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From Sociological to Ontological Inquiry: An Interview with Antonio Negri

MAX HENNINGER

ANTONIO NEGRI IS PROFESSOR OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AT THE UNIVERSITÉ DE Paris-VIII (St. Denis). He is the coauthor, with Michael Hardt, of *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of State-Form* (1994), *Empire* (2000), and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (2004), works that examine the juridical, political, and economic aspects of globalization. Negri is also known for his numerous philosophical and political interventions from the 1970s and 1980s, and in particular for his interpretation of Spinoza.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Negri was associated with the current of Italian Marxism known as *operaismo* (other important exponents of which were Mario Tronti, Sergio Bologna, and Romano Alquati). *Operaismo* was characterized by a conception of working-class struggle as the driving force behind capitalist development, and by a strong sociological interest in the changing composition of the post-1945 Italian working class. The classic statement of the *operaista* conception of labor is Mario Tronti's 1966 collection of essays *Operai e capitale*.

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Active as a political agitator in the petrochemical factories of Porto Marghera, Negri developed the category of the ‘mass worker’, an unskilled, highly mobile worker not affiliated with traditional working-class organizations, but prone to assert his demands through sabotage, absenteeism, and wildcat strikes. According to Negri’s analysis, the mass worker assumes a hegemonic role in working-class struggle with the rise of Fordism, displacing the highly unionized and privileged ‘professional worker’ of the pre-Fordist era. The category of the ‘mass worker’ has proven highly influential; in works such as *Die “andere” Arbeiterbewegung und die Entwicklung der kapitalistischen Repression von 1880 bis zur Gegenwart* (1974), German historian Karl-Heinz Roth has used it to analyze the role of immigrant labor in Germany. In 1960s Italy, the term ‘mass worker’ was typically used to refer to migrant workers from the Italian South.

During the decade of civil unrest that followed the revolt of 1968 in Italy, Negri argued that the mass worker’s generalized rejection of factory labor was precipitating a process of dramatic economic restructuring. The growing preference for self-employment and the ongoing militancy of factory workers were prompting corporations such as Fiat to invest heavily in automation. Production-oriented sectors of the Italian economy were gradually being displaced by new, more strongly sales- and advertising-oriented corporations (of which Benetton would eventually become the paradigmatic example). On Negri’s analysis, spelled out most clearly in *Dall’operaio massa all’operaio sociale* (1979) and taken up in later works such as *Fine secolo: Un manifesto per l’operaio sociale* (1988), the mass worker was yielding to the ‘socialized worker’ as the mechanisms of capitalist valorization were beginning to extend throughout all of society, preparing the transition to a post-Fordist economic regime characterized by highly flexible systems of production, the end of full employment, and a growing reliance on ‘immaterial’ (analytic and communicational) labor. Marx’s *Grundrisse* were an important theoretical reference point during this period, as was the Marxist concept of the transition from the ‘formal’ to the ‘real’ subsumption of society under capital. *Marx oltre Marx: Quaderno di lavoro sui “Grundrisse”* (1979), a work that features lectures Negri held in Paris at the invitation of Louis Althusser, constitutes the most comprehensive formulation of Negri’s reading of the *Grundrisse*.

During the 1970s, Italy’s factory-based extraparliamentary groups gave way to the much more diffuse network of anticapitalist movements known as Autonomia. When Pietro Calogero, the public prosecutor for Padua, posited a direct link between Autonomia and the activities of the terrorist Red

Brigades, Negri was fraudulently charged with crimes ranging from “formation of an armed band” to complicity in the 1978 kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, the president of the Italian Christian Democrat Party. After spending four years in preventive detention (a time when many of the original charges were dropped, while new ones were presented in an obvious attempt to prevent his liberation), Negri was elected into parliament on the ticket of the Italian Radical Party in July 1983. His parliamentary immunity swiftly revoked by a vote of 300 to 293, he escaped to France, where he lived in exile until 1997. A first-person account of the events surrounding Negri’s persecution and escape can be found in *Diario di un’evazione* (1985). During his exile, Negri continued to work as a university lecturer, and he engaged systematically with the thought of French poststructuralists such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Foucault.

The analysis of globalization for which Negri is best known today is in many ways prefigured in a book written with Guattari and published in 1985, *Nouveaux espaces de liberté*. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of capitalism as a force that accelerates processes of deterritorialization while simultaneously seeking to capture and exploit the creative potential set free by those processes is repeatedly invoked in Negri’s recent work, as is Foucault’s concept of biopolitics (developed in the first volume of Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, and used there to conceptualize the ways in which politics increasingly concerns the very survival of the human species). The concepts of deterritorialization and biopolitics are frequently discussed or alluded to in works such as *Empire* and *Kairòs*, *Alma Venus*, *Multitudo: Nove lezioni impartite a me stesso* (both 2000).

While in France, Negri also continued to work on his original and influential interpretation of Spinoza, first formulated in the 1981 study *L’anomalia selvaggia* and later expanded in the essays collected in *Spinoza sovversivo* (Negri 1998). This reading turns centrally on the concept of a fundamental tension in the Western metaphysical tradition between teleological philosophical models, which interpret reality by reference to transcendental laws of development, and models that explain reality in terms of immanence and struggle. In the important essay “*Reliqua desiderantur*: Congettura per una definizione del concetto di democrazia nell’ultimo Spinoza” (reprinted in *Spinoza sovversivo*), Negri takes up the concept of immanence as it features in Spinoza’s ontology and uses it to develop a concept of ‘absolute democracy’.

In 1992, the publication of *Il potere costituente: Saggio sulle alternative del moderno*, a philosophically inflected study of the juridical concept of constituent power, announced the most recent phase of Negri’s thought, in

which the transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economic order is related to fundamental changes in the nature of political sovereignty. Invoking the Spinozian distinction between power-to-create, *potentia* (*potenza*), and power-to-command, *potestas* (*potere*), as well as the concept of the multitude (*multitudo*), Negri has begun to theorize the transformations of political subjectivity and the possibilities for revolutionary rupture and radical democracy in the age of a fully globalized capitalism (the age of Empire). On Negri's reading, the concept of the multitude is that of a social, economic, and political subject whose capacity for self-organization makes the mechanisms of political representation that developed in the course of modernity increasingly obsolete. The concept of Empire is that of the flexible, transnational, juridical, and political order that emerges when the movements of capital begin to dissolve the rigid territoriality of the nation-state.

Negri was incarcerated a second time when he returned to Italy in 1997, and was still in prison when *Empire* became an international best seller in 2000. Since 2003, he has been free with a passport. Today, his theories are an important reference point not only for academic debates on globalization, but also for the new social movements that emerged on the global political scene with the protests surrounding the 1999 G-8 conference in Seattle. Besides continuing to teach in France, Negri edits the journals *Multitudes* and *Posse* (published in Paris and Rome, respectively). He also contributes regularly to *DeriveApprodi*, perhaps the most important journal associated with contemporary Italy's social protest movements. Negri is currently preparing a further collaborative work with Michael Hardt.

The interview below was conducted in Italian in Venice on 21 July 2005.

HENNINGER: The political texts you published in Italy during the 1970s are part of the Marxist discourse of those years, a discourse that emphasizes political subjectivity and the open character of struggle rather than the dynamics of the economy. You discovered this Marxism in the *Grundrisse*. What role did this text play in the development of your thought? Can one speak of a point of departure?

NEGRI: The return to the *Grundrisse* after 1972 was no doubt an important moment in the development of my interpretation of Marx. It shouldn't be forgotten, however, that the 1960s had already been characterized by a rereading of Marx, that of Mario Tronti—an enormously innovative rereading, in my opinion. On the one hand, the *Grundrisse* were important for accentuating the

methodological (and therefore subjective, epistemological) characteristics of the Marxist discourse we developed within *operaismo* from the 1960s onward. On the other hand, they were extremely important in terms of transforming that discourse during the transition from the mass worker to the socialized worker; they were important in terms of reevaluating the essence of a productive society. In other words, what mattered was the immediate inquiry; it was on the basis of that inquiry that one searched for texts to support it. The process was never one of elaborate theoretical investigation leading to practical activity; it was on the contrary a question of reconstructing practical activity from a theoretical point of view. That was the distinctive feature of our Marxism. The *Grundrisse* were also extremely important for me, who chose to work on them. My book *Marx oltre Marx* is the endpoint of the interpretation of Marx that we developed. It's a work with a strong militant tendency. The problems analyzed are invariably problems that arise from within the political debate and the development of the struggle. I believe the revival of Marxism that occurred in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s, from Mario Tronti to my own reading of the *Grundrisse*, was essential. Today it's no longer possible to speak correctly about Marx outside these parameters. That's a very polemical way of putting it, if you like—polemical with regard to the traditional Marxist hermeneutics one still finds in the academy, or on Wall Street, which are objectivist Marxist hermeneutics. They're of more use to the bosses, today, than to the class struggle.

HENNINGER: The final pages of *Il dominio e il sabotaggio*, a politico-strategic document published in 1978, seem already to announce that series of reflections in which you set out to clarify the ontological premises of a radically democratic politics. In your study of Spinoza, published in 1981, this link between politics and ontology becomes explicit. You seem to have found in Spinoza a number of philosophical stimuli whose importance for the subsequent development of your theoretical approach it would be difficult to overestimate. The obvious examples are the theme of immanence and the concept of the multitude. Both are part of an ontological vision that conceptualizes the world as the site of an interaction not determined by any transcendental order or teleology. In this world, the isolated individual of Cartesian philosophy no longer exists; subjectivity is conceptualized by Spinoza in terms of processuality and cooperation.

NEGRI: Spinoza has always informed my work. What's more, during the 1970s I began to spend considerable time in France, where I encountered a revival

of Spinozian studies that made me recognize the potential of that discourse. I have to say I'm somewhat puzzled by your remark on *Il dominio e il sabotaggio*. Yes, there is the introduction of an ontological horizon at a certain moment. It's there, for example, in *Macchina tempo*, a book that includes texts from the late 1970s (that is, from before the time when I began working systematically on Spinoza). During that period, in order to recognize the crisis of orthodox Marxism, we had to confront the transformed character of the reality in which we were immersed; a new conceptualization of being was required. It was a question of understanding the internal dynamic. Sociological inquiry was no longer sufficient. We had to proceed from sociological to ontological inquiry. The development of the political debate coincided with the revival (in Italy as well as in France) of Nietzschean criticism, or rather the transformation of Heideggerianism into an attempt to think being as open, in terms of potentiality. I don't think, however, that one can find a reference to Spinoza in the text you've indicated—or, for that matter, in the one I've indicated. The premises were no doubt there. But they were premises that had already been announced within Marxism; think of the late Althusser. Even before his psychological crisis, Althusser confronted the Machiavelli-Spinoza problem as a theme of central importance for the project of reforming Marxism. In Althusser's work, the attempt to reconquer subjectivity entailed an examination of the ontological transformations that underlie the political process.

HENNINGER: Can you say something about your relationship to Althusser?

NEGRI: I always had enormous respect for Althusser's accomplishments during what might be called the first phase of his work, but I can't say I ever really understood the meaning of the epistemological break or his style of analysis, which never dropped the conceptual apparatus of *Capital*. I have to say that in 1977 and 1978, when I lectured on *Marx oltre Marx* at the École normale supérieure and saw Althusser regularly (he was present at a number of these lectures), the difference between our points of view was evident, both to him and to me. In particular, there was at the time—not just in Althusser but also in his close friends—a serious underestimation of the *Grundrisse*. I'm not claiming they ever openly declared it, but in the end one suspected that, for them, the *Grundrisse* could be grouped with the texts written before the epistemological break, that is, before the beginning of the great constructive phase of Marx's thought. My relationship to Althusser came later (and I have

to say it was a very important moment), when I returned to Paris at the beginning of the 1980s and saw him during his illness. I began to read the manuscripts he was working on. Althusser's somewhat desperate attempt to formulate his conception of aleatory materialism was extremely interesting, but also risky in terms of the way the argument was constructed. In any case, Althusser remains a key figure. He is pivotal in the reelaboration of Marxism for the twenty-first century.

HENNINGER: Althusser's work is rich with references to Spinoza, like your own. It also contains a number of references to Machiavelli. You mentioned Althusser's engagement with the 'Machiavelli-Spinoza problem'. Your own reading of Machiavelli is contained in *Il potere costituente*, published in 1992. In that work, you define constituent power as the capacity to establish a new juridical and political order, but also new forms of community, even 'new being'. You begin with the premise that Machiavelli was the first thinker to conceptualize this capacity, and you develop this premise via a reading of the *Discorsi* and the republican phase of Machiavelli's thought—all this within the larger context of a book that opens with the claim that "to speak of constituent power is to speak of democracy." Can you elaborate on this republican and democratic dimension of Machiavelli's thought?

NEGRI: Obviously today I would insist far more on the alternative between democracy and republicanism than I did then. Despite its merits, republican discourse remains linked to the transcendental tradition. It achieves a first moment of consolidation between Rousseau and Kant—a moment that is no doubt subversive in many ways, but that is also still indebted to the philosophy of the One, of a reduction of multiplicity, and of the alienation of the subject through mechanisms of representation. From this point of view, the concept of democracy is more radical than republican thought, especially when republican thought is seen as the main current of the Atlantic tradition. That said, the fact remains that in Machiavelli the issue is far less explicit. Machiavelli has the luminosity and force of the writers of Renaissance humanism. These writers lived during a revolutionary period in which a number of distinctions (such as that between republic and democracy) were obscured by the intensity of the struggle they were conducting against the traditional forms of power. Machiavelli sees the relationship between republic and democracy as noncontradictory. What interests him is the force that can set in motion both the republican process and the democratic process. It's

a moment of formidable theoretical transition, the invention of a possible future. In this sense, Machiavelli's thinking is in some ways very ambiguous, but within this ambiguity there is strength. This, it seems to me, is what needs to be emphasized in Machiavelli. What's more, there is in Machiavelli's work the conception of a political temporality: a temporality that one can and must interrupt, but that also refounds life in its entirety. This is another fundamental point that has never been grasped by modern political theory. Seen in this way, Machiavelli's thought is truly a great anticipation of the philosophy being developed in our own time.

HENNINGER: In a preface to *Il potere costituente* written after the publication of *Empire*, you suggest that today we are beyond modernity, and perhaps even beyond constituent power. The same period sees the terms *biopolitics* and *biopower*, taken from the late Foucault, appearing in your work with growing frequency. The concept of biopolitics—the idea that life itself is increasingly becoming the object of politics—can also be found in the work of Giorgio Agamben, although its connotations are very different there. Even in Foucault, the concept of biopolitics is used not so much to conceptualize processes of creation or constitution, as it is in your work, but rather the capacity to annihilate life.

NEGRI: It's clear that Giorgio Agamben's discourse on biopolitics is limited by the Heideggerian premises of his thought. That is, power-to-create is power to create even nothingness, a power that contains within itself its own negation. This idea is very strongly developed in Agamben. The field of politics becomes a pure *spatium*, without any capacity for expression. In Giorgio Agamben, power does not open toward the act, but is contradictory—it is completely ambiguous. Power can be the power of pure negativity: the power of Bartleby, the power of the Muselmann in the concentration camp. I would say that in *L'aperto* (1992), Agamben's most recent book, these elements are fundamental. Foucault is a separate case. In his work, biopolitics is interpreted first and foremost from a historical point of view—not so much as an ontological foundation but rather as an aspect of the historical problematic. Within this problematic, certain concepts, and in particular that of the production of subjectivity, become fundamental. I'm certainly not an acolyte of Foucault (nor of Deleuze). I've worked with this type of concept in order to see what the outcome might be. What's more, the only article I ever wrote on Foucault as such is on *Discipline and Punish*, a book Foucault wrote during

the early 1970s, before the beginning of the great second phase of his thought. It's an article in which I argued that Foucault's analysis is perfect, except that it forgets subjectivity. I said: let's wait for him to begin to indicate to us this missing element. As it turned out, I didn't wait in vain. Far from it. I believe that the influence Italian Marxism exercised on Foucault (and on Deleuze) was extremely important. It was a symbiotic relationship, in the end; there's something profoundly unitary about this whole experience in Italy and France. Having said that, I should add that biopolitics is for me the space that is characterized, first, by the new forms of production; second, by the extension of the new forms of production across all of society; third, by the emergence, within this society, of all the classic elements of contradiction associated with the real subsumption of society under capital. In other words, I try to take up the concept of biopolitics and redefine it (in a very substantial way, obviously) in order to explain the rupture and the antagonism that the development of capitalism has represented. Biopolitics might simply be the bright side [*la faccia chiara*] of biopower. But it's more than that. It's a point of strength. This seems to me absolutely fundamental, from an immanent, nondialectical, and nonteleological point of view.

HENNINGER: In Agamben the concept of biopolitics is closely linked to that of bare life. It doesn't seem as if a philosophy premised on the concept of bare life could be compatible with your own theoretical approach. But is there not a point of agreement between what Agamben calls the unrepresentable community and what you have described as the horizontality of ontological relations in the Spinozian universe?

NEGRI: No doubt there have been moments of agreement. *La comunità che viene*, for example, was a moment of profound agreement, even if the premises were rather different. I think the premises are to be looked for in our divergent conceptions of being, or rather of potential being. For Agamben, potential being is always negative being, a being that forces itself to construct. For me, on the other hand, there is a *dynamis*, so to speak, whose foundation is not metaphysical but ontological, in the sense that it is not grounded in a reelaboration of classical philosophy, but in the transformations of labor, or in human activity today. There is a very pronounced materialist tendency in my thought, which is at odds with the epistemological sensibility of Agamben. Ultimately, I believe the concept of bare life is a mystified concept. On my view, bare life is the life of the proletarian, to put it starkly. Bare life

is the bare life of the poor. But the poor nevertheless dispose of a certain wealth. This wealth is completely material: it's their capacity to work, their capacity to express themselves. This capacity for expression isn't grounded in any human essence, but simply in concrete power relations as they are determined by history. Obviously this doesn't mean there can't be meanderings, relapses, psychological dramas, and so on. But I don't understand why this has to be seen as somehow implicit in human nature, rather than being explained in terms of causal relationships with external phenomena. For me, there is this materialist affirmation of man's capacity to construct his world, and I think this capacity is evidenced by the fact that the world we live in is one that we have constructed, for better or for worse. From this point of view, I'm a Spinozian, whereas the ontology and the metaphysics of Agamben are Heideggerian. I don't want to use too strong a word, but it's a metaphysics that contains the concept of original sin.

HENNINGER: Perhaps you can say something more about how the concept of biopolitics relates to the crisis of national sovereignty you've analyzed with Michael Hardt—that is, to the transition from modernity to postmodernity and the overcoming of the forms of political struggle you discuss in *Il potere costituente*.

NEGRI: Take the conclusion of *Il potere costituente*. I remember it as a dramatic moment of writing. I can recall perfectly when I wrote it. I don't normally remember. When it comes to my other books, I can remember neither when nor how I wrote them, and the same is true of the rest of *Il potere costituente*. But I can recall writing the conclusion very clearly. I think I wrote it six times. I simply wasn't able to link the modern concept of constituent power [*potere costituente*] with what was already presenting itself as the advent of the new social movements, the plurality and multiplicity of a constituent capacity [*potenza costituente*]. As far as I'm concerned, the contradiction between *potere costituente* and *potenza costituente* was already completely obvious. In such a situation, the only way to resolve the theoretical or conceptual problem is to return to the level of concrete, practical analysis—to go and examine the context, the ontological substratum that determines the definition of the concept. The transition from *potere costituente* to *potenza costituente* was the transition from the last forms of modern society—a society organized around the state, the bosses, the working class, and a juridical order founded on a single, absolutely stable center—to a society in which the power of capital has

become as diffuse as the subversive capacity of the multitude (the ensemble of singular multiplicities). To me, a postmodern *potenza costituente* began to signify a proliferation of movements: forms of self-governance, self-valorization, and resistance that spread not just across the social fabric of the nation-state, but throughout global society. Theoretical progress is always made on the basis of this relationship between the concept and reality. Every concept is a common name. A common name is always something we construct with a view to the efficacy of its descriptive force. There are no universals to be plucked from the sky and applied here on earth. We have to construct the common names that can allow us to understand how reality functions. For me, this transition took place during the writing of *Il potere costituente*. That's where the premises were established, within that problematic, during the anguish of writing the conclusion. I remember that at that point I said to myself: I'm now going to work on these problems. That was when the concepts of the multitude and of democracy were linked to that of *potenza costituente*. They were linked to the idea that this society needs to be reconstructed even as it is being destroyed, and that a constituent exodus has begun, an exodus that is absolutely fundamental both for understanding the transformations of our world and for animating the forces of transformation, of revolution.

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