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Book review: movement and institution by Francesco Alberoni

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Movement and Institution by Francesco Alberoni

Review by: Craig Calhoun

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datum, existing since all eternity and simply revealed by the historian”—presides over traditional narrative history. But the second—“the illusion that consists in the rational consent given to the ex post facto reconstruction of a necessity: nothing was possible except what took place”—hovers threateningly over the new history (p. 20). Furet’s aim is to define a moderate ideal of “problem-oriented history”—a resolutely “intellectualist history,” not necessarily quantitative but fully conscious of its methods, its choices, and its premises—and to steer a course between the reefs of “scholarly rationalization” on the one hand and “spontaneous understanding” on the other. For by recognizing his own role in constructing his hypotheses and even his data, Furet’s “problem-oriented” historian respects the freedom of the historical agents he studies and the openness of actual historical situations. “Conceptual” or “problem-oriented” history thus “protects its analytical power against the scientific illusion” (p. 20).

Furet’s ideal historian is a philosophical empiricist, for whom theory is an instrument of investigation rather than a metaphysics, and a political liberal whose fundamental concern is with human freedom. Precisely because it deals with “human action at the level closest to the freedom of invention,” and because of its *difference* from the social sciences—having borrowed ideas and hypotheses from the latter, it can test their explanatory power (p. 20)—history turns out to be, for Furet, “the best antidote against the misleading simplifications and illusory rigor inherent in the notion of a science of society” (*ibid.*).

It is not an accident, therefore, that, in the majority of the essays in this volume, the author of the opening papers on historical methodology is himself not primarily a quantitative historian, dealing with economic or demographic series, but a historian and analyst of political and ideological discourses and of the powerful effects of man’s representations of reality. Ideas, rather than material determinations or obscure *mentalités*, are both the preferred object of Furet’s investigations in this book and the locomotives of political action.

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Movement and Institution. By *Francesco Alberoni*.

New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. Pp. 401. \$45.00.

For any who have wondered what Max Weber’s work would be like without its wealth of historical detail and precision of definition, this book is the answer. Alberoni’s range of reference is as broad as Weber’s, but he says too little about each of the many cases he cites for any of them to really make sense. Like Weber, he devotes a large part of his work to classification, but, though many fine distinctions are made, little clarity is achieved.

Alberoni takes off from the premise that there are two fundamental social states “which are present in every historical period and in every society” (p. 3). One of these two states is institutionally organized, “everyday” social life. The other is the nascent state: “an exploration of the limits of the possible within a given type of social system, in order to maximize that portion of experience and solidarity which is realizable for oneself and for others at a specific historical moment” (pp. 20–21). It is important to stress that the nascent state is not at

root a kind of social organization but an experience. The experience may depend on structural preconditions, but it is fundamentally different, an experience of complete transcendence of everyday life in favor of a creative oneness. It is a social phenomenon, not an entirely individual and idiosyncratic experience. A movement is “a historical process which starts with the nascent state and ends with the reestablishment of everyday-institutional order” (p. 221).

Obviously, Alberoni is speaking of Weberian charisma, Durkheim’s “collective effervescence,” and the transformative experience that goes beyond rational class interests to motivate revolutionary collective action. He is greatly influenced by Freud and Marx, as well as Durkheim and Weber, and by such modern scholars as Alain Touraine, Mircea Eliade, and Victor Turner. Indeed, Turner, more than any other contemporary thinker, defined the same object of analysis in his accounts of “*communitas*.” Where Turner was tentative and suggestive, however, Alberoni is all-encompassing and definite. The biggest difference, and the one that works most to Alberoni’s disadvantage, is his failure to develop the brief case studies by which Turner illustrated what he meant by *communitas* (and liminality). Though Turner’s *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1969) did not match the quality or sustained analytic development of his earlier works, it was not only provocative but very influential as well. Historians, sociologists, and other anthropologists could read in it both something of the power of shared experiences of altered perception (which the 1960s had lately recalled to interest) and the rudiments of an analytic scheme for making sense of their symbolic structuration. Turner’s work has sometimes been mistaken for more of a complete theory than it is, but Alberoni, in trying to achieve theoretical synthesis, loses purchase. Particularly, in trying to read so much of world history and the diversity of human experience through this one lens, he avoids coming to grips with other features of the movements he mentions—from the birth of philosophy in ancient Greece, through several religions and revolutions, to the advent of Khomeini’s Iran. This is unfortunate because Alberoni, like Turner, addresses an important issue, one that modern social theory seems systematically unable to grasp no matter how often it is mentioned and no matter how many empirical studies suggest its importance. As Alberoni himself implies, this may be most glaringly obvious in Marxism, which speaks powerfully to the structural preconditions and proper ideology for revolution but has nothing to say about its experience.

Alberoni’s book is organized into nine chapters. The first four establish what he means by the nascent state, its structural preconditions, experiential nature, and dynamics. The last of these, unfortunately, refers not to what concretely goes on in the nascent state—certainly not to its content—but, rather, to a very simplistic and abstract rendering of Freudian psychology. On this basis, Alberoni tackles group formation. Every nascent-state group is defined by contraposition to structures obtaining in the world of institutions:

Fusion takes place, in other words, between things that were previously separate and there is opposition toward things that were earlier separate and now appear to be unified. This schema applies equally well to the Jew or the Roman who “becomes” a Christian and to the members of separate African tribes that “become” a nation, or to workers of different firms, cities, or nations who “become” communists, or to women of different classes, political creeds, and nationalities who “become” feminists. The fracture separates them from pagans, whites, capitalists, and males, respectively. . . . We need to search for a sociological homogeneity in terms of class, rank, race, or profession in order to understand where the fracture occurred that produces depressive overload and thus the nascent state,

but this is certainly of no use in explaining why those particular people came into interaction. [Pp. 127, 128]

The why, unfortunately, turns out to be a rather limp mixture of psychological propensity (apparently universal, not analyzed as a variable), personal affinity, charismatic leadership, and symbolic integration.

Succeeding chapters turn to institutionalization, movements, "cultural civilizations," and the Western cultural tradition. The first two are self-explanatory. The third is an elaboration (but not concrete development) of the interesting idea that some sorts of institutions are able to call repeatedly on nascent state experiences and movements, gaining vitality from them but not losing integrity: "These are the cultural civilizations, and although they originate as a movement, they are not in reality a movement but institutional powers that spread by means of successive movements without losing their identity—that is, they are differentiated by means of successive movements without being fragmented by this differentiation. Moreover, even when fragmented and scattered, they have the property of being able to reconstitute themselves rapidly" (p. 261). Alberoni has in mind primarily the great religious traditions and Marxism. This is a clever way of thinking about the commonplace notion that Marxism is "sort of" a religion. It also suggests something of what is meant by the cultural power of the great traditions and how this might be integrated with analysis of their institutional structure. The last chapter shows Alberoni's excess ambition at its worst. It takes up Max Weber's great project of accounting for Western rationality but moves from ancient Greece to the Soviet Union in less than fifty pages, complete with innumerable sidetracks. The burden of the chapter is to show that: "in the West, unlike what happened in the East, certain conditions must have formed whereby the leading institutions of society were founded on the nascent state and its rational elaboration. Rationality is understood as a control and verification of whether the institution preserves as much as possible of the nascent-state experience" (p. 334). Like Weber, Alberoni sees Western culture as distinctive, largely because of its rationality. He does not, however, improve on Weber's account of the development of rationality. And, if his own contribution is to be more attentive to its sociopsychological roots, we are left wondering why human nature on the one hand, and the nascent state on the other, have such different products in different parts of the world.

Alberoni is learned; he has insights; his topic is important. Alas, his treatment is discursive, with more definitions than analysis, and more casual references than evidence. It is unfortunate that he never develops his theory with either formal precision or empirical richness.

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The Practice of Everyday Life. By *Michel de Certeau*. Translated by *Steven Rendall*.

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985. Pp. xxiv + 229. \$24.95.

Michel de Certeau should be better known. Even in France, he does not enjoy the vogue that might be predicted for work of such originality. *The Practice of*