

Antonio Negri

The Porcelain Workshop: For a New Grammar of Politics.

Trans. Noura Wedell.

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Undoubtedly Antonio Negri's recent work represents an attempt at conceptual reinvigoration of leftist political theory. Particularly in light of his work with Michael Hardt in *Empire*, *Multitude*, and more recently, in *Commonwealth*, not to mention a wealth of publications over the last twenty or so years, Negri has worked to redefine the terms of a potential political-economic emancipation along (neo-)Marxist lines. This latest compilation of lectures (or what he calls workshops), delivered between 2004 and 2005 at the Collège International de Philosophie, is especially important because of its accessibility to a more general audience and as a potential introduction to his positions. However, while much of what Negri discusses is not particularly novel for those familiar with his *oeuvre*, what is of interest is his engagement, albeit cursory, with theorists that have taken issue with his ideas (not to mention his polemics against Lyotard and Baudrillard) and a certain clarification of his own relation to the work of Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze.

Negri's main concern is with articulating what he sees as the caesura between modernity and post-modernity at numerous political and economic levels. By modernity, Negri means the traditional conceptualization of transcendent political power centered along Weberian and Schmittian lines and the Fordist economic organization of the modes of capitalistic production. Negri stresses, following largely Marx's observations in the *Grundrisse*, that post-modernity is the condition of the real subsumption of society under capital, a condition of biopolitical production in which capital relations penetrate all aspects of life. The emphasis on the biopolitical reflects a changing condition of labor, from a traditional Marxist understanding of material-alienated labor to immaterial or cognitive modalities no longer under the diktat of exchange value. Likewise, the break from modernity and post-modernity shifts the concept of sovereignty to what Foucault diagnosed as biopower. Lastly, Negri documents the intrinsic crises of the nation-state form as a consequence of the propagation of global capital so that the concept of war shifts to that of global civil war (something that Schmitt himself remarked decades ago). Rather than following theorists like Derrida or Agamben, who no longer see an 'outside' to the dominant neoliberal capitalistic order, Negri wishes to stress the immanent (and importantly, *excessive*) potentialities of resistance that emerge according to the logic of global biopolitical capitalistic percolation: 'one of the specificities of postmodernity is the *reversibility* of its effects: *any domination is also always resistance*' (36). It is no surprise, then, that Negri accepts the limitless propagation of global capitalism in such a way that the very conditions for such a universal form of resistance are engendered. Thus

Negri throughout returns to a vocabulary of the multitude and the ‘commons’, that is, the attempt to reconstruct a notion of collective, by implication, global, democratic subjectivity able to act (through its various expressions) and the emergence of a space of activity through a shared global cognitive work as the only manner in which to take on the dominance of biopolitical forms of rule.

While much of the above is a restatement of Negri’s own positions throughout his many works, what remains problematic, at a political level but also at a conceptual level, is Negri’s inherent Eurocentrism. In fact, in the preface to the book, Negri asserts quite unashamedly that ‘[i]t seems to me at the time—and does so today even more—that only in Europe can we build a political field that corresponds to the most recent transformations of social conflictuality, rendering the latter strategically essential for a genuine politics of multitudes on a globalized scale’ (9). This of course belies Negri’s attempt to articulate the postmodern interdependence at the heart of global economic forms of production (53). Because, he asserts, the ‘definitive anticolonial victories coincided with the triumph of peripheral Fordism’ (ibid.), attempts to instantiate local struggles of autonomy in the periphery simply play into the hands of the dominant class of neoimperial/neoliberal governance. Thus only with the exposed break from modernity to postmodernity occurring in Europe, and through a distinctly European form of biopolitical immaterial capitalism, can there emerge a truly global notion of the multitude and the commons. If this strikes the reader of Negri’s work as another instance of the traditional paternalistic left it should come as no surprise.

What is clear, however, is that Negri’s concept of the caesura between modernity and postmodernity and its corresponding conceptual edifice is predicated on maintaining this Eurocentric bias: the immaterial and cognitive basis of ‘frictionless capitalism’ (Bill Gates) immanently realized in the social forms of capitalistic production, so important for Negri, needs the resolutely modern form of material production to remain fixed in the periphery: where are the sweatshops to be located that give First World economies its service orientated economic structure? What this implies is that the biopolitical context of global capitalism is in fact predicated upon a continuous exploitive condition that David Harvey calls accumulation by dispossession. Rather than seeing late capitalism as a step towards the fulfillment of the promise of emancipation, of recreating the negation of the negation, at a global level, what many sociologists (Wacquant, in particular) have noted is in fact how such neoliberal practices reverberate back into the metropole through a strengthening of the state apparatus. Whereas Negri sees the nation-state in crisis as a result of global economic processes, it is doubtless more accurate to stress the hardening of the state’s coercive form in the management of its own internally superfluous populations (i.e. urban ghettos, the chronically poor, etc).

All of this points to the limits of the biopolitical paradigm for thinking about the potentialities of political and economic management and the possibilities of resistance immanent in this framework. Only with a recognition of this embedded Eurocentrism at

the heart of Negri's work can the left begin to conceive a truly global lexicon for a post-biopolitical form of resistance.

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