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INTERVIEW

INTERVJU

Mark Losoncz

CONVERSATION WITH ANTONIO NEGRI

Mark Losoncz: To begin with, let me ask you some questions concerning Eastern Europe... In the introduction to Paolo Virno's *Grammar of the Multitude*, Sylvère Lotringer claims that the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 was a decisive experience for *operaismo* and that it was a moment of crisis for the Italian Communist Party. What are your memories of this historic period?

Antonio Negri: In 1956 *operaismo* still didn't exist. It was founded in 1958-1959. The first issue of *Quaderni Rossi* was published in 1961. Nevertheless, the revolution in 1956 was an extremely important moment for the consciousness of Italian communists and leftists. This was the first crisis of the Party after World War II. Certain important intellectuals began to keep distance from the Party in 1956 – there was a higher level of consciousness regarding the bureaucratic nature of the Party and the Soviet regime in general than before. In Italy, the Party's hegemony (to use an Italian expression) over the intellectuals was very strong. The crisis in 1956 was not really a workerist crisis in the operaist sense. *Operaismo* was something different: it was not the result of an ideological crisis, but a crisis of reality itself (of the workers' relation to work). We didn't confront Stalinism, but capitalism (Agnelli, Fiat, etc.): the development of Italian industry was very intensive in the 1950s.

M. L.: But wasn't the Hungarian revolution perceived as an experience that meant to create council communism?

A. N.: Yes, absolutely... But the experience of the uprising of 1953 in East Germany was also important – it was the first “red [communist] sign”. These two experiences appeared in Italy as intellectual phenomena. *Operaismo* is a real and political movement – it isn't an ideology.

M. L.: I know that you were a Hegelian-Lukácsian thinker when you were young. You wrote a book on Hegel which was very much influenced by Lukács's interpretation and you also wanted to translate *History and Class Consciousness* to Italian.

A. N.: Eventually, I became the editor and my comrade, Giovanni Piana, the translator. This was in 1967. Yes, I read *History and Class Consciousness* when I was working on Hegel's philosophy of law. *The Young Hegel* by Lukács was also very important to me.

M. L.: It seems to me that today your theory shares something essential with Lukács's theory. It is the question of subjectivity. Lukács claimed that the subject

is born from the environment of absolute alienation, while you suggest that a certain authentic subject is already present beyond alienation. The Negrian subject does not participate in the dialectics of alienation from being-in-itself to being-for-itself.

A. N.: I consider capital to be a relation of force between capital and the subjected subject [*le sujet qui est assujéti*] who is still capable of resistance. This is the ambiguity of the workforce of the working class – and it was a crucial aspect in my interpretation of Marx’s *Capital*. It is a dualist model. Capital is neither the Leviathan, nor the Moloch. The consciousness of living labor is always already present, materially and immaterially, in physical and psychical sense. There is always an element of resistance, force, independence, and of a constructive and constituent alternative... And I have tried to find these ideas in Lukács’s writings as well. If you want to interpret Lukács according to the model of generalized alienation, you should take into consideration that this idea is under the influence of Lenin. It doesn’t explain the fact that the working class is capable of creatively breaking with the given. I don’t use the word “alienation” (I prefer to call it “suffering”) because it refers to everything and nothing at the same time. Furthermore, since Heidegger and his critique of technique, the concept of alienation has become something horrible. If we have an enemy today, it is Heidegger.

M. L.: It seems to me that there is a renaissance of the “objectivist” Lukács, especially in the Critique of Value (*Wertkritik*), for instance, in the writings of Anselm Jappe.

A. N.: I am completely against this tendency. I think that it is actually a reactionary element today. I can recognize it a little bit everywhere. For example, there are some very reactionary elements in the readings of Marx, a renewal of a quite deterministic concept of Marxian thinking. In my opinion, the workforce is always already cognitive and thus, it is the source of resistance. Today, value is further linked to the quality of work. According to the classical definition, ideology is that which is instrumental in destroying the experience of resistance of the subjective actors. There is something that can be called the “self-valorization” of capital, but capital isn’t the devil. Capital is an employer similar to me. There are no laws of capitalism; there are only norms that are created in order to command. Capital is an institution.

M. L.: You visited Yugoslavia many times during the 1950s. You participated in a seminar on self-management in 1956 and you have also been to Dubrovnik. What was the importance of the Yugoslavian experience for you?

A. N. [*laughs*]: None! I had no illusions... I was not a Trotskyist. However, it was important that Yugoslavia was a wonderful country and it had an exceptional war of resistance against the Nazis. They were lovable people who won their freedom and unity. It was a deep and significant ideal. Yugoslavia was one of the great socialist achievements that exceeded the national framework. I visited the factories. From a technical perspective, everything functioned in a traditional and backward way. Yet it was an anti-Stalinist socialism. Tito was perhaps the prototype of a Stalinist, but the living consciousness of the people was also of great importance. I know that there was a terrible history of prisons, Đilas... For me and my comrades, the Yugoslav self-management was rather a juridical phenomenon than a real thing.

M. L.: There is a series of discussions regarding the destiny of French philosophy. For instance, Pierre Macherey¹ claims in an interview that French Theory was a fanciful projection of Americans who homogenized and simplified everything that happened in France. What do you think of the expression “Italian Theory”?

A. N.: Listen, Italian Theory does not exist. There was an operaist way of thinking which was quite an important reinterpretation of Marxism, linked to a certain phase in Italian history. It was happening mostly in the 1950s and until the 1970s. This movement was a preparation for 1968 in the factories and at the universities. *Operaismo* isn't only a theory, but it is also a leftist practice within trade unions and the Communist Party, especially within the Italian working class in Turin, Milan... It was organized in a complex way, but it was still united. The movement was subjected to terrible repression. Italian Theory is a schema invented in the field of marketing, in order to take advantage of the importance of certain Italian authors who have been successful in the global market [*laughs*]. However, this expression can still be useful. Today, Italian philosophies are shifting to positions that were repressed during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, it is a kind of a financial rent and people who continue the operaist path can benefit from it. On the one hand, Italian theory is a marketing operation, but, on the other hand, it is a network of connections of people who are working on similar issues. It is evident that there are also incompatible positions within it. For instance, there are many things shared by Giorgio Agamben and myself (and we have been friends for a long time), but we do many things that are not compatible. Giorgio wrote only one book to which I can fully subscribe: *The Coming Community*. This book was an expression of the Italian experience of subjectivity that influenced the Italian immigrants here in France, in the 1980s. I am referring to the experience of practice, struggle, intervention... But the Heideggerian aspect has become more and more important in *Homo Sacer*.

M. L. [*laughs*]: But given that you claim that Heidegger is the most important enemy today, isn't Agamben also an enemy?

A. N.: There is a very important difference. Agamben is not a Nazi.

M. L.: You mentioned the question of marketing. I remember that in an interview you gave to Cesarino, you suggested that you wrote *Multitude* with Hardt partly for the supermarkets.

A. N.: Right, I like paradoxes very much. The concept of multitude has become a widespread concept. It is fundamental and non-trivial. It is an expression that refers to living labor, a very important expression even from the viewpoint of sociology. *Empire* was born when Éditions du Seuil proposed to me to write a short book on sovereignty for the French students of the preparatory classes. In the beginning, it was an entirely venal task. I was very poor when I wrote this book because I was in exile, undocumented (*sans papiers*). So, I did everything in order to make a living. These were not conditions in which one writes [*laughs*].

M. L.: In the interview you gave to Cesarino, you also claim that the concept of multitude had a very simplified reception...

A. N.: I think that *Multitude* is very important. This book was written at the time of Bush and it analyzed these phenomena. It was the beginning of the war

1 „Faire de la philosophie en France aujourd'hui. Entretien avec Pierre Macherey”, *Cités* 56, 2013, pp. 13–35.

in Iraq. We theorized globalization in which capital also globalizes itself. Nobody can command the global market – it is chaos. The coup performed by Bush was an attempt to control this chaos. And there were also groups of singularities who were resisting. Not only the Zapatistas and the anti-globalist activists... It was a multitude. Thus, the concept of multitude was also important from the viewpoint of the definition of what today functions as resistance.

M. L.: I have a friend who works in a company in Paris. He works in a hall separated into boxes. The employees are calling people to enquire about dog food. So, in a certain sense, it is cognitive and affective labor. My friend likes *operaismo* very much, and asked me to raise you the following question: “Why does Negri think that the immaterial work that I do has an emancipatory character? Why does he think that I am already living in communism that exists parallel to capitalism?” What would you answer to my friend?

A. N.: I don’t think that he is in a good situation... Of course, he is as exploited as everybody else. I only claim that anybody who works in similar conditions has the possibility of trying to liberate themselves. It is easier for your friend than for the workers in factories. I come from a working-class family; I know what it is like to be a worker. My father explained me what it means to carry fifty kilograms on your shoulders. One is physically destroyed. Resistance was a flight [*fuite*]. My father was also in the Communist Party. However, today people have the possibility to think even when their work concerns dog food or some shit like that... People have a possibility and it is a new ontological possibility! It isn’t merely a different kind of work, but it is also about a different kind of man [*homme*]. In cognitive and affective labor, a set of human passions and vital powers is transformed into labor. It is the biopolitical context which is communist. And within this context, one might say: *nihil humani a me alienum puto*. Your friend is right when he claims that his work is perhaps worse... But, first of all, and that’s what an operaist would tell you, we have to demystify the beauty of the mass worker. That kind of work is terrible, it is absurd suffering! And when you come out from the factory, you have to go home where your children are waiting for you, and the salary isn’t good enough...

M. L.: When you made an interview with Deleuze, you acknowledged that you feel a tragic note in his writings. It seems to me that there is a certain tragic note in your texts as well. Your rhetoric is often optimistic, but, on the other hand, your diagnostic suggests that *mala tempora currunt*.

A. N.: I am thinking of something absolutely fundamental. Neither the revolution in 1917, nor the great Chinese revolution, nor the victory against imperialism, nor what happened in Latin America succeeded. After all these great revolutions there was reaction from all directions. The true experience of self-management was always destroyed. Reaction didn’t re-invent liberty and, what is more, it didn’t invent anything. (And it was not capitalism that destroyed feudalism – that process was unimaginable without the communists...) However, even though reaction is going on and it repeats itself, it cannot touch the heart of subjectivity. I think that communism is alive and that current biopolitics is a communist one. Cooperation and the construction of global passions are irreducible. We produce together only, not because there is a boss who directs us, but because we can produce only together. This is a great transformation of consciousness and of the power of imagination.

These are the conclusions of a true Spinozism. The experience of my generation, of my comrades and myself, is tragic. We were defeated. Many people died and many people spent a lot of time in prison... But we are alive.

M. L.: What is your interpretation of today's crisis? In the *operaismo* of the 1960s, there was a thesis according to which the crisis is a preventive counter-revolution, a kind of reaction. Today, it's quite difficult to interpret the crisis in that way.

A. N.: Yes, that's evident. The crisis of the 1960s was caused by the workers. It was a revolutionary movement, especially in 1968, that put the capacity of capitalism to continue its development as before in crisis. Today, it is completely different: we are assisting the end of the capitalist cycle, of neoliberalism. This cycle is defeated in the political field. There is no more American hegemony. On the other hand, the form of exploitation has been transformed; it has become a financial exploitation which doesn't refer to value anymore. That's why there is also a crisis of economic thinking. Nowadays, the workers have to agree even when they don't have neither a party (the Left has disappeared), nor a true trade union. Still, there is resistance. The crisis concerns the impossibility of pushing the exploitation further in the domain of (de)regulation... Capital tries to exploit biopolitics, *bios*, the entire society. This is also a debt crisis, a real estate crisis...

M. L.: How do you see the difference between the author of *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* and the Negri who wrote the trilogy with Michael Hardt? It seems to me that there are many differences, especially with regard to labor and the concept of value. On the one hand, the author of *Marx Beyond Marx* emphasizes the importance of liberating oneself of labor as such and not only of liberating work. *Rifiuto del lavoro* was essential for you. On the other hand, in your later theory, one can find a certain praise and glorification of immaterial and living labor. Work has become more positive than it was before.

A. N.: I am touched [*touché*] by this question. For the worker, the refusal of work expresses the refusal to get up in the morning and his desire to stay in bed with his wife. It was the refusal of a completely impoverished life. In the factories of the great northern cities, everything was over. In these gestures there was also nostalgia for the community of the past. But, first of all, it was a real refusal, a refusal of salary, of the working process... Salary was not only a quantity, but also something which determined the entire life. Thus, the refusal of work was a refusal of life that was imposed. In the ontological transformation of workforce, in cognitive, affective and cooperative labor there is a discovery of what is common. The common isn't public law, it is the desire to be together, work together and live together! It goes beyond all the elements of individualism; it is a discovery of a singularity that lives with others. It is a fundamental element today, and this is why the refusal of work has been transformed. We have to decide which kind of work we refuse because there is no metaphysical essence of work. Similarly to capital, work is a relation. Work is living or dead. I was in a Renault factory. It was a shock for me. The workers didn't touch the commodity...

M. L.: It seems to me that there is also an important difference with regard to the question of value. In *Marx Beyond Marx* you suggested, while interpreting *Grundrisse*, that in Marx's theory there is a horizon beyond value. Your new theory opposes the impossibility of measuring contemporary work to the immeasurable

and living value. Thus, value has become something positive. Is this a mere change in terminology or it expresses a more essential change?

A. N.: I am not sure that there is as great a difference in my opinions in the case of value as that which I accepted in the case of the refusal of work. In the 1960s, I elaborated a critique of the law of value, a discourse beyond value. In this context, value is linked to big industry and its analysis isn't detached from its historical forms... Thus, value is linked to the individualization of work within necessary labor. This kind of work is transformed into salary and profit. The discourse on cooperation implies (already in Marx's theory) a certain quality that exceeds and modifies quantity. Two persons working together determine the relation of value to labor somewhat more than in the case of only one person. The cooperation of workers determines quality. In scientific work or in service economy, the quantification of work is a huge problem. Therefore, this difficulty with regard to the relation value–labor is politically and ontologically fundamental. What does it mean to reconquer value? Today, it means to solve the problem of the evaluation of labor on a global scale. Money is a standard; it is the means of exploitation, the measure of capitalist productivity. (For instance, Harvey says that value is extractive, that it extracts from the entire life, from the Amazonian forest...) The crises of capitalism are first of all the crisis of money.

M. L.: What do you think of the contemporary currents in Marxism? Which do you prefer?

A. N.: I am interested in Moishe Postone. He is very intelligent, however, he is extremely deterministic. I am also interested in Harvey – I agree with his concept of accumulation by dispossession. Postcolonial thinking is also important to me, for example the Gramscian and Trontian theory of Spivak. There are many people who work on the problem of the financial aspects of capitalism, on the self-valorization of capital. I am also engaged in many polemics... For instance, Badiou isn't a Marxist...

M. L.: He is a Rousseauist and a Platonist.

A. N.: Yes. And Žižek is not Marxist either. He is a Leninist and a Lacanian. But, for example, there are many important trends in feminist thinking. I love the journal *Historical Materialism* very much, they are old comrades... Marxism is a living philosophy. I have always thought that I am not a Marxist, but I think that Marxism is absolutely inevitable for contemporary thinking.