

The Aleatory Encounter and the Common Name: Reading Negri Reading

Althusser

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“It is raining.

Let this book be, before all else, a book about ordinary rain.”

(Althusser, 2006, p. 167)

In the beginning of the edited series of notes that make up the publication of Louis Althusser’s “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter” (Althusser, 2006), Althusser starts with the rather poetic trope of rain, which he writes, refers to Epicurus’ rain of atoms in the void and the role of the Epicurean “swerve” in creating chance or aleatory encounters among the atoms. The purpose of this brief article is to begin a reencounter between the thought of Althusser and Antonio Negri in regard to the occasion of political practice, particularly in regard to the struggles around the constitution of common names or common concepts (*nome comune*). This topic is important because common concepts contribute to organizing reality and political struggles through media and social communication. Such a topic engages the role of ideology and the critique of ideology in those struggles, particularly in the modern era of broadcast media saturation and, now, crowd-sourced information aggregation (via social computing technologies and

page ranking algorithms) and computer mediated communication. As we will see, reenacting an encounter between Negri and Althusser around the ontological commitments for naming forces an encounter between a 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' (to use Negri's terms) understanding of political struggles, not least involving a consideration of the 'a-symbolic' and symbolic terrains of struggle, and the historiological and historiographical forms that theory projects upon and may contribute to struggles. First in this essay we will discuss Negri's discussion of Althusser's late work and then we will proceed to a discussion of *nome comune* via the problem of the occasion for utterance—*kairòs*.

The occasion for theory as political practice involves *kairòs*: in rhetoric, the responsive appeal of the speaker or writer's words to the facts, events, and audience at hand. In *Machiavelli and Us* (Althusser, 1999), as elsewhere in his work, Althusser's interest is with the place and time of theory and philosophy's intervention. But in Negri's *Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo* (Negri, 2000; English translation, Negri, 2003), where the term properly appears, *kairòs* more importantly carries its New Testament sense of an historical break that carries with it salvation: an 'untimely' time, which can change the course of ordinary events by reorganizing their values.

According to Negri (2003), the political importance of *kairòs* extends to language and communication in two important ways: first is the construction of a history of materialism (Negri, 2003, p. 140), that is, a narrative of interventions and powers (*potenza*), rather than materialism as simply *critique*. Second, is the construction of common names or concepts for the real attributes of human

percepts and expressions (reading Negri's discourse on the *nome comune* through part two of Spinoza's *Ethics*).

Negri's Althusser

Let us begin this encounter between Althusser's ideological rain of atoms in the void under the event of the swerve (chance) and Negri's occasion of *kairòs* with Negri's "Notes on the Evolution of the Thought of the Late Althusser" (Negri, 1996), which presents Althusser's later work in a "postmodern" totalizing form of real subsumption (i.e., "total subsumption," Negri, 1996, p. 57). The break with traditional Marxist party politics that Althusser mentioned in his, at the time, well commented upon meeting with the Left group, *Il Manifesto*, in November 1977 (see, Goshgarian 2006, p. xxii), which begins Negri's text (1996), is given a reading by Negri that reads Althusser's understanding of the political break as situated within a break between modernism and "postmodernism."

Unlike many of the French poststructuralist thinkers that Negri has engaged, Negri's own writings seem willing to deploy the term "postmodernism" in order to describe a historical, as well as an epistemological, break. For Negri, the historical break of postmodernism refers to the total subsumption of the life world by Althusser's capitalist "ideological state apparatus." The breadth of Negri's (1996) "postmodern" reading of Althusser's later work is suggested in the following:

What has actually happened? [i.e., in reference to Althusser's remark regarding the historical break mentioned at the *Il Manifesto* talk of 1977]

What has happened is that ideology has massively extended its domination over the whole of the real. To a great extent, the real intermingles with ideology. If the ISAs [the Ideological State Apparatuses (Althusser, 2001)] produced domination by making it mechanically singular through different institutions, today this domination gets mixed up with the entire social process. The world, we can say, has been subsumed into capital. In this case, Althusser, without saying so explicitly, is following the thought of his student and friend Foucault. But, as in the case of Foucault, so for Althusser, this postmodern extension of the power of the ISAs, this further overdetermination of domination that their unification provokes, does not pass without resistance: resistance of the body, resistance of bodies. But where and how, within a logic of total subsumption of society by capital? Where, within a fabric where every general alternative has been broken open (“socialism is shit”)? It is to the bodies, to the immediately lived, that thought must go, as in Spinoza, where bodies organize themselves in the interstices of capitalist domination, in which community relations live (as in the past, in the original accumulation of capital), where resistance produces zones in which “market relations do not reign” [Althusser]. Again it is the ontological fabric of communism that checks itself, resists, rebuilds, against the totality of domination.

(Negri, 1996, p. 57)

Many issues—in Althusser, Foucault's, and of course, in Negri's—works are condensed together in this passage, so it is worth unpacking it in order to understand Negri's reading of Althusser's later works.

If we read Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation" (Althusser, 2001), we find that the historiological trope of the 'postmodern' is not present. In line with Althusser's non-historiological approach, what is investigated in Althusser's work (2001) is the difference and relationship between the structures of state force: "repressive" and "ideological" state apparatuses as characterized by functions of violence and ideology, respectively (Althusser, 2001, p. 97). While the notion of history as duration is critiqued in Negri's works (not the least in Negri, 2003), a concept of "postmodernism" as not just an epistemic, but as an historical, break is deployed. And in his work on Althusser (Negri, 1996) this historiological device plays a dominant role in positioning Althusser's works not only in regard to contemporary events in 1977 and after, but in regard to Althusser's 'earlier' and 'later' work (*pace* commentary on Heidegger's oeuvre, that there is a linguistic 'turn'--*Kehre* (Negri, 1996)—in Althusser's own oeuvre).

In Althusser's work (2001), however, the repressive state apparatus works in conjunction with the ideological state apparatus in order to maintain the state's control. For Althusser (2001), the ideological state apparatus maintains the state through expressions, but it is supported by the repressive state apparatus (in the sense that the latter acts as a force to assure belief). At the same time the state's repressive apparatuses are supported by the ideological state apparatuses, which

reinforce social and cultural cohesion without the use of direct violence and legitimize the state's mechanisms and use of violence.

The lack of a historiological ground in Althusser's works is significant, I believe, not the least because it removes a speculative element from political philosophy, and so brings into question philosophy as a historical or ontological narrative practice. Inversely, the introjection of an historiological concept of postmodernism into Althusser's later works may introduce metaphysical and speculative elements that negate the conceptual power and the practical limitations suggested through the concepts of the void and aleatory events.¹

It is unclear if any type of historicism, much less Negri's postmodernism fits within Althusser's work. The 'structuralism' of Althusser's later philosophy is a structuralism of empirical repetitions supporting an episteme of cultural and social affordances and even physical affordances that guide the productive possibilities that result from the conjunction of atomic bodies brought about by the Epicurean "swerve." Despite the chance occurrences of atoms meeting, how they are to develop is afforded by the structural episteme in which they are 'thrown.' The swerve allows for a world to occur out of the meeting of atoms in physical extension and thought, but how that world does "take hold" (Althusser, 2006) is a result of "structures" that direct the bodies in their social productions. Althusser's 'structuralism' here, allows for a non-historiological reading of conjunctive relations between bodies and allows for the empirical support and continuance of epistemic

¹ "Every encounter is aleatory, not only in its origins (nothing ever guarantees an encounter), but also in its effects." (Althusser, 2006, p. 193)

forms. It also allows for multi-level analyses on different strata of production, without forcing the social or personal 'atoms' to 'obey' historical causes, historical periods, or even unitary agency (i.e., a person may be conceived multiply, as, too, may traditional economic classes).

On the other hand, the Althusserian position greatly problematizes the role of traditional theory or philosophy in political practice. Philosophy is itself read as a philosophy of the void (Althusser, 2006, p. 174-175), which, somewhat paradoxically, empties out the possibilities of a 'positive,' speculative philosophical practice.

How we are then to read the generative options for philosophical political practice available in this void is not totally clear. Negri (1996) reads Althusser's discussion of *fortuna* and *virtù* in Althusser's later work on Machiavelli through the framework of Negri's reading of Spinoza's works, resulting in a theory of political practice as imagination, vis-à-vis philosophy understood (*pace* Deleuze) as the creation of concepts. Just as the "void" of political possibility in Machiavelli's Italy presents the occasion for an upcoming ruler who has the right qualities at the right time to appear and change the state through the use of *virtù*, so it seems that for Negri (1996) the philosopher is given, thanks to similar, "postmodern" circumstances existing in language, the task of helping construct a new state through the reformation of language and the building of new, more 'adequate' or corresponding concepts. Negri's postmodernism--that is, capital's total appropriation of meaning in the construction of social and political illusion--is the prime empirical occasion (or from a more skeptical view of Negri's project, merely

the conceptual precondition) for what might be seen as the ‘philosopher’s task’ in political revolution.

Common Concepts and Negri’s Kairòs

Although it seems unclear if Althusser’s more ‘structural’ approach can be reconciled with Negri’s postmodern historical shift for the dominant location of state power, nonetheless Negri’s reading of common concepts and the role of the imagination in providing a conceptual scaffolding of support for the revolutionary expressions of the ‘atoms’ in the void deserves further examination, not the least for both justifying and explaining the role of a certain type of philosophical activity (i.e., the creation of concepts) in political practice. For this reason, I would like to concentrate here on a brief consideration of the role of *kairòs* in the formation of “common concepts” (*nome comune*) in Negri’s book *Kairòs, Alma Venus, Multitudo: Nine Lessons to Myself* (Negri, 2003) and then briefly compare such a view to Althusser’s notion of atoms in the void and the role of the swerve.

Kairòs in Negri’s (2003) work refers to an historical break, as well as a political site, for the founding of a new ontological order. For Negri, *pace* Spinoza’s two attributes of substance (extension and thought) in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, this ontological order emerges via the common relation of bodies to one another through their common extensions in space and through their common languages. The problem of ideology is, thus, the problem of the construction of languages that are alienated and alienating from the common experiences of bodies. In Negri’s postmodern-capitalist episteme, ideology represents the total subsumption of

human relations via the ideological state apparatus (including the media). In so far as a negative ontology exists for Negri (1996), it exists as “the void” of power in this total subsumption of real bodies by ideology (p. 63). In its postulation of a postmodern landscape devoid of the hope of dialectical resistance, Negri’s postmodern vision shares with Baudrillard’s a historicist dystopia, though significantly, one for all that which claims salvation through the immanent expression of the bodies and thoughts of the multitude themselves.²

The relation of *kairòs* to this historiology of the postmodern introduces another wrinkle to the account of time in Negri’s writings. While *kairòs* occurs within an historical duration, it also signifies a break in durational notions of time (it is akin to the category of “the event” in Deleuze or Derrida’s works; “*Ereignis*” in Heidegger’s works). It is a break in time that allows a different signifying order and its temporality to unfold, in contrast to the everyday events that ‘go along’ ideologically (Negri, 2003, p. 152).

Here Negri (2003) borrows from the Derridean “a-venir” to articulate a sense of time in *kairos* that is a present-future instead of past-present. Vastly adding a speculative dimension to the Derridean “a-venir,” however, Negri (2003) sees *kairòs* as the event of naming—that is, constructing a “common name” or “common concept” (*nome comune*) to things, and thus overcoming the “void” that it finds, a void that marks an “edge of time” to which the “arrow” of *kairòs* flies over, connecting the buried history and reality of the past and present to future production (via naming and the things named) (Negri, 2003, chapter, 1, “Kairòs: the

² “To be sure, the postmodern totalization of power removes, as we have seen, any possibility of a dialectics,” (Negri, 1996, p. 63)

Common Name”). This ‘casting a net’ toward the future, which is *kairòs*, is the ‘event’ that is intrinsic for Negri toward the construction of a different future for the “multitude.”

If we refer to Negri and Michael Hardt’s *Empire*, the production of the *nome comune* is not only a task for philosophers and intellectuals in general, but it is a task for the “multitude” as a whole. The notion of the ‘commons’ is reinvested within the context of Negri’s postmodern political landscape as a struggle for a new language in the midst of ‘total [linguistic] subsumption’ (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 302-303).

But, what is a “common name” or “common concept”? To answer this, we need to return to Spinoza’s *Ethics*, part II (Spinoza, 1982). “Common ideas” there are “adequate ideas” (hence, Negri’s (2003) discussion of “adequation” in his discussion of *kairòs*). But Spinoza’s notion of *adequatio*, like the medieval rationalist tradition that it comes out of (*‘adequatio rei et intellectus’*—correspondence between thing and intellect), is anything but ‘common.’ Common experiences, in the colloquial sense of ‘common,’ refer to common perceptions and judgments, which for Spinoza are *inadequate* understandings of the essential nature of things and their causes as attributes of God. “Common ideas” in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, part II (1982)³ refers to the products of rational deductions as means for corresponding human intellect to the rational order of the universe (‘God’) and, so, the essence of things. Indeed, what is least common in the rationalist tradition is the mass of people having a ‘common sense’ (in the colloquial sense) and judgment adequate to essences. And in this tradition, hardly can a popular poetics of naming be seen as

³ See, particularly, proposition 40, Scholium 2, of Part II of Spinoza’s *Ethics*.

assuring an *adequatio* sufficient to “common ideas.” Indeed, Spinoza’s *Ethics* mimics the rhetorical form of geometrical proofs in order to certify that the reasoning process regarding ontology mimics the analytic truths of geometrical deductions.

What is not common in the common in Spinoza (1982) is a true set of “common ideas” that correspond to the nature of the universe. Transposed onto Negri’s postmodernist perspective of “total subsumption” by capitalism, specifically in terms of capitalism’s cooptation of language (cf. the post-Fordist understanding of production, ‘cognitive capitalism,’ etc.), this means that the ‘common’ of late capitalism is the opposite of ‘the common’ that underlies human bodies in the world of labor and the necessity of those bodies and their minds working together as the basis for production.⁴ However, turning this ‘negative’ critique into a ‘positive’ one based on creating a language of the true (qua *adequatio*) by philosophy and the multitude is, *in the practical rather than the rational sphere*, indeed a heady project. The Negrian (-Hardt) ‘thesis’ regarding the ontological origins and political efficacy of *nome comune* requires a very, very broad collapse of rationalist and empiricist traditions, as well as overcoming the differences between practical and pure reason. The concept of the imagination and the political practice of common naming bear a heavy load in this regard. It is unclear to me how much the Althusserian “swerve” and “void” would support this.

Conclusion

⁴ *Pace* the workerist and autonomist reading of the ‘Fragment on Machines’ of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, related to ‘general intellect.’

Within the very limited confines of this brief analysis, I would suggest that Negri's reading of the later Althusser is strongly influenced by the assumptions embodied in Negri's notion of postmodernism, including the presence of the term itself as a grounding historiological category that situates Althusser's later works in certain practical and theoretical manners.

In sum, Althusser's critique of ideology seems to involve more than a struggle around the establishment and disestablishment of common names in technologies such as broadcast and social media. It involves struggles with the non-symbolic institutional forces that give violent force to expressions. In the later Althusser there seems to be little support for the view that a struggle around common names, per se, could lead to political and social change, not least because Althusser's terrain and history of struggles is multilayered in terms of agents, materials, and temporal-historical causal influences. Further, chance seems to play a very strong role in organizing these different affordances toward significant events. Due to chance, the *kairòs* of the event of struggle for Althusser seems much more indeterminate than in Negri's postmodern political landscape and this seems to challenge, if not undo, the optimism of Negri's strategy of struggle around the *nome comune*.

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