'. Does law's modern, post-Enlightenment configuration remain appropriate for the new figures of humanity that are currently being imagined?

Despite these criticisms, universalisms and evocations of universal humanity enjoy a healthy "afterlife" within and outside the field of law. Universal humanity is strategically invoked in anti-racist political argument. Recent attempts to develop a new post-capitalist emancipatory politics in the continental leftist political tradition have offered new readings of Western Universalist and various theological discourses. In the legal field, from the assertion of human rights to reasonable personhood, responsibility and judgment, overt or latent universal conceptions of humanity persist in legal doctrine, practice and claims to legitimacy.

**Should we say therefore that today universalism is a "dead concept walking"?**<sup>1</sup> How can we reckon critically with the complex legacy of legal universalist thought in the contemporary period of scientific and social change?

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**The two-day symposium "Afterlives of the Universal"** will consider universalist conceptions of humanity in contemporary juridical and political conditions, and the theoretical critiques they face in legal thought and practice. Special attention will be paid to recent engagement with the notion of a universal humanity in critical race studies, biopolitics, political theology, and postcolonial theory.

Other questions the symposium is interested in exploring include:

- In what plural ways do legal thinking and practice work with conceptions of the human today, and to what extent do these draw upon, deploy, modify or conflict with universalist thought?
- Is universalism realizable in law and practice, or does it always conceal and reproduce inequality?
- Can law respond to the challenges of post- and anti-universal conceptions of human life? Would this compromise its specific claim to legitimacy, or can an alternative juridical or political grounding be found?
- Does contemporary transnational legal globalism entail a de facto universalism?
- How do recent critical revisions of the figure of "the human" interact with the complicated political, ethical and legal "afterlives" of the universal?
- Can or do universalisms still form part of a discourse of critique and resistance?
- Do post- and trans-humanisms lead away from the notion of "universal humanity", or entrench it?
- Through what practical techniques have universal conceptions of the human been made and managed?

**The organizers welcome paper proposals** on any topic related to the question of universal conceptions of humanity in connection with law.

- Proposals to the organizers by **15 January 2020**
- Some (limited) financial support is available to a graduate student applicant
- More information: [LawandtheHuman@kent.ac.uk](mailto:LawandtheHuman@kent.ac.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> See Boris Buden (2007) "Strategic Universalism: Dead Concept Walking"  
<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/0607/buden/en.html>