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# Toni Negri: 'Here it is, finally, the revolt. But for the revolution there's time'

Byby Jacopo Jacoboni (interview with Antonio Negri)

Published La Stampa, November 13 2005. Negri's comic response to the French riots focusses like many others upon the apparent novelty of a movement which refuses to speak, let alone articulate specific demands, ' This movement wants something, but it doesn't know yet what it wants.' His take on the Anglo Saxon model of multiculturalism/integration is much to the point, though he disagrees that this is the key political content of the riots and is clearly inspired by a tabloid mentality - drinking beer being an, if not the, essential aspect of Britishness.

"What do you mean gangs! The explosion in the banlieues is no impromptu jacquerie. And even if it was, it would be taking place in a radically changed social context, whose basic elements are the crisis of fordism and the lack of a political response – not only in France – to this crisis. Consequently for me it remains a revolt, but I could also say an insurrection, understood in a tenuous sense." Obviously something is missing that would be needed to speak of insurrection in an authentic sense: "what is missing is a political consciousness of objectives, what Marx called 'for itself'.

This movement wants something, but it doesn't know yet what it wants." *Toni Negri, the 'cattivo maestro' [\*a phrase commonly used at the time of Negri's fitting-up for spurious Brigade Rosse links; it means something like 'wicked mastermind, but as the word 'maestro' literally means 'teacher', it's also a play on his status as a professor] of Autonomia [\*Operaia], who in 1979 was arrested for "armed insurrection against the Italian state" and sentenced to 30 years, later reduced to 13, is back.*

Once again at the centre of debate, after the *New York Times* dedicated a page to his *Empire* and the *Nouvel Observateur* included him among the 20 great philosophers of the century, Negri has returned from Mar del Plata, Argentina, where he witnessed the anti-Bush protests. Now he is sitting in the living room of his new house in Venice, where the walls are covered in books, with countless American and British magazines and the latest issues of *Le Monde* on a coffee table.

*Much of the international press has attempted to read the explosion in the French banlieues as seeing the failure of the French model of integration. Does this explanation convince you?*

Not at all. Hasn't the anglo-saxon model failed equally? Look at the America of New Orleans, the England of July 7, with the terrorists born English in the deepest sense of the word, who go to the pub and get drunk on beer before blowing themselves up...The point is not the failure of the two multicultural models.

*Now you'll say: it's to do with the organization of work.*

"There are at least three hidden elements behind the banlieues in flames. What's in crisis is the fordist industrial model, which foresaw permanent employment and a schema of indefinite growth, supported by the state. Then this crisis is joined to the processes of economic globalization. Added to this are neoliberal policies of cutting off public spending, which produce a welfare crisis. It's nothing to do with integration, the problem here is the total lack of a political response to the crisis of fordism. The lack of this response is linked to the crisis of democratic representation.

*But excuse me, why are the suburbs erupting in France and not in Italy? Postfordist dynamics are the same here.*

Partially because we are less socially advanced as a society. And then because, paradoxically, in part this turmoil is finished here. In the 1970s a potential for social struggle burst out; or rather, in Italy or Germany 1968 lasted 10 years. But this also diluted the effects. But watch out: there are already protest movements here. The Susa Valley [footnote], the movements for housing in the cities, immigrants' battles against immigration detention centres...[\*literally 'centres of temporary permanence'. The struggles are a somewhat more serious than 'Close Campsfield leafletting in the UK; there have been a number of occupations and some centres closed. There's an outside chance that if the 'centre-left' parties win the imminent election they may be forced to abolish the institution, which they invented themselves, altogether.]

[Italian opposition leader Romano] Prodi says that soon the periphery of the Italian cities [footnote: literal/historical sense of 'periphery', with observation on present London tendency] will explode too. So you half-agree with him?

Bah, for one thing Prodi is exaggerating, and I doubt that he really knows anything of the periphery. As for [Italian deputy prime minister, foreign minister and post-fascist party leader Gianfranco] Fini, well, as far as he's concerned the fact that there isn't an explosion means the problem doesn't exist. Berlusconi doesn't know what to say. And then how would he be able to talk about immigration, caught between [the racist Northern League's 'Minister of Reforms' Roberto] Calderoli and the cunning of Christian Democrats like [interior minister Giuseppe] Pisanu?

*And the French? In 1990 Mitterand asked 'what can a young person expect in an ugly block under a grey sky when society looks away?' Yet the degradation has continued unstopably. Is French socialism good intentions and a bad conscience?*

Look, I think the two are as different as can be, but both a republican like Mitterand and a monarchist like Chirac understood very well what has happened. And like them, the French elites, especially with the great influence of sociology in the French administration, had very clearly in mind the explosive dynamics that were building up in the banlieues, but what could they do? They were under attack themselves from the great neoliberal wave, which intensifies conflicts and revolts and has blocked every attempt they made to direct the transformation.

*I beg your pardon, that means the politicians are excused in advance. It's always the fault of the neoliberal dynamic...*

Certainly not. I'm only saying the revolts are an expression of the incapacity of neoliberalism to become state policy. I'm not speaking of dirigisme, but a state's ability to exercise governance, that is to place itself in permanent contact with the movements. Fordism, for all its evils, had this ability.

*Sarkozy called the youth of the periphery 'racaille' [in the case of the minister's outburst most often translated in English media as 'scum', but the sense is a bit less violently contemptuous]. Aside from other questions, isn't there still the politics played by politicians?*

Sarkozy was thoughtless and unforgivable. But it's not the first time a French politician has called the youth of the banlieues *racaille*, they've done it a thousand times. Only this time the people exploded. This is an event.

*It's notable, though, that in what you call 'revolt' it's the Renaults of the workers and not the Porsche Cayennes of the drug dealers that get burned. What kind of a revolt is that?*

The fact is the drug dealers had their cars in garages! I know very well some schools in Epinay sur Seine. It's the only banlieue where only a few cars were burned, without an explosion like the one in Clichy. And do you know why? Because perhaps at Epinay an equilibrium of the mullahs and the drug bosses prevails. In Italy too, where there's the Mafia there's often no revolt.

*That doesn't alter the fact that innocent people's cars were burned, and even disabled people got beaten up. This is hardly our image of social struggle, is it?*

What are a few burned-out cars next to this epochal impulse? And anyway, they burned the cars because no-one came out to defend them. I don't think the people in those neighbourhoods were against the kids.

*Many were intimidated. A 61-year-old pensioner was killed precisely because he was defending his car. Doesn't speaking of 'insurgents' give them an undue legitimacy?*

I'm not cynical or machiavellian. I have all the human compassion and grief possible for anyone who's killed. But I'm not disturbed by the fact that in a conflagration of these proportions there are only two deaths. And then what about the two who were electrocuted? And how many kids were injured? And how many die in other outbreaks of racist madness?

*You won't deny that those who attack innocent citizens strengthen the case of those inclined towards a purely repressive solution to the problem?*

There's no doubt that Sarkozy provoked a reaction, even if it wasn't the one he expected. What's more, before and afterwards he repeated a hypocritical line, proposing positive discrimination: help the good blacks and repress the bad ones.

*Some have accused him of political calculations in view of the presidential election.*

Sarkozy has a problem: he has to stop the right from seizing a big political area from the Gaullist candidate. Both Le Pen and De Villiers, although for the Gaullists the latter is a little more manoeuvrable, could cost them a lot of votes. Instead, Sarkozy is seeking hegemony over the entire right. Today this project seems to me to be in crisis.

*De Villepin, on the other hand, has promised economic aid.*

At first De Villepin and probably Chirac looked on warily. Then they reacted in their own way, on one hand promising order, on the other seeking to recover what was recoverable in the peripheries. But in the end there could even be a third Gaullist candidate.

*Even the left, to be honest, was in difficulty.*

Fine, as far as the official left is concerned. But the official left is a minority in France today. The majority is the left that said no to European Constitution, a nationalist and stubbornly republican left that has nothing to say about the banlieues.

*And the Parisian intellectuals? Not much was heard from them.*

But when did they ever show signs of life, during the great social events of recent years? They're watching where the veil of power will move.

*Can the 'revolt' lead in a positive direction?*

The prime minister's logic doesn't go far beyond charity, but what would be needed here would be a real opening of the processes of participation, which are serious things, not like the wonderful Italian primaries, where everyone votes and everyone is included! Participation enters the discussion in relations of power, schools that function, savings banks that lower interest rates...

*Even you say that to speak of authentic 'insurrection' a political end would be needed, and it's missing here. What are the demands of these youths?*

The problem is that they know what they don't want, not what they want. It's a big mess. My friend Patrick Braouezec, the former mayor and now the regional president of Saint-Denis, said the other day that here we need a new agreement like the Grenelle accord between the unions and the Pompidou government, which blocked the events of '68. But then the workers were calling for wage increases, changes to the hierarchical structure and access to forms of welfare. The youth of the banlieues are only seeking a line of flight. Doesn't the right to flight seem to have become a human right? The Seattle stage is certainly over, but the end of the no-global cycle has generated a new cycle of struggles that has fully drawn on previous movements, in France just as in Argentina.

*Did you notice that French Muslim women weren't on the barricades? Is Olivier Roy right in saying that's because they're stronger than the men, they integrate more, and so are less angry? Or because their brothers and husbands keep them segregated?*

I would be cautious here. You say they weren't there? Well not long ago I was in Tehran and I saw how the women wear the hijab in an ever-more revolutionary style, lowering it another centimetre every hour. And yet they're not noticed. And in Paris maybe they weren't photographed, but what do you think, that the youths who burn cars don't make love? That behind every man there isn't a woman? The film that really captures the banlieues isn't Kassovitz [*La Haine*], who's cold and metallic. The real film is *L'esquive* [the dodge]. A female teacher tries to make a North African class read a text by Marivaux. At first they all make an effort. Then something breaks. And it's precisely the erotic and affective relations between the kids that produce the revolt. In the end the class refuses to recite the drama of the white bourgeoisie. In the same way, the young French Muslim women of the banlieues will emerge deeply changed from this revolt in which they took part.

*Negri, do you still believe in the use of violence as a solution to the problems of the postindustrial crisis in Western society?*

Michael Hardt and I have tried to imagine an exodus from this society in crisis. In this exodus, just as Moses had Aaron, there's a need for a rear guard, which may use arms, but for self-defence. This is resistance, because reality is made this way, the world is made this way, and the Multitude operates in this world, in search of the line of flight that they were seeking in the banlieues, without finding it.