

Histories of the Otherwise: Miguel Abensour on Insurgent Institutions

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Theories of radical democracy have frequently been criticized for their supposed anti-institutionalism as well as a refusal to engage with normative questions. This contribution turns to the work of Miguel Abensour in an attempt to respond to both charges. A first part reconstructs Abensour's theory of the institution and shows that his notion of "insurgent democracy" is directed against "the state" but is for this reason not anti-institutionalist. Instead, democratic institutions are anti-statist to the extent that "state" is meant to signify the highest degree of crystallization of diverse forms of domination. According to Abensour, democratic institutions question relations of domination by perpetuating a "circulation between insurgence and institution" and manage to continually reactivate the instituting dimension of political action by way of symbolic mediation. A second part argues that "cryptonormative" argumentation strategies in existing radical-democratic theory either derive their institutional preferences from ontology (as in Mouffe or Castoriadis) or implicit philosophies of history that link the appearance of "the political" to a Eurocentric narrative about modernity (as in Lefort). Abensour's work, however, contains the outlines of an alternative method: that of insurgent counter-histories of political action, which aim to practically demonstrate the contingency of instituted domination in the past so as to liberate instituting action in the present.