

## Negri in prison

In his book on Spinoza, *The Savage Anomaly* (1981), Toni Negri notes that 'the chronicles attest, whether approvingly or hostilely, that Spinoza's thought is monstrous.... These chronicles present us with a personage and a body of thought, an image and an evaluation, that evoke a superhuman character.' One can't help feeling that these comments also describe the Italian state's image of Negri. Faced in the 1970s with what it clearly regarded as a monstrous and superhuman figure, the response of the Italian state was incarceration. Now Toni Negri is back in jail, joining the other socialists still imprisoned in Italy.

The Italian state first arrested and imprisoned Negri in April 1979. Having accused him of being 'the brains' of Italian terrorism since 1971 – by virtue of his role as one of the leading thinkers of *Autonomia*, and thus supposedly responsible for a whole range of terrorist acts such as the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro – the Italian state finally came up with the charge of armed insurrection against the powers of the state. Essentially, the court treated *Autonomia* and the Red Brigades as the political and military wings of a single organization, despite strong evidence to the contrary.

In June 1983 Negri stood for election as a candidate for the Radical Party, and was duly elected Deputy for Milan, Rome and Naples. The Italian parliament allowed Negri to leave prison under protection of parliamentary immunity, only to instigate procedures to authorize the withdrawal of the same parliamentary immunity the following month. Negri left for France on 19 September, just one day before parliamentary immunity was finally removed. Restarting Negri's by now notorious 7 April trial days later, the courts convicted Negri in his absence, sentencing him to thirty years' imprisonment.

From 1984 to 1997 Negri taught and conducted research on political science in exile in Paris, and published widely on a variety of topics. In June 1997, however, he returned voluntarily to Italy, entering Rebibbia prison in Rome to serve out a thirteen-year sentence for 'membership in an armed band'. He remains in prison.

Since his first arrest, Negri's treatment at the hands of the Italian state has been appalling; the judicial process of which he has been the centre has been at

best a farce. The various trials to which he has been subject have, to all intents and purposes, been show-trials, violating due process of law and the European Convention of Human Rights. His 'crime' is that of political opposition. And Negri is far from alone on this score. The Italian state has never been able to comprehend the nature of the extra-parliamentary activities conducted by large sections of the Italian Left in the 1970s. Its only response has been to incarcerate those whom it managed to arrest, regard them as terrorists, and commit them for trial on largely trumped-up charges based on the flimsiest of evidence – often on the basis of unsubstantiated claims made by real but 'repentant' terrorists.

Negri's current situation is no better. His request in January to begin the procedure that leads to parole was refused because of police claims that he might flee. Given that his sentence has been reduced to nine years (though there are new charges pending, again relating to the 1970s), and that Negri has served over half of this sentence, he should in fact be eligible for more liberal arrangements involving external work with less surveillance.

Radical philosophers should be aware that one of the most influential Marxists of the final decades of the twentieth century, whose writings provided intellectual and political grounding for many who refused to succumb to either the parliamentary road or the vanguard party, and whose philosophical work will be of lasting importance, is once more imprisoned by a member state of the European Union. The demand for Negri's release and amnesty is a demand that philosophers should not be imprisoned for their thoughts and writings; a demand that we oppose the attempt to make radical philosophy a criminal activity.

But this demand should not be made in isolation. Negri is far from being the only Italian imprisoned for his or her political beliefs. Indeed, many Italian socialists are frustrated by the way that the campaign to free Negri has taken precedence over the more general campaign for political prisoners to be released. The demand should therefore be a demand that *all* those in Negri's position be released and given amnesty. One can only hope that the return of Negri will act as a catalyst.

**Mark Neocleous**