

## Review Essay on Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job*

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In *The Labor of Job*, Antonio Negri thinks through labor, value, affect, time, and revolution via the ontological view he finds in the biblical book of Job. He uses this radical biblical book to think about the revolutionary possibilities provoked by the immeasurability of pain. As much as I long for revolutionary thought, ultimately Negri's reading of Job is less radical with respect to pain than the book of Job itself. Perhaps unfairly, my assessment becomes more acute, because I read this book in the light of Negri's very successful and important later works with Michael Hardt, *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004). Written from prison and prior to Negri's later success, the Job book might have sounded on a different register had it been published and circulated at that time. Published in the wake of the success of *Empire* — in Italian in 2002, and then again in 2009 by Duke University Press, with a forward by Michael Hardt and commentary by Roland Boer — it ends up participating in a different intellectual context, one less close to pain and exclusion. Let me first give my reading of what Negri is doing, before I turn to critique.

Negri begins with the problem of epistemology for dealing with the problem of evil and then moves to ontology. He concurs with the important critique made by many, following Auschwitz and Hiroshima, that we can no longer put faith in instrumental reason. Rationality does not necessarily produce good, nor does it always prevail. People do not logically deserve the suffering they endure. We therefore cannot simply be Spinozists, and “confirm our rational faith” (p. 9). Or, to put it another way, “*how can one continue to be a communist after Stalin?*” (p. 8, italics Negri's). Epistemology is not enough. But how then to think about the problem of evil, in detranscendentalized fashion? If evil is not causal, and not transcendent, then how do we account for it? Like Job, Negri raises important philosophical questions about the problem of evil.

Negri turns from epistemology to ontology. Ontology allows for exploration of the unknowable, or what he calls “the immeasurable” (pain, evil, and the divine). The immeasurable is part of being, it is born in the body, it provokes resistance, collectivity, and creativity (pp. 25, 26, 89-94). This assertion is the heart of Negri's materialism. Humans, he argues, must wrestle in their bodies with the painful abyss of non-being and tragedy that can only be understood at an ontological level. The confrontation with pain can produce the conditions for revolution: collectivity, creativity, and new forms of subjectivity. An ontological exploration of the unknowable fits with his larger project as voiced in *Empire*, with Michael Hardt. They explain that their project is to “reveal an alternative ontological basis that resides in the creative and productive practices of the multitude”, and from it, “the production of subjectivity toward ... a new constituent power” (2000, 47). “Revolution is not something which is realized in one's mind”, Negri writes in the Job book, “it is realized first in being, and minds will be modified on this basis” (p. 62).

Given his Marxist commitments, Negri's view of revolution is related to labor. As Hardt points out in his introduction, the Job book presents Negri's theory of labor. For Negri, the key point to consider about labor is not so much its pain, or its alienation, but its power (although he does at one point suggest that Job's pain is the pain of exploited labor, which to my mind is a misreading [p. 47]; more on this point later). Negri wants to think about how labor's power can be harnessed. No longer, he argues, can labor's value be measured in terms of time. As Hardt and he clearly explain it, for Marx, “value is expressed in measurable, homogeneous units of labor time” (2004, 145). In contrast, as they analyze it, in the biopolitical transnational capitalist order, time is no longer quantifiable in this way (in the global north at least, people tend not to punch in and out). Labor is immaterial, based on producing ideas and affect. Furthermore, human creativity always exceeds

what can be captured by value (2004, 146). Like instrumental reason, the calculation of value is in crisis. No longer is exploitation the going concern: now the question is one of exclusion.

In Job's world, the calculation in crisis is that the labor of righteousness does not produce value and justice. Instead it produces chaos, terrors, boils, pain, waters rising up, Leviathan and Behemoth. Herein lies the most productive comparison of the modern world and the ancient text that Negri draws. Labor does not produce value, nor does adherence to a moral code necessarily produce justice. The contemporary world might do well to ruminate on this point.

Yet Negri seems to want labor to produce some kind of value and justice, if non-monetary and revolutionary in nature. Negri wants to harness the immeasurable — hook the Leviathan, so to speak — and turn it toward a new constituent creativity and power. In many ways, he is Benjaminian in his wish to rupture the empty homogeneous time of value with the creative time of now, that flashes up from below (p. 99). Negri writes, "This crisis [in value, and in justice] does not only represent negativity; on the contrary, it exhibits a terrible and creative indeterminacy: a new ontological fabric for a new creative capacity" (p. 52).

Negri is not alone in trying to invert the cosmos/chaos order of Joban value. I am reminded of Carol Newsom's reading of God's speech from the whirlwind as somehow equating God to chaos. She points out the "curious level of identification between God and Leviathan" in ch. 41 (2003, 251), and also that in ch. 38, God is represented as a "mid-wife who births the sea [chaos]" (2003, 244). This suggests to Newsom a challenge to the passion of humans for order and moral order; God is not bound by the need for human order, God is wholly other (2003, 252-253). Bill Whedbee also sees God's metaphors of mythical chaos monsters as challenging Job's need for order; these monsters represent a comic, festive, and playful response to Job's accusation (1977, 23-26). Catherine Keller picks up on Whedbee's reading, and uses the chaos of the speeches from the whirlwind as a way of challenging theologies constructed on strict notions of order, which enable domination (2003, 4-7, 124-140). It is perhaps Job's most radical idea, and it is compelling in the alternate imaginary it presents.

For Negri, this chaotic energy is precisely the "new ontological fabric" from which revolution will be forged. He insists that his understanding of pain is non-dialectic, because pain is not negated; it remains "an instant of reality without closure" (p. 92). The sense of chaos and uncertainty of pain is kept alive. Yet Negri pitches this transition to the new ontology as that of death to resurrection, a dialectical move if ever there was one. He reads Job's hope for a *go'el* ("redeemer") as a messianic moment, in which labor can become immeasurable, it is "*value without measure, as power. ... Labor is now configured as the expansion of free activities*" (p. 71, italics Negri's). This possibility for labor is something Hardt and Negri have suggested is already occurring in immaterial biopolitical labor. In *Multitude* they write, "in immaterial production the creation of cooperation has become internal to labor and thus external to capital" (2004, 147). Immaterial and creative production is precisely what has produced the crisis in value in the first place. Is capitalist globalization the messiah then, for people who live in the global north, since it allows the creativity of immaterial labor to emerge? Of course one of the main critiques of Hardt and Negri is that they are not adequately concerned with the exploitation of labor that still does take place everywhere, in prisons, in sweatshops, in homes, in fields. They say that they know it still exists and yet they begin with biopolitical labor (2000, 53), which on a relative scale is not all that painful (as much as we might complain about the pain of writing, it is not the same as working in a sweatshop).

Maybe for this reason Negri turns to the ancient text. Job gives Negri pain, a place of solidarity with the exploited (One might otherwise wonder why he needs Job, since in many ways Negri is giving a reading of Negri. In this sense, he follows a trend of philosophers reading the Bible, a trend which could be said to be another mode of scripturalizing, by which philosophers can annex ancient authority). Negri's reading relies on pain. Pain grounds community and creativity. The interiority of

the abyss of non-being in being is what motivates people to “the resurrection of bodies”. Negri writes, “If the universality of death and suffering enables us to recognize time as a manifestation of the being and common reality of our existence ... this recognition certainly does not do away with pain or death. Instead it founds necessity, the desire to eliminate them” (p. 86). Pain is a motivator to move beyond it.

Negri makes grand claims for pain that cannot really be supported by Job. He writes, “Pain is a key that opens the door to community”, and “Pain is the democratic foundation of political society, whereas fear is its dictatorial, authoritarian foundation” (p. 90). Leaving aside for a moment the fact that Job is definitely frightened (e.g. ch. 7) and definitely does not form community in his pain (the book is filled with Job’s complaints that people have abandoned him, e.g. ch. 19), there is a larger issue here: as anti-dialectical as Negri says he is, he ends up sublating pain into creativity. The poem of Job, on the other hand, does not recuperate pain; it does not fold pain back into meaning. The Joban poems do not make the trite argument that is so often forced onto the book, that pain is for a reason, or, as Negri would have it, that creativity and community can be created out of pain. Job insists that there is no meaning in pain. God does not answer the question of pain, in the speech from the whirlwind. God does not make meaning out of pain. There is no self-made destiny in lieu of calculus and rationale in the book. Negri reads Job as if Job moves from pain to creativity. Because Job “sees God”, he tears God from transcendence. He joins in God’s creativity, he “participate[s] in divinity, in the function of redemption that [hu]man[s] construct in life” (pp. 96-97). Negri seems to miss the fact that the redeemer never does come for Job, nor does Job pull up his socks, and creatively invent his way out of the situation.

Although I am fully in favor of the kind of detranscendentalizing reading that Negri offers, there are two substantially negative effects of his reading. First, the epilogue is conflated with the poem. Effectively, Job becomes responsible for the favorable events of the epilogue, which Negri calls a “second nature” or a new mode of liberation. Negri goes along with the work of the epilogue. But, as Bruce Zuckerman so compellingly argues (1991), the epilogue tames the critique of the poem, making it palatable, and bringing it into the realm of canon. Second, in referring to resurrection, redemption, and messianism in the way that he does, Negri effectively provides a secular Christianized version of the Hebrew text (this point is highlighted in Boer’s commentary, p. 127). It is this larger Christian metanarrative that fundamentally prevents Negri from staying within the realm of the non-dialectic. He is not able to stay within the Benjaminian time of now, but necessarily moves into an eschatological ontology.

Moreover, Negri’s use of Job may be indicative of the power relations in which Negri himself is inscribed. In order to determine labor’s power, Negri suggests, via Job, that we must rethink time and power in ontological terms. For Negri, pain is what marks the ontological “concreteness of time” (p. 86). “Time is at once a reality, an event, and a praxis” (p. 85). Here Negri looks to Job 29, in which Job recounts the ideal conditions of his former life, as a parable of “time reappropriated by life against the alienated time of death”. There is an element of irony here, because in Job 29, Job recounts his old life in a way that is not particularly favorable to him. The passage is almost parodic. His steps were bathed in curds, oil flowed from the rocks around him; when he went into the public square, young men hid, and elders and princes covered their mouths. He was clothed in righteousness, he was eyes to the blind, feet to the lame; he was father to the poor. Now in this time of his distress, those younger and of lower stature than him mock him (ch. 30). In ch. 30 Job describes the “children of a fool” (*bny nbl*), who, he says, are mocking him. Job is quite hostile to these “children of a fool”, describing them as those who were not even good enough, in his old life, to have been given a place with the dogs tending his flocks. They are those who scrounge for food and live in the wilderness; they are like thieves who have been expelled from their community (Job 30:1-13). If parable is to be employed, I would say the children of foolishness are the revolutionary community, those living outside of the logic of capital. Job’s oration indicates that he is quite

outraged about having been made lower than them. Job's former economic station led him to philanthropy, perhaps, but not solidarity (see Runions 2009). My point here is that by ignoring this context, Negri ends up reading what is essentially Job's class warfare as resurrection and a new ontology. I know it is not his point, far from it, but I wonder if it is symptomatic of a revolutionary project that begins with the promise of "immaterial labor" that is produced in the global north. Negri and Job both start from similar economic positions, in relative global terms.

At the end of the day though, Negri's reading is most hurt by the fact that he cannot leave pain undigested and unredeemed, as he says he wishes to do. The important question that Negri provocatively raises, but does not quite answer, is how to think about evil and pain beyond a calculative epistemology and a dialectical ontology, without resulting in quietism. Certainly Negri addresses and goes beyond the kind of quietism that one might imagine attends the non-meaning of pain. But in the end, pain is sublated into resurrection, creativity, and revolution that is generated neither from the pain of the two-thirds world, nor from Job's suffering, but from his own context (by way of contrast, Alyssa Jones Nelson offers a valuable collection and discussion of readings of Job that come out of situations of pain in the two-thirds world). It seems that some (epistemological) account of exploitation is still needed in assessing the systemic causes of, and responses to, pain. The problem is exacerbated by an insistence that is not unique to Negri, of mapping philosophy onto scripture, and in this case a Christianized view of Hebrew text. The challenge Negri leaves us with is how to think about pain, labor, philosophy, the book of Job, and revolution, without suppressing or sublating any of them.

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