Il profeta?


Antonio Negri in Conversation, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 26 June.

Antonio Negri visited London this summer for the first time since 1978. His recent release from prison and the restitution of his right to travel have enabled him to embark on a worldwide lecture tour, riding on the huge popularity of *Empire* (2000) and its emblematic significance for certain strands of the anti-capitalist movement. These two conferences – the first an invitation-only workshop organized by the Centre for the Study of Invention and Social Process, Goldsmiths, in collaboration with the School of Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck; the second at the ICA in association with Continuum Books – focused on his most recent book to be translated into English, *Time for Revolution* (2003). This brings together two texts that bridge *Empire*: ‘The Constitution of Time’ (1981), and ‘Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo’ (first published in 2000, after Negri had finished work on *Empire*). Both events were packed, whether through scholarly interest in his latest publication, or just to hear what the man has to say about the effects and questions generated by *Empire*. At a time when many leading intellectuals on the Left have a cosy relationship with the state, even if only cynically, Negri is a spectacular exception.

Negri was first arrested in April 1979 as part of a drive to imprison leading figures from the political organization Autonomia, accused it of being the political front of the terrorist activity associated with the Red Brigades in the 1970s, culminating in the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro in 1978. In June 1983 Negri stood for election as a candidate for the Radical Party and was duly elected Deputy for Milan, Rome and Naples. As a result, he was able to leave prison under protection of parliamentary immunity. But the Italian parliament immediately instigated procedures to withdraw this. Negri left for France on 19 September, escaping the ruling by a day. In his absence he was sentenced to thirty years’ imprisonment. In June 1997 Negri returned to Italy voluntarily to face a sentence of thirteen years, with the promise of release for his comrades – a promise that was not kept. (See Mark Neocleous, ‘Negri in Prison’, *Radical Philosophy* 92, November/December 1998.)

Both events took a similar form. First (via a translator), Negri gave an account of aspects of his work in general and *Time for Revolution* in particular. There followed comments by respondents and questions from the audience. Negri described the emergence of his theoretical and political practice from his diagnosis of, and response to, a crisis of Marxism. This crisis is understood by him as emerging immanently from the realization of Marx’s thesis that the capitalist mode of production comes into its own when there is a move from ‘formal’ to ‘real’ subsumption of production by capital: that is, from an economy in which the reproduction of capital is an external or partial determination of production, to an economy in which the reproduction of capital constitutes production completely. This is also understood as the dissolution of the independence of use value from exchange value. The crisis is that, in so far as this takes place, capital absorbs all alternative or revolutionary forces into its internal metabolism. Hence, the classical Marxist conception of the working class is undermined, according to Negri, in so far as it posits an exogenous force of resistance to capital. This generates what he goes on to describe as the theoretical and political aporia of postmodernism. He identifies two predominant postmodern responses: the appeal to a residual or marginal exogenous force of resistance, which, as a result, tends to be politically weak and ineffectual (e.g. the Frankfurt School); or the celebration of capital as an encompassing totality (e.g. uncritical forms of cultural studies).

Negri understands his political involvement in Italian workerism and Autonomia and his theoretical work as resulting from an alternative response to this aporia: namely, to develop an endogenous form of resistance to the totalization of capital. This has revolved around the elaboration of living labour as the creative, productive and constitutive force that capital feeds off like a vampire. This critique of Marxism is the source of Negri’s (and Hardt’s) now well-known...
theses that: today (1) we face a new form of capitalism without borders or an outside, namely ‘empire’; and (2) resistance to empire must therefore take place immanently, by a force that is constituted on this new terrain but irreducible to it – namely, not the traditionally conceived working class, but ‘the multitude’. The texts published in *Time for Revolution* elaborate different aspects of this project. The thesis of ‘The Constitution of Time’ is: if real subsumption takes place, then Marx’s account of labour time collapses, since there is no external criterion of measurement. This reveals labour as a self-constituting time that is thereby resistant to capital, and thereby a ‘revolutionary time’. ‘Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo’ is an attempt to elaborate the ontology at stake in this project.

The questions and problems with Negri’s position have become almost as well known as the theses. Is ‘empire’ a correct, or even coherent, conception of contemporary capitalism? How is the multitude distinct from traditional forms of resistance? In particular, is its distinction from class won only at the expense of a Christian romanticism of love and poverty? If the multitude is endogenous to capitalism or empire, in what precise sense is it resistant? How can it be resistant without a claim to transcend capital? Is it not a new formation – or perhaps even just a new terminology for – of real subsumption, and therefore just another statement of the aporia of postmodern theory and politics? These sorts of questions were not always pursued as forcefully as they might have been by the broadly sympathetic audiences that greeted Negri at these events, but he did face some criticism.

Judith Revel and Éric Alliez both objected to the close and apparently derivative relation of the multitude to class. Both insisted that class should be dropped as a conservative relic of classical Marxism, and that the emancipatory philosophical and political force of the multitude depended on this. Negri’s response tended towards a scholarly apology that Marx’s account of class had been a theoretical and political preparation for the conception of multitude, and he was critical of Deleuze and Foucault in so far as they had not learnt this lesson. Alliez, who responded at both events, also asked why Negri had conceptualized the multitude in terms of love and not desire. Negri’s answer was that desire was born of the need for militancy, whereas love was born of the act of militancy. Peter Osborne reiterated the question in relation to commodification: is the relative absence of Negri’s analysis of commodification due to his indifference to desire, with the consequence that the analysis of labour as a commodity is effaced? Negri responded by emphasizing the resistance of living labour to commodification.

The issue of Negri’s relation to Christianity was raised in the light of his allusions to the Bible and the example of certain saints, as well as his curious emphasis on love and poverty. Some questions seemed to reveal a Christian contingent in the ICA audience. Negri pleaded scholarly atheism, but admitted sympathy with liberation theology. Julian Read asked about the form of war that would be induced in the epoch of Empire, as did Jon Beasley-Murray, via the disarmingly direct questions: Will there be a revolution? And do we want one? His reasoning was: if revolution is impossible, then there will just be eternal war; but if a revolution takes place, then the result will be an eternal, dead time in which (quoting David Byrne on heaven) nothing ever happens. So which is preferable? An antinomy of multitudinous thought! Negri assured everyone that while he, following Spinoza, loved capitalism, a revolution was already inscribed in the body of the multitude.

At one point during the workshop at Birkbeck Judith Revel recounted a short tale about the reception of Negri’s thought by the anti-capitalism movement. She was asked to talk at an event brandishing a banner that read ‘Welcome to Counter-Empire’. She pointed out to the organizers that this slogan was misleading, since the multitude is an immanent force of resistance and empire has no outside. So they changed it to ‘Welcome to Empire’. Everyone laughed, but not for the same reason.

Stewart Martin