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Reason and Revolution Redux: Antonio
Negri's Political Descartes

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REASON AND REVOLUTION REDUX:
ANTONIO NEGRI'S *POLITICAL DESCARTES*

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**Antonio Negri, *The Political Descartes: Reason, Ideology, and the Bourgeois Project*.
Translated by Matteo Mandarini and Alberto Toscano. London: Verso, 2006
(original Italian text 1970). 344 pages. \$12.95 (paper). ISBN: 1-84467-582-3.**

There is a peculiar, Janus-faced quality about reading an early work by a now famous author. Facing two directions at once, the reader tends not only to address the book in the present, as a work worthy of our attention today, but also to examine the book's role in the moment of its emergence, placing it within the context of the author's overall career. In the case of Antonio Negri's *Political Descartes*, this means reviewing the book itself while exploring the role that Descartes plays in Negri's own political philosophy. It means beginning in the present.

Negri is a well known, global intellectual, whose recent writings include *Empire* and *Multitude* (both co-authored with Michael Hardt), and he achieved international fame in the 1970s as a radical thinker whose views landed him in an Italian prison. Many readers might be a bit surprised to learn that an early work was devoted to analyzing the works of René Descartes, as traditional or old-fashioned a thinker as may be found in the philosophical canon. Those more familiar with Negri's *oeuvre* will not be as surprised, since he wrote an important book on Spinoza—*The Savage Anomaly*—while serving his famous prison term, and Negri has often commented on the history of philosophy, as a field in itself and as the intersection of two fields. Negri's own thought is deeply imbued with a sense of history and of philosophy, and the translation of *The Political Descartes* provides an excellent occasion to explore the connections between them.

Fortunately, Negri himself has provided a postface to the English edition that addresses this background. Responding to critics who wonder why a leftist philosopher in the 1960s would choose to write on Descartes, Negri offers four "observations." First, "every metaphysics is in some way a political ontology" (317). That is, Descartes's development of a metaphysics, which both broke from the medieval thought of the Scholastics and resisted the mechanistic theories of someone like Hobbes, formed an understanding of the being of politics in a novel sense. And, as Negri notes, in seventeenth-century Europe, any metaphysics was itself a form of politics. Second, the endurance of a philosophical thought is "linked to the power of the *implicit political dispositif* within the author's ontology" (318). The plan (*dispositif*) of Descartes's

thought, so influential on subsequent centuries of French (and Western) philosophy, allows us to study the historical evolution of bourgeois power. The Cartesian model is thus essential for understanding the ideology of the modern world. Third, “archaeological consideration of a philosophical stance can be traversed by *different genealogies*” (318–319). Thought is constituted not only by continuities but also by choices, breaks, and contradictory movements. Descartes’s establishment of a rational political order occurs within a context of shifting alternatives. Fourth, and finally, Negri observes that “a political ontology of the past (in this instance Descartes’s) can be usefully contrasted with the current state of affairs” (319). In other words, a study of Descartes’s thought and time enhances our ability to understand our own.

The last aspect may be most important for Negri. Amid the crises, political and philosophical, of the sixteenth century, Descartes stood on the threshold of the modern world. The emergent bourgeoisie of the seventeenth century attempted to confront the power of the monarchy and aristocracy, to forge a new spirit of capitalism, and radically to restructure society. Negri maintains that the global proletariat (i.e., the *multitude*) is in the same position today. The similarities go further: Descartes lived through the epoch of the emergence of the modern state, whereas “we are in an interregnum between the old forms of capitalist government and the new ones of a global governance, which are seeking an effective definition” (320). The revolutionary bourgeoisie of the seventeenth century and the global proletariat today face grave crises: “the Thirty Years War lies at the basis of the Absolutist reaction against the bourgeois revolution, in the same way that ‘pre-emptive war’ lies at the basis of the capitalist reaction against the revolution of the global proletariat” (321). The reactionary movements of “re-feudalization” then, and privatization of public assets now, provides yet another parallel. And, Negri concludes, both periods witness “the collapse of the ideological model that had nourished the first revolutionary insurgencies, accompanied however by the persistence of the unstoppable and irreversible productive and social force of the new historical subjects” (321). By drawing these historical parallels between Descartes’s time and our own, Negri makes the case for a *genealogical* (in Foucault’s sense) approach to the history of ideas: a history which is also a history of the present.

Intriguing as it is to compare the mid-seventeenth-century to the early twenty-first, it also seems a bit of a stretch. Negri’s postface appears to shoehorn his earlier work on Descartes into a theoretical framework—set forth in *Empire* and *Multitude*—that he espouses now. The translators’ introduction, “Antonio Negri and the Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought” (borrowing a title from Georg Lukács’s famous essay), goes even further, comparing Negri’s views—though surprisingly few from *The Political Descartes* itself—to the recent work of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. The attempt to make this 1970 dissertation appear timely in 2006 makes their argument seem forced. The fact that *The Political Descartes* really is a dissertation, written (as Negri notes) “for an academic qualification and submitted to the judgement of a committee of university colleagues” (317), is another blow to its relative hipness; there are over 700 footnotes, for example, and many are lengthy expositions taking up more space on the page than the main text.

However, for all of that, Negri's central notion that Descartes produced a "reasonable ideology" consistent with the needs of a revolutionary bourgeoisie does provide an opportunity for an interesting rereading of Descartes's philosophy, and that rereading is accomplished effectively in the pages of *The Political Descartes*.

Negri begins by analyzing Descartes's use of metaphor, which Negri finds distinct from the baroque usage of some of Descartes's contemporaries. Descartes's many metaphors for philosophy—taking a straight path through an otherwise tortuous forest trail, establishing the foundations of truth upon which to erect a well-built house, analyzing the world's interdependent elements like a careful watchmaker, and so on—reveal a sense of the world as rational and coherent. As Negri puts it, Cartesian metaphor "relies on a measured argumentative order, which bears no relation to that rupture of existential mediation that the baroque imagination always demands" (29). Descartes's use of metaphor undergirds a profoundly humanist order in which the system of nature and the system of man's apprehension of it (thought) go hand in hand. The world "is itself metaphorical, the exposition of a human plan" (53). Combining an analysis of Cartesian metaphor with a biographical inquiry, Negri holds that the early Descartes was a Renaissance humanist. This humanism quickly becomes visible as a cultural phenomenon with distinct civil and political effects. As Negri will argue, the "new science" of Descartes (and Galileo, *inter alios*) posits a philosophical and cultural horizon that metaphorically calls for a general equivalence between the elements of the universe (and between mind and body). The "ideological horizon [...] presides over the conquest of the world by a new class. This class regards general equivalence as the precondition for its own advance, for the interchangeableness of roles, and for the possibility of the destruction of all obstacles to its own growth" (74). Thus, in the metaphors used by Descartes to understand the world and the mind, Negri finds the revolutionary bourgeoisie, dramatically taking the stage in world history.

Negri continues his biographical and philosophical analysis by showing how Descartes's own physical "separation" from Paris—i.e., his move to the Netherlands—paralleled the "metaphysics of separation" in his thought. In the 1620s, Descartes seemed to move away from his Renaissance belief in nature as a system of immutable laws to be mastered, and began to suspect that the powers of God could be separate from the scientific or natural order of things. In what looks almost like a crisis of faith (that is, of his earlier faith in the general equivalence between science and reality), Descartes is willing to assert that, for example, if God wanted to, He could make it so all radii of a circle *were not* equal. Although a natural enough view of an omnipotent God, this admission appears to be a retreat from the triumphant humanism and scientific spirit of the Renaissance. Negri associates this philosophical defeat with the economic and political crises of the early 1620s, namely, the outbreak of the Thirty Years War and the larger European financial panic. Here emerges the Baroque, which Negri defines as a sensibility consisting in "the tension between the awareness of the severe, implacable defeat of the Renaissance, on the one hand, and the always re-emerging nostalgia for that experience on the other" (115). Negri concludes that, "confronted with the crisis

provoked by its own development, the bourgeoisie responds by disavowing the more extreme consequences of what it had hoped for, demanding instead assurances about what it had already achieved” (117). That is, the revolutionary fervor must be tempered in the face of crises that risk all the previous gains. This is true in philosophy and science, no less than in politics, and Descartes abandons his earlier humanism and pursues a new philosophical path. Or, in Negri’s phrasing, “Once the revolution is over, the war of position begins” (155).

This is where Descartes discovers the notion of radical doubt that eventually leads him to the *cogito*, the connection of thinking and being that typifies his philosophy. Quoting from the *Discourse on Method*, Negri notes that, “with the failure of the Renaissance experience behind him—when the world of the senses, philosophy, and experience is internally separated, derealized, and appears (or is) nothing but a dream—Descartes declares that: ‘I resolved to pretend that all things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams’” (171). By developing the formula, *I think, therefore I am*, Descartes carves a space outside of the world of experience, the world that the scientific humanism was to have conquered, and finds the true “reality” to be interior, solitary, and superior to the “false” world of experience. Upon this rock, the *ego*, Descartes will erect his entire system, of the soul, God, and the world. Negri points out, however, that Descartes has not somehow stumbled upon a way to resolve the crisis that led him to this point; he does not recover the losses earlier sustained. Rather, Descartes responds to the crisis by accepting it and by building a new system adequate to it. As Negri puts it, “The crisis does not result in a pacification with the world, but in the proposal of a world adequate to the self-limitation and autonomy of the subject” (173).

A political theory resting on individual authority and supremacy follows from this logic of separation and isolation. If, in his metaphysics, Descartes begins by eliminating anything exterior to himself (the “I”), and thereby builds the world up from that solitary foundation, it makes sense that Descartes’s politics proceeds from the foundational fact of a single, individual subject—this time, that of the sovereign, figured as God. In the *Meditations*, Descartes begins by dismantling the world (through radical doubt) and then builds it up again on the foundation of the *cogito*. Negri finds in this process an allegory for the process that creates the bourgeois political philosophy:

the active and independent subject is characterized by its confrontation with the bewitched world of absolutism; the productive form of this separate existence projects its own class essence in the shape of absolute autonomy; the impossibility of politically possessing the world, of remaking it as real from its current bewitched state, is registered, but it is accompanied by the hope—the unflagging albeit restrained conviction—that the productive, social and cultural hegemony of the bourgeois class will find in absolute mediation the capacity to rebuild the world. (228)

Fascinating though this political allegory may be, it stretches credulity to argue that Descartes's meditations reiterate or figure forth the self-awareness of the emerging bourgeoisie. But then, perhaps, I do not know how to read properly, since Negri adds "If one knows how to read a text, one can see all of this in the *Meditations*" (229).

Negri sums up his boldest assertion of this homology between Descartes's thinking and the emergence of the bourgeoisie as the true subject of history thus: in Descartes, "a metaphysics was constituted through the conclusive definition of the bourgeois class" (242). Descartes has often been called the "father of modern philosophy," and Negri wishes to extend this appellation to cover something like the modern world itself, viewed expressly as the world made modern by the emergence and eventual dominance of the bourgeoisie. For Negri, all modern philosophy follows from Descartes—extending to Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel—as the metaphorical exposition of this class. "Metaphysics continues to provide the metaphor for the emergence of the bourgeoisie as a class, the allusion to a project of reconquering a lived essence, of realizing a willed revolution" (315). In Descartes, Negri locates the principles, the "reasonable ideology," that shaped the modern world.

Notwithstanding Negri's rather strident affirmations (e.g., "It is impossible to read the history of bourgeois thought, beginning with Descartes, in any other perspective than this one" [316]), his argument remains unconvincing. However, *Political Descartes* does provide an interesting rereading of the connection between Descartes's works and the historical period in which they were written. This book also provides insight into Negri's own philosophy, showing where his thought came from and how he developed a method (used to perhaps greater effect in *The Savage Anomaly* and other works) for analyzing philosophy and history in the context of a historical materialism of Marx and the post-Marx tradition. Negri's *Political Descartes* reveals the profound interconnectedness between metaphysics and politics, and displays Negri's own dexterity in combining broadly historical research with close reading of individual texts and careful analysis of ideas.

Whether Descartes provided the appropriate philosophy for the emergent, revolutionary bourgeoisie, his ideas undoubtedly exerted profound influence over the future thought once the bourgeoisie had reorganized Western societies, causing all that was solid to melt into air. As a genealogical foray into understanding the earlier crisis in an effort to better prepare us to understand our own, *Political Descartes* offers an intriguing glimpse into a time when the categories of thought did not seem adequate to the task of grasping the changing world. Perhaps we, in our postmodern condition, can identify with Descartes on the cusp of a new world order of things. Rather than lionize (or demonize) Descartes as the founder of modern thought, we can sympathize with a mind struggling to find ways to think the present system.

In his early treatise on Hegel, *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse emphasized Hegel's concept of reason as powerfully real, embodied, the very stuff of history. For Hegel, the

French Revolution, that culmination of the bourgeoisie's march to the front and center of the historical world stage, represented the triumph of reason as well: the rational came to dominate the actual, and thought directed reality. In Hegel's estimation, the task for reason was to understand the world and, by understanding it, transform it. One might say the same goals apply to philosophy in Descartes's time, and in our own. Negri ends *The Political Descartes* by quoting Hegel (from the *Philosophy of Right*), while also quietly acknowledging a joke about Descartes's supposed affiliations with the Rosicrucians: "Perhaps already in Descartes it is possible to 'recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to enjoy the present, this is the rational insight which reconciles us to the actual ...' Or, perhaps, it begins to" (316, ellipsis in original).