Antonio Negri’s Revolutionary Utopianism (Review)


Antonio Negri’s *Time for Revolution* consists of two shorter works, written twenty years apart, *The Constitution of Time*, and *Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo*. Both were written in jail while Negri was serving time for leading the subversive organization, *Autonomia Operaia* (Workers’ Autonomy), which committed 174 attacks against civilians and 206 robberies.[1] Two members of a neofascist party were burned alive in their party headquarters by another organization led by Negri, *Potere Operario*.[2] When he first went to trial Negri was also held responsible for being the being the brains behind the notorious Red Brigade, and for having demanded the ransom and masterminded the death of the Italian Christian Democratic Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, although those charges and another involving murder were dropped. Whatever one thinks of Negri, one must concur with his insistence that his thinking and his politics are one. Which is to say it is impossible to discuss Negri’s work independently from the political goal his thinking is meant to help create.

That goal, I think, can be fairly summed up from the formulation used in the opening sentence of his work with Michael Hardt, *Multitude*, as "democracy on a global scale."[3] In this respect, his readership is pretty much the same as Badiou’s and Žižek’s, and others of that stripe who have serious arguments about which Lenin one should follow.[4] I find it extremely telling that almost no one schooled in traditional political theory or philosophy takes the figures just mentioned as serious political thinkers. The reason for that is although Negri *et al* may well raise criticisms of the society around them, the goal itself is never subject to any kind of rigorous analysis: thus they continue to judge one extremely flawed, enormously complicated existing system by reference to something as wisp-like as an idea that goes under such names as “communism,” “democracy,” “utopia,” “the common.” Equipped with these names, and certain in their knowledge of the superiority of this other world, what Negri calls in *Time and Revolution* as the “to-come,” they divide the world into the progressives like themselves who exist under the glow of this imagined future, and the reactionary or ideologically deluded (a fair amount of time is spent showing how some of the ostensible progressives are ideologically infected by delusions – for Negri, Benjamin is particularly problematic).[5] With such gnosis, serious questions about institutional representation, articulation, and mediation of interests never have to be addressed. A bipolar ethico-political model is thus established in which real politics is displaced; this displacement includes real communism as it played out historically, and which, to Negri and company, was either an inadequate exemplification or outright betrayal of the purity of their idea of progress.

Of course, Marx insisted vehemently that his socialism was scientific and that he had nothing to do with idealism; which was why, so he reasoned, he did not want to waste time dreaming up “cookbooks of the future” about socialism, thus contenting himself in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* with throwing out a few lines about rotation of office as illustrating how ‘administration’ under socialism would look. Marxism was always the promise of an end to politics, along with an end to all other institutional impediments – class, money, law, private property, marriage – that would issue in a condition unlike anything we as a species have ever experienced before. Real history, as opposed to pre-history, was what Marx called it in *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. How this real history would be realized neither Marx nor any of his followers answered; and the question of what kind of world would be created in trying to eliminate these far from perfect institutions was not seriously asked, let alone answered, though the reality of communism might well give us serious pause given that its attempt to eliminate certain institutions has often led to far worse institutional configurations.

In sum, Negri, and those like him, write much about revolution but never seriously address the question of what types of changes may be achievable through political means. In this respect, Negri belongs to a line of non-political thinkers who think they are thinking about politics. When one really thinks about politics one must sober up and concede that people have very different talents and orientations. Not surprisingly, different people see and value things very differently, and the art of politics is about brokering those differences, not assembling a handful
This lengthy preamble to *Time and Revolution* is necessary because a committed Marxist like Negri forces one to examine his assumptions about his new world “to-come,” which is said to be merely a class struggle away. From the opening, “Premble” (sic.), Negri informs us that this is a “prolegomena to the construction of the communist idea of time, to a new proletarian practice of time.” And, should any member of the proletariat, or anyone else for that matter, wonder why their new dawn must rest upon such a theoretical edifice as Negri provides, the reader is informed: “Outside of a materialist, dynamic, and collective conception of time it is impossible to think the revolution.”[6] “Thinking the revolution” with Negri is an exercise in rationalism of the sort that Marx himself was all too prone to employ. Consider, for example, Marx’s notorious claim, in a letter of March 5, 1852, to Joseph Weydemeyer, that he had discovered that “the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, [and] that this dictatorship only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.”[7] Indeed, Negri’s *The Constitution of Time* is little more than an attempt to prove Marx’s assertion true, that is to say, that “[a] new being-in-the-world is determined”[8] and that this new being is due to the “fact” that “[t]ime realizes itself in catastrophe.”[9] With a seemingly interminable series of finger jabbing italics and catechism-like formulations, Negri argues that the capitalist treatment of time as “subsumption” and “the time of command” is to be exploded by the proletarian experience of time liberated from exploitation — “time that has transformed self-valorization into auto-determination, into institutionality.”[10] The argument is ostensibly about the immanence of this collision of times, times that have been demarcated along Marxian lines, and which ultimately demonstrate the inherent rationality of Marxism.

As I said above, this is rationalism pure and simple. That it is supposed to be materialist rationalism makes not the slightest bit of difference. It is a thoroughly rhetorical edifice that consists of words — words that are meant to help realize the “to-come.” Negri might represent himself as a philosopher, but his ‘philosophy’ consists of a plethora of teleological determined lines and points of reference that close us off from any reality that exceeds Negri’s predetermined telos. Above all, Negri is a mesmerist seeking to expand the army of the multitude who are to form the constitutional body of the proletariat in their class struggle.

The second essay, *Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo: Nine Lessons to Myself*, is linked to the first by an “Afterword” in which Negri appears to offer a self-critical analysis of the first essay. The main difference between the essays is, not surprisingly, rhetorical rather than substantive. Now Negri speaks more of the “poor” than the proletariat and love also enters into the picture. Negri tells us that “[w]ithout poverty there is no love” and that “It is the poor person who renders love real.”[11] Not surprisingly, militancy is “the praxis of love,” which “reveals the coexistence of the dynamics of poverty and the constitution of the common.”[12] The role of time as *kairòs* (the opportune singular moment in time) in this “edifice” is to enable “the common”: “we are immersed in the common because *kairòs* is a fine dust of interwoven and interlinked monads that expose themselves to the void indicated by the arrow of time, thus constructing the to-come.”[13] Negri’s materialism stands in the closest relationship to his metaphysical determinism, and his Spinozism provides a metaphysics with which he hopes to undergird this view of life as laws of necessity. In order to support and justify this Spinozian view of life as immanent, Negri attacks “transcendence and transcendentalism.”[14] Unlike materialism, says Negri, they have a history “because they have always been the philosophy of the victors and hence those who command.”

Why Negri would think that the *essence* of life plays itself out in a Manichean political schema is anyone’s guess. However, his idea that a shared politics is based on a shared metaphysics was just one of the Leninist-Stalinist shibboleths that helped forge a totalitarian society. Fortunately, Negri and his disciples are unlikely to assume real power in a state any time soon. However, even the thought of living in a regime in which one might be forced to share or conform to Negri’s metaphysical proclivities is a frightening one.

Negri’s thinking totalizes at every turn. While his view of the *kairòs* is meant to draw our attention to the fusion of singularity in the moment and the act of naming — an important process, dealt with far better in my view by Franz Rosenzweig and Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy — the fact is that singularity is almost completely lacking in Negri. That his ontology is reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze’s nominalism changes nothing. There is simply the multitude or the common or the poor or the proletariat on the one side and capitalism on the other. Of course, in this respect Negri is simply reproducing Marx’s myopia regarding distinctions that have nothing to do with class but everything to do with different ways of living in the world, for instance, distinctions regarding status, religious denomination,
culture, nation, and family. Like Negri, Marx assumed a commonality of interests among the working classes he was talking about that did not actually exist. This limited account of human motivation would have enormous consequences for twentieth century politics, economics, and culture. Even Mussolini’s apparently critical realization that the Great War illustrated that the nation was far more important than class simply repeats Marx’s limited account, as Sorel argued, in different terms. For Sorel, both were merely myths designed to activate human energy.

Negri’s invocation of his own “materialism” is used to create an appearance of concreteness that is in fact missing from his highly abstract narrative. Everything is simulacrum in this kind of narrative, whether it be politics, society, people, or the economy. Negri does not have to explore any of these fields in depth because he already knows the root of all social problems (capitalism) and the answer to all our problems (communism). He does not need to examine how actual disputes and decisions might be mediated and made in order to achieve limited but real political improvements because he already knows that the common will is a good will and common means are good means.

Toward the conclusion of *Time and Revolution*, Negri writes, “in 1968 mass intellectuality presented itself for the first time in hegemonic form, that is, as a hegemonic constellation in and of the multitude.”[15] The claim, like so much else in the book, is false: – the radicals of 1968 were a group of young people who wanted to make the world in their image and interests. They were students with little learning but an unshakeable belief in their ability to create a far better world than their parents had created. This may have been an understandable response to a generation whose parents and grandparents had precipitated and participated in two world wars. Nevertheless, their desires and their heritage had little in common with the overwhelming majority of people on the planet – people who were far more anchored in religious and social traditions such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Confucianism. People who are “trajected” by such pasts are very far removed from the ideas of appetitive “self-valorization” and social emancipation from gender and sexual constraints that have taken root in modern universities and shaped the contemporary West, especially during the last fifty years.

Similarly, the idea that fascism is socially ubiquitous, the enemy to be eradicated, and the real core of capitalism – all standard ‘68 ‘ideas’ – has very little to do with the social and political movements in the Middle East, China, Indonesia, Central Asia, Russia and other parts of the globe. Negri’s “multitude” is comprised of those, among his readers, who fail to see that the world is far more complex than the ‘68 generation understood. Though such people may think that the world can be changed through street protest and calls to political action, how a real economy or society actually works remains unknown to them. But this is as it should be. The multitude needs “gnostic” leaders like Negri who know how to bring about the necessary change in human existence. Its role is merely to do as it is told.

The problems we face today, which involve serious deficiencies in our political, economic and social institutions and very real tensions within the current geo-political context, are both enormous in scale and rarely conform to Marxist categories. Negri, therefore, cannot help us with them. He belongs to an academic sideshow that entertains the young and relatively inexperienced, people who prefer to bask in their own ethical purity rather than to involve themselves concretely in the difficult business of politics. It is far easier to deal in rhetoric than patiently to explore and address the complexities and variegations of human nature and its economic, social, political and geo-political realities.


Interestingly, in *Time for Revolution*, the word democracy is only treated as a negative because, Negri says, it has been distorted by the concept of modern sovereignty (225-226). He goes on to say, “the common renders any order immeasurable” (227).


[9] Ibid., 120.

[10] Ibid., 97.


[12] Ibid., 218.


[14] Ibid., 179-180.