

## Preface to the 2002 Edition

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I began writing *The Labor of Job* long ago, in 1982 or '83. I was in the fourth year of my prison term and I was writing my book on the poet Leopardi at the same time.<sup>1</sup> I was working on the question of suffering. Leopardi provided a phenomenology and a poetics. Job was an *exemplum*. The situation I found myself in was desperate. I had been held in a high-security prison for some time, solely on political grounds, and I had no idea of how to get out. I sought a means to resist through the analysis of suffering. Once I had overcome the illusion that one could defend oneself from an absolute Power, the problem became that of not becoming immersed in the pain and misery of prison.<sup>2</sup> It was the question of how to develop an adequate understanding of repression so as to resist it and to find a way to interpret political defeat as a critique of Power. Once I left prison and was forced into exile in 1983, the problem remained unchanged. To interpret that state of suffering had become for me an essential element of resistance.<sup>3</sup> There were numerous interpretations of Job but none of them had been able to provide a theological explanation of

1 Negri, *Lenta Ginestra. Saggio sull'ontologia di Giacomo Leopardi* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001).

2 [Trans: I shall follow throughout the now-established tradition in Negri translation of rendering *potere* as Power and *potenza* as power. See the translator's introduction to Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, translated by Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).]

3 I told the story of these events in a book that is now impossible to find, *Diario di un'evasione* (Milan: M. B. P., 1986).

evil. *Si Deus est, unde malum? Si malem est, cur Deus?* It was not a question merely of understanding. It was a case of discovering how one could set oneself on a path of liberation. It was a practical problem, not a theodicy. It was the problem of liberation, in prison and in exile, from within the absoluteness of Power: liberation from a political defeat that appeared as an epochal passage—as well as a question of the evaluation of the end of an epoch that could not be reinstated and the explanation of the nightmare of a utopia that had become terror. How could one travel Job's path in search of liberation?

It had been simpler with Giacomo Leopardi.<sup>4</sup> Like all the Romantics, Leopardi was full of irony (that is, capable of critical distancing from the passions) and was able to reflect on praxis, as well as to free up reflection and praxis in poetry. In the different periods of Leopardi's poetic activity, I observed the critique of philosophy, which became great poetry, and I saw it explicating itself in an ethical and political phenomenology. I saw it being shattered only to be reborn, till it became a secular and materialist utopia of human solidarity.

I found none of this in Job. In the book of Job the senseless pain of life is undergone immediately and we encounter an enormous capacity for refuting that pain, to the point that every possibility of critical reflection, all attempts to reach an accommodation between existence and destiny, are excluded. Leopardi's path of liberation was political, that of a great existential phenomenology and of its poetic double—he thereby became a precursor of Nietzsche—whereas the experience of Job was constituted on the basis of an unreflecting violence, entirely within the immediate perception of being—from an unbearable ontological pain. It was the materialist experience of absolute pain. Job is an oriental Niobe who nevertheless resists from within his identity.<sup>5</sup> He does not change, he resists. Thus I was

4 [Trans: Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) was a brilliant poet, essayist, and philosopher who remains relatively unknown in the Anglophone world.]

5 [Trans: Niobe is a figure from Greek mythology. She boasted of her fourteen children to Leto, who had only two, and as a punishment Apollo killed all of Niobe's sons and Artemis all of Niobe's daughters. Distraught, she fled to Mount Sipylus where she wept unceasingly and was turned into a stone waterfall.]

presented with a number of themes. The first was that of the incommensurability of pain. In this I found myself directly in contrast with my Marxist heritage, which (like all modern cultures) is a culture of measure. In my youth, in particular, I had absorbed the good, civilized Marxism of the Italian Communist Party. It was a culture of measure, a labor of measure, the measured passion of the *Raison d'Etat*. And when I had concerned myself with workers' labor, I was confronted with that fanaticism of measure in which the trade unions excelled. When I had turned to international problems, it was once again measure that emerged, as in the good old Westphalian tradition. Reasonableness and cynicism, utopia and realism always came together in their search for the sense of measure. It was only with the events of 1968 that I realized, with astonishment, what a great transformation in the destiny of humanity was possible, and that it could overturn all worldly measure. I perceived this in '68. Later, throughout the 1970s, it became ever clearer and more precise. I asked myself again whether it was this acute perception of the crisis of measure and of the laws that structured it that so disturbed my reason, to the point that I sought, with a few friends, the revolutionary clash with the state. It ended badly. I was in prison. And yet there had been something solid and real in our rebellion.

We were faced with a profound transformation in the mode of production, of our world. It was as though we were confronted with a new cosmogony.

So, when asked why we rebelled, I answer that reason and measure were at stake. At stake were the entire social edifice, industrial production, and the forms of life. At that time in the early 1980s, when I was working on the great themes of pessimist thought, the laboring classes (in our wealthy and developed continents) realized that the nature of work had completely changed. The transformation of work that lay behind the defeat of the workers' movement, and which was the source of the bastardization of its parties, rested upon the ruins of the measure of value. Without a measure of value, socialism became impossible. But so did capitalism. One had to create anew. The ruination of the law of measure was something that would profoundly upset the world: Job had been loyal to

all the measures that regulated the world supported by God; the workers had been loyal to all the measures that regulated the world governed by capital. Now, though, measure had exploded. Job protested against measure and he suffered from the pain of the incommensurability of life: now all measure had blown up. What has all this to do with my anxiety for liberation? The reason is minor and simple but also profound: both the workers' movement and I experienced what Job had, that is, the pain of incommensurability and the consequent discovery that to the end of measure one could reply only with the passion for creation. Where old measures had fallen it was necessary to create new ones; and passion could only play itself out now in its capacity to move with joy beyond measure. Only from this perspective was it possible to imagine communism anew.

But how? How could one draw this concern for creation into the political struggle and, in particular, into communist struggle? This led to some further reflections. I felt a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the fact that I had lived my political engagement in the abstract, that is, through books, in ideology. Now repression had brought my brain into contact with my body. My criticism was not of the role of the intellect, which was central and increasingly more productive in society. It was simply a rediscovery of the body. A reaffirmation of its presence and its resistance. This was the second line of interpretation of the book of Job. Job is always a body, even when his discourse becomes progressively more metaphysical, which it increasingly does when he discovers his incommensurable distance from God. It is in this situation of absolute distance, of the complete lack of measure, that Job's bodily struggle with God begins. My body and the bodies of my comrades were also drawn into this incommensurable relationship of struggle. Hence my thought and my abstract passions had to be brought to bear on this. The whole of my history would have been senseless had our bodies not been in the grip of events. We had to begin with the body in all its concreteness. "To liberate" was to liberate the body. Only in this way would the communist project free itself of idealism and reveal its materialism. The more we insisted on the body the more communist we became.

(It was during this time that I encountered Wittgenstein's proposi-

tions on pain in his *Philosophical Investigations*.<sup>6</sup> I realized that the theme of the incommensurability of pain and the discovery of the social, pain and recognition, suffering and the dialogue between bodies, were fundamental for human experience. It was the basis of communication. It was, of course, a very different route from that traveled by classical theodicy, and by Job in particular, but in the end it was all the same: the incommensurability of pain was recognized through the relationship between people, within the dialoguing multiplicity, and it was in this way that pain produced the world and language demonstrated its creativity).

A third element became central to my reading of Job. In the book of Job the ethical experience of pain (via the body) opens onto the definition of truth. But where there is no measure, where is truth? Where there is no logic, in what way can truth be grasped? Job's ethical drama, as well as the catastrophe of the workers' movement and of our experience of resistance, could conclude only in a situation beyond measure and beyond the logic of measure. Job recognizes God again because he sees him. We also need to see anew a free humanity beyond the disproportionate [*smisurato*] dominion of capital and of Power over existence.<sup>7</sup> Truth could consist only in a new collective vision in which destiny had been made subject to power.

Reflecting on these events today, I feel just how much they were linked, on the one hand, to the exacting experience of prison and, on the other,

6 Negri, "Piacere, dolore, senso," *Annuario di itinerari filosofici* 4, no. 2.

7 [Trans: The term *smisurato* appears repeatedly in *The Labor of Job*. I have decided to render it in multiple ways, according to the context (that is, as "disproportionate," "immense," "immoderate"), and keep the Italian in square brackets. It is related to the Italian for measure, *misura*, as are other terms that Negri uses frequently throughout this book and elsewhere, most important, that of immeasure (*dismisura*). *Dismisura* has become a technical term for Negri, growing out of his critique of the labor theory of value, and he has since dropped *smisurato* from his technical vocabulary. In *The Labor of Job* we see Negri's early attempts to develop this concept of the immeasurable, which we recognize today as being central to his thinking. The focus on measure is a core concern of Negri, stemming from his critique of the labor theory of value in his texts from the mid-1970s collected in *Books for Burning*, edited by Tim Murphy (London: Verso, 2005), and his hugely influential *Marx beyond Marx*, translated by Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan, and Maurizio Viano (New York: Autonomedia, 1991) (published in Italian in 1979), to the works written with Michael Hardt of recent years.]

to the cultural atmosphere across Europe in the early 1980s. How can this be defined except as the beginning of postmodernity? Postmodernists said that grand narratives were over. They insisted on the end of all measure and on the disproportion of all the terms of philosophical thought. But the arguments advanced were slight or, if you prefer, feeble—in Italy at the time one spoke of weak thought [*pensiero debole*]. In the case of Job, however, the immeasurable presented itself as a grand and dramatic narrative, and within this narration there was no weakness but all that mattered was the laceration of the flesh. In Job, the postmodern was presented as a positive contamination and, ultimately, that fantastic biblical book exhibited a postmodern cosmogony. Can I then claim to have experienced, through Job, the passage from the modern to the postmodern?

Whatever else this little book represents, it is the first book that I completed in France, at the start of my Parisian exile, which lasted from 1983 to 1997. And although it is true that it was started, or at least conceived, in Italy, it is also true that here I began to “wash my clothes in the Seine.”<sup>8</sup> I had already written *Italie rouge et noire*,<sup>9</sup> which was a sort of diary of what had happened in the last months of my incarceration and the first of my liberation in Italy in 1983—a memoir of what had led me into exile. I had also written a little book with Félix Guattari, *Communists Like Us* (1983–84), which was a summary of our political ideas. It was a way of beginning to do politics again. In these books I had not, however, added anything to my previous thought. I had simply described some theoretical and practical events through which my thought had developed. “Washing my clothes in the Seine” was something else entirely. It was a case of bringing Italian workerism into contact with French poststructuralism and thereby producing a short-circuit between Foucault and Deleuze and the workers’ struggles that had developed in Italy and linking these with the thought those struggles had produced.<sup>10</sup> Michael Hardt, reprising a famous phrase

8 To “wash one’s clothes in the Arno” was the leitmotif of the nineteenth-century Italian patriotic writers during the time of the struggles for Italian unity. We cosmopolitan Italians prefer the Seine, as well as many other rivers and seas.

9 Negri, *Diario di un’evazione* (Milan: M. B. P., 1986).

10 [Trans: *Operaismo* or workerism is a heretical version of Marxism that posits the working

of Marx concerning France and Germany in the nineteenth century, has written that in the twentieth century revolutionary thought develops in France and revolutionary practice takes place in Italy. I think this motto describes this history well.<sup>11</sup> But if this was the backdrop, it was a case of “incarnating” French theory in Italian practice and, consequently, excavating the subversive content of practice from within the theoretical ontology of freedom. It is ironic that this should happen through a reading of one of the books of the Bible—and yet that’s what happened. It is Job who enabled me to explore that terrain of French theory of freedom on whose basis *Insurgencies* and then *Empire* would advance.<sup>12</sup> It is Job who led me to a close friendship with Foucault, and then with Guattari and Deleuze, which would encourage me to attempt a synthesis. If Job’s desert ends with a vision of God, defeat and every prison of the multitude will end in a new insurrection.

I almost forgot a last thread: the fascination negative thought [*pensiero negativo*] exerted on us all. Negative thought is serious stuff. From Nietzsche and Benjamin to Taubes and Agamben, what was being discussed was the touching of an extreme limit in the experience of being. But all too often these discussions flattened the thought of crisis. Negative thought became a poignant but impotent piety (and justification) of defeat. It represented a fleeting “ontology of decline.”<sup>13</sup> Instead, what was needed was the strength to recognize that the crisis was not only real but that it

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class as the dynamic but autonomous core of capitalism. As Mario Tronti writes in one of the founding texts of workerism (collected in *Operai e capitale* [Turin: Einaudi, 1966]): “We too saw first capitalist development and then workers’ struggles. This is an error. The problem must be overturned, its terms must be changed and one must start again: at the beginning is the class struggle. At the level of socially developed capitalism, capitalist development is subordinated to workers’ struggles; it comes after them and it must make the political mechanism of its production correspond to them.”]

11 Michael Hardt, “Laboratory Italy,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, edited by Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 1–10.

12 Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, translated by M. Boscagli (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

13 [Trans: This expression is taken from Gianni Vattimo’s *Al di là del soggetto* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981).]

also constituted a new field of struggle and of reconstruction of being. (At that time, when we were all still in prison, any such recognition was a way to force a path out of the present into the future.) One could not turn crisis into the principal quality of reality. Nor could one consider all action and all struggle fated to defeat or insignificance. Job understood as a caricature of misfortune appeared on the outer horizon of the world of negative thought. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, I resisted such siren songs. First, I attempted the impossible in the field of political agitation and militancy. Then, I studied pessimism in prison but illuminated it with Spinoza's thought. Spinoza was my other important object of study in prison.<sup>14</sup> Spinoza began where Job left off, with the sight of God. It was a case, then, of insisting on a bodily confrontation analogous to the one that Job fought with God. In effect, we were once again Jobs fighting against the Powers that exercised their command over the world and enslaved it, fighting the wretchedness to which the dominion of the strong and the cruel subjected it.

We can understand, therefore, how the ancient Christian Fathers recognized in Job a precursor of Christ. He, like us, crossed the desert to win back life at a higher level, in an entirely materialist redemption that signifies the discovery of the joy in revolutionizing the world.

*Rome, June 2002*

<sup>14</sup> Negri, *L'anomalia selvaggia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981) (*The Savage Anomaly*, translated by Michael Hardt [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991]).