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What Is (Insurgent) Universality?

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Abstract

In my response to Harry Harootunian, Aldo Beretta, Rebecca Fritzl, Niklas Plaetzer, and Vanita Seth, I discuss some of the terms that constitute the theoretical plot of my book: insurgent, universality, temporality. I also discuss the methodology of my work and the difference between radical democracy, insurgent democracy, and what I call the democratic excess. Eventually, in my response to Seth, I show how the work method of *Insurgent Universality* is maximally distant from any ontological discourse.

Keywords

insurgent universality – radical democracy – temporality – ontology

In sincerely thanking my reviewers for their generous critical remarks, I will try, where possible, to generate a kind of imaginary round table in which, in addition to making my voice heard, individual contributions are also in dialogue with each other.

One observation present in some of the reviews concerns the lack, in my text, of an unambiguous definition of terms such as insurgent, universality, and temporality. The observation should be taken seriously since these terms constitute the theoretical plot of my book. My immediate response is that the observation is both correct and off the mark at the same time. The observation is correct when one considers the political use that has been made of the term ‘insurgent universality’ in some publications that appeared soon after the book’s release. The term has been used to denote a politics that is able to unite

the proletariat or the oppressed classes in all their diversity. Or to prioritise not passive victims, but active agents of political practices of freedom and equality. Or the term has been used to denote mobilisations made possible by the real universality created by capitalist social relations.

These are partial definitions. At times, perhaps, they are in tune with the spirit of *Insurgent Universality* as a legacy articulated by a multiplicity of partial and complementary experiments.

But now, three years after the book's publication, the term requires greater clarification. Beretta and Fritzl correctly point out the distance between my notion of universality and a 'potential' and 'polemical' meaning of universalism. This means that universality is defined neither *against* a common enemy nor as a dimension that is present *in potentia* but yet to be implemented. Beretta and Fritzl propose some critical remarks. According to them, my notion of universality would risk falling into 'a relativist interaction between different lifeworld-rooted constellations of experience and expectations, without any mediation that links them together.'¹

This is an interesting criticism, because it is the opposite of a critical remark made by Vanita Seth, who instead reproaches me with a sort of fear that would block my reasoning on the pluralisation of temporalities. In other words, if for Seth, my work on the pluralisation of temporalities would stop for fear of the 'anarchy of relativism', Beretta and Fritzl see in my approach the risk of a 'relativist shortcoming'.

All I can do is respond to their opposing critical remarks. Beretta and Fritzl quote a passage from my book:

In an era where universalism risks becoming an empty shell [...] the alternative legacy of insurgent universality shows us another possibility [...]. This is the meaning of the beautiful image given to us by the Zapatistas in their 1996 *Fourth Declaration*: 'The world we want is one where many worlds fit.' Insurgent universality begins with this plurality of worlds.²

According to Beretta and Fritzl, to avoid the risk of a relativist mosaic of particularities, greater emphasis must be given to the *one* world where many worlds fit, that is, to a structure of unity that 'needs to be theoretically reconsidered' in the direction of the Hegelian concrete universal.³ As is often the case when quoting a long passage, some parts are cut out. But the cuts are

¹ Beretta and Fritzl 2022, p. X.

² Tomba 2019, p. 28.

³ Beretta and Fritzl 2022, p. X.

often more telling than the quoted parts. What did Beretta and Fritzl cut out? The line before the quoted text reads:

Insurgent universality is an experiment with the democratic excess of the plurality of powers. It is the *incompleteness of this* experiment – not the experiment in itself – which is shared.⁴

Where Beretta and Fritzl's citation stops, the text continues:

Insurgent universality begins with this plurality of worlds, authority, and forms of self-government; it begins with equal access to politics in the form of assemblies and groups; it begins with the Communard's universalization of politics and property; it begins with the councils' experiment of the democratic excess. Insurgent universality shows to what extent democracy and private property are compatible with each other – and to what extent they are incompatible.⁵

What is listed in this brief quotation are the book's chapters on the assemblies of the *Sans-culottes*, the associations of the Communards, the proprietary forms defended by the Russian peasants, and the self-government practices of the Zapatistas. The notion of 'universality' emerges from the 'historical' chapters of *Insurgent Universality*. Not from a definition or concept that I could have included in the book's Introduction. The theory I extract from concrete socio-historical practices serves to challenge dominant concepts and categories in modern political discourse.

From what has been said, the distance in perspective and method that separates my work from what Beretta and Fritzl observed should be already evident. The 'one world' in my work is constituted by the incompleteness of the experiment. These experiments share something, an idea of 'universality', which is unstable, fragile, and incomplete. For this reason, these experiments complement each other and must be investigated by digging into the concrete social-historical material from which they emerge. I want to clarify this idea by resorting to an expression of the Zapatista Declaration of June 2021, *From the Other Europe*. The Zapatistas speak of 'the long and hidden thread that unites different and distant geographies and links calendars near and far'.⁶ The 'long and hidden thread that unites' is not brought to light by a theory. Instead, it is woven by the practice of what the 2021 Zapatista Declaration calls 'the

4 Tomba 2019, p. 28.

5 Tomba 2019, p. 28.

6 <<http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2021/06/23/el-desembarco/>>.

human' as an *open common* experiment. This is the *one*, the common experiment with the world and ourselves. It requires a multiplicity of temporalities, and not the selective unifying structure of the Hegelian world history, which cuts out what does not correspond to a preordained rational course of historical progress. Whether it is the state, modern law, or socialism to be realised, Hegelian world history cuts out, as Beretta and Fritzl did, the concrete historical cases summarised in the second omitted part of the quotation. If chapters 1793, 1871, 1918, and 1994 are understood for what they are, that is, concrete cases from which I extract an alternative and open political theory, Beretta and Fritzl's critical remark falls on deaf ears. There is no need to bring up any 'thought-experiment' in which the 'Haitian antislavery insurgency, the Russian Revolution and the Zapatista insurgency all [happen] simultaneously'.⁷ The method of *Insurgent Universality* is maximally distant from any kind of thought-experiment. What I do is show that the practice of women's political citizenship in the French Revolution, the reactivation of the medieval imperative mandate operated in the assemblies of the *Sans-culottes*, the forms of ownership and self-government defended by the peasants in France and the Bossale communities in Haiti, constitute a *web* of social and legal practices *incompatible* with the modern national citizenship, the representative democracy, and the private property that were violently imposed in both France and Haiti. What I have called the *web* of social and legal practices extends not only geographically but also temporally to include the medieval imperative mandate and its reconfiguration during the Paris Commune, in the German Revolution, and in the Russian Revolution. That *web* also includes, among the very many possible cases, the democratisation of land-ownership relations in Zapatista practices and the forms of common land tenure of the Russian peasants.

At this point, some might think that insurgent universality consists in the political organisation of that 'web'. Even at the risk of disappointing some readers, the answer is no. *Insurgent Universality* is a book of theory. It is neither the manifesto of a new International, nor, much less, a substitute for praxis. There are historical events in which that web has been evoked and revived. That is what happened in the German republic of councils in 1919 – 20. A document from November 1918, *The United Republics of Germany and Their Constitution*, declared: 'Our revolution has already begun returning [*zurückkehren*] to the true democracy we can find in the medieval constitutions of municipalities and provinces, in Norway and in Switzerland, and especially in the meetings of the sections of the French Revolution'.⁸ These

7 Beretta and Fritzl 2022, p. X.

8 Landauer 2012, pp. 200–1.

geographic-temporal bridges form the ribbing of an *alternative legacy of modernity*. What *Insurgent Universality* does is provide political, legal, and economic categories for this alternative legacy. Working with the incommensurability between these categories and the dominant legal and economic forms, my book carries out a more-humble *insurgency* in the field of theory. It not only carries out a materialist critique of the state and private property, but also shows a real web of alternative social and political trajectories. This geographic-temporal web constitutes the unstable and fragile *universality* of a multiplicity of unfinished experiments.

The Communards of Paris knew something about this. There is a passage from the *Declaration to the French People* drafted by the Communards on April 19, 1871, that states: ‘universalising power and property’. Few phrases better than this express the meaning of the democratic excess that characterises insurgent universality. The *universalisation* of power takes place through a new institutional order characterised by dispersed power, provincial communes, assemblies, and the imperative mandate. The *universalisation* of property is not the handing over of private property from individuals to the state, but a practice of democratising property relations that gives priority to users and their reciprocal relations with the thing. These were the two vectors which made the Commune a *Universal Republic*. Democracy in action operated on the basis of political citizenship rooted in local assemblies, not in the privilege or chance of being born in one place or another. This democracy in action had begun to dissolve the rigid binaries between aliens and citizens, private property and state property, private and public, state and social, male and female.

At this point I hear Plaetzer’s voice drawing my attention to some similarities between my notion of insurgent universality and the conception of a ‘radical democracy’ developed by thinkers such as Claude Lefort, Étienne Balibar, and Jacques Rancière. Or even, and especially, the ‘insurgent democracy’ developed by Miguel Abensour. Plaetzer correctly points out my differentiation from Rancière, according to whom ‘democracy cannot consist in a set of institutions’.⁹ Instead, my notion of insurgent universality is articulated as a ‘new institutional fabric’.¹⁰ But it would be this differentiation, according to Plaetzer, that brings my argument close to that developed by Abensour on insurgent democracy and institutions. I can only follow the intelligent critical remarks Plaetzer puts forth.

As Plaetzer suggests, with Abensour I share the need to envision insurgent institutions capable of giving durational stability to a democratic form of life. But it is precisely here, where Abensour’s discourse and mine almost overlap,

⁹ Rancière 2015, p. 54.

¹⁰ Tomba 2019, pp. 21, 74, 218.

that the difference emerges. Abensour's lexicon is still grounded in oppositions: the irruption of the *demos* on the political scene is characterised by the vocation 'to act against both the state of the Old Regime and its remnants',¹¹ its insurgent institutions operate 'against the state' and are the manifestation of 'anti-state law'.¹² After all, this is the title of Abensour's book: *Democracy against the State*. The Machiavellian moment which Abensour revives in insurgent democracy is 'the principle of non-domination',¹³ the 'struggle against those whom Machiavelli calls the *grandees*'.¹⁴ His insurgent democracy is 'directed at non-domination, one permanently inventing itself to better perpetuate its existence and to defeat the counter-movements that threaten to annihilate it and to effect a return to a state of domination'.¹⁵ Where, then, is the difference? What I highlight from the analysis of the historical material is not an oppositional structure or the 'principle of non-domination'. This binary structure of opposition to the state and dominant forms would leave the definition and function of new institutions in a vacuum filled by new and old polemical oppositions. Going back to the passage quoted earlier, for Abensour the institutions of the insurgent *demos* would have the function of defeating 'the counter-movements that threaten to annihilate it and to effect a return to a state of domination'.¹⁶ Here is the risk of an oppositional political logic. What is grounded on the 'non' quickly shifts into an 'against'. The will to defeat the counter-movements was also the justification for the Terror that ended women's assemblies, the *Sans-culottes*' attempts to restore the medieval imperative mandate, and peasant advocacy of forms of communal ownership and local self-government. The polemical logic of non-domination is lacking. The conflict is not so much, or not only, between domination and non-domination, but concerns the *tension* between mutually incompatible legal systems that must be investigated historically. Materialistically. In other words, what emerges in the insurgencies I investigate historically is not only an action 'against', but a multiplicity of practices conforming to *another* legal system, which is incompatible with the dominant one in the modern nation-state.

Failing to grasp the fundamental difference between my work and that of radical and insurgent democracy theorists confused Plaetzer, who then projected his personal confusion onto the theoretical framework of *Insurgent Universality*: 'it is not clear how institutions could simultaneously enact a politics

11 Abensour 2011, p. xxiv.

12 Abensour 2011, p. xxviii.

13 Abensour 2011, p. xviii.

14 Abensour 2011, p. xxiii.

15 Abensour 2011, pp. xxiii–xiv.

16 Abensour 2011, p. xiv.

of temporal rupture *and* generate the stability that would give actors *enough time* to pose a substantive and lasting challenge to relations of domination.¹⁷ The answer is that what I call insurgent universality is not a ‘negative disordering’ but a *positive ordering* that reconfigures and combines institutional forms, legal practices, and customs. These are not anti-state by definition. Rather, in the practice of dispersed sovereignty they reconfigure the state from being the representative of unity, i.e., the nation, to a unit among units. I showed this in the chapter on the Paris Commune. The state continues to exist, but as a unit with particular, specific functions limited not by mechanisms of checks and balances, but by other powers in action. To grasp these dynamics, it is necessary to dig into the historical material and documents of the insurgents. Into their practices.

Moving toward the conclusion, another term needs to be examined. It is the term temporality and its pluralisation. This is the best time to bring in Harry Harootunian, who takes up an old observation by Foucault, who ‘once confessed he could hardly tell the difference between Marxian and bourgeois histories’.¹⁸ Foucault’s observation is correct to the extent that, and only to the extent that, both share an ‘uncritical adherence to a unilinear narrative form distinguished by a unidirectional progressive movement, punctuated by epochal stages as regular as scheduled train-station stops, announcing an after, now passed, and a before yet to come’.¹⁹ A number of thinkers drawing on the Marxist tradition, including Harry Harootunian and myself, have challenged the assumption of a unilinear historical temporality.

But here one must be theoretically and politically rigorous. It is not enough, as Seth seems to suggest, to pluralise historical temporalities to avoid the historicism and teleologism implicit in the unilinear conception of historical time. The question is how the plurality of historical times should be thought of in tension with dominant temporalities and how all these temporalities are qualified beginning from this tension. To prioritise the tension means *politically* highlighting concrete conflicts and struggles, and *theoretically* showing how the tension modifies the terms of the tension. It is now a matter of unpacking this statement.

Beretta and Fritzler note that in *Insurgent Universality* I use the term temporality both as a formal concept and to denote historical temporalities as their multiple concrete realisations. In a note they refer to Moishe Postone who distinguishes between abstract time and historical time, ‘where the movement *in time* as an abstract continuum is opposed to the movement *of time* as

17 Plaetzer 2022, p. X.

18 Harootunian 2022, p. X.

19 Harootunian 2022, p. X.

historically constituted transformation'.²⁰ To respond and to clarify my use of the term temporality, I would first like to show the difference between my work and Postone's. The main problem with Postone's analysis, and much of the Critical Theory tradition, is the priority given to abstract time. Here Harootunian clearly shows the difference between my approach and Postone's. Harootunian observes: 'capitalism's abstract time constitutes the principle on which historical time is supposedly temporalised, that is, the state and capital's time, providing the basis of history and absolutising one form of time to cover the entire world, thus avoiding the more difficult labour undertaken by Tomba and the pursuit of history's multiversum.'²¹ It is on the basis of the distinction between abstract time and socially-necessary labour time, which I developed at length in *Marx's Temporalities*, that it is possible to avoid the simplification of a conflict between the universal history of abstract time and the histories of concrete historical times. Socially-necessary labour time has terribly concrete implications and constantly operates as a synchronisation in 'worldwide levels of exploitation and plurality of different times'.²² Grasping the functioning of socially-necessary labour time is the cornerstone of a materialist approach to history and politics. It is socially-necessary labour time that comes into tension with forms of exploitation, legal and proprietary forms characterised by different temporalities, and shows them as such. Similarly, the nation-state imposes an administrative, legal, and bureaucratic system that comes into tension with pre-existing forms. What is instead achieved by privileging the abstract time is an abstract universalism characterised not only by the production and circulation of goods, but also by progressive (universal) commodification in the market and automation in production. What is not seen is the 'worldwide levels of exploitation and plurality of different times'. These times generate friction, resistance, conflict, and tensions. The socially-necessary labour time is of average; it violently intervenes as synchronising time in an existing heap of production and exploitation times. It does not subsume them abstractly. It requalifies them, imposing rhythm and intensity on them.

When legal, social, and economic structures come into conflict, a plurality of different temporalities is reconfigured and becomes an active part of the tension. This means that, taking a well-known example from Chakrabarty, when the Santal god Thakur manifested to the Indian peasants and told them to rebel,²³ the issue, *pace* Chakrabarty, is not the agency of the gods but the

20 Beretta and Fritzl 2022, p. X.

21 Harootunian 2022, p. X.

22 Harootunian 2022, p. X.

23 Chakrabarty 2000, p. 103.

reconfiguration of religion and belief as part of a conflict between temporalities and legal systems. As much as the contribution of *Subaltern Studies* in relation to Marxist historiography was to be appreciated, today it is ineffective and has generated misunderstandings. It is not about 'resist[ing] analyses that see religion simply as a displaced manifestation of human relationships that are in themselves secular and worldly'.²⁴ This way of seeing is still trapped in the binary opposition between religious and secular. If, instead, one starts from and prioritises a concrete conflict, such as the Santal rebellion of 1855, then one must understand the terms of that conflict in their reconfiguration by means of the tension between different terms, *which have specific reality only in that tension*. Different times, including those of spirits, emerge in these tensions. But they emerge as layers gleaned from the energy of the tension. In Italy, the peasants organised in the Sicilian Fasci in the late nineteenth century carried socialist flags, crucifixes, representations of the Madonna and saints in demonstrations. These icons were part of the conflict. The future-oriented reg flag formed a single constellation with the atavic Mother of God and the everyday practice of the cult of Saints. No differently, when the god Thakur spoke in 1855, his agency was entirely reconfigured and produced by a new tension. In other words, it is this tension that gives that specific agency to the god Thakur.

Chakrabarty's famous *History 1* is too close to the time of abstract labour. This simplification allowed him to construct an opposition between that temporality and a multiplicity of concrete *History 2s*. It also allowed him to construct a binary opposition between one monolithic Europe and a multiplicity of extra-European histories. And from here arose many of the confusions that also characterise Seth's objections toward my work.

If my work does not indefinitely multiply temporalities and points of view, it is not because of a Hobbesian anxiety concerning the 'absence of disciplinary rules' that Seth accuses me of.²⁵ Rather, it is because I observe those temporalities from the point of view of concrete tensions organised around the synchronising devices of socially-necessary labour time and the nation-state with its legal system. It is certainly possible to multiply temporalities by attributing agency to non-human species. But the issue is not the proliferation of these temporalities, but rather their tension with dominant temporalities. The plurality I advocated does not presume, as Seth does, 'History as empty, homogenous, secular time', but a field or plexus of tensions, which I treat as both a battlefield²⁶ and a field of possibilities.

24 Chakrabarty 2000, p. 103.

25 Seth 2022, p. X.

26 Tomba 2022.



Seth writes that my method assumes the ‘primacy of History’s organising logic’ and therefore ‘must expunge competing ontologies’.²⁷ My first objection, as mentioned above, is that I do not assume a History’s organising logic. What I start from is an analysis of different temporalities *in* a concrete field of tensions organised around some dominant temporalities. What my method shows is how to turn a field of tensions into a field of possibilities. My second objection is that my method does not ‘expunge competing ontologies’, but treats the ontological turn as yet another ideological manifestation which, behind the vague term ‘ontology’, hypostatizes differences instead of showing tensions. Let me clarify this point by taking an example from Seth. The example is that of ‘Captain Cook’s voyage to the Hawaiian Islands and his subsequent death at the hands of the Indigenous people in 1779’.²⁸ I have chosen this example because, according to Seth, ‘temporality’ is crucial to understanding what is happening. When Captain Cook lands on the island during the winter festivities, he is celebrated as ‘Lono, a god-king, returned from across the horizon’. But when ‘Cook returned to the island after the month of festivities. This confused and dangerous disruption to the cosmic order was promptly countered by the mortal wounding of the English Captain and the subsequent ceremonial rituals in the wake of his death’.²⁹ Here, Seth accuses me of not taking ‘different ontologies seriously’ and refusing ‘to explore the myriad ways of conceiving time that are perhaps not secular, that are inhabited by non-human agents – gods, spirits, nature, animals, ancestors’.³⁰

Ontologies, cosmologies, calendars, temporalities, and non-human agents appear in Seth’s description. But part of the story is omitted in Seth’s account. It is Sahlins, the source from whom Seth took the story, who tells us that the British accused the natives of a strong ‘propensity to theft’.³¹ But what theft, gift, and exchange are in incommensurable symbolic and legal systems remains entirely uninvestigated. Seth omits another detail: when the Indigenous people took one of Captain Cook’s longboats, he resolved to capture the king, Kalani’ōpu’u, and detained him as a hostage until the stolen boat was restored.³² The kidnapping of their king triggers the reaction of the native population, and Cook is killed. To omit this ‘detail’ is to say that the natives had no political and legal system – that the kidnapping of their king is not a crucial element of the stability of their political order. It is like saying that they do not

27 Seth 2022, p. X.

28 Seth 2022, p. X.

29 Seth 2022, p. X.

30 Seth 2022, p. X.

31 Sahlins 1958, p. 128; and Sahlins 1995, p. 82.

32 Sahlins 1995, pp. 83, 114.

operate in conformance with legal and political structures, but with ontologies and cosmologies according to which Cook's killing is a cultural event that took place at the appropriate time in the mythic cycle. It is like saying that the natives do not act politically but operate mechanically on the basis of a cosmology threatened by Cook's unexpected return.

The categories of ontology and cosmology have some significance as constantly reconfigured elements in the tension between legal, social and economic systems. It is about the tensions generated by Cook when he interprets the actions of the natives under the legal category of 'theft' or when he performs an action of war such as kidnapping the king. It is about the tensions generated by the agency of the natives when they take the longboats and kill Cook. These tensions are not clarified by subsuming them under the vague category of ontology. The work method of *Insurgent Universality* is maximally distant from any ontological discourse. Ontology is now such an overblown term that it has become good for any use, including concealing a personal confusion of thought with equally confusing terms.

In conclusion, in *Insurgent Universality*, I prioritise tensions and conflicts between legal and social systems, and show (a) how those tensions reconfigure the terms of conflict, be they legal structures, traditions, or even cosmologies. I am interested in their requalification in a precise historical conflict. Moreover, (b) I show how that tension is at the same time a field of possibilities. How from that reconfiguration of the elements involved in the conflict, something unprecedented also takes shape, such as the imperative mandate reactivated by the Communards from the medieval arsenal or the *ejido* and forms of local self-government reconfigured in the practices of the Zapatistas. Neither the imperative mandate of 1871 nor the *ejido* of 1994 correspond to their medieval or Indigenous synonyms. These are not static terms but have changed and are changing in countless force-fields with other legal systems. What *Insurgent Universality* investigates is the activation-reconfiguration of past institutions and traditions in a conflict of the present. There are social and temporal strata that operate on the basis of other legal structures and dominions. They do not violate laws, as appears from the perspective of the state when the category of 'theft' is employed. What they do is obey other laws. The choice is not between the laws of the state or those other laws. *Insurgent Universality* prioritises the tension generated by that encounter-clash. In that tension there are temporal structures out of sync, which I call temporality, and there are synchronising structures. Both are shaped and reconfigured in and by the tension.

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