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### Massimiliano Tomba

*Marx's Temporalities*

Translated by Peter D. Thomas and Sara R. Farris, Brill, Leiden, 2012. 206pp., €99.00 / \$138.00 hb

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### Luca Basso

*Marx and Singularity: From the Early Writings to the Grundrisse*

Translated by Arianna Bove, Brill, Leiden and Boston, 2012. 226pp., €99.00 / \$138.00 hb

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## Reviewed by **Christian Lotz**

Marx scholarship in Germany (e.g., Haug, Backhaus, Wolf, Heinrich, Elbe, Reichelt, Arndt) and Italy (e.g., Fineschi, Finelli, Musto, Bellofiore) have produced many fine works in recent decades, and due to the outstanding and meticulous work of the editors and translators of the *Historical Materialism Book Series* (Brill and Haymarket), some of that scholarship is now becoming available in English. Massimiliano Tomba and Luca Basso need to be added to the above list since their recent books deal with research routes not yet travelled through Marx's philosophy and social theory. Both Basso and Tomba are true masters of Marx's work as a whole, its development in its different stages, as well as its internal breaks, ruptures, and incoherent moves; in addition both are aware of the developments in Marx's thinking now available through and visible in the MEGA edition of Marx's and Engels' works.

The goal of Tomba's investigations is to pluralize history, time, and historical development. Without falling back onto a "postmodern" view of history, Tomba offers a reading of the early and later Marx that reveals, behind the synchronization of capital and state violence, the "historical *multiversum*" (160) and the "different temporalities of the class-struggle" (160) both in regard to its historical dimension of fights of the past and in its regard to its different international struggles. Put paradoxically, he argues that Marx confronts us with a historicism without historicism.

The overall strategy of Tomba's work is the ultimate destruction of any teleological readings of Marx's early as well as later work. Instead, with Marx, we are supposed to look at history as forms of "geological layers" (177) in which all layers and perspectives ultimately appear as *contemporary* possibilities, insofar as all non- and pre-capitalist forms of production can no longer be interpreted as stages toward the capitalist mode of production (182). History is made up by many non-synchronous "temporal pathways" (3), the consequence of which is that former struggles and simple juxtapositions of historical elements and historiographical positions become impossible. For example, as Tomba argues, Marx "drew attention to a

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communist tradition that had been at work within the bourgeois revolutions, and which conflicted with them” (34, 56). As a consequence, the “practical materialist” “rewrites the past in order to release the revolutionary possibilities for the present” (40). Memory, then, no longer is something of the past, but, instead, something that functions *within* a present and unleashed new possibilities (43).

However, though even to the superficial reader it is clear that Marx’s development from his early writings, through the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, up to his later historical research, points to a *critique* of teleology, Tomba does a marvelous job revealing the full complexities of and counter-tendencies in the development of capitalism, in the pre-capitalist mode of production, as well as in political developments. Similarly to scholars from the German *Neue Marx Lektüre*, Tomba implicitly presents a critique of much of twentieth century worldview Marxism that, as he puts it, operated with “a conception of the world that shared the same philosophy of history as that of the winners” (171), namely a determinist and *linear* vision of historical movement. But, with Tomba we not only learn to see history as counter-history (166), we also learn to understand the “counter-times of the workers’ struggle” (169). Moreover, Tomba shows how capital and value contain different temporalities and that the projection of a single temporality is itself a fetishization of time that comes into play with the perversion of all social relations into relations between things. The duality between use-value and value, however, is much more complex, as Tomba correctly argues, insofar as we find the time of labor, free time, time of surplus value, and time of necessary labor (137), all of which become intertwined with a plurality of exploitative practices and strategies and a plurality of its connected struggles about which Tomba wants us to think “in a historical-temporal multiversum” (156).

One of the advantages of Tomba’s approach to time and temporality is that it does not fall back onto a simple dual logic that runs through much of the Marxist tradition from Benjamin to Negri, mainly due to a static juxtaposition of linear and abstract time introduced by value with the concrete time of rupture and revolution. Instead, Tomba wants us to think about a “pluriverse” of “workers’ counter times” (160). Once the dual logic of a capitalist homogenization of time and an authentic concrete time breaks down, a rich vision of history and time can appear. As Tomba puts it, “it was a mistake to superimpose the time of revolutionary politics onto the tendencies of capitalist development. The dominant capitalist temporality does not coincide with that of the highest technological development; the temporality of revolutionary politics can also pass through seemingly archaic layers of time” (180).

Overall, one wonders, though, how Tomba’s own position as “performative historiography” (162, 39) can bring in any *shared* vision of a non-capitalist future or a new (communist) vision of individuality that Tomba outlines in the first chapter of his book by brilliantly reconstructing what Marx had to say around 1845. Given that Tomba should understand *his own* theorizing in light of his own pluralized vision of history, and given that he asks us to give up the idea of a “single revolution” for a discovery of “different revolutionary temporalities” (180), for which struggle does *his* philosophizing stand in? Given what the author tells us about being true practical materialists, the reader wonders where Tomba himself stands. Which non-liberal political perspective does his position open up, and how does *he* intervene “into an historical situation” (viii) that is now taken as a political situation (54)? Moreover, on the one hand, he argues that we need a pluralized conception of struggle and history in order to destroy any “unilinear representation of time” (177), on the other hand, however, he does not clearly show how all these different temporalities and counter-tendencies *ultimately* need to be unified by one goal, namely, the overcoming and destruction of capital. Put differently, Tomba offers no clear argument of how we get from the plurality of historical possibilities to the “possibilities for liberation that the capitalist mode of production, as a ‘continual revolution,’ *continuously* reveals” (83 my italics, C.L.), which, again, limits the attempt to pluralize Marxian concepts.

One odd aspect of this book is that its author, as far as I can see, nowhere clearly explains some of his basic concepts, including the concept of “temporality.” Though the term seems to be of Heideggerian origin, Tomba fails to explain how history, time, and temporality are to be understood conceptually. Accordingly, what is missing is a systematic and philosophical framework that makes the investigation of Marx’s theories more transparent. For example, the idea of different “times” and their unification in one present, could be

traced back to Husserl. Systematic reflections on these concepts, especially in relation to Heidegger (with whom Tomba shares a similar concept of past and repetition) and Foucault (with whom Tomba seems to share a radical anti-teleological conception of the past) would have been helpful. In addition, much of what Tomba says about the pluralistic vision of history and the destruction of a Eurocentric Marxism (x, 66), it should be confronted with work in recent post-colonial studies and its critique. Be that as it may, Tomba's book is a superb demonstration of careful scholarship and everyone who wants to know more about the concept of history in Marx will be forced to consult Tomba in the future.

The concept of individuality that Tomba deals with in the first chapter of *Marx's Temporalities* can be read together with Basso's *Marx and Singularity*, although Tomba only refers to Basso's book four times in footnotes. The reason for why Basso's detailed reconstruction of Marx's concept of individuality is related to Tomba is their shared conviction that a non-capitalist future must entail a non-liberal vision of individuality. As is known, Hegel and Marx rejected the liberal notion of "possessive individualism," but it is less known to what extent Marx's entire theory focusses on developing a new concept of individuality that Basso, in need of a differentiating term and with the intent to connect Marxian philosophy to recent French philosophy (such as Badiou, Simondon, and Deleuze), calls "singularity." Marx's philosophy of individuality, Basso argues, avoids the pitfalls of both individualism and holism by understanding individuality as a relation that cannot be reduced to a fixed and stable "subject." Instead, as Basso argues, individuality should be conceptualized as a "process" (3), "movement" (21), and a "relation" (10) that are formed by *specific* environments and contexts (8), the consequence of which is that Basso, here close to Badiou, also rejects a substantial concept of class. As he puts it, a "class unfolds in the field of practice, and cannot be determined once and for all" (11), and "it is impossible to treat the notion of class aside from the concrete struggles" (109). One might wonder, though, whether Basso suppresses Marx' claim in *Capital* that the classes *are* constituted by a "rigid schema" (109) and as something independent from their "concrete actualizations," namely, labor time, which is, at first, determined by the production of absolute surplus value.

Basso traces Marx's concept of individuality and singularity through his entire oeuvre focusing primarily on the writings around 1845 and the *Grundrisse*. As becomes clear throughout his superb reconstruction of the Marxian body, a dialectical concept of individuality needs to overcome the abstraction that takes place in capitalism and which leads to the externalization of the society and community for the individual. This is most visible in Marx' critique of Hegel, which Basso presents in Chapter One in relation to the atomism of civil society, a position that Marx starts to revise shortly thereafter (61) and reformulates with the advent of the social-material conception of individuality in *The German Ideology* (Chapter 2), before he finally works out a relational approach of individuality as "separation" (133) in *Grundrisse* (Chapter 3). The author focusses in the latter on what he announced in the Introduction by working out a concept of individuality as the result of and determined by social relations (143). He thereby tries to position himself beyond both an "organicist" and a "liberal" reading of Marx (90) by arguing that individuality for Marx only exists in its realization (92). This entails, surprisingly, the revelation that for Marx the individual cannot be subjected or subsumed by the logic of class constitution (97). Instead, as Basso, argues, we should speak of "transindividuality" (100) in order to indicate the process character of individuality as "something extremely mobile" (101) and ambivalent, insofar as under capitalism individuality can be fully expanded and, at the same time, "create condition of emptiness and division within each individual" (155) through domination by abstractions (160).

It is not clear whether Basso's anti-substantialist concept of individuality in which the individual "remains inextricably linked to the concrete conditions of his actualization" (87), and his relational approach to the question of class, leads to paradoxes: for example, one might ask, if everything depends upon *specific* circumstances, what allows us to still speak of an *overarching* framework (such as capital, capitalism, or mode of reproduction) which, in turn, leads to an ultimately a-historical approach to Marx's basic concepts, especially since, for Marx, history means *form* and not, as Basso claims, process. It is certainly correct to claim that many theoretical passages in Marx come out of specific political and social circumstances,

movements, and conflicts, but the latter is only possible because they are tied to a framework that transcends the situation and, ultimately, defines all capitalist situations as belonging to *one* form.

Finally, both Tomba and Basso seem to display the same tendency of reading much of Marx's theory as being based on postmodern concepts such as contingency, pluralism, openness, and plurality, in combination with the attempt to avoid falling back onto a historicist position. Accordingly, both belong to a new tradition in Marx readership that tries to leave behind certain dogmas of twentieth century Marxism. One wonders, though, whether this general consensus established in the new discourse on Marx a) turns into empty academism (a critique the reviewer should also be subjected to), and b) cuts off the branch on which it sits. Nevertheless, both works are exciting and outstanding achievements in academic Marxism, and we should applaud the editors of the *Historical Materialism Book Series* for making this work available to an English language readership.

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