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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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05.10.2023

The brief century of Toni Negri

It's about feeding everyone, modernizing, being happy. Communism is a happy collective passion, ethical and political, fighting against the trinity of property, borders and capital.



Operaism, the seventies, April 7, Rossana Rossanda, global recognition: the brief century of Toni Negri, or 90 years of a communist philosopher.

Professor of State Doctrine at the University of Padua, [Toni Negri](#) has been one of the organizers and theoreticians in the area of workers' autonomy and has taught at some of the most important European universities. His works include *Il potere costituente*, *Spinoza subversivo* and *Marx beyond Marx*, as well as the celebrated trilogy that make up *Empire*, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*, written with Michael Hardt.

In this interview conducted by Roberto Ciccarelli on the occasion of his 90th anniversary, Negri reflects on the seventies, operaism and his time in exile. For Antonio Negri, being a

communist today "means the same thing it meant when I was young": a future in which we conquer power to be free, to work less and to love each other.

RC – Toni Negri, you turned ninety years old. How do you live your time at this point in your life?

TN – I remember that Gilles Deleuze suffered from a disease similar to mine. Back then, there was no assistance and technology that we enjoy today. The last time I saw him he was in a wheelchair, breathing with oxygen tubes. It was a really tough situation. It is also for me today. I think that, at this age, every day that passes is one less day. You no longer have the strength to turn it into a magical day. It's like when you eat a good fruit and it leaves you in your mouth a wonderful taste. This fruit is life, probably. It is one of its great virtues.

RC – Ninety years is a brief century...

TN – There can be different types of brief centuries. There is the classic period defined by Hobsbawn, which runs from 1917 to 1989. There was the American century that, however, was even much shorter: it lasted from the monetary agreements and the definition of a global *governance* in Bretton Woods to the attacks on the Twin Towers in September 2001. As far as I am concerned, my long century began with the Bolshevik victory, shortly before I was born, and continued with the workers' struggles and with all the political and social conflicts in which I participated.

RC: This brief century ended with a colossal defeat.

TN – It's true. But they thought that history was over and that an era of pacified globalization had begun. Nothing more false, as we can see every day for more than thirty years. We are in a period of transition, although – in reality – we always have been. Even underground, we find ourselves in a new time, marked by a global recovery of struggles, against which a harsh response is developing. Workers' struggles have begun to become increasingly entangled with feminist, anti-racist, migrant and freedom of movement, environmentalist, etc. struggles.

RC – You are a philosopher, you won a chair in Padova when you were very young. You participated in the *Quaderni Rossi*, the Italian *operatic* magazine. You researched, you did grassroots political work in the factories, starting with the *Petrolchimico* de Marghera[1]. First you were part of *Potere Operaio* and, later, of *Autonomia Operaia*. You lived the long cycle of the Italian 68, starting with the impetuous 69 worker in Corso Traiano in Turin[2]. What was the political climax of this story?

TN – The seventies, when capitalism strongly anticipated a strategy for its own future. Through globalization, capitalism precarious industrial labor along with the entire process of value accumulation. In this transition, new productive poles were ignited: intellectual work, affective work, social work that builds cooperation. At the base of this new accumulation of value are obviously air, water, living and all the common goods that capital continued to exploit in order to combat the fall in the rate of profit that it knew from the sixties.

RC – Why, since the mid-seventies, has capitalist strategy been victorious?

TN – Because there was a lack of an answer from the left. Rather, for a long time, the left totally ignored these processes. From the end of the seventies, any form of intellectual or political power, punctual or general, that tried to show the importance of this transformation and that tended to the reorganization of the workers' movement around new forms of socialization and new forms of political and cultural organization was repressed. It was a tragedy. It is there that we can see the continuity between the brief century and the time we live in now. And from the left, they sought to freeze the political picture in what was possessed.

RC – And what did that left possess?

TN – A powerful image, although inadequate even for then. He mythologized the figure of the industrial worker without understanding that the industrial worker himself desired something completely different. The industrial worker did not want to be well in Agnelli's factory, but wanted to destroy his organization; He wanted to make cars to offer to others, but without the need to enslave anyone. In Marghera she would not have wanted to die of cancer or destroy the planet.

This is basically what Marx wrote in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*: against the emancipation of commodified labour from social democracy and for the liberation of labour power from commodified labour. I am convinced that the leadership taken by the Communist International—evidently and tragically during Stalinism and then in an increasingly contradictory and impetuous manner—destroyed the desire that had mobilized gigantic masses. Throughout the entire history of the communist movement, that was the battle.

RC – What was the confrontation on that battlefield?

TN – On the one hand, there was the idea of liberation, which in Italy was illuminated by the resistance against Nazi-fascism. The idea of liberation was projected into the [Italian] Constitution itself, in the way it was interpreted by those of us who were young at the time. In this process I would not underestimate the social evolution of the Catholic Church, the culmination of which was the Second Vatican Council. On the other side, there was the realism of social democracy, inherited by the Italian Communist Party, the realism of the Amendola and the Togliattians of different origins. All this began to crumble in the seventies, when, instead, the possibility of inventing a new way of life, a new way of being communists, presented itself.



Marco Pannella (Radical Party), Rossana Rossanda, Toni Negri and Jaroslav Novak (Potere Operaio)

RC: You still define yourself as a communist. Today, what does it mean to be a communist?

TN: What it meant to me when I was young: to know a future in which we would have conquered the power to be free, to work less, to love each other. We were convinced that bourgeois concepts such as "freedom", "equality" and "fraternity" could be realized in slogans such as cooperation, solidarity, radical democracy and love. We thought about it and acted on it, and it was what the majority of the left thought and what made it exist.

But the world was and is unbearable, it has a contradictory relationship with the essential virtues of living together. And yet, these virtues are not lost, they are conquered with collective practices, they are accompanied by the transformation of the idea of productivity, which does not mean producing more commodities in less time, nor waging

increasingly devastating wars. On the contrary, it is about feeding everyone, modernizing, being happy. Communism is a happy collective passion, ethical and political, fighting against the trinity of property, borders and capital.

RC – The arrest of April 7, 1979, in the first phase of the repression of the workers' autonomy movement, was a before and after. For different reasons, in my opinion, it was also a watershed for the history of *Il Manifesto*, thanks to an intense guarantee campaign that lasted several years. It was a unique journalistic episode, carried out together with the militants of the movements, a group of brave intellectuals, the Radical Party, etc. Eight years later, on June 9, 1987, when the castle of dubious and unfounded accusations was demolished, [Rossana Rossanda](#) wrote that it was a "belated and partial reparation of something irreparable." What does all this mean to you today?

TN: First of all, it was the symbol of an undeniable friendship. For us, Rossana was a person of incredible generosity. Yet, at a certain point, even she found a limit: she could not impute to the PCI what the PCI had really become.

RC – What had it become?

TN – In an oppressor. He massacred those who denounced the mess he had gotten himself into. In those years there were many who said it. There was another way, to listen to the working class, to the student movement, to women, to all those new ways in which social, political and democratic passions were being organized. We proposed a mass alternative, honestly and cleanly. We were part of a huge movement that involved the big factories, the schools, the different generations.

The policy of closure by the PCI determined the birth of forms of terrorist radicalization: this is undoubted. It was us who ended up paying and very expensive. Considering only my case, in total I lived fourteen years in exile and eleven and a half years in prison. *Il Manifesto* always defended our innocence. It was utter idiocy to think that I and other members of the *Autonomy* were considered the kidnapers of Aldo Moro or murderers of comrades. However, in the campaign for our innocence itself, which was important and courageous, a substantial aspect remained untouched.

RC – Which one?

TN: We were politically responsible for a much broader movement against the "historic compromise" between the Communist Party and the Christian Democrats. A police response from the right was unleashed against us, as could be expected. What, however, is not yet recognized is the coverage that the Communist Party itself gave to this same answer. Deep down, we were afraid that the political horizon of the class would change. If

this historical knot is not understood, how do we complain about the non-existence of the left in Italy today?

RC – April 7 and the so-called "Calogero theorem"^[3] were considered as a step towards the conversion of a not inconsiderable part of the left to "justicialism", that is, it delegated its policy to the judiciary. How was it possible to let himself be dragged into such a trap?

TN – When the PCI replaced the economic and political struggle with the centrality of the moral struggle, and did so through a series of judges who gravitated to its area of influence, it ended up going its own way. Did they really believe they could use justice to build socialism? Justice is one of the most dear things to the bourgeoisie. It is a devastating and tragic illusion that does not allow us to see the class use of law, prison or the police against subordinates.

In those years, even young judges changed. Before they were very different. They called them "praetors of assault." I remember the first issues of the magazine *Democrazia e diritto*, where I also worked: I was happy because we talked about mass justice. Later, the idea of justice was derived in a very different sense, retrofitted to the concepts of "legality" and "legitimacy". And, in the judiciary, the political positions ended up disappearing and only the positions between its different internal currents remained. Today we are left with a Constitution reduced to a package of rules that no longer even correspond to the reality of the country.



Potere operaio in a demonstration. (Negri in the lead)

RC: In the years of imprisonment, you continued with your political battle. In 1983 they wrote a document from prison, published by *Il Manifesto*, entitled "Do you remember

revolution?". There was talk of the originality of the Italian 68, of the movements of the seventies, irreducible to the "years of lead". How did you live those years?

TN – That document said important things, but with a bit of shyness. I think he was saying more or less the things I just mentioned. Those were hard times. We were inside, we needed to get out somehow.

I confess that, in the midst of that terrible suffering, it was better for me to study Spinoza than to think about the absurd darkness in which we were submerged. About Spinoza I wrote a voluminous book, a kind of heroic act. I couldn't have more than five books inside my cell. And all the time he changed "special" prison: Rebibbia, Palmi, Trani, Fossombrone, Rovigo. In each, a new cell with new people. I would wait a few days and start again. The only book I had with me was Spinoza's *Ethics*. I was lucky enough to be able to finish the text before the 1981 riot in Trani prison, when the special forces ended up destroying everything. I'm glad that book has shaken up the history of philosophy a bit.

RC – In 1983 you were elected as a deputy and you were able to get out of jail for a few months. What do you think of the moment when, within the chamber, they voted to put you back in jail and you decided to go into exile in France?

TN – It's an episode that still hurts me. If I must make a historical and detached judgment, I think I was right to leave. In France I was useful to establish relationships between different generations and I was also able to study. I had the opportunity to work with Félix Guattari, I managed to insert myself in the debate of the moment. It helped me a lot to understand the life of the undocumented [*sans papiers*]. So was I, I taught even without having documents. I was helped by my classmates at the University of Paris VIII.

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RC – Even Rossanda criticized you...

TN – Yes, he asked me to behave like Socrates. I replied that I was risking ending up as the philosopher myself. According to prison reports, in fact, he may have died. Pannella^[4] took me materially out of prison and then blamed me for all the blame in the world because I didn't want to go back inside. There were many who deceived me. Rossana had already put me on guard at that time and maybe she was right.

RC – Did you ever do it again?

TN – Yes, when he told me not to return from Paris to Italy in 1997, after fourteen years of exile. Before leaving, we met in a café near the Cluny Museum, the national museum of the Middle Ages. He told me that he would have wanted to chain me so that I would not get on that plane.

RC – Why did you decide to return to Italy at that time?

TN – I was convinced to give the battle for amnesty for all the comrades of the seventies. At that time the bicameral commission was operating, it seemed possible. I ended up another six years in jail, until 2003. Perhaps Rossana was right.

RC – What memories do you have of her today?

TN – I remember the last time I saw her in Paris. A very tender friend, who cared about my trips to China, was worried about my health. He was a wonderful person, then and always.

RC – Anna Negri, your daughter, wrote "Con un pie entangled en la historia" [*Con un piede impigliato nella storia*] (DeriveApprodi, 2009), where she tells this same story from the point of view of her affections and also from the point of view of another generation.

TN – Tengo tres hijos maravillosos —Anna, Francesco y Nina— que sufrieron todo lo sucedido de una forma increíble. Miré la serie de [Marco] Bellocchio sobre Moro [*Esterno Notte*] y aun me sorprende haber sido acusado de aquella increíble tragedia. Pienso en mis dos primeros hijos, que por esos años iban a la escuela. Algunos los veían como los hijos de un monstruo. Estos jóvenes, de una forma u otra, soportaron acontecimientos enormes. Tuvieron que dejar Italia y volvieron, atravesaron ese largo invierno en primerísima persona. El mínimo que pueden sentir es un poco de bronca contra los padres que los pusieron en esa situación. Y yo mismo tengo mis responsabilidades en esta historia. Ahora nos llevamos bien de nuevo. Y esto, para mí, es un regalo de una belleza inmensa.

RC – At the end of the nineties, coinciding with the new global movements and the anti-war movement, you gained a strong position of visibility alongside Michael Hardt, starting with "Empire". How would you define today, at a time of return to specialism, but also of the return of reactionary and elitist ideas, the relationship between philosophy and militancy?

TN – In my case, it is difficult to answer this question. When they tell me about my work [*opera*], I answer, "Lyrical? Really?" It makes me want to laugh, because I am more of a militant than a philosopher. Some will find it funny, but I see myself as Papageno...

RC – There is no doubt, however, that you wrote many books...

TN – I was lucky enough to find myself halfway between philosophy and militancy. In the best years of my life, I moved permanently from one to the other. This allowed me to cultivate a critical relationship with the capitalist theory of power. Pivoting on Marx, I went from Hobbes to Habermas, passing through Kant, Rousseau and Hegel. Pretty big names to measure yourself against. Instead, the Machiavelli-Spinoza-Marx line was a fruitful alternative.

I insist: for me, the history of philosophy is not a kind of sacred text that mixes all Western knowledge – from Plato to Heidegger – with bourgeois civilization itself, bequeathing functional concepts to power. Philosophy is part of our culture, but we have to use it for what it serves, that is, to transform the world and to make it more just. Deleuze spoke of Spinoza recovering the iconography that represented him with Masaniello's clothes. I wish it were like that for me too. Even now, in my nineties, I still have this relationship with philosophy. Living militancy is less easy and, even so, I manage to write and listen, from my situation of exile.

RC – Exiled, still today?

TN – A little, yes. It's a different exile, anyway. It depends on the fact that the two worlds I live in, Italy and France, have very different conflict dynamics. In France, *operaism* did not have many followers, although today it is being rediscovered. The French movementist left was always led by Trotskyism or anarchism. In the nineties, with the magazine *Futur antérieur*, with my friend and colleague Jean-Marie Vincent, we had found a mediation between *gauchisme* and *operaismo*: it worked for about ten years. But we did it with great prudence, the opinions on French policy we left to the French comrades. The only major editorial written by Italians participating in the magazine was that on the great railway strike of 1995, which so closely resembled the Italian struggles.

RC – Why is *operaism* finding this resonance globally?

TN – Because it responds to the demands of resistance and a recovery of struggles, as happens in other critical cultures with which it dialogues: feminism, political ecology, postcolonial criticism, for example. And, secondly, because it is not an appendage of anything or anyone. It never was. Nor was it a chapter in the history of the PCI, as some wish. Instead, it is a precise idea about the class struggle, it is a critique of sovereignty that coagulates power around the bosses, owner and capitalist pole. But that power is always divided and always open, even when there seems to be no alternative.

The whole theory of power as an extension of domination and authority proposed by the Frankfurt School and its most recent evolutions is false, even if, unfortunately, it remains hegemonic. *Operatism* debunks this brutal reading. It is a style of work and thinking. It takes up history from below, made by the great masses in movement, seeks singularity in an open and productive dialectic.

RC – I was always surprised by your constant references to St. Francis of Assisi. Where did your interest in this saint come from and why did you take him as an example of your joy at being a communist?

TN – Since I was young, I was carried because I used the word "love". They took me for a poet or for a deluded person. On the contrary, I always thought that love was a fundamental passion that keeps mankind standing. It can become a weapon for living. I come from a family that suffered a lot during the war and that taught me a love that still makes me live. Francis is, at bottom, a bourgeois who lives in a time when he sees the possibility of transforming the bourgeoisie itself, to make a world in which people love each other and love the living.

The reference to him is, to me, like Machiavelli's reference to the Ciompi. Francis is love against property: exactly what we could have done in the seventies, tearing down development and creating a new way of producing. Francis was never taken back as he deserved, nor was the importance of Franciscanism in Italian history taken into account. I quote it because I want words like "love" or "joy" to enter political language.

The original version of this conversation, in Italian, was [published by *Il Manifesto*](#) on August 5, 2023. The notes of this version in Spanish, included with the aim of clarifying some references and contextualizing the readers, belong to its translator, Agustín Artese.

Notes

[1] Negri refers to the *Petrolchimico* establishment in Porto Marghera, in the Italian region of Veneto, the seat of intense experiences of workers' organization and struggle towards the end of the sixties, particularly during the months of July and August of 1968, as well as during the "hot autumn" of 1969.

[2] The interviewer refers to the process of struggle of the industrial workers of the metalworking complex of Turin, which began in April 1969, which would culminate in the "revolt" of Corso Traiano – headquarters of the FIAT Mirafiori establishment, symbol of the city's automobile industry – on July 3 of the same year.

[3] The interviewer refers to the "theorem" attributed to Judge Pietro Calogero during the events of repression, persecution and prosecution of leaders and militants of the Italian

extra-parliamentary left in the months following the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, in May 1978. Calogero was responsible for the arrest of Antonio Negri along with other leaders of *Autonomia Operaia*, during the mass arrests of April 7, 1979. The hypothesis advanced by the judge – the "theorem", supported even by the Italian Communist Party itself – directly associated the political and academic-intellectual activity of the detainees with the "formation and participation of armed gangs" and the incitement to "armed insurrection against the State". As a conclusion to the procedural development of the "theorem", Negri was sentenced to 12 years in prison.

[4] Negri refers to Marco Pannella (1930-2016), leader of the Italian Radical Party (PR), who proposed him to be part of the electoral lists of the PR during the parliamentary elections of 1983, considering it a reference to a process of judicialization, persecution and repression of leftist political dissidents during the seventies. Despite obtaining the parliamentary seat and with it immunity in the elections of June 1983, the Chamber of Deputies would reopen the debate for his arrest, which is why Negri would go into exile in France a few months later, in September of the same year. For his refusal to return to Italy and submit to a new arrest, the leader of the PR would publicly accuse the philosopher and militant of having abandoned the struggle for the liberation of the comrades who were still imprisoned.

Cover photo: Tony Negri turned 90 on August 1, 2023. Photo Judith Revel

Interview by Roberto Ciccarelli

Translation: Agustín Artese

Source: [Jacobin](#), 1 October 2023

Edited by [María Piedad Ossaba](#)

Available translations: [Français](#)

La Pluma. Net 03.10.2023