Materialism and Theology: 
A Conversation 

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In this rare and exclusive interview, Antonio Negri confronts, for the first time, the question of theology and its relation to his ontology and political views. This interview takes up the main themes in Negri’s radical political philosophy such as love, the multitude, desire, the infinite, immanence, power, resistance, and exodus, and carefully relates these themes to Christian theology, especially Latin American liberation theology. 

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Any serious reflection on the intersection between theology and politics today must frame its structure by referring to a twofold operation: first, what simultaneously links up and separates Jacob Taubes’s and Carl Schmitt’s reflections; and second, that which ignores the theological-political paradigm by spiritualizing the material world out of existence. Spiritualizing the matrix between theology and politics neglects the ‘‘heretical’’ tradition that links Thomas Müntzer to the Marxist reflection and the Marxist materialist tradition to the theology of liberation in Latin America. This radical materialist-theological tradition has always been accompanied by various and different forms of revolution, in time and space. It is about the tradition of the hidden and oppressed. This is what Walter Benjamin calls the Jetztzeit that we can see in that ‘‘sign of the time.’’ The hidden oppressed (Jetztzeit) is the explosion of the power of the multitude. Further, this identification of the hidden and oppressed in history is a power that goes beyond the imperial logics and boundaries and creates disutopic, actual, and effective projects of resistance, struggles, and liberations (exodus). 

Our target in thinking the matrix of theology and politics today is to follow the logic of the hidden and oppressed. We must, above all, think inside this tradition that links theology and revolution, and consider the ‘‘heretical’’ possibility of reflecting about a materialistic political theology in which theology meets the political in a conceptual apparatus that is fundamental for both fields of research. Moreover, this new field is one marked by themes such as subjectivity, event, production, exodus, and prophecy. We speak about this with Toni Negri on the occasion of the English translation of his book Thirty-Three Lessons on Lenin (forthcoming). 

Gabriele Fadini: We have mentioned Thomas Müntzer and the peasants’ war in 1525. Marx defined it as one of the most important revolutionary events of German history. As a matter of fact, the Müntzer revolution was understood by thinkers from
Frederick Engels to Ernst Bloch as the prototype of the Marxist materialist insight; indeed, it showed the inner truth of communist theory. And this “inner truth” of materialist theory is closely related to theology (as Mu¨ntzer was a theologian above all). In this way, theology can be seen as a constituent element of revolutionary process even without knowing it as such. Thomas Mu¨ntzer and his political theology of the revolution gives us an example, and nowadays some of his “descendants” like Camilo Torres and the liberation theology movement continue the struggle for liberation in Latin America, leading us to reflect on these themes. What are your thoughts about this tradition?

Antonio Negri: At times there is a certain type of theology that intersects with revolutionary events. It is necessary, however, to clearly designate exactly what kind of theology we are speaking about. We must be clear here because it is equally certain that not all theologies cross revolutionary phenomena but, on the contrary, there are some theologies that cross the opposite of revolution: namely, pure ideological reproduction of Empire.

Theology becomes important for revolutionary thinking when charity and love (agape and amor) are assumed to be unrestrainable powers*where, in other words, the same logos, the same rationality is placed at love’s disposal. From this point of view, amor has first an epistemological, and then soteriological, importance. That is, it is love that individuates which are the forces and the powers that can develop the common and, through the common, realizes more and more charity. This epistemological power of love is joined to a power of liberation. Liberation here emerges as a thorough materialism, which moves from a focus on soteriology to all-out revolution. In this sense, it is necessary to try to understand what is the relation between charity and poverty, love and poverty*that is, the relation between theology and history, theology and politics.

There are two paths. The first is one in which poverty is equated with power, and so the relation between theology and politics is possible because poverty is the capacity to express different forms of love, the organization of passions, and ultimately the unfolding of desire. In the second, poverty is that flat and desperate situation that only the transcendental can redeem. It is clear that it is only the first conception of poverty that can make amor operational. That is, it is clear that only the nonmystical determination of poverty can give love a political role.

Mysticism, in fact, subtracts everything from poverty, reducing it to misery. By defining it in relation to the divinity in spiritual terms only, it looks toward the neutralization of the power of poverty and the desire immanent in it. And that is the role of religion. By contrast, the theology of liberation is the attempt to oppose a historical conception of poverty, as the capacity for creating revolt, to the merely spiritual and inoffensive conception of religion*better said, of logos. A conception of poverty that unfolds through love implies a common openness and a collective disposition, spatial and temporal dislocations of fabricated goods. It is configured as an alternative dynamic of life against the identity of closure of the conception of
poverty meant in spiritualistic terms.

Fadini: The communism of Mu¨ntzer is based on the incarnation as a principle of immanence, such that the law does not arise from a hierarchical theocracy but from that law of nature in which “Christ” is the same “making-body” of the divine as the whole of reality and of eternity with temporality. The principle of resistance and struggle against sin*that is, against those who want to take possession of what was given to everybody*is to participate in this movement of immanence that is Christ: the logos that you have already identified. The “void” about which German mysticism speaks becomes in Mu¨ntzer the void of God that, in making himself man, calls man to make God.2 The subjectivity that arises from this void is the plane of immanence of the divine presence in history. Political theology of revolution*or of resistance. One immediately thinks of the figure of [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer, who understood theology as the process of redirecting transcendence into the power of immanence.3

Negri: The answer to the theological question is found at the point of human wondering about the question of the infinite and of perfection. Human beings’ wonderings begin to ask this question, not in front of a mystical or interior empty void, but before a void of experience and the emptiness of time*when it stops and when it starts again. Expelled from the earthly paradise, humanity is on the edge of the void of nonbeing against which it has constantly to project being to continue the process, and it is in front of this extremely risky void that humanity has to operate in order to be.

Now the question is, Is it possible to define a plane of immanence as a constructed plan? In other words, can theological thought as transcendent be bent to the thought of life under the living forces immanent in the production of life? Or, on the other hand, can theological thought, as transcendent, only be satisfied by the temporal transcendence*the last form of transcendence*that the subject tests once she or he is in front of the void and its ruin? I believe that the only possibility of the theological is that one which asserts that transcendence is bent onto immanence. And so the theological becomes the bearer of an option extremely strong and positive! It is an option that, however, remains open to the possibility of both success or failure: the risk of the failure and of the alternative, the risk of the experimentation, that is neither Sartre’s nor Augustine’s risk, but absolutely realistic and never exclusive. A risk in which it is never an “‘aut-aut” but always an “‘et-et.” In this constructed context, I believe, we have to consider Mu¨ntzer again, setting aside the historical falsification in which he was often interpreted. On the other hand, the dimension of sin and of evil can be understood only according to the given framework of moral theology.

Evil and sin are antithetical to learning about love as radically open. More than this, evil and sin are basically an obstacle in what Michael Hardt and I call “training in love”*that is, the constituent and common element of life. More exactly, evil is a block of sociality; it is a negation of the expressive capacity. It is definable not by
itself but in relation to its opposite. In this landscape, the solution to evil is neither a return to nor even a restoration of the complexity of being. From Hölderlin to Hegel, for example, evil was always defined as both a blockage of desire and, at the same time, the overcoming of this blockage. It was always interpreted in terms of restoration of an antecedent condition, of a presumed totality of being. Evil is punishment, subtraction; the good is restoration and restitution of the action to the totality of the All. But there is not restitution that can be restoration because humanity, immersed in a progression of good against all the impediments that we call evil, changes and is always and forever transforming. The common is built on the work of charity and so is not a reality behind which actions can be restored. Rather a life built on love is a reality that taps into the infinite process—a process that is always in flux and gains energy in the richness of the singular implications that cross it. The good, the infinite, are nothing less than pure construction. Let’s dare hope, let’s dare build something!

Fadini: While the prophecy ...
Negri: Imagination develops in prophetical terms by following the epistemic tendency that develops reality. But this tendency is not a guaranteed way because it is something that could unfold in more than one or two (or even several) paths. It is a process that is always exposed to modification: the telos is never grasped but is always on the move. Just as there is no guarantee in desire as in prophecy, so there is no preordained destiny. Desire is, in fact, nothing else than a sort of “in itself” that runs into infinite possibilities determining the most probable, in the case that the conditions that produced the imaginative hypothesis still remain.

Prophecy is something like absolute risk and is difficult, but also at the same time it is a knowledge and an action that tries to interpret the common formality of the process. In other words, prophecy is an attempt to discover a common form, a form or that in which there is no obligation to move, but rather a desire to build something together to move in common. Prophecy is then disutopic—that is, a hypothesis that goes on by modifying the conditions in which it was born. Prophecy lives in a tension: it is never dialectical but a process that always starts again. At the same time, the tension that animates prophecy is constitutently contradictory because it doesn’t build the world in direct terms, but verifies itself constantly in the process of building in front of the forces that really build the world. Prophecy shares the dynamic of desire: it is not the desire, in fact, that builds reality, but that part of desire that bends on the praxis for effectively creating reality. Prophecy on these terms is this anticipation and verification of this praxis.

This brings us back to the important point found in the history of revolution. Revolution in Mu¨ntzer runs along the determinations of time. It is the affirmation of a Jetzt not reducible to that in which all time is swallowed up, but is rather open to a constituent praxis of eternity. This is the eternity whose heart is the praxis of charity (agape). Charity is a praxis that, in the communion of goods and wealth, struggles for appropriation of the common and against the expropriation of work and production. That is, a repeating of the event of kenosis (emptying) but also, and at the same time, the new rise of constituent praxis. In my book Kairos’ /Alma Venus /Multitudo, I speak
about amor as praxis of the common and above all about kairom’s as Christ that empties himself in order to produce a new being. This raises the immediate question: can this be a paradoxical convergence between materialism and theology?

The paradox dominates so much of our situation that it seems as if it can’t help going on: kairom’s, Jetztzeit seem unable to find other solutions if not in this precise paradox*that is, in the irresolvable tension that animates it. However, the paradox alone cannot be enough. The paradox has to be transcended in the constituent praxis that is love. And here there is a decisive question: that is, in which way love can be able to transcend the paradox of instantaneity, of Jetzt, by preserving the potency of gift and of expression*in other words, the experience of innovation presented in Jetzt. In answering this question it is necessary to think in terms of accumulation and threshold, to conceive behind love, so as behind every Jetzt, not a subject as individual but a subject already articulated as common and already part of a collective. Only in this manner is it possible to bring the discourse from a diachronic exentiality as a break (or as an intensive expression of a negation) that turns into abundance, an excess that is not caused by a total, corresponding productive cause. Only when this dynamic is lived as not a dialectical swing back and forth between accumulation and threshold, can it change the coordinates of the relation between love and poverty; a relation in which accumulation of desires intrinsic to poverty not only makes of it the potency of eternity, but radically modifies its very structure. It is not about the passage from quantity to quality of which the old Marxists spoke, but it is about a non-Darwinian complexity of elements of love and resistance, accumulation and innovation, that presupposes the common as not the banal basis of identity but guarantor of a possible intertwining link between love and poverty.

Fadini: In your last works, one of the themes that is present more frequently is the “exodus.” An exodus is a movement not in space but “constituent”: exodus in the sense of repossession and liberation. Here this concept leaves its historical connotation to a figure of event that runs throughout all praxis and the struggle for liberation. It is not incidental that liberation theology speaks about the experience of exodus as that “integral liberation” that refuses any kind of reformist language but only affirms the necessity of radically subverting an oppressive system.

Negri: When we speak about exodus we speak, first of all, of a break inside the social and economic structures of reality. The concept of exodus has its roots in the truth that capitalism is already overcome and, in this way, the working class (the working strength), the multitude can never again be gathered under the banner of capital. The exodus is therefore a purely subjective device. It is the horizon that has refused capitalism. Exodus is the refusal to stay under the order of capitalism because, when it is under the laws of capitalism, it is obliged to stay and to operate under these established rules and limitations. The event of the exodus is given starting from this objective condition.

There are two alternatives to the stance that produces exodus. The first is the front of homogenized capital. It is clear, as has already been stated, that this is firmly
opposed by the constitutive power of exodus. The second stance is no less adequate but is slippery to some so-called radicals*namely, the reformist position. We have seen the failure of the reformist position. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, reformist programs were organized and implemented, but the fatal flaw was that this stance thought it knew where it was going before it started. This is pure illusion; in fact, in the exodus there is an opening through which one can go, a path on which one can walk without a sure destination. By contrast, the reformist stance pretends to know the direction that revolution will take. The exodus stance is much more open and radical. In the time of exodus, destiny is there to invent, to create anew all things.

So I find on this exact point many similarities with the theology of liberation, and yet there are other aspects that I cannot identify with. By moving in revolutionary terms, in fact, in a situation of perpetual exodus, I need a form of ‘‘faith’’ to build a model of the common that puts me together with others, to build together with others the passages that allow me to forge new dimensions of the future and of the world of love to come.

But here we need to be precise. In the idea of exodus, there is the refusal of dialectic, the refusal of all the transcendental conditions, the refusal of the Trinity, and of the Nicene concepts (indeed, Nicea invented the modern dialectic!). The exodus is premised on total and absolute risk a constituent device because it starts from a materially defined condition, viz., the fact that one is no longer a slave to anyone. In the exodus the productive capacity, the capacity to express needs, to realize desires, is made completely autonomous.

**Fadini:** The exodus in liberation theology is incarnated in that exigency of ‘‘becoming conscious’’*that is, radical affirmation of an autonomous subjectivity. The movement of liberation is not only grounded in the rise of subjectivity, but is liberation first of all of the same subjects, their bodies, their desires, and their passions. The exodus in liberation theology alights in this singularity. With this it seems to me to cross an instance intrinsic to Lenin. It seems to me, in fact, that an irreducible thesis of your book Thirty-Three Lessons on Lenin is the role of subjectivity, not only in the growth of the revolutionary process but as a trait of discontinuity and rupture inside the same process. It is not by chance that, in the notes entitled ‘‘Marxism on the State,’’ Lenin associates ‘‘messianism’’ with the question ‘‘Who will start?’’5 Obviously not the Messiah but the Russian proletariat, but there is an indirect convergence between messianism and revolution on the theme of the subject.

**Negri:** The Lenin book was framed by reading Lenin anew. It puts Lenin within the context of a movement in which the idea of the party was founded on the concept of the vanguard. The idea was simple: to destabilize a capitalist power premised on economic and social factors and restructure it in terms of class struggle. It was about a lecture focused on Lenin that bridged the history of the working movement and the new political tendency of the mass workers. This lecture developed the more profound reality of restructuring the capitalist domain.
There was an adhesion to a Leninism in functional and transitory terms, as if Leninism was the heredity that the movement had to realize to pass to new phases in which the relation between technical (and material) composition and political composition was completely changed: from the mass workers to the social worker. Lenin*that is, the father of the movement*had to be inserted again in technical composition. The fundamental demands of Lenin were still actual (realizable), but they have to be immersed in the new political and economic conditions of class struggle. The discourse in my book on Lenin was very near to that of Mario Tronti in his “Lenin in Inghilterra,” translated and revised as “Lenin in New York.” It is a formula and a project that meant both a retrieval of the past and a nondialectical rupture toward the future of class conflict.

Now, we have always to remember, the exodus proceeds in a risky situation. The exodus, in certain phases of rebuilding the world, is certainly a temporal figure but also a spatial figure. Inside this time of transition, we today do not ask so much, “who will start?” but “who will fulfill?” or even “who and where in the globalization will manage in the communist fight?”

Today the problem for us pertains to the project that, in the situation defined by the end of unilateralism, will develop and bring to political fulfillment the first project of exit from capitalism. Although I don’t always wish to, I return to thinking of Europe, to seeing that the possibility of realizing the mechanism “exodus-transitionfulfillment” is at the highest point of development there and not, for example, in other places more peripheral to the development, such as Latin America or China. And when I speak about fulfillment, certainly I speak about a fulfillment that is absolutely devoid of a Messiah that solves the problem. I prefer to think of messianism as a collective and immanent logic found within the unfolding multitude.

Lenin is still and always will be for us an image of multitude. Indeed, Lenin intensifies the existing multitude for us.