
Massimiliano Tomba, *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. xii, 286.)

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This is a game-changing book and not only for political theorists. Historians (and others who work with historical materials) will find an original argument about time that challenges what have become (at least since the eighteenth century) conventional ways of thinking about it. The book is nothing less than an attempt to “deprovincialize” or “decolonize” the linear temporality of modernity, to insist instead on the coexisting multiplicities of lived time and the tensions among them, and to treat the past not as a dustbin of discarded options but as “an arsenal of futures” for political movements (13).

Massimiliano Tomba, formerly of the University of Padua and now a professor in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, is not the first to challenge what Walter Benjamin called “homogeneous empty time.” The distinction of Tomba’s book is that it documents what he elsewhere refers to as “the political uses of anachronism” in four historical case studies: the French and Haitian Revolutions (1793); the Paris Commune (1871); the soviets of the Russian Revolution (1918); and the Mexican Zapatista uprising (1994). In each case, Tomba shows, insurgents looked to communal experiences of self-government to challenge the practices that linked state monopolies of power with capitalist conceptions of private property and individual rights—practices that were legitimized as the necessary forward movement of history. “Western modernity has elevated these concepts to its own principles and enclosed them in the shell of the abstract subject of law. But freedom and equality are, above all, political practices that have emerged in the countless insurgencies that have undermined the existing order, opening it up to different outcomes” (15). That these insurgencies were often suppressed in the name of modernity’s forward march has made them no less vital for the political actors who, time and again, look to them for new inspiration. It is the demonstration of the fact of this impressive and ingenious historical appropriation that makes the book so compelling. In each of Tomba’s cases, protesters invoke legal recognition of communal rights to oppose the imposition of state centralization and/or regimes of private property. The critical historian’s role is to attend to these occurrences; the job of the political theorist is to theorize them; in his role as historian/political theorist, Tomba does both.

The repeated invocation of past political experiments in the name of communal autonomy leads Tomba to reconceptualize time itself. Modernity’s time is singular, positing sharp breaks between past and present: the traditional (the feudal, the primitive) is superseded by the modern, the old becomes obsolete as it makes way for the new. This representation of time, Tomba argues, is deeply political; it is the way modern state power has been legitimized. The synchronization of what were in fact disparate temporalities is a form of

violence that must be exposed and resisted. In its place, Tomba offers a more complex vision that involves examining concurrent tensions among temporalities; there are coexisting and multiple streams and roads, or shifting, unstable tectonic plates. The metaphors he deploys all aim at this representation: insurgencies overflow the banks of the river of time (1); or they form “the many underground rivers of a karst landscape” (13). (A karst landscape, according to my dictionary, is one “underlain by limestone which has been eroded by dissolution, producing ridges, towers, fissures, sinkholes and other characteristic landforms.”) Insurgencies are also represented as faults in the geological strata of history, or as “clumps of roads” that don’t necessarily form a straight line or an evolving path. And then there is the image of the prism: insurgent conflicts “act as prisms that refract the white light of universal history in the colors of the different temporalities” (7, 24). In all of these instances, insurgency is in excess of what counts as settled, contained history; it confronts rather than accommodates what is represented as necessary progress, interrupting any possibility of linear narrative.

The literal illustration of this confrontation is the charts presented in each chapter which juxtapose different legal or legalistic documents. Chapter Two examines the French revolutionary declarations of 1789 and 1793 and the French revolutionary constitutions of 1791 and 1795. Chapter Three covers the French constitutions of 1795, 1848, a declaration to the French people of 1871 and the “Manifesto of the 20 Arrondissements” in 1871, as well as the French constitution of 1958. In chapter four, there are the French constitution of 1793, the Russian constitutions of 1918 and 1936, and a number of declarations and decrees from 1917 and 1918. In chapter five, the Mexican constitution lies alongside the list of Zapatista proposals. Tomba has these documents speak to and across one another; they represent alternative visions of social order, not the progress of the modern over the traditional. They are visions, moreover, that refuse existing authority, not in the name of anarchy, but in the name of obedience to another (more just) authority.

What gives these insurgencies their universality, in Tomba’s definition of it, is people acting in common who “put into question the hierarchical organization of the social fabric” (41). It is the “in common” that constitutes universality (not universalism or *the* universal, which reduces multiplicity to singularity): “These groups were not merely the excluded who demanded inclusion but also true citizens who questioned the political and social order beyond the formal recognition of legal citizenship. They were the parts that were not reducible to the *peuple* of the nation-state and, in their actions, even exceeded it. In other words, they expressed the excess of the ‘rights of man’ over legal citizenship” (41). Tomba’s discussion of the Paris Commune’s proclamation of a Universal Republic in 1871 illustrates this nicely: “The universality of the Universal Republic was not about scale. It expressed political citizenship beyond national identity. Being ‘French’ in Paris during March–May 1871 was not a matter of national belonging but, rather, a political and social practice. The adjective ‘universal’ in reference

to the Republic conveys the completion of the twofold task of universalizing power and property" (82).

Insurgent Universality calls our attention to those moments in which "a democratic counterthrust to statism" and to capitalism offered "an alternative legacy to modernity." The legacy persists, Tomba argues, awaiting its contemporary invocations. With a new understanding of temporalities, we can see the legacy as "full of energy, able to reorient modernity and construct new possibilities for a different communal life" (27). It constitutes a living source of inspiration for those of us committed to egalitarianism and social justice. But are there other possible uses? Is there a danger of appropriation by forces whose definition of community or communalism is different? Tomba lets himself reflect on this possibility only briefly. As he celebrates the way in which "the archaic ceases to be simply past and becomes a trail marker of possible futures," he adds a caveat: "as long as we do not let the tremendous energy that springs from what-has-been fall into the hands of new reactionaries" (26). In some ways, it seems impossible that this could happen, given the book's attention to what amount to left critiques of state power and of capitalism in the name of communal autonomy and communal ownership of land and the means of production. What would a "reactionary" appropriation of that legacy entail? But also, what does the term "reactionary" (the general antithesis in political jargon of "revolutionary" or "progressive") imply for the alternative temporality Tomba has offered us?

These are questions to be answered by the kind of empirical/theoretical work Tomba has undertaken in this book. They are small points that do nothing to compromise the extraordinary achievement of *Insurgent Universality*. It is a book that will certainly become a classic across the disciplines and required reading for anyone thinking about the writing or the making of history.

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Benjamin R. Hertzberg: *Chains of Persuasion: A Framework for Religion in Democracy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 224.)

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In *Chains of Persuasion: A Framework for Religion in Democracy*, Benjamin Hertzberg begins with a long-standing question: What is the proper role of