Frank Tannenbaum Reconsidered: Introduction

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Frank Tannenbaum (1893–1969) was a man of many parts. He was brought up by immigrant parents on a New England farm, which may explain his sympathy for small farmers. At the same time, however, he embraced the cause of urban workers and became a Wobbly and an anarcho-syndicalist theorist. In fact, Tannenbaum first made a name for himself as an advocate for the unemployed, the homeless, and the imprisoned—the latter after being jailed for his role organizing those at the bottom of United States urban society. Yet he also studied with John Dewey at Columbia University and got a doctorate at the Brookings Institution with a thesis on the Mexican agrarian reform, inaugurating three decades of engagement with the Mexican Revolution. During this time Tannenbaum became the friend and adviser of ministers and presidents.

Later in life, Tannenbaum became the professor of Latin American history at Columbia and one of the founding fathers of Latin American studies, as well as a model of the activist scholar that has characterized that field ever since. Every time I enter the Frank Tannenbaum Room at Columbia's Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS) for a meeting of the monthly University Seminar on Latin America, I reflect not only on Tannenbaum's role as a pioneer of contemporary Latin American history, but also on his role as a pedagogic innovator, the founder of Columbia's University Seminars—which bring together academics and practitioners from outside the university to consider issues of common concern—and his commitment to being an engaged intellectual.

Tannenbaum's writings reflect his varied interests and life experience. When he died in 1969, he left behind a diverse body of work that was both influential and highly regarded. Some of it was topical writing for activists published in leftist magazines like *The Masses*. But much of it was scholarly writings, if often of an activist kind, on three main issue areas: US labor, the Mexican Revolution, and slavery and race relations in the Americas.

The first area, labor in the United States, was the focus of *The Labor Movement: Its Conservative Functions and Social Effects* (1921) and his older and wiser reconsideration of these issues three decades later in *A Philosophy of Labor* (1951). The second area, the Mexican Revolution and its agrarian reform, was the subject of his doctoral dissertation, published in 1929 as

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The Mexican Agrarian Revolution, and two more general books on Mexico and its revolution: *Peace by Revolution: An Interpretation of Mexico* (1933) and *Mexico: The Struggle for Peace and Bread* (1950). As the publication dates suggest, these are subjects that occupied Tannenbaum throughout his adult life. He addressed them first as a young activist, but then returned to them later in life as a mature scholar. The book for which he is best known today—*Slave and Citizen: The Negro in the Americas* (1946)—a comparative analysis of slavery, race relations, and citizenship in Anglo-America and Latin America, contrasts the status of their populations of African descent in the mid-twentieth century and traces back those differences to their systems of slavery. It was Tannenbaum's only attempt to take on this big issue, which loomed large in US culture, society, and politics during the postwar era.

For this "Classics Revisited" reassessment of the work of Frank Tannenbaum, *ILWCH* has commissioned essays on these three areas from leading scholars in each of these fields. Michael Merrill, Dean of the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies at Empire State College, SUNY, and an engaged US labor historian in his own right, wrote the lead article reconsidering Frank Tannenbaum on the labor movement.[1] Tannenbaum's writings on the Mexican Revolution are the subject of the essay by Alan Knight, a Senior Fellow of St. Antony's College, Oxford, and the author of a prize-winning book on the historiography of the Mexican Revolution.[2] Alejandro de la Fuente, a professor of Latin American history at the University of Pittsburgh and one of the leading historians of race relations and politics in pre-revolutionary Cuba,[3] reflects on *Slave and Citizen* and the continued relevance of what is still known as "the Tannenbaum thesis" on the differences in slavery and race relations in the Americas.

Michael Merrill's rereading of Frank Tannenbaum's writings on US labor is original and nuanced. It comes to the striking conclusion that what Merrill calls Tannenbaum's "social democratic anarcho-syndicalism" is closer to Veblen than to Marx, with a greater rejection of soulless industrialism than rapacious capitalism, and a greater stress on culture than on class in his explanations of social difference and social struggle.

Significantly, Alan Knight finds a similar stress on culture in Tannenbaum's writings on Mexico and its revolution, concerns that spanned three decades of Tannenbaum's career. After an initial enthusiasm for revolutionary Mexico's urban labor movement, which waned with his disillusionment with its increasing corruption and cooptation, Tannenbaum shifted his focus to preindustrial rural Mexico, its peasant revolutionaries, and indigenous communities, finding in them the "authentic" Mexico and the roots and agents of its predominantly rural revolution—a populist view of the Mexican Revolution that stresses the urban-rural divide, a separation at once spatial and cultural.

Tannenbaum's stress on culture, geography, and ethnicity also informs his comparative analysis of slavery, race relations, and citizenship in "Anglo-Saxon" and Latin America, where he rejects Eric Williams's identification of capitalism as the shaper of slavery and race relations in the Americas.[4] Instead, as

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Alejandro de la Fuente underscores, Tannenbaum stressed the impact of law and custom in creating dissimilar societies in which the "divergent position of the Negro" was key to explaining major differences in postabolition race relations, which he traced back to their different systems of slavery. In Anglo-America, law and custom racialized slavery and reduced slaves to the status of chattel, without the right to have families or to purchase their freedom. By contrast, in Latin America, Tannenbaum argued, law and custom led to a recognition of the common humanity of the slaves that was key to their having rights as slaves, frequent manumission from slavery, and equal citizenship rights after abolition.

The importance of this recognition of the slave's "moral personality" in *Slave and Citizen* echoes Tannenbaum's stress on recognition of US workers as "human moral agents" who are more than the extensions of the machines that they tend, which Merrill underscores in his essay. This is the underlying psychological and philosophic significance of labor unions, which secure that recognition for their members, and explains their love for and loyalty to their unions, Tannenbaum argued. But unions, as Merrill also emphasizes, were Tannenbaum's agents for change, a change at once looking back to a preindustrial face-to-face society and forward to an industrial democracy in which unions would replace the state (in Tannenbaum's 1921 anarcho-syndicalist youthful writings) or the corporations (in his more mature 1951 anarcho-syndicalist social democracy). It was a vision that stressed incremental change: the same strategy of "little things" that informed Tannenbaum's views of revolutionary Mexican peasants, or resistant and parochial peasants acting in their narrow self-interest, yet advancing the process that led to greater equality and social justice and a society shaped more by cooperation and human beings than by competition and machines.

Although some of these ideas of Tannenbaum's seem dated, others have outlived their author, and some have acquired a new relevance in recent years. Inevitably, however, during the past half century, Tannenbaum and his writings have been criticized by succeeding generations of scholars from varying vantage points. Tannenbaum's stress on the role of unions in bringing about an improvement in wages, working conditions, and social benefits seemed prescient in the mid-twentieth century but less convincing after 1980. His initial syndicalist vision of political economy, organized around producer congresses in which the union replaced the state, seemed naive, while his later vision of what Merrill characterizes as a "Madisonian industrial democracy" of worker control, in which the union replaced the corporation, seemed utopian.

On the other hand, Tannenbaum's populist vision of the Mexican Revolution as a spontaneous rebellion of the rural poor, "impelled by local and agrarian grievances, carrying the imprint of popular, peasant and even Indian agency," as Alan Knight's stresses, became *the* "traditional" interpretation and, like all conventional wisdoms, became the target of later revisionists. Some of these revisionists have stressed the political over the social and the

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top-down hegemony of local and national leaders over bottom-up peasant revolutionaries, while others have seen the Mexican Revolution as elitist or middle class, even as a bourgeois revolution. Still other critics have attacked Tannenbaum's characterization of Mexico's peasant communities as parochial, closed communities. If his anarcho-syndicalist ideas about US society met the fate of marginalization, his populist interpretation of the Mexican Revolution paid the price of mainstream success: revisionist critiques.

Most controversial of all, however, were Tannenbaum's ideas about slavery and race relations, and, in particular, the "Tannenbaum thesis" that Latin America's more egalitarian and less conflictual race relations reflected differences in its system of slavery from Anglo-America, in both law and custom. Tannenbaum was criticized by younger generations of scholars for confusing law with reality. A generation of mostly Marxist Brazilian scholars attacked his view of Brazil as a racial democracy and its slavery as more benevolent than that of the United States, seeing class as more important than culture. In addition, North American scholars began to question the causal relationship Tannenbaum posited—but did not prove—between slave systems and later race relations. Moreover, as Alejandro de la Fuente stresses, Tannenbaum's view of Latin American abolition as "taking place without conflict was empirically problematic," particularly when Cuba's intertwining of abolition with bloody wars for independence is taken into consideration. Lastly, in the age of President Barack Obama, it is less clear that race relations and the status of peoples of African descent are worse in the United States than in Latin America.

The authors of these essays have their own differences with Tannenbaum as well. Michael Merrill criticizes Tannenbaum not only for his anarcho-syndicalist political economy, but also for a hostility to the state that "blinded him to the possibility—indeed, the necessity of some kind of political strategy" for government action to provide public goods, to mobilize people, and "to create mechanisms for common action." Alan Knight, for his part, faults Tannenbaum for his essentialist views of Mexico and its indigenous communities, for ignoring the Revolution's 1920s anticlericalism and 1930s radicalism, and for being overgenerous in his judgments of the revolutionary elite, including the corrupt labor boss Luis Morones. Lastly, Alejandro de la Fuente criticizes Tannenbaum for not seriously exploring "the connections" between "slave systems" and "results," and for not realizing that history is a complex and sinuous process, in which citizenship is a "contentious political construct," not a "fixed and unproblematic category."

Despite these criticisms, all three authors of this "Classics Revisited" reconsideration of Frank Tannenbaum see him and his writings as still relevant today, at times newly so. For Merrill, Tannenbaum's philosophical anarchism and suspicion of the state speak to today's radical thinkers—from Noam Chomsky and Naomi Klein to Antonio Negri and Howard Zinn—while his combining anarcho-syndicalism with an incipient social democracy that values bottom-up unions more than top-down policies holds out a promise of invigorating a social democracy that remains our best hope for change. At the same time,

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Merrill sees Tannenbaum's stress on culture over class as prefiguring the "cultural turn" in history, including labor history, which has dominated the profession in recent years. For Knight, Tannenbaum's view of the Mexican Revolution (especially the Epic Rebellion of 1910–1920) as "popular, rural, agrarian and spontaneous" is fundamentally correct, as recent "postrevisionist" interpretations argue, and speaks as well to more recent theories of peasant wars in the developing world more generally—although Tannenbaum, in Knight's view, goes too far in a populist direction.

Most striking, however, is Alejandro de la Fuente's analysis of the continued relevance of *Slave and Citizen*, which continues "to inform current scholarship" and to be republished in new editions, "despite the fact that most historians consider his main arguments wrong." Part of the explanation, de la Fuente argues, is that recent research has supported Tannenbaum's emphasis on "the centrality of the law," while the stress of social historians on experience over structure and in particular on agency and resistance has led to an exploration of the ways in which slaves used law and custom to survive, adapt, resist, and transcend. Also important in the continuing relevance of the Tannenbaum thesis has been the support of recent research and writing for analyses that differentiate Spanish and British America, with so distinguished a historian as Sir John Elliott recently publishing a comparative study[5] that de la Fuente characterizes as "a nuanced restatement of Tannenbaum's central thesis."

A similar stress on agency in the postemancipation period has also confronted evident differences between the status and behavior of peoples of African descent in the United States and Ibero-America, even though the questions now asked are different, as is the assessment of the seeming Afro-Brazilian passivity, which some scholars now see as negative or as reflecting a racial democracy ideology experienced differently by different groups. Lastly, although Tannenbaum's failure to demonstrate the relation that he posited between slavery and later race relations has been criticized by several prominent scholars in recent decades, their efforts to analyze the roots and causes of contemporary race relations has maintained the relevance of the Tannenbaum thesis, even while criticizing it.

In different—but often related—ways, then, Michael Merrill, Alan Knight, and Alejandro de la Fuente explore the character, criticism, and continued relevance of Frank Tannenbaum and his writings to their fields of expertise. This introduction's attempt to draw out some of the threads that link these essays on the different areas of Frank Tannenbaum's work, however, is but a prologue to the more complex and comprehensive reflections to be found in the articles themselves. Individually, they represent expert accounts and insightful analyses of Tannenbaum's writings on US labor, the Mexican Revolution, and slavery and race relations in the Americas. Together, they comprise a sophisticated reconsideration of the life and work of a legendary US leftist scholar-activist of the twentieth century, an illuminating "Classics Revisited."

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NOTES

1. Like Frank Tannenbaum, Mike Merrill has been an activist scholar who not only has written highly regarded publications on US economic history and labor studies, but has also worked closely with the US labor movement in several different capacities.

2. Alan Knight, *The Mexican Revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1986).

3. See Alejandro de la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba (Envisioning Cuba)* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

4. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1944).

5. John Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven, 2006).

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