

REVIEW

Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, translated by Matteo Mandarini, with foreword by Michael Hardt and commentary by Roland Boer (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0-8223-4622-7

In this short book, Negri reflects upon the theme of suffering through a close reading of the Book of Job. This biblical text recounts of a prosperous and devout man who loses his family, his possessions, and his health, as God capriciously puts Job's righteousness to the test. Initially, Job fully accepts his reversal in fortune, exclaiming: "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1: 21) However, Job soon grows indignant and accuses God of acting unjustly. After protesting his innocence, Job witnesses God's appearance and is at last rewarded with wealth and a long life.

In reading the Book of Job, Negri is not interested in answering the question of why human suffering exists in spite of God's benevolence. Nor does Negri want to sing the praises of patience in the face of calamity, as most interpretations of the tale of Job have it. Rather, Negri's principal aim is to investigate the liberatory and subversive potential of suffering—specifically, to explore how suffering can advance the cause of labour against the rule of capital. As Negri writes in the preface to his book, the issue of suffering is "a practical problem, not a theodicy. It [is] the problem of liberation... from within the absoluteness of Power." (xviii)¹

At the core of *The Labor of Job* is a parallel between Job and labour. In Negri's view, Job's wretchedness signals the failure of retributive justice. This kind of justice functions according to a theory of measure that matches offence to punishment and righteousness to reward. Clearly, this theory does not apply to Job, whose tribulations are at odds with his virtuous life. To Negri, Job's unjust punishment exposes God as a Power that is arbitrary and boundless [*smisurato*: literally, without measure]. This is a Power that, being "no longer subject to the rationality of measure, ...becom[es] evil." (11) Accordingly, Job accuses God of destroying "both the blameless and the wicked" and of mocking "at the calamity of the innocent." (Job 9: 22, 24)

Just as retributive justice fails in the tale of Job, similarly—argues Negri—the labour theory of value has become meaningless as a measure for labour. This theory postulates that

¹ In this review, I follow Matteo Mandarini's translation of *potere* as "Power" and *potenza* as "power." The former captures power in its constituted, fixed form (that is, power-as-domination), while the latter refers to power in its constitutive, dynamic form (that is, power-as-potentiality).

the value of an object corresponds to the amount of labour-time that its producers have expended in its making. Negri attributes the increasing irrelevance of the labour theory of value to the recent expansion of production processes to include immaterial labour, that is, the production of information, ideas, and emotional experiences. (One can think here of advertising, which seeks to woo consumers into buying certain products by associating such products to affects—e.g. a specific perfume to a sense of passion and sensuality.) For one thing, ideas and emotional states are difficult to measure; for another, their production often takes place outside of working hours.² However, as Negri is careful to point out, “the fact that the criterion of measure is lacking does not remove the measured phenomenon. The suffering of the man who labours, who sacrifices himself and sacrifices to wealth—the pain and misery remain.” (10)

For Negri, the persistence of suffering on the part of labour poses the urgent problem of the “construction of a new possibility of justice.” (48) This constructive work—Negri contends—cannot consist in the restoration of old measures; rather, it finds its new basis on the boundless [*smisurato*] creativity of labour. The Italian theorist likens labour’s creativity to a mysterious figure onto whom Job lays his hopes for his own redemption: that of the Avenger [*go’el*]. In Negri’s interpretation, this figure is a Messiah who takes it upon himself to defend Job from his adversary, that is, God. (69-70) Much like Job’s Avenger, creativity is the force that allows people to redeem themselves by overcoming capitalist exploitation.

Importantly, the redemption that interests Negri does not concern the soul, but rather the body. (51, 72) Negri’s argument is that, to redeem the body from suffering, one must start from one’s own tormented body. The crucial step here is to transform pain into a constitutive force. This transformation happens at the collective level, as people come to understand each other’s pain. “While no one is able to feel another’s pain,” Negri explains, “understanding pain is not an intellectual act, or at least not merely so, but a pitying [*compatire*], a suffering with [*patire assieme*].” (93) Unlike fear, which prompts people to accept draconian measures, pain creates horizontal relations among people. Thus, suffering generates the condition of possibility for the creation of a non-hierarchical order.

In the last chapter of his book, Negri argues that the path to liberation is sealed as soon as domination is made visible. Negri disregards the ending of the Book of Job, wherein God restores Job his health and doubles his wealth; instead, Negri lingers on God’s appearance to Job. According to the Italian philosopher, this passage signals God’s loss of transcendence, as Job’s protests force God to descend from heaven and to explain his actions: “I have seen God, thus God *is* torn from the absolute transcendence that constitutes the idea of him, God justifies himself, thus God is dead.” (96; italics in the original) In other words, exposing Power is already a triumph, for domination is vulnerable to subversion only once it becomes visible.

In fact, for Negri the making-visible of Power cannot be separated from the creation of a new order. “*Creation*,” the Italian theorist argues, “*is the content of the vision of God*.” (97; italics in the original) Job sees God, *wherefore* Job redeems himself through an act of creation that subverts God’s rule. By the same logic, exposing the Power of capital is the first step to the

² On this matter, which is in fact undeveloped in Negri’s commentary, see the useful foreword by Michael Hardt, especially xii.

liberation of labour through the creation of a new order free from exploitation. This order would allow labour to metamorphose into free activity and continuous “creation, that is,... the subversion of existing forms and... innovation.” (103)

Two implications ensue from the transformation of labour along the lines that Negri delineates. First, innovation would become a central feature of everyday life; specifically, it would guide the way people live and relate to the present, themselves, and others. In Foucauldian parlance, innovation would become an *ethical* principle, that is, a principle subtending a way of life. Secondly, and consequently, the constant “subversion of existing forms” (103) would prevent new structures from becoming unchallenged and, therefore, from crystallising into new forms of domination. In this sense, innovation would free people from Power “without repeating Power’s destiny” (70)—i.e., it would end domination without giving rise to new forms of rule.

Admittedly, Negri does not reference Foucault on the link between ethics and innovation. And yet, Foucault is never too far from Negri’s mind. As the Italian philosopher writes in the preface to his book, it was the tale of Job that brought Negri in contact with French post-structuralism, and especially with Foucault, Guattari, and Deleuze. Indeed, this tale encouraged Negri to “attempt a synthesis” (xxiii) between his own workerism and Foucault’s as well as Deleuze’s thought (xxiii).³ However, Negri’s theoretical structure could have benefitted from a further injection of Foucauldian ideas, as I illustrate below.

The plank supporting Negri’s argument is that the existing criteria of measure are becoming increasingly less relevant, to the point where modern societies are no longer “subject to the rationality of measure.” (11) I am not in a position to determine whether retributive justice and the labour theory of value are in crisis or not—but even if they were, it does *not* follow that there are no criteria of measure at all today. As Foucault argues, modern societies have in fact experienced the proliferation of *new* criteria in the form of the norm. Norms define states or behaviours towards which one is supposed to aspire and, consequently, against which one is judged and corrected. In this sense, norms function as benchmarks that make it possible to position people on a continuum between the poles of deviance and normality.

The specificity of the norm is that it is not confined to the realms of the economy (as the labour theory of value) or of justice (as with the retributive model). Rather, norms are pervasive in modern societies, encompassing sexual orientation, aesthetic standards, dietary practices, and so on. Thus, for example, a ‘normal’ production process is one that maximises efficiency and reduces waste; a ‘normal’ student is assiduous and obedient; and a ‘normal’ sexual orientation, (usually) heterosexual. Importantly, norms neither derive from nor are enforced by a centre of power, such as a monolithic capitalist class. In fact, norms operate through a plethora of social agents who act in a relatively autonomous fashion from each other and, at times, for very different reasons.⁴ As Foucault famously put it, “the judges of normality are

³ As the translator notes, “workerism is a heretical version of Marxism that posits the working class as the dynamic but autonomous core of capitalism.” (xxiii)

⁴ See Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 30.

present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social worker'-judge."⁵

Negri's failure to adequately take into account the role of norms in modern societies means that the emancipation that he anticipates may well leave a number of oppressive norms unscathed. How emancipated can a society be, where norms that uphold and reinforce forms of domination like sexism and racism are still intact? In this regard, Negri is right to suggest that exposing the causes of suffering is a crucial step in the framework of a political strategy, for one can attempt to change only the problems that one is aware of. Unfortunately, this is pretty much all the Italian theorist says on what a strategy for change might look like for labour. Arguably, the topic of strategy remains undeveloped because it exceeds the remit of *The Labor of Job*; and yet, this topic looms over the entire text, as I explicate below.

What brings strategy to the foreground is the question of how precisely labour can deploy its creativity to free itself from a capital that is at least as creative. "The bourgeoisie," Marx and Engels wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, "cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society."⁶ Capital thrives on innovation: to paraphrase what the Italian writer, Tomasi de Lampedusa, said in other context, under capital everything needs to change for everything to stay the same. If this is true, then what is to keep capital from turning situations, people, and actions that endanger its own rule into something that pays? To my mind, Negri's book falls short of providing a satisfactory answer.⁷

Questions also remain on Negri's insights on pain and its potentially emancipatory role. While a shared experience of suffering can unite people and catalyse action, political projects that find their thrust in pain tend to be steeped in resentment for the very suffering that one has experienced. As both Nietzsche and Wendy Brown have persuasively argued,⁸ this resentment leads political agents to seek to avenge themselves by hurting their adversaries. In doing so, however, such agents only perpetuate suffering by displacing it onto their enemies, instead of creating an order that eradicates or at least minimises suffering. The upshot here is that projects that are driven by suffering fail to create real alternatives, limiting themselves to repeating "Power's destiny." (70)

The above begs two fundamental questions on Negri's argument on pain. Firstly, to what extent is suffering an experience that *all* workers undergo, as Negri maintains? In other words, is exploitation intrinsic to capital, such that it causes all wage-earners to suffer? Or is exploitation only the worst manifestation of capital, in a way that leaves open the possibility for fairer forms of capitalist production? Secondly, does every worker experience the same

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., 1995), 304.

⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, translated by Samuel Moore, with an Introduction by Gareth Stedman Jones (London: Penguin Classics, 2002), 222.

⁷ In fact, we can pose the question of how creativity can escape capital's capture to Foucault's own work. Specifically, in what ways does Foucault's injunction to think and act differently go beyond the capitalist process whereby "everything that is solid melts into air"?

⁸ See Wendy Brown. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995), chapter 3.

kind of pain, regardless of, say, their job satisfaction, working conditions, or income? That is, what differences exist among workers? To what extent can these differences trump commonalities, thereby hampering the creation of a political project?

My quibbles with, and questions on, Negri's book are not meant to detract from its value. Foucauldian scholars will find much in this book to disagree with, but they will also find some inspiring and thought-provoking arguments. In this respect, Negri's arguments on innovation as an ethical principle and on the political centrality of the body can only receive appreciation from students of Foucault. All in all, Negri's *The Labour of Job* will leave the reader with more questions than answers, but maybe this is precisely why reading this short and difficult book is well worth one's time.

Salvatore Cucchiara
M.A. Student
Department of Political Science
University of Alberta
10-16 Henry Marshal Tory Building
Edmonton, AB T6G 2X5
Canada