



The White Elephant at the Dinner Table

Erik Empson

review of:

Timothy S. Murphy and Abdul-Karim Mustapha (eds.) (2007) *The Philosophy of Antonio Negri: Revolution in Theory, Volume 2*. London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press. (PB: pp. 248, £19.99, ISBN: 9780745326092)

Negri is enormous. For a long time something like an uninvited dinner guest in political circles, he is now more likely to be the celebrity after dinner speaker. And why not? Consistently innovative in thought and steadfast in action he is now so well known that from being an author whose groundbreaking studies of Spinoza and Marx could rarely be seen on the shelves other than in the odd decent Anarchist bookshop, he has, perhaps almost in spite of himself, become a point of focus for that rather nebulous politics of social change of the global multitude's struggle and a new configuration of power in the form of Empire.

However, has this shift from notoriety to popularity resulted in a dilution of the real strength and import of his social analysis, his many-layered workerist reworking of the philosophical discourse of modernity? What is behind the acute sensitivity to the politics of 'class composition' that is trumpeted as the lynchpin of his periodisations and continued belief in man's ability to shape his world? It is a mammoth tradition of philosophising that Negri, among his peers (some of whom are contributors to *Revolution in Theory*) has rescued and resuscitated from its intellectual glaciation during the years of capitalist triumphalism.

So what of this revolution in theory? To talk of 'revolution' today, when it can label the most ordinary things, seems outlandish. It is difficult to think of it in a meaningful way. Revolution, whether political, cultural, sexual, has – and one wonders if Negri would object to this Shibbolethian term – become 'over-determined'. In a world where everyday social action is so heavily embedded in mortgages, careers, families and the rest of it, where people seem to have no choice but to entrench themselves in the systems that limit their freedom, talk of revolutions seems far-fetched as a useful political concept of the ongoing foundation of the modern state or an affirmation of new forms of political constitution. Our ideas and ideals are encoded into the structure of our

being, they no longer lie outside as future hopes or nostalgic regrets. Indeed, whether deliberately, foolishly, or both, Continuum had already tried their luck by publishing the thick-skinned author's dense 'Rebibbia Prison' philosophical writings as *Time for Revolution*, thus short-changing more than a few starstruck, post-Genoan, would-be initiates to the Negrian cause who, reviewers included, simply couldn't get their heads around it.

Thankfully most of the essays in this volume do not simply regurgitate what are fast becoming empty maxims of Negrian politics, nor shade themselves in his weighty theoretical shadow. They engage with the analytical traditions that Negri draws on, and whilst often problematising his interpretation, show that there is no single philosophical lineage to which he belongs, but a broader project of anti-modernity that he is just one representative of. This is an important emphasis, one that is significantly enhanced by Judith Revel's essay which situates Negri in respect to the reception of Nietzsche in post-war Europe. Important because it should not be possible to dismiss such a tradition of political action and thought by easy swipes at one of its theorists, which is happening all too often in academic circles where attacking Negri is a substitute for genuine engagement with the body of ideas within which his thought is situated. If you take on Negri, be prepared to take on a body of thought that includes Althusser, Nietzsche, Spinoza, Foucault, Deleuze and a richly woven fabric of at times connected, at times discontinuous challenges to liberal and socialist apologetics for the market and a state that, hiding behind the mantras of individual liberty and collective austerity, subjected individuals time and time again to broadsides against the exercise and realisation of their social being.

For Negri 'the Spinozian metaphysician', politics are inextricably connected with philosophy. However, our age is Pleistocene, homo erectus has emerged victorious (albeit dressed in cyborgian garb), and the attempt to think the ontology of the real horizons of being as opposed to their abstract ideal version is a project that no longer leads to impasse, crises and caesurae as it did, necessarily, for Spinoza. In our postmodern times, thought is immediately productive, inherently practical, and embedded in the process of economic valorisation. And here, a revolution in *theory* begins to make sense.

The first contribution in *Revolution in Theory*, is that of Pierre Macherey, himself a veteran of the extraordinarily fertile theoretical struggle in the 1960s to sever the deep existential and humanist links between materialist philosophy and its speculative idealist apron strings. He argues that Negri "breathes new life into thought" in his attempt to find an authentic philosophy of constitution considered on the plane of action whilst recognising that the political acts within the philosophical. Or, as Jason Read poses it in the second essay in this volume, Negri develops a new practice of philosophy where "being is not fixed but determines its own outcomes and is the measure of its own limits". It certainly sounds good so far but is this just a white elephant, a gift of wonder that is merely taxing our intellectual surplus? Can Negri's philosophy be put to use? For many, compared to *Empire*'s pachydermic stomp, *Multitude*'s tusks were far from penetrating.

The challenge is to think both class composition, the state of the struggle over the social

surplus, and political subjectivity at the same time. What makes Negri so attractive to the initiated is the idea that evolutions in the global division of labour can be periodised politically as the result of a dynamic relationship between power and resistance. Our post-diluvian situation is one where both the means and relations of production have been de-stabilised by the very same force. The architect of this would have to be particularly powerful. So, can we rightly speak of a new political subject?

By comparing Negri and Arendt's reading of Machiavelli, Michel Vatter's contribution helps to rethink the relation between 'the people' as a sovereign constituting power and the attempts to turn that political will into a transcendent self-subsisting (through constitutional and juridical norms) power that ultimately circumscribes foundational freedoms. Political action need not be considered solely as an affirmation of the new but instead as the exercise of a sovereign resistance or intrinsic indifference to power, that – seen alongside the idea of the return to the beginning in Machiavelli – is a permanent revolution against politics from within the social. The idea of a separate autonomous political realm is counterposed to a kind of power that is constituted from below in communes: local self-organised forms of power organically built upon communist cooperation.

I agree, but how does this multitude, which in Virno's terms shuns political unity, square with what on a number of occasions Negri has trumpeted as its power to act and take decisions? Why is the multitude more than the age old pre-modern figure of the recalcitrant populace's refusal to form itself into a people? How does it come to pass that the multitude has the power to decide the exception? If it can be found, the answer must lie in class composition, and how we act within it.

Directly taking up Negri's theoretical relationship to Michel Foucault, in respect to his theorisation of bio-power and bio-politics, Alberto Toscano takes quite a scathing swipe at Negri's attempt to mark an epochal shift in the form of capitalist and state power in the modern world. Counterposing Negri's attempt to build up these oppositions in an all-too-convenient systemic manner to what he calls Foucault's 'methodological nominalism', the ambivalences behind Negri's claims for a postmodern form of politics and his reliance upon simple dichotomisations are further drawn out by engaging in the differences between him and other heirs to the radical traditions of anti-modernity in the form of Virno, Agamben and others. The crux of the debate is the appropriateness of Marx's critique of capitalism's reduction of living labour to abstract labour. Either we have genuinely entered into a new state of affairs where capitalism no longer needs to perform this reduction in real terms and can profit from the self-valorising power of labour, or this latter has always been a latent aspect of concrete labour which established power is finding new ways to manage in the face of new found political subjectivities based around it.

The same criticism then can be levelled at both the idea of multitude and immaterial labour. They turn a latent recurring feature into a predominant form of the new order. But maybe Negri has been trying to say something more. Recall the alleged congruities of philosophical critique and political action. Perhaps Negri, by naming a movement – by expressing it – is merely alerting us to a possibility within an existing process, something about which we can make choices that will influence the outcome. After all,

isn't that the kind of thing, iron laws of historical necessity notwithstanding, that lured us to the idea of revolution in the first place? Maybe in our hyper-critical times we've not listened enough to the injunction to act. Ted Stolze clearly has and looks at Negri from quite a different angle by means of the latter's writings on the book of Job. Though not central to Negri's thought, being more like the pointing done to a building once the main edifice has been constructed, Job's suffering, his refusal to accept his friends' exhortations that he accept his lot, is not just a figure for the struggle of the maligned Marxist theoretician, but can be recast as an example of how we might not submit to the inevitable, to our fate or to God's will, and instead continue to believe in the immeasurability of the future.

If the attempts to critically engage with Negri as part of a wider tradition is a high point in this volume, its nadir is surely found in the asinine contribution by Alex Callinicos. But the latter's criticisms – the jealous nitpicking, the venom and bile – help elucidate, in respect to the criticisms that Negri's intellectual motifs belong in the past, just how far he has really travelled. Callinicos' main gripe is the role of the unionised professional worker in social struggles over the wage, antediluvian bread and butter pure and simple. He invites us to wonder how poor and destitute miners in Wales suffering with drugs and despair would respond to the idea that they were the architects of their misfortune. Bless! He consigns those that he attributes with the power to affect change to the status of being the enduring impotent, victims of it. Presumably Callinicos would still have his meths-drinking miners chipping away at the blank face of profitability, chanting 'coal not dole' and mining material for Ken Loach movies.

You can take or leave Negri's periodisations, coming as they do from the peculiar admixture of Italian and French workerism mixed with North American management theory, but criticising Negri for failing to provide a strategy for working class revolution is to entirely miss the point. It amounts to claiming that he is outside the very struggles he has been part of forming anew. It seeks to tie the intellectual back into a straitjacket of political correctness, of obedience to the present, from which he had originally struggled so hard to escape. The melting of the boundaries between communicative and constitutive action in today's world means that taking up the new institutionalisations of old forms of power is as important, nay *more* important than agitating for generalisable points of class solidarity following an outdated model of political leadership. To create crises at the constitution of meaning is to de-stabilise the consolidation of political authority around new axes of power, and that is worth untold banner waving Sunday strolls through police-lined London streets. As Charles T. Wolfe puts in the final chapter of *Revolution in Theory*: "Materialism is a theory of action for Negri, not a theory of science or of truth". To force a dichotomy between intellectual and manual labour is invidious.

Negri is huge and has, as a result of that, recently, the volume in hand included, been prodded and poked in all sorts of awkward places. However, understanding his politics is not to examine how he measures up to other skeletons in the closet but to concatenate with a project of a temporal non-reductionist materialism – probably best done after a drink or two. To their credit, the authors of this book have by and large done so. The common must be expressed rather than merely stated, and that entails a process wherein (to reiterate Wolfe's quote from *Empire*), 'knowledge has to become linguistic action

and philosophy has to become a real re-appropriation of knowledge'. Hear, hear! Let's not expect a stampede, but if more figures of this calibre step up to the plate, a genuine political language that speaks of real alternatives will become stronger.

the author

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