

Persian Empire

Antonio Negri in Iran, 4–6 January 2005, House of Artists and Centre for Dialogue Among Civilizations, Tehran; 7 January 2005, Isfahan

What exactly does Antonio Negri have to say to Iran? Politically and economically distanced from the standpoint of the US and its allies, Iran has produced its own quite singular, yet strangely familiar, take on the contemporary intersection of politics and philosophy. Leading politicians translate Kant and quote Plato; hyper-conservative mullahs look to Heidegger for anti-technological inspiration; students turn to Deleuze and Foucault for micropolitical forms of cultural resistance; Bakhtin, Benjamin and Adorno speak to others of their own uneasy modernity. After the suppression of several Marxist and Marxist-Islamist parties in the 1980s and a subsequent period of postmodern malaise among intellectuals (with Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard in ascendancy), there is now a new thirst for radical thought. Governmental reformists attempted parliamentary reorganization and the reconciliation of Islam and democracy under the shadow of Karl Popper, but this is now widely regarded as a failed project. Following a steady stream of recent philosophical visitors – Rorty, Habermas, Ricoeur – will Negri prove an appropriate guide for a country which is in Condoleeza Rice's recent terms an 'outpost of tyranny', and as such most definitely outside of what America (though not Negri) understands by Empire?

With the 1979 revolution still within living and cultural memory for many, there is, perhaps understandably, widespread suspicion of classical Marxist or revolutionary solutions. During one of the sessions, a middle-aged lecturer whispered in Negri's ear that he was a Trotskyist, whilst another professor felt free to hail openly the death of Marxism and sing the praises of the free market. The obvious severity of the Iranian theocratic state, even as the government repeatedly applies, and fails, to join the WTO, might appear to scupper Negri's globalizing analysis from the outset. Indeed, much of the discussion over the somewhat gruelling four-day lecture series focused on precisely this question: how much does the analysis of Empire matter to a country in which it is primarily the state, and not new transnational forms of power, that shapes the everyday experience of politics? Negri's attempt to replace the analysis of the working class with an all-inclusive multitudinous new proletariat is a bemusing, if intriguing, proposition for many in Iran, who perhaps see little of relevance in his 'communicative, productive' model of mass political agency to what is, in many ways, a society constrained, at virtually all levels, by a ubiquitous, if internally riven, state.

Of course, Negri was not there to discuss the Iranian case in particular. Nevertheless, elements of Negri's work might well appeal to different political tendencies: his anti-capitalism to the religious hard right, his perceived anti-Americanism to the conservatives, the emphasis on communication to liberals and his revolutionary rhetoric to the few remaining Marxists. The question during the lecture series thus became: how are the elements of Negri's project – immaterial labour, the analysis of Empire, biopolitics, non-parliamentary democracy – to be united in a way that makes sense in the Iranian context?

Two hundred people, including families, journalists and students, arrived for the first day under the banner 'Spinoza and Democracy'. While Iranian speakers (Ramin Jahanbegloo, Morteza Qassempour) presented the case for Spinoza as an eminently liberal and secular or even ecological thinker, pointing to a progressivist understanding

of politics, Negri talked instead of the need to read Spinoza as a thinker of ‘absolute democracy’ whose critique of the theological-political apparatus is tantamount to a destruction of all transcendence and hierarchy. Echoing Spinoza’s argument that a theocratic government will necessarily perish because, as a rule based on fear and sad passions, it breeds dissent and sedition, Negri perhaps came close to voicing a welcome heresy. He also spent much time outlining the arguments of the recent *Multitude*, where, faithful to Spinoza’s *Political Treatise*, democracy is argued to form the fundamental tendency of every society, which every other political formation necessarily corrupts.

When asked about the current state of progressive politics in Europe, Negri spoke passionately against existing ‘democracies’, claiming that the institutional Left must be destroyed if a Spinozan concept of politics is to emerge: the democracy of multitude against the democracy of the one (whether understood as the monarch, the state, the nation, the people or the party). But again this concept of democracy from below proved problematic in a country that has the lowest universal voting age in the world – fifteen – yet whose democratic desires are caught between slow or sterile governmental reform and the prospective of Western democracy ‘from above’. It is also impossible to ignore the Iranian experience of revolution – conceived in the first place precisely as coming ‘from below’ – and the manner in which it was all too quickly captured by repressive and reactionary factions. Many, it seems, put their faith in the long slow march of modernization, driven by the vast and technologically astute youth (the result of a post-revolutionary population boom in the 1980s). If there is to be a new Iranian revolution from below, it is unlikely to take the form of a plebeian carnival or quasi-Biblical ‘exodus’.

The second and third days (concerning the concepts of ‘globalization’ and ‘radicalism’, respectively) produced some interesting, rather trenchant responses, particularly considering that *Empire* has not yet been translated into Persian. It became clear that there is some disagreement among translators as to how to render certain central



concepts, particularly ‘multitude’, though most of the audience read French or English. Again the question was posed: what does it mean to maintain a concept of radicalism that has no frontal relation to the constraints of the existing order? Morad Farhadpour, in particular, pressed Negri on his attempt to bypass sovereignty in all guises, referring to Schmitt and Agamben in support of his argument that all politics must, at least initially, have a relation to the state, and that radical politics for Iran would not resemble an exodus from the state, but a gap within or distance from the state. After dismissing this line of questioning as a kind of ‘mysticism’, and rejecting the idea that true struggle ever takes place at the level of the state, Negri was also sceptical of any celebration of micropolitics – although one could argue that part of his broader project attempts to reverse Deleuze and Guattari’s horror at the excessively communicative elements of capitalism into the potential for a kind of connective and futuristic communism.

Referring to recent social movements and political clashes, such as Genoa, Negri spoke about the importance of ‘the common’, the forms of direct democracy carried out by a ‘new proletariat’, and the production of new forms of cooperative existence. This latter point, related to the concept of immaterial labour and the exploitation of communicative capacity in general, has an interesting resonance in Iran, with its sudden massive proliferation of web-based networks (blogs, instant messaging, information-exchange sites such as orkut). There is some discussion about imposing an Iran-wide ‘intranet’ to counter some of the ‘pernicious influences’ of the World Wide Web, but it is clear that this would jeopardize the simultaneous and opposing government desire for increased economic exchange. Besides, several of the reformist mullahs currently write popular, if frequently disparaged, blogs of their own.

However, this kind of immaterial labour – the ‘informatization’ of Iran – remains lopsided. It is not in the workplaces that information flows and communicative capacities are plundered, but on the outside, in the private realm. It is not at all clear that the boundaries between intellectual activity, political action and labour have really dissolved, as Negri’s analysis presumes. The technological knowledge possessed by the Iranian middle classes serves little purpose in this heavily bureaucratic world, which is why one blogger, who also works as the translator for a state ministry of science, can speak of a ‘double logic of production’. This separation of power, communication and labour is not without its problems. Even if their disseminatory potential outstrips that of newspapers (which are all too frequently shut down), what if blogs are just one tool in a larger strategy of bypassing politics altogether?

In a country with a giant nationalized oil industry, a fragile Islamic welfare state, and a deeply corrupt form of state capitalism, it seems that Iran’s youth, rather than its economy, is increasingly plugged into the circuits of Empire, not least because massive numbers leave each year to work and study abroad. The Iranian state, on the other hand, appears to be on the wrong side of the new imperialism, rather than inside or outside of Empire as such. The difficulty of articulating the dimensions of Negri’s univocal vision with the schizophrenic fragments of a complex nation mean that his presence in Iran, though very welcome, was oddly tangential to its most pressing concerns.



Nina Power