The problem of salvation is all the more important for those who have been Marxists. — Negri, *The Labor of Job*, 9

What a sublime and, at the same time, profound vocation this theological discipline has. — Negri, *The Labor of Job*, 99

Four features of Antonio Negri’s *The Labor of Job* stand out, at least for one trained in that arcane discipline of biblical criticism: radical homiletics, philosophical commentary, revolutionary readings of the Bible, and the politics of cosmogony.¹ Let me say a little more about each one as I follow the ropes that moor Negri’s *The Labor of Job* to the Bible and biblical criticism.

At the heart of the book is what I would like to call a radical homiletics. A discipline much neglected these days, homiletics is really the art of connecting a text like the Bible with the realities of everyday life. Moving from the intricacies of textual analysis to the application to life, Negri’s homiletics is radical on two counts, one political, resting on Marx, and the other textual, reading Job as a preeminent document for our time. Job both describes our time and offers a way through the impasse of Left action.

Further, this book is a philosophical commentary. Caught in the rough ground between two camps—radical philosophy and biblical criticism—it is not conventional biblical criticism, if such a thing actually exists, with its characteristic assumptions, methods, and skills. Is Negri then a lone

¹ I read this text partly as a biblical critic, one who is quite familiar with Job, who has taught it and studied it at various times. Apart from the three major topics, I also leave aside two bowlers—the resurrection of the flesh and the Messiah. The first simply does not appear in the belief structures at even the latest possible date of composition for the book and the second is a deeply theological argument that is difficult to locate in the text.
As an example of what I mean, let me begin with the radical homiletics of another Italian, Pier Paolo Pasolini, who wished to make a film about Paul set in our current world. As Badiou reports it, on the basis of the full script of a film that was never made, Pasolini's idea was to situate Paul in the modern world but keep all of his statements unaltered. Thus, while Rome becomes New York, Jerusalem becomes Paris, Damascus becomes Barcelona, and the early Christians become the resistance, Paul's condemnations, attacks, pain, calls for repentance, and statements of love and acceptance all speak directly to our own situation. As Badiou puts it, "The most surprising thing in all this is the way in which Paul's texts are transplanted unaltered, and with an almost unfathomable naturalness, into the situations in which Pasolini deploys them: war, fascism, American capitalism, the petty debates of the Italian intelligentsia..." Another Italian radical with another biblical text attempts very much the same thing. Like Pasolini on Paul, Negri on Job offers a radical homiletics.

Sprinkled throughout the book we find statements that bring Job into very intimate contact with today. On theodicy, he writes: "It was, of course, a very different route from that traveled by classical theodicy, and by Job in particular, but in the end it was all the same" (vie, my emph.). Above all, Job speaks directly to the question of a "theodicy of capital." With neither bourgeois theory nor proletarian practice able to provide such a theodicy, everything becomes far more brutal: "Capital is truly Behemoth and Leviathan, Hiroshima and Auschwitz. And here we are on the other side, where the proletariat is able to directly construct value thanks to the accretion of pain that it has experienced" (75–76).

Job and the proletariat mesh here, while capital goes the way of Leviathan and Behemoth. Or on the question of retribution, which is the theological position of Job's three friends, we find that all the great systems have been fundamentally retributive: "The great historical time of the Occident has been dominated by empty retributive conceptions—from Aristotle, through Christianity's reactionary accounts of it, to the more

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3 Ibid., 9; ibid., 41.
advanced capitalist ones. Socialism is the apologia for a retributive theory of justice, human action, and social rewards” (36).

Before Job’s withering sarcasm all of them are found desperately wanting. There are many more examples, such as the Church’s appropriation of Bildad’s “divine overdetermination” (it’s all due to God’s grace and power [19]), or Job’s very modern-seeming “cosmogonic materialism” that resists position like those of Bildad (48), or the critique of unexpected and overwhelming love, pushed by the last interlocutor, Elihu, rubbed by Job and targeted at the purveyors of “Christian love” (see chapter 5).

At the end of the last chapter of the book Negri goes into overdrive. Job is nothing less than the “parabola of modernity”. “The book of Job is the parabola of modernity, of the forever unfinished dialectic of world and innovation, of being and relation, that characterizes it. And the problem of the book of Job is that of modernity — of the alternative between the totalization of the rule of science and technology over the world, and the liberation of new subjectivity” (103).

The problem of the book of Job is that of modernity — radical homiletics indeed. But Negri goes on to sweep into Job’s modern agenda all of the subjects of the book: ethics, pain, labor, value, power, subject, collectives … in short, ontology and metaphysics. Indeed, we can organize the very sense of modern time in terms of the great narrative pattern of Job: “We can see no better way to periodize the time within which we live than through the analogy with the suffering and resurrection of Job” (104). Or rather, this is the source of communist hope, which must pass through Beliemoth and Leviathan in order to see the flowers that grow on the thorns.

Both the figure of Job and the story that bears his name (Negri often elides the two) become the exemplum for Negri’s own practice. Job functions as the fulcrum between Italian revolutionary practice and French thought. (Negri escaped from one to the other while writing the book.) More than one reader may begin to ask the question Negri himself poses: why Job? Negri could have chosen any other great text to explore the same problems. Or, in terms of biblical interpretation, it is the old problem of exegesis versus esegesis, reading (literally “leading”) out of a text over against reading “into” a text. Does not Negri engage in a heavy bout of esegesis here? Is all this really in Job? As any first-year biblical student will tell you, biblical interpretation is neither one nor the other. Exegesis and esegesis are inseparable: the heuristic framework with which one begins reading invariably wobbles and changes shape in the face of the text’s own words and sentences. More simply, what we bring in is altered, often drastically, by what comes out.

Philosophical Commentary

However, the royal road to homiletics is the careful task of textual interpretation or what is usually (and misleadingly) called exegesis. My argument is that Negri takes up what can be called a philosophical exegesis or commentary: he reads Job as a work that raises profound philosophical questions. We need to be careful here, for such a philosophical commentary may run in two directions. It may follow the line of Agamben’s The Time That Remains, a book on Paul where we find precious little engagement with biblical critics and a cloud of philosophical witnesses and issues. Or, like Negri, it may put these philosophical interlocutors in the back room (the “Notas” as he calls them), where one might go for a smoke and chat, and keep the biblical text in the foreground. Pride of place is reserved for the text of Job and a small number of biblical commentators. Quite simply, he wants this to be a close engagement with the book of Job, which is the peg on which he wishes to hang some crucial matters. They may be philosophical matters (hence my descriptor as “philosophical commentary”) but he wants to work out those matters through an engagement with the text. The focus is the text and then its


5. So we find an exploration of the likenesses and differences between Spinosa and Job in Note A, a short and sharp engagement with Pierre Giraud’s mistaken reading of Job as scapegoat in Note B, a fascinating intense burst on laughter in Note C, the sublime in Note D, gore in Note B, a fascinating intense burst on laughter in Note C, the sublime in Note D, pain, community, and communication in Wiegend in negative theology in Note E, pain, community, and communication in Wiegand in negative theology in Note E, and then Habermas’s mistakes concerning modernity in Note I.
application—that is, homiletics—and not the thoughts of other philosophers.

However, this desire for Job’s text leads Negri quite nicely into a problem that lies at the heart of biblical criticism, namely, the tension between what is called historical-critical and literary approaches to the Bible. The former may be more homogenous and the latter quite scattered, but in Negri’s discussion they take the shape of two options: either the text is a fragmented collection gathered over time, or it has a literary integrity that gives unity to a disparate piece. (Very roughly and for those not up to speed on biblical criticism, historical-criticalism arose in the heady mix of religion and politics of Germany in the middle-nineteenth century and became the hegemonic method for a century or so; over against historical-criticalism’s search for the history of the literature of the Bible and the history behind that literature, the so-called literary approaches represent a breakout from historical critical orthodoxy from the 1970s onward, asking a whole range of different questions about the nature, ideology, and function of literature.)

Even with the limited resources that were at his disposal, Negri is very careful to read both text and biblical commentators. In the process he replicates this tension between historical-critical and literary approaches within his discussion. So, we find a careful representation of the historical-critical assumptions concerning the structure and history of the text now known as Job. The prose prologue and epilogue (chapters 1–2; 42:7–17) become the most ancient layer of the text, after which we find the poem of Job’s complaint, the engagement with the three lawyers, Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, the subsequent additions of the mythical cosmogony and the monsters Leviathan and Behemoth, all of which we find in the famous voice from the whirlwind in chapters 38–41, the insertion of Eliphaz’s engagement, and finally the latest one, the “Hymn to Wisdom” (chapter 28). He even provides the obligatory “dates” that stretch from an unspeakably ancient and undatable basis through to the third or second century BCE.

Now, one would expect that such an approach to the book would produce an inevitable fragmentation, especially if it is coupled with an assumption (still far too strong in biblical criticism) that what is earliest is the most authentic and genuine. Indeed, fragmentation is one of the well-known outcomes of historical critical analysis. All we are left with is a text broken in little pieces. Another outcome is the interminable and irresolvable debate about precisely how to divide the text. Or rather, how many layers do we have and how do they relate to each other? For example, I was taught that the prose prologue and epilogue were actually later accretions to the poetic text. And in a typical twist, the folktales may be old (but then who really knows?) but was added at a later date. Negri neatly sidesteps the quagmire of such minute arguments, a quagmire that has swallowed up more than one promising biblical mind.

Necessary as such engagements may be, they are also highly hypotheitical. With nothing more than the text in hand (there is simply no external evidence as to how Job might have come together or when it was written), historical-critics have notoriously claimed a “scientific” status for their work. Even now, when it is on the defensive, I still hear all too often the claim that such an approach is “real” biblical criticism.

For all his obligatory nods to historical-critical positions concerning Job, to the point of listing in his bibliography some of the main commentators, Negri is by no means beholden to them. In fact, when I first read his text I thought he was opting for a poetic-literary coherence characteristic of some of the newer literary readings. Influenced in part by the New Criticism, as well as a half-concealed reverence for the text that was proclaimed in terms of literary artistry and the compositional skill of the

6 In this way Negri avoids the problem that bedevils the current efforts to engage philosophers and biblical critics on the letter of Paul. Biblical scholars, locked into their own history and set of assumed questions, tend too quickly to dismiss the engagements of the likes of Badiou, Agamben, Žižek, or even Kristeva. Keen to learn from biblical scholars, these philosophers in the end despair of biblical scholars ever making a valid contribution to the issues that interest them. What we really have is a dislocation of two traditions of commentary with their different histories, speeds, and engagements. See also Bork, Criticisms of Religion.

7 After a comment on the translations of Job that he used, Negri is careful to list the biblical materials first before adding the philosophical works with which he is more at home. Yet these works do not swamp the list.

8 For all of this see Negri, The Labor of Job, 2–5.
supposed authors, one branch of the newer approaches argues strenuously for a deeper coherence and integrity of the biblical texts that had been torn to pieces by historical-criticism. This seemed to be Negri’s path. Add to this the names of some of the commentators whom he invokes and the picture looks complete. We find Norman Habel’s commentary, a curious work that attempts to use narrative theory in order to interpret a poetic text, but a work that does argue for the composite integrity of Job. More regular than Habel is Samuel Terrien’s sensitive commentary. Terrien is no hack, having written some very fine work, but he is also a theologian. He has written variously an atlas of the Bible for children, works on music and worship, and two well-known books on biblical theology. From this background Terrien is keen to find texts from the Bible that are—to put it bluntly—good for you if you read them. For all my enjoyment of Terrien in the 1980s when his work was quite popular, he always struck me as a bit of a snob.

Despite the number of times Negri defers to Terrien’s judgment, he sidesteps those snobbish bits. Indeed, although Negri initially seemed to me to be opting for a poetic-literary position of integrity and coherence, or even a theological assumption concerning the text’s deeper role for good, he does neither of these things. Instead, what we find is an argument for philosophical coherence. Let me give a few examples. When Negri broaches the supposedly final and late-layer addition of the “Hymn to Wisdom” in Job 28, he writes: “It is almost certainly a passage inserted very late into the book of Job—perhaps the very last of the additions to the text. But, like the other additions, it is a logical and fitting one—this, and only this, interests us” (45, my emph.).

The issue with which the Hymn to Wisdom must deal is: who is God if he is not a just judge? Negri makes a similar move for philosophical integrity when he engages with the wonderful figures of Leviathan and Behemoth and related cosmogonic content (the supposed third layer): “There should be little doubt about where I stand myself on the question of the interpretations of these passages: where we are led necessarily by philology we are also led by strictly poetic and philosophical considerations” (52, my emph.). Then again, in relation to Elihu’s speeches (fourth layer of the text): “In whatever manner things stand, I am interested in studying these discourses for what is said in them, for the further, strong variant that they insert in the philosophical architecture of the book of Job. These discourses are in fact far from being simply an internal articulation of the text, rather, they represent a new critical position” (63, my emph.).

So we have a collection of observations—a logical and fitting addition, philosophical considerations, a new critical position within the philosophical architecture—that really point toward an argument for philosophical integrity. In fact, each new insertion or each new layer on the historical reconstruction of the text becomes an effort to deal with the problems that have arisen from the previous insertion or layer. In short, what Negri has done is absorb the historical fragmentation and layering of the text, bounce off the literary and the theological arguments for coherence, and then make his own argument for philosophical integrity. Not a bad way to move, if you ask me.

To sum up, Negri’s philosophical commentary is the outcome of various efforts to deal with tensions in his reading of Job. His initial step is to focus on the biblical text and keep the philosophers in the background (the “Notes”). But this then leads him into an ongoing tension over method.
within biblical studies: either the fragmented layering and insertions of historical critical readings or the poetic coherence of literary and indeed theological readings. Here he takes on board the first, listens closely to the second, and then argues for his own brand of philosophical integrity. What we end up with is a philosophical commentary that faces the text and mediates the critical positions it generates. Implicitly this position is also a challenge to the age-old assumption of the origins of theology: the Bible might have supplied the stories but the philosophy comes from the Greeks. The blending of the two in the first centuries of the common era produced that unique discipline known as theology. By contrast, for Negri a text such as Job is a fully fledged philosophical text.

On Liberation Theology, Revolution, and Reaction

This philosophical commentary finds in Job the great opposition between measure (mesura) and immeasure (dismesura). I can’t get out of my mind the image of a thread that strings all of the other topics together like some vast necklace. So we find value, labor, pain, ontology, time, power, evil, theodicy, creation, and cosmogony all linked in a circle. It is difficult to organize these topics in the conventional linear fashion of argument or narrative. Instead, I feel as though I am breaking into a close-knit circle and the point at which I break in affects my perception of what is going on. So I prefer to take a different approach: rather than try to perform some neurosurgery and enter deep within the workings of Negri’s mind, I will throw in a few spoilers, a few items that reorganize Negri’s own categories.

There are two such spoilers. The first comes from one of Negri’s hints: he salutes liberation theology’s intersection with historical materialism. And the second is that Negri is hot on the trail of the revolutionary tradition of biblical narrative. In his treatment it takes the form of a celebration of chaos and re-creation. Let me take one at a time.

As for liberation theology, a little background: out of the explosion of the 1960s that produced second-wave feminism, black power, indigenous movements for political rights, and a host of other strands, liberation theology also found its voice. The foundation text from 1969 is Gustavo Gutiérrez’s Theology of Liberation, where we find the articulation of the Bible’s “preferential option for the poor,” an attempt to identify a structural and collective notion of sin, some Marxist terminology, and an argument that salvation is not restricted to the spiritual realm but includes social and economic relations.13 However, the Marxism within liberation theology has always been held at arm’s length, useful perhaps for social and economic analysis but no more. And even that was contentious for a suspicious and often hostile Magisterium; so liberation theology in its Roman Catholic variety fell back on the ambiguous tradition of Roman Catholic social thought.

Rather than enter these debates, Negri’s salute is directed toward the convergence of theological and materialist thought. He writes:

It is very important that we underline the convergence, through the revolutionary process, of materialist and religious thought in this re-invention of value. The Marxist thinkers of the 1930s, in the hell of fascism, the Christian authors of the 1970s, in the hell of underdevelopment, have rediscovered the same themes; it is no coincidence that Ernst Bloch has the same rhythms of the Job of the “theology of liberation.” (78)

These themes concern the convergence of salvation and liberation and a pattern that moves from misery to liberation. The second theme is ordinary and universal, the first is the great achievement of liberation theology. The allusion to Bloch is actually an allusion to his Atheism in Christianity, especially the section on Job where he argues that Job stands up to God and challenges the arrogant deity who refuses to answer and then finally tries to dismiss Job. The hero of this story is one of the bearers of the seed of atheistic rebellion, a standing on one’s feet against an oppressive God of the rulers.14 Negri will end up disagreeing with this position on

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13 Gustavo Gutiérrez, Theology of Liberation. See also his The Power of the Poor in History and We Drink from Our Own Wells.
14 Ernst Bloch, Atheism in Christianity (English edition); Auseinandersetzung (German edition).
Job in some respects (the dismissive deity of chapters 38–41 is in fact one who has been called to account and squirms as a result), but he implicitly acknowledges the influence that Bloch has had among liberation theologians.  

As for the phrase “the Job of the theology of liberation,” I can’t avoid thinking of Gutierrez’s book On Job: God-Talk and the Suffering of the Innocent even though Negri never once mentioned it directly. For Gutierrez the issue is undeserved suffering, both that of Job and that of the poor in Latin America. The answer, suggests Gutierrez, lies in prophecy where Job moves beyond his own suffering and contemplation in response to God’s own appearance in the whirlwind of chapters 38–41.  

This discussion of liberation theology lands us squarely in the second spoiler—the revolutionary tradition of the religions that claim the Bible as their sacred text. This is an old theme of which we can find a hint in Marx with his comment that religious suffering is “a protest against real suffering” and that religion “is the sigh of the oppressed creature.” But it was Engels who would take this idea and run with it, to the point where he sits at odds with Marx. So in On the History of Early Christianity we find the argument that Christianity was originally a revolutionary movement among the poor and oppressed, one that eventually won over the Roman Empire, although it lost its revolutionary fervor on the way. Given the imprimatur of one of the founders, a number of Marxists have pursued such a theme, especially Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Kautsky, Ernst Bloch, and, most recently, Michael Löwy.  

Negri, I would suggest, wants to read Job in a comparable fashion: this is a revolutionary text, one that seeks nothing less than a re-creation of the world. Now for the spoiler proper: the Bible is not merely a revolutionary text, for it has plenty of material within it that may be described as reactionary. All too often we come across the call for obedience to an oppressive ruler or God, for the subservience of slaves, the groveling of repentance for the “sin” of rebellion, beginning with none other than Eve and Adam in the Garden. Even in the New Testament we find a profound tension between Paul’s doctrine of grace as an undeserved and unexpected irruption and the call to obey one’s rulers since they have been placed where they are by God. A comparable tension between rebellion and submission, between standing up for oneself and giving in to power, also appears in Job. Negri uncovers it, albeit despite himself.  

Negri does so by means of the tension between measure and immeasure. He argues that Job dismisses all forms of measure and comes out as a champion of immeasure. Translated, Job is not for reaction but for revolution. Translated again, Job is the purveyor of the chaotic mess of re-creation out of pain rather than the measured order of an oppressive and unjust status quo. I am not so sure that Job—both character and book—can be enlisted all that easily with the revolutionary cadres. There is a little too much of reaction mixed in with the insurrection, a little too much measure mingled with immeasure.  

The treatment of (im)measure is an important philosophical question in The Labor of Job, yet it is not my task to tackle it from on here, although I do so elsewhere. In brief, Negri wants to overcome a negative, retributive measure with a creative immeasure that eventually leads to its own new form of measure. Through this pattern he runs the key categories of value, labor, time, justice, good, and evil. What fascinates me is the way the valuation of measure and immeasure shifts: at first measure is negative and immeasure positive, but when we encounter a negative immeasure, a new, creative measure begins to appear.  

Be that as it may, I am interested here in the way Negri sinks himself into the matter of cosmogony and how the opposition of immeasure and intocriation and destruction of the creative power of chaos, Negri comes out on the side of a new created order, a new form of measure that does not fall into the...
traps of the old one. With his reference to "a great chaos, a great immeasurableness," we are in the realm of the myths of creation where order follows chaos (52). And the key to such order is creation. The creating deity wins a victory over chaos (variously a monster, the sea, a serpent, an older opponent) and then imposes order: the rhythms of the heavenly bodies, night and day, the seasons, social order, and often a city as the axis mundi. In other words, it is a new type of measure that overcomes the immeasurability of chaos. Is this what Negri wants, at least in his book on Job?

The Politics of Cosmogony

Beneath Negri's discussion there surges what might be called the politics of cosmogony. The crucial questions are: is it chaos that is revolutionary or is it (re)creation? Translated into Negri's terms: is immeasurable the truly revolutionary moment, or is that moment found in another form of measure? In the final run, Negri opts for the latter: the full victory over immeasurable evil comes through good measure, and that entails that the original bad measure has also been comprehensively driven from the field. Unless I am badly mistaken, this is a rather conventional narrative, found in one creation myth after another. Chaos and disorder are inherently bad, a threat to life itself, so the rescue must come in the form of the creation of order, which is of course good. We find it all in the flood narrative of Genesis 6-9: the initial creation (measure) has turned out to be flawed, characterized by extraordinary evil and exploitation. In order to begin again, God makes use of a beneficial chaos (the flood) to wipe out the old and begin again with a new, created order. Or, in Negri's own words, when "measure fades into the disorder of the universe and evil is reflected in chaos, in the immeasurable," (49) we need "the collective creation of a new world" that "is able to reconstitute a world of values" (14).20

So we arrive at a point where Negri's reading of Job is not all that exciting. The revolutionary narrative is merely a variation on the timeless cosmogonic myth of creation out of chaos. There is, however, one significant variation on all of this: the creative activity comes not from God but from a paradigmatic man, Job. And that argument comes in a section of Negri's commentary that is brilliant, the commentary on Job 38-41, the infamous "voice from the whirlwind." "Then Yahweh answered Job out of the whirlwind," 21 it begins, and from there we get a grand tour of the created universe. The point of this exercise lies in a question tossed to Job: what is your suffering compared to all this?

There are almost as many opinions on this whirlwind tour as there are commentators. Some find it a useful reminder of our weak status before such powers and wonders; others suggest that the only response can be thanks and awe; but others have argued that it is really a continuation of Elihu's speech in Job 32-37 and that it doesn't answer Job's charge at all. God's boasting doesn't actually answer the question of Job's thoroughly undeserved suffering.

Yet Negri gives what is to my knowledge a unique reading: the very fact that God actually appears is the sign of Job's victory. Up until this point God had remained conspicuously silent, not even bothering to answer Job's increasingly bitter challenges. In God's place we found the various arguments, such as retribution (Eliphaz and Zophar), mystical overdetermination (Bildad), and transcendent providence (Elihu), each of which Job rejects. Finally, Job sterns God enough to make an appearance and actually respond to the accusation. At this moment, Job triumphs. The key verse is Job 42:5; "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee." Job has seen God, an event that normally leads to instantaneous death. Even Moses was allowed only a glimpse of the divine derriere. Job has seen God, and he is not bowed. As Negri puts it:

I have seen God, thus God is born from the absolute transcendence that constitutes the idea of him. God justifies himself, thus God is dead. He saw God, hence Job can speak of him, and he—Job himself—can in turn participate in divinity, in the function of redemption that man constructs within life—the instrument of the death of God that is human constitution and the creation of the world. The materialist reading of the vision of God has, thus, the capacity to capture the creative

20 This comment relates to Job 38:13 35.
21 Job 38:1.
moment of this ontological immersion of man — whether it be Adam or Job — in the relationship with the divine, and thus of linking ontologically — not merely intellectually — the human powers [patronage] to those divine, that is, the singular in the universal. (96–97)

Somewhat ecstatic, is it not? In fact, the last pages of the book breathe a prophetic fire of ecstasy. Yet the point is clear: Job has reached up to God and has seen him, he has called God to account and forced him to justify himself. No matter how much God tried to belittle Job, he had been forced to do it.

As brilliant as this reading of the last sections of Job might be, it faces at least two problems. First, this argument for the creative sun of human beings is not so new. Marx himself became quite ecstatic when, in the first flush of Feuerbach’s “discovery” that the gods and all that they entailed were projections by human beings, he proclaimed that “for man the root is man himself.” In contrast to the illusory sun of religion, man needs to “revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun.” And Ernst Bloch argued that in the Bible itself we find the “exodus out of Yahweh,” the seeds of a protest-atheism that would eventually depose God and allow the Homo absconditus to emerge and stand on his or her own feet for the first time. The creative and powerful man without God would face the universe with confidence. What we have in Negri’s hands is a well-worn Marxist story, although he cranks it up to the mythical level of cosmogonic creativity.

The problem is that I am not sure it is the best sort of political myth for Marxists to latch onto. The reason is that it overestimates the ability of human beings to engage in such grand creative tasks. My misgivings do not concern hybris (their efforts may indeed be seen as an effort to state hybris in the face and say that it’s a worthwhile goal) so much as a need for some modesty and awareness of limits. Far too many projects of recon-

struction by the Right or the Left have ended in brutal failure for one to get too carried away by the re-creative potential of human beings.

The problem I have just outlined feeds into the second trip wire with this argument of the re-creative power of human beings. Negri seeks a very different, re-creative measure, where we find reconstructed labor, value, time, and so on. In refocusing the vermillion appeal of the abyss of chaos and immeasure, Negri is in the end a Marxist. And the hard-nosed realists among us will agree: a chaotic, anarchist agenda may be very appealing (it is for me to some extent), but no society can function without at least some sanctions, without some order. But there is a catch. In moving from bad order (measure) to good order via chaos, what is to prevent the next step from occurring (again): good order = bad order? It is the old revolutionary problem: how do you prevent the revolution from running into the mud?

Conclusion: Negri’s Aporia

For these reasons I rather like the undercurrent of uncertainty in Negri’s text. He can’t actually close out his reading as he would like, stumbling over the famous verse: “therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” As the last line of poetry before the prose epilogue, it is supposed to sum up the vast personal-cosmic struggle of the preceding two score chapters. As might be expected, commentators have been drawn to it like bees to a honeypot. Traditionally the idea that Job actually “repents” is enough of a sign that he has reconciled himself with his suffering and God and seeks forgiveness for his blasphemous challenges. Yet

Karl Marx, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law, 183 and 176 (English edition); Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie, 183 and 176 (German edition).

Ernst Bloch, Atheism in Christianity (English edition); Atheismus im Christentum (German edition).

I prefer this incompleteness to his effort to claim that Job has been misunderstood. In each case — Job is patient, his hybris becomes petitio, the text is misogynistic (Mrs. Job, who wants him to suffer) — Negri argues that there is a poor misrepresentation or even misanthropy in the tradition (see chapter 6). However, apart from the problematic separation between original text and misinterpretation, the text of Job is not quite so clearly in Negri’s favor.


An epilogue Negri describes brilliantly: “The return of the folkloric disease at the end of this enormous, cosmic, theological, human adventure is like a shower, a bath, a rest after having traversed great mountains” (The Labor of John, 98).
which argues that Job doesn’t repent. After all, Negri suggests, repentance is not needed for redemption or liberation. Not altogether happy with this, he then suggests that the answer is to be found not in the words but in the vision-prophecy. He goes on to quote Paul quoting Job in Galatians 3:17-18, and then, finally, he reverts to talking about the Messiah. This formal uncertainty on Negri’s part manifests the biblical text’s own ambiguity. It is as though Negri has picked up the ambiguity at a subliminal level and then replicated it in the form of his own text.

In fact, this section of Negri’s text trails off, unresolved, open, with a little more chaos than he perhaps expected. That is how it should be, it seems to me.

Works Cited


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Each of these translators add a commentary to their translations. The one by Terrien, which we refer to frequently, was the most important.

The following set of texts was also crucial for the attempt to explore the theological–critical debate around the book of Job.


