ALTERNATE ROUTES: A JOURNAL OF CRITICAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

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BOOK REVIEW

The Winter is Over: Writings on Transformation Denied 1989-1995, by Antonio Negri. Los Angeles: California: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 2013. $16.95 U.S., paper. ISBN: 978-1-58435-121-4. Pages: 1-312.

Reviewed by A.T. Kingsmith[1]

The articles contained in this book attempt to capture the obstruction of the transformation that had been launched by the spring of 1968 (as a direct response to that long post-war winter) and the return of political hope after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In doing so, Negri's writings present themselves in the form of lucid, sardonic reflections that trace the birth of new networks of social reproduction and of new subjects of living labour from within the technological and tertiary realities of production in twenty-first century capitalism.

The "winter" to which Antonio Negri gestures in this recently translated collection of writings is that of the post-war reconstruction which followed the end of World War Two. For Negri, the onslaught of this winter neutralized any lasting desire for change. It was a time of sterile reforms and government coalitions (aimed at preventing any credible opposition from the left) dominated by a technocratic bourgeoisie which bribed workers to sell their souls into consumer culture by corrupting their experiences with an unprecedented intensity.

Negri approaches such a vast conceptual terrain by dividing the work into four fragments—each containing a series of essays. The first, 'on movements,' interprets the affirmation of 'weak thought as a form of mourning' on the part of socialists for their failed revolutions. The second, 'on culture,' explores the 'softening of critical thought' confronted by a transformation of reality that seeks to renew the crises of the previous century. The third, 'on polemics,' probes the 'beginning of the end of American hegemony' in the Middle East. The forth, 'on Italy,' is a personal stage of reflection on the 'grotesque stain left upon the fabric of Italy' by the neoliberalism wrought by former prime minster Silvio Berlusconi.

In-between such fragments Negri constantly asks: Is the winter ever really over, or are we faced, instead, with a sort of transfiguration of winter? And if so, what can we make of this winter—a kind of cold season provoking new sensations—that returns after the ice has melted? Perhaps Negri has a point. Who today can truly claim 'the winter is over' after the revolutionary aspirations of the twentieth century have not only been pathetically subsumed by the failure of the world—and of 'really existing socialism'—but also, and above all, in our inability to express, articulate, or even dream of those revolutionary aspirations anymore?

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There are moments in the text we might expect Negri to helplessly decry that this deconstruction offers us a definitive narrative of how things have really happened; 'there is nothing left to be done.' But this is not the case. For as Walter Benjamin's infamous *Angelus Novus* reminds us: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[2] The seasons, as we might remember them from childhood, no longer exist. Behind this pervasive transformation of our natures however, "we still find a humanity which, free of memories and nostalgia, still reacts and inhabits spaces where it is possible to develop not only new life projects, but also a nearly unconscious passion for freedom and justice which replicates the experiences of a forgotten past, as they emerge from the unconscious, from the realm of desire" (32-33).

There is a contagious optimism to a work which zeros in on 'a nearly unconscious passion for freedom and justice' behind the (neoliberal) transformation of our natures. Even now—when it appears that information technologies have fully subsumed every methodology of knowledge production, foreign wars are no longer loathsome events but rather dutiful homages to 'human rights,' and that progress, which is impossible to peg, must be guided and enjoyed by the richest nations—Negri calls upon a 'democracy of the multitudes' to lead us out of the darkness.

Such a democracy of the multitudes is explored in detail through the concept of what Negri calls *the metropolitan strike*. In starting from the dual position that 'blocking the circulation of commodities has been fundamental in the history of working-class insurgency' and that 'the sphere of circulation is no longer simply one movement in the total process of capitalist valourization, but the global form structures production itself,' Negri argues that to confront capital in the sphere of circulation is to strike the metropolis—that fundamental vector of contemporary struggles 'where life and work tend to pass over one another.'

And yet having said this, Negri reminds us that we could never succeed in understanding the radical nature of these new struggles if we were not to ask: *who are the actors?* Drawing from his accounts of the 1995 strikes in France—the largest since May 1968—Negri argues that today's primary agents of struggle are the service sector workers.

What Negri suggests—and this is the leap that his reading of the strike makes—is that the *immaterial* and *interactive* character of the labour performed in the service sector constitutes the global form of an increasingly interactive and even *democratic* form of production in a post-industrial or post-Fordist environment. Emergent in these struggles is therefore a form of publicness that is antagonistic to both the state and to a capitalist command that is increasingly parasitic and predatory in its relation to the self-organized sociality and co-operation exhibited in immaterial labour. For Negri, it is in this democratic co-production of public services that it will be necessary, in turn, to seek out a properly democratic form of politics.

Of course, the question these tactics—whether they take the form of occupying urban sites, blockading ports, or the riotous direct expropriation of commodities without passing through the mediation of money—pose to and for us is whether the concept of the strike is flexible enough to capture these forces and energies. Should we still speak of a strike when many of the forms

[2] Walter Benjamin. (1968). "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Berlin: Schocken Books.

contemporary metropolitan antagonisms take involve the freezing and shutting down of various forms of transportation and supply and the direct seizure of space and goods? To what extent should we instead retire this term in a post-seasonal epoch no longer defined by struggles around wages—struggles that no longer necessarily have, as their horizon, the seizure of the means of production? And what would it mean to take the city today when 'the city' has become the metropolitan concentration of apparatuses and infrastructures inseparable from the valourization of capital?

The Winter is Over does not have all the answers for such difficult questions. However, it is a coherent and impassioned attempt to push the tactics of social transformation into the terrain of the twenty-first century, and for that oft-neglected reason, it is very much worth your time.