

FOUCAULT *DOCET*

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ABSTRACT: In a wry response to Negri's article, Pier Aldo Rovatti—one of the key figures behind the *pensiero debole* ('weak thought') movement attacked by Negri in *The Italian Difference*—defends the Foucauldian inspiration behind his own understanding of philosophy. He points to the anachronism of the national image of thought put forward by Negri in his article and questions his interpretation of the problem of difference. Rovatti disputes the idea that philosophy can synthesize by fiat different expressions of subjectivity into a unitary political subject, and calls for a reflexive clarification of the tasks of the philosopher, one that would not end up recreating a logic of mastery.

KEYWORDS: Difference; Foucault; Knowledge; Negri; *Pensiero Debole*; Subjectivity

In spite of appearances, Antonio Negri's obscure pamphlet *The Italian Difference* does not really lend itself to a polemical discussion. It must be taken for what it is, a *coup de théâtre* dictated—as the author himself confesses—by a rather ingenuous moment of *hubris*. At the end of the day, it is a *sparata*, as we say in Italian. Such a blast would intend to strike at the entirety of Italian contemporary thought (and with particular violence against so-called 'weak thought') in its capacity as a *philosophy of the master*; at the same time, it positively exempts from this treatment three names—the old Gramsci, and the new Mario Tronti, the workerist, and Luisa Muraro, the feminist—in their capacity as, it would seem, *philosophies that creatively resists the master by means of difference*. Everything else is a desert.

If there are no doubts about Gramsci, the two other names are—even for an Italian—quite unexpected. I wonder what those concerned by this bizarre ordering think about it (and then I ask myself: What status does he who arranges them arrogate to himself? Is he like the fourth man officiating at a football match?). Mario Tronti stood aside many years ago, avoiding the public scene; Luisa Muraro, whom I know very well, is on the contrary very present on the feminine front. She appears on television and even in glossy magazines without fear of becoming what Negri would call a 'game show hostess'. Along with these choices, we could produce many others, just as arbitrary and per-

sonal: this reminds me of the habit, quite in vogue in Italy, whereby everybody imagines himself to be the coach of the national football team and dictates his own line-up. So, I'll drop it.

As for Negri's intended targets, they revolve around the old motif, often used in reactionary terms, of the 'poverty' of Italian philosophy. I just want to say something about weak thought ('the vilest point' of the twentieth-century decline, as Negri delicately describes it), considering the fact that, at the beginning of the 1980s, I was its promoter together with Gianni Vattimo. Weak thought was an episode in the Italian philosophical debate that aroused considerable alarm in academia and whose effects (which also had significant international echoes) have yet to die out. These effects, which in part intersected with those of deconstruction, should induce some caution even in the worst-disposed of critics. I mean that, were he to exercise such caution, Negri would realise that what is at stake here is an issue of power [*potere*] that concerns the so-called metaphysical violence of philosophy, its administration of truth, and the elements of micro-government that follow from it, beginning with the real privileges that exist in the institutional circles of research.

I think Negri is well aware that there is a front of struggle within philosophy, related to the very way in which the *scientificity* of concepts is understood and *knowledge as power* [*potere*] is used. Negri's sharp mind cannot overlook this Foucauldian inspiration of weak thought, unless he does so deliberately. As a matter of fact, his *very strong* thought could obviously fall into the critical horizon of weak thought itself.

I'm sorry to say this to a friend, but this pamphlet by Negri on the Italian difference is full of superficialities, that is, hurried verdicts which, as if wielding a machete, take the place of the reflection required by critical discourse. When sarcasm becomes the systematic shortcut for analysis, I doubt that philosophy remains (as Negri writes in the opening of his pamphlet) 'that critical activity that allows one to grasp one's time and orientate oneself in it'. I fully agree with this definition, to the extent that I'd like to bear it in mind when discussing some of the, so to speak, *serious* aspects that underlie Negri's text—since it is clear that something serious, and thus really discussible, both inspires it and makes it cohere.

My first observation concerns the emphasis on *national character*. The author of *Empire*, and other volumes that articulated its hypothesis, is the same author who, ever since his association with Mario Tronti at the beginnings of so-called 'workerism', has always stressed the multinational and ultimately global dimension of capitalism, and the correlative international and worldwide dimension of anti-capitalistic struggle. The subject in transformation in these struggles (in the sense that this subject is by now no longer the factory worker of the 1960s) does not identify himself with national characteristics, and, if he does so, he condemns himself to a theoretical and practical delay that corresponds with the worst vice of the 'Lefts' that Negri dislikes, insofar as they are inevitably retrograde vis-à-vis the *imperial* phase in which we live.

But in that case even an analysis of philosophical thought in specifically national terms will be similarly retrograde and, in a word, *anachronistic*. For instance, an evalua-

tion of weak thought that did not take into account the international intellectual horizon, European and extra-European, in which it operates (Michel Foucault's discourse on power [*potere*], Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, Richard Rorty's ideas), would be meaningless. Just like other struggles, philosophical struggle, with its fronts of resistance, takes place on a global scene that far exceeds—in its practices—national vicissitudes.

What's more, Negri's own thought is clear proof of this: it is enough to observe the use he makes of a number of philosophical contributions to describe the condition of *empire*, and, in particular, the valorisation of theoretical strategies borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. In my view, it follows from this that the problem of an 'Italian difference' simply does not exist or is entirely artificial (and backward-looking). While what evidently remains important, and perhaps essential, is the *problem of difference*. It is with regard to this problem that we are called to provide critical clarification, one that acknowledges its genealogy (thus passing through Nietzsche and Heidegger); evaluates the legacy of a phase (basically, that of Deleuze), about which it is justifiable to ask whether difference has inclined towards a metaphysics of difference; and finally gives the right weight to Derrida's proposals (and thus his idea of deconstruction) which, as it is well-known, produced considerable insight into social practices, for instance into those of women. This is a problematic picture, one that needs to be explored with proper attention and circumspection. On the contrary, Negri simply assumes it at first blush, with excessive haste.

My second critical observation concerns Negri's overall approach. First, I note his insistence on the word *creativity*. It is difficult to disagree with him: behind this philosophical operator lies the couple Bergson-Deleuze, on which the group behind *aut aut*, the journal I edit (and which Negri knows well), has worked a lot in recent years. It is doubtless the case that Deleuze elaborates the idea of creative philosophy and conceptual *invention* with great originality. However, Negri applies it to a scenario that appears politically pregnant yet somewhat simplified. For him, it is as if there were only two levels: that of anti-capitalist struggles, and that of the theoretical tools suitable to represent and promote them. Any other term or mediation is excluded.

This scenario is a little bit magical, and actually cuts through differences and conflicts on both sides. It is by no means irrefutable that global struggles produce a uniform intelligence and, given that *diversity* appears to be a basic assumption with regard to this point, it is possible, and even desirable, that *different expressions of subjectivity* realise themselves, with valid points of individual specificity. Would the task of philosophy be that of unifying them in a strong thought of struggles? Answering 'yes' is problematic, to say the least. An answer that would guarantee such diversity using a thought that is sufficiently supple and open to the plurality of instances would seem more coherent. A thought that knows how to put itself on the line and renounce the haste of truth, in brief, a thought that is able to ward off its claims to hegemony.

All this leads us to the other dimension of the problem, itself characterised by a debate between positions, that is, by what could be called a struggle within philosophy. There is no trace of this in Negri's pamphlet, while, in my view, such a conflict of posi-

tions should be taken very seriously if one wishes to broaden one's perception of practices and form a microphysical picture of the balance of powers [*poteri*] in theoretical struggles. Foucault *docet*. Otherwise, at every turn, one runs the risk of taking refuge in positions exposed to dogmatism and, conversely, carrying out unproductive erasures, that is, throwing out the baby with the bath water.

The friend-enemy paradigm is useful only if it is the result of a search for identity, not the presupposition of a discourse. It seems banal to observe that if we speak of philosophy we first of all need to understand each other well regarding the status of philosophy and the so-called philosopher. Once we have agreed on the fact that philosophy must be a critical orientation vis-à-vis present reality, multiple foldings and differentiations appear on the scene, and there impose themselves just as many deconstructions of this very assumption which, at every turn, tends to congeal into an abstract presupposition. As Negri knows perfectly well, these foldings and differences are not the creation of isolated minds, uprooted from actual contexts, and they measure themselves up to the identity and status that the so-called philosopher assumes at any given time.

Such a 'philosopher' is never completely foreign to a disciplinary apparatus, to be understood as the historical disciplinarity of philosophy qua knowledge and as an institutional apparatus in which his practice of thought is always being produced. Without a critical clarification concerning the philosopher's stance both within and without discipline, we run the risk of turning him into a mythical figure and maybe, precisely for this reason, one who is very close to the logic of the master.

Translated by Lorenzo Chiesa