

## Who is really free? Antonio Negri and the Prison

### Tom Waibel

In her DVD-project “Antonio Negri. The Cell” (Actor Publisher, Barcelona/New York 2008) Angela Melitopoulos presents an arrangement of more than two hours of video-material based on three interviews with the famous Italian philosopher focusing on problems of exile, imprisonment, freedom and the construction of personal joy and community. The interviews were held in the last days of Negri’s Parisian exile in 1997, in the prison of Rebibbia 1998 after his voluntary return to Italy facing a long-term sentence on controversial charges of “association and insurrection against the state”, resulting from the Autonomia trials and the corresponding repressive Italian special laws against terrorism. The third interview takes place in Rome 2003, where the philosopher reflects his experience after being released. Melitopoulos’ media-work offers a non-chronological documentation revealing mnemonic and micro-political processes through the montage of Negri’s materialistic thoughts, whose apparently metaphysical insights are consequently grounded on concrete material practice.

### Reterritorialization and restitution

After more than fourteen years of exile in France, Negri decided to return from his “exodus in time” [\[i\]](#) where he maintained captured in a strained relation between the necessity of reterritorialization – the reencounter with persons and places – and the demand to reconstitute personal and political history. “I saw myself getting old with no possibility of opening this golden cage in which I was trapped. This made me panic... In fact it is important to be part of an environment in which you can act!” For him winning back the potency of political action signified a paradoxical detour of years in jail: “I knew I had to pay this price in order to obtain my freedom again, in order to get a passport.” However, the state-authorized piece of paper is nothing but a material trace pointing towards a far more extended problem on which Negri, not thinking that there is a substantial difference between prison and the rest of life, vigorously insists: “Actually, who is really free by now?” Yet prison is not necessary to experiment freedom and Negri is not making a philosophy out of imprisonment and deprivation: “One must not go through prison... The fact is that one must make the positive passions alive.”

### Solitude

Such positive passions basically disseminate towards the others, towards community and away from what Negri addresses as the biggest dangers in life: “To be alone, but above all the danger of being constrained to transform one’s loneliness into a kind of defense of one’s individualism.” He characterizes this particular loneliness as the powerlessness to act politically, in contrast to another solitude drawn by Spinoza, whom he already dedicated a study during his first imprisonment from 1979 to 1983. [\[ii\]](#) Negri describes Spinoza’s solitude as “a constitutive act of going out of oneself for the construction of community that passes the concrete analysis of every atom of reality.” In other words, solitude as a possibility to construct different worlds through what is common, solitude as indication of a common perspective, where “each of us is a machine that produces reality, each of us is a machine that constructs.” For Negri there is only the militant who succeeds in experimenting the poverty of the world, identifying new forms of exploitation and suffering, organizing around this the processes of liberation, but also participating in them, for “thought is never abstract, it is always concrete.”

## The monadic cell

In the concrete solitude of prison, the cell is a monad, “an expansion of one’s own personality.” About his first time in prison (from 1979 to 1983) Negri comments: “To go in prison and to continue to fight was about the same... The cells were filled with fear, palpable and precise... The cell became a segment where you were barricaded to defend yourself.” The second time (from 1997 to 2003) is marked by a completely different personal and political situation; Negri had finished the writing of *Empire* (published during imprisonment) [\[iii\]](#) just one day before returning to Italy, “so my head was full of ideas when I went back to prison.” Nonetheless the situation in prison confronts him with a multiplicity of problems, one of them the noise in the cell: the panoptical prison architecture not only guarantees visibility but also audibility. Another problem is to stay alone; there are always people around who want to talk and, as already pointed out, even for solitude common perspective is required. Negri faces the challenges throughout a tremendous quantity of work, about ten to twelve hours a day: “That’s fine. Then the cell is really a cell. Just like I imagine a monastery would be.” Indeed a monastery without prayer, but also without music (“the music in the cell destroys the inner equilibrium”), without plants (“the first time that I put my foot on the grass, I felt like the astronauts who landed on the moon”) and even without horizon. Negri illustrates the deeply felt missing of any horizon in the cell by the story of a young falcon kept in the cage of the prison’s garden until he is finally let free – yet the falcon doesn’t want to leave. It’s necessary to scare him away, and taking off the falcon keeps on flying in circles over the prison at least for half an hour. Negri concludes: “The falcon had never seen the horizon and I think he was afraid.”

## Dream-techniques

Withstanding such fundamental lack of horizon obliges to invent a varied regime of resistance. “In prison you understand the thousand forms of resistance.” One major source of resistance is to be found in a constant banalization of the prison itself, backed by concrete techniques of survival, which strictly prohibit dreaming. “There is an essential technique that consists of preventing dreams.” In prison you’re not free to let your imagination wonder, or as Negri puts it: “You’re not allowed to have dreams, or, you can’t falsify reality. You have to work in this reality in order to free yourself from it, in order to change it, but you must always accept it. You’re in prison and not anywhere else. There are spaces in which you can work, also inner spaces, but you can’t imagine being anywhere else, otherwise you injure yourself too much because you are immediately thrown back into reality. That’s why you’re not allowed to dream, because each time you dream you’re without protection.” Negri’s tremendous mental strength is based on such a constant denial of delusion since “you have to use your imaginative powers to construct your freedom.”

## Arrows of time

However, such imperatives do not lead Negri to the construction of a despotic regime of self-control. He analyzes clearly the transitional condition of the Italian prisons undergoing a change from a disciplinary system to a system of self-control where the prisoners experiment certain freedom constantly checked by psychologists and sociologists. “It’s a hugely hypocritical regime that is enforced here. Furthermore, the prisoners are very intelligent. They immediately know what the psychologists and the social workers want... Perhaps the self-control is not the real goal or the deeper intent of this penal system, rather this hypocrisy is constructed as the necessary form of the modern social life”. Refusing hypocrisy Negri safeguards rare traces indicating some horizon beyond visibility, precarious because of their potency of dream: “The only thing that makes you dream are the planes that pass over, they leave a line in the sky... You think it passes beyond the horizon like a sign, the arrow of time that flies around...” Negri is observing such arrows of time out from his

space capsule, his cell in the space, where inside he is awaiting “to land on the moon”. During this extraordinary journey he finished the work on two books – *Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo* [\[iv\]](#), and together with Michael Hardt, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* [\[v\]](#) – being the concept of Kairos *ex negativo* perhaps the one most closely related to the every-day experience of imprisonment. “The cell and the prison represent exactly what life without Kairos would be like.”

### A time not yet experienced

For the Greek the moment in which an arrow is shot, for Negri Kairos is “as if one built bridges, bridges to the unknown that lead to a time that one has not yet experienced.” Bounded and blocked in prison space and time the production of reality not just questions how you live, but also where and when you live, demanding “to understand the there and now, the *Hic et Nunc* as a historically significant element.” It’s this element, which opens up the possibilities of the event, “the staging of the objective external condition of singularity” where nothing is defined until the end but “everything is determined through the struggle”. And, following Negri, here too the only way of avoiding death is to be found: “seize time, hold it, and fill it with responsibility”. The filmic construction of Negri’s narration redeems some of those demands by seizing time, holding it and – via hyperlinked arrows – filling it with the responsibility of lectures cutting across chronological sequentiality.

---

[\[i\]](#) If not indicated otherwise, all quotations are pronouncements of Antonio Negri derived from: Angela Melitopoulos, *Antonio Negri. The Cell*, Actor: Barcelona/New York 2008.

[\[ii\]](#) Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly. The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, Minneapolis/Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1981. In this study "drafted by the light of midnight oil in prison", Negri writes, “prison dissolves time: This is the principal form of [punishment](#) in a [capitalist](#) society “ (ibid. Preface, p. xxiii).

[\[iii\]](#) Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2000.

[\[iv\]](#) Antonio Negri, *Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo*, manifestolibri: Roma 2002

[\[v\]](#) Michael Hardt / Antonio Negri, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin 2004.