

Book Review

Political Theory

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Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity, by Massimiliano Tomba.
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Massimiliano Tomba's *Insurgent Universality: An Alternative Legacy of Modernity* is a major scholarly achievement that powerfully intervenes in contemporary debates in political theory, historiography, geography, and the history of revolutions. It proposes nothing short of a remapping of the modern world that brings into relief a complex, transnational web of insurgent struggles for self-determination that contest the developmentalist trajectory of modern capitalist state formation. Its unique combination of scholarly rigor, critical acumen, and philosophic originality make it worthy of wide discussion and debate.

The sheer scope of Tomba's book—both historically and geographically—is impressive. After a significant methodological introduction, which I will turn to in a moment, there are in-depth chapters on the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, and the Zapatistas, followed by concluding remarks. In each case, the author combines nuanced knowledge of scholarly debates in multiple fields with highly original arguments. However, to fully understand the structure and flow of the book, whose brief summary might unwittingly suggest a unilinear narrative, it is necessary to elucidate the author's unique methodology, which has its roots in the work of Karl Marx, Ernst Bloch, and Walter Benjamin.

While navigating microhistorical debates on revolutionary conjunctures with impressive intellectual dexterity, Tomba simultaneously develops a macrohistorical account of what he calls an “alternative legacy of modernity.” He brings this heritage into view by displacing the privileged reference points of great theorists and leaders in favor of anonymous insurgents from below, whose theory manifests itself in collective action. His history is thus one characterized by a multiplicity of agencies and the tug-of-war of ongoing social struggles, across a space-time continuum that is constitutively

multidimensional, rather than by a single, grand march of history led by prominent individuals. The singularization of history and its reduction to streamlined narratives of development, he argues, is itself part of a colonial political project and its accompanying Eurocentric ideology. The telos of development is invariably the modern state and capitalist social relations. Anything short of that is considered undeveloped, backward, or anachronistic.

Far from providing his reader with one more diffusionist account of European modernity, or indulging in the dialectically opposite strategy of “discovering” European modernity outside of the Western world, Tomba jettisons the entire logic of unidimensional histories and geographies. This is one of his most powerful and important methodological contributions. History, for him, is a “multiverse” in which there are multiple, competing layers of time, and time itself—if such a thing exists—is subject to different rhythms and directions. The very idea of an “alternative legacy of modernity” thus refers to his endeavor, throughout the book, to tap into and bring to the fore strata of time that do not fit within the developmentalist march of capitalist and colonial history.

Tomba’s account of the historical “multiverse” not only breaks with unilinear history; it also displaces the very logic of a unidimensional geography. In each of the chapters, he is attentive to the ways in which insurgent struggles have connected to and revitalized times outside of the dominant temporality, but also how they have cut across nation-state-centric geography. His account of the French Revolution, for instance, situates it in the landscape of the Haitian Revolution in order to demonstrate how different actors from below, across disparate times and territories, connect to, interact with, and relay one another’s struggles. “The insurrections of the slaves in Saint-Domingue during August 1791,” he writes, “imposed the new political agenda for the revolution in Paris; the insurrection of August 10, 1792, forced the Legislative Assembly to abolish the active-passive citizenship distinction; the insurrections of May and June 1793 reopened the question whether the deputies should speak in the name of France as a whole, or in accordance with the people’s will as expressed in squares, assemblies, and societies” (37).

The same is true of Tomba’s account of the Paris Commune, which he connects back to lost opportunities of 1792–1793, while simultaneously situating it in relation to the Arab and Berber insurrection in Algeria in 1871. Similarly, he interprets the Soviet Constitution, in the next chapter, as “a path marker, indicating a direction leading out of the French experiments carried out in 1793 and 1871” (120). The Zapatistas are also situated in this deep history and multidimensional geography of rebellious struggles against hierarchical state power and capitalist hegemony. Against all of the streamlined

histories of modernity, which are organized in different ways around a developmentalist trajectory linked to Europe, Tomba outlines a transnational network of global insurgencies that have accompanied the colonial project and contested its social, political, and economic forms.

At the center of his analysis is the theoretical juxtaposition between universalism and universality. “Universalism,” he explains, “refers to a passive subject and a potential victim who must be protected and have his rights guaranteed” (32). The state plays a central role in this regard, as well as hierarchical forms of representation that purport to safeguard abstract individuals. By contrast, “universality refers to the agency of individuals and groups that do not claim rights but, rather, practice rights and liberties” (32). Rather than working within the extant political, juridical, social, and economic structures of a given society, universality—particularly in its insurgent form—challenges these structures by channeling the power of those below to make their own world. “Insurgent universality,” he writes, “has to be understood in the concrete situation of individuals who act in common and put into question the hierarchical organization of the social fabric” (41). Its subjects—including women, slaves, peasants, the poor, foreigners, and the indigenous—are not simply those who seek inclusion but rather those who contest the very system that excluded them in the first place.

In this regard, insurgent universality “distinguishes itself from universalism through a different way of practicing politics, which is characterized by the exercise of power starting from communities, associations, assemblies, councils, and groups” (20–21). Its subjects build alternative worlds, which have their own unique temporality and spatiality. They connect in various ways to “anachronistic” times consigned to the dustbin of history, or they prefigure potential times to come. They also construct bridges between spaces that have been segmented by nation-state ideologies, and they reveal heterogeneous spaces *within* the dominant geographic units. Tomba’s insistence on breaking down the presumptive monolithic unity of Europe, by exposing its internal stratification and alternative space-times, is a particularly welcome gesture in this regard. In sum, the “alternative legacy of modernity,” which the author tracks across a complex spatiotemporal multiverse, manifests itself in an insurgent universality that has “exceeded legal citizenship and questioned race, gender, and poverty—that is, the aristocracy of the white, male property owner as the citizen of the new configuration of exclusion, hierarchies, and inequalities within the paradigm of the legal equality of the nation-state” (68).

The political center of gravity of the book thus comes into full relief insofar as it generally operates within the framework of a form of Marxian autonomism that is anticapitalist, anticolonial, feminist, and antiracist. It advocates

for the insurgent force of the multitude over and against hierarchical forms of domination and exploitation. Rejecting the reductionist opposition between class politics and cultural politics, which plagues so many liberal approaches to Marxist analysis, Tomba demonstrates through myriad concrete examples the extent to which struggles for liberation are pitted against a system in which capitalist exploitation is so intimately intertwined with racial and gender oppression that they require holistic analysis instead of methodological atomization.

One of the questions the book raises, in this regard, is that of state power and strategy. On one reading, it could be taken as an antistatist embrace of left populism that sides with popular power and social movements over and against hierarchically organized parties and the state. The latter are always, or nearly always, represented by Tomba as corrupting forces that run the risk of adulterating the “democratic excess.” This, however, leads to a real conundrum: if capitalist hegemony mobilizes the full power of the state to impose and maintain profit-driven social relations, and if the primary weapon of those from below is to pluralize their struggles and avoid hierarchical forms of political organization, then aren’t the latter put at an enormous disadvantage, or perhaps even consigned to failure? “Decentralized parochial autonomy,” according to the historical analysis provided by Michael Parenti in *Blackshirts & Reds*, “is the graveyard of insurgency.”¹ Indeed, the insurrectionary movements celebrated by Tomba are, in general, those that have been crushed or marginalized, whether it be the various self-governed communities and autonomous clubs quashed by the Jacobins, the Paris *communards*, the “democratic excess of the plurality of powers” and local forms of self-government that were terminated by the Bolsheviks, or the Zapatistas (who did, originally, envision the possibility of an incursion into Mexican state power before refocusing efforts on building local autonomy) (141).

There is the risk, moreover, of elevating the idea and methodological form of insurgent autonomy above the complex weave of material forces and the precise content of political projects by casting it as the transhistorical value used to judge political tactics across time. By connecting this issue to the point in the preceding paragraph, we can say that one of the principal questions raised by Tomba’s book is the following: does an autonomous Marxian approach that maintains a principled skepticism toward state power run the risk of straightjacketing movements while focusing more on political form than content? Does it aspire, at most, to the glory of losing *correctly* by conforming to the principled “right method” rather than strategically winning through tactical compromises based on the de facto exigencies of concrete situations?

This issue comes to a head in the chapter on the Russian Revolution, which was the first successful anticapitalist social revolution in history. Instead of pointing to all of the practical compromises that were necessary to keep the Bolshevik revolution alive against the incredible counterrevolutionary assault, both internally and externally, Tomba champions the “plurality of powers” of the provisional government and ultimately sides with the Socialist Revolutionaries against the Bolsheviks. Whereas the former, he maintains, “continued the populist tradition and saw in the peasant reality fruitful anachronisms,” the latter had “inherited from Plekhanov a conception of history according to which there would be archaic forms to be destroyed and historical stages to accelerate in order to recover the Western European trajectory in the race toward socialism” (165). It is not clear, however, that the Bolsheviks were simply theoretically ensnared within models of Western state development. They were responding to a very practical problem in a unique historical conjuncture: how do you quickly transform a semifeudal, war-torn, and economically destitute country into a force capable of fending off the imperialist armies of the most powerful capitalist states, thereby preserving the gains of the revolution for the masses?

Much of the academic research in the Western world on the Russian Revolution has been the ideological product of what Walter Rodney calls “the bourgeois view of history,” which has been amply funded and supported by major capitalist business interests—via foundation grants—and propaganda centers like the Hoover Institution (whose connections to the CIA, the Pentagon, and the State Department have been underscored by Rodney). Since Tomba’s work is clearly allied with radical struggles and his scholarly engagements are so rigorous, it seems out of character for him to occasionally rely on historians whose work has been nurtured and supported by these interests—such as James Bunyan, Harold H. Fisher, Edward H. Carr, and Oliver H. Radkey—rather than on the rigorous materialist accounts found in the writings of William Blum, Domenico Losurdo, Michael Parenti, John Reed, and Walter Rodney. It is unfortunate, in this regard, that he does not engage with the literature on the massive military intervention in the USSR from 1918 to 1920, during which time fourteen capitalist countries unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the revolutionary Bolshevik government while supporting the counterrevolutionary insurgency within the country. In an ideal world in which socialism would have been allowed to develop unhindered by counterrevolutionary war (which has never been the case), local and self-directed forms of autonomous organizing would likely flourish. However, in the actual world, in which there has only ever been socialism under siege, the very survival of revolutionary movements has often required tight party unity and centralized organization.

The questions this book raises do not diminish its importance but rather make it that much more relevant to contemporary scholarly debate. Moreover, its insightful methodology—which proposes a multidimensional analysis of space-time that radically contests dominant histories and historiographical trends—has much to contribute to some of the most important and pressing discussions in political theory. Above all, *Insurgent Universality* demonstrates how an alternative map of the modern world—which gives pride of place to the recurrent, transnational uprisings against capitalism—can help orient our present and future struggles. Where some only see the smoldering embers of past and distant conflagrations of class struggle, Tomba reveals how these very embers continue to feed the fires of insurgency.

Note

1. Michael Parenti, *Blackshirts & Reds: Rational Fascism & the Overthrow of Communism* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997), 54.