

Antonio Negri: *Swarm: Didactics of the Militant*

Encouraged by her successful production *Avanti!* (2001), where she mixed texts by Gramsci, Pasolini, and Negri, Swiss director Barbara Nicolier suggested to the Italian thinker that he should write a play. Antonio Negri agreed, on the condition that she would help him, and their working sessions (2003) in Rome resulted in his first work for the stage, *Swarm* (2004).

From the published transcripts of those sessions we know that they started with a short text Nicolier had used in *Avanti!*, the “Militant,” from the conclusion of *Empire* (2000) by Michael Hardt and Negri. In a discussion about a possible “typology of militancies” (Tuaille 2013: 170) and the corresponding “decisions,” Nicolier brought up two plays, Brecht’s *The Measures Taken* and Müller’s “answer” (171) to it, *Mauser*. Since Negri did not know either play, she proceeded to explain how they might fit with their plans.

Both plays are structured as trials where a chorus representing a revolutionary tribunal is carrying out an inquiry into a troubling case of militant violence, and reaches a judgment about the decision made on that case. In Brecht’s *Measures*, the decision, which followed the party line, is to make the militant comrade disappear completely, and he consents to it: The singularity is sacrificed for the revolution and it is absorbed by the party. In Müller’s *Mauser*, the decision, which again followed the party line, is the same but the militant dies for the revolution, like a martyr, while disagreeing with the decision. Nicolier concluded that the two plays “connect very well together, they make a beautiful dialectical tension, but they need the third one” (171). That is the play Negri volunteered to write. In it, the decision is taken by the multitude where the new militant functions as a cooperative singularity, “embodying struggle and a life’s choices at the same time” (Negri 2011: 3).

After Brecht’s traditional and Müller’s critical militancy (xiv), Negri explored in his play a new one: “Revolutionary political militancy today ... must rediscover ... its proper form: not representational but constituent activity” (Hardt & Negri 2001: 413). The section “Militant” begins: “In the postmodern era, as the figure of the people dissolves, the militant is the one who best expresses the life of the multitude: the agent of biopolitical production and resistance against Empire” (411). The future of communist militancy is

exemplified not by a party member but by Saint Francis of Assisi. “Once again in postmodernity we find ourselves in Francis’s situation, posing against the misery of power the joy of being” (413). This is a vision of “love, simplicity, and also innocence” (413) where Christianity and communism fuse.

In their discussions, Nicolier referred fittingly to the revolutionary journey as “the stations of the cross” (Tuaille 2013: 171), a tradition introduced and supervised by the Franciscans, the religious orders founded by St. Francis in 1209. The Stations of the Cross (or the Way of the Sorrows or *Via Crucis*) commonly refers to 14 images depicting Jesus on the way to his crucifixion, and grew out of reproductions of the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem. It was established in the 15th century by Franciscans who later built in Europe outdoor shrines to duplicate the path Jesus walked to Mount Calvary. I propose that, with St. Francis as his model of the new militancy, Negri wrote a “morality play,” *Swarm*, structured as a Way of the Cross in 12 scenes/stations of a militant on his way not to the communist party but to the multitude or, to put in medieval terms, not to a monastic but to a mendicant community. Negri turned the “learning play” of Brecht and Müller into a “pedagogical apparatus” (Negri 2011: x), subtitled “Didactics of the Militant,” which takes its artists and audience on a spiritual pilgrimage through contemplation of the passion of the militant as “constituent activity.”

Like the Franciscan Stations of the Cross, Catholic “morality plays” were very popular in the 15th century. On his way to salvation, their protagonist encountered personifications of virtues and vices which tried to steer him toward the good or bad life. Negri’s anonymous “Man,” an Everyman who discusses revolutionary violence with a chorus, goes through the stages of a moralistic political pedagogy where he encounters temptations and virtues, from alienated separation and personal indignation to solitary terrorism, party subordination, multitude belonging, and at the end collective exodus to the desert. Escaping the traditional unified, organized collective that suppresses difference, “the ‘Man’ embodies a singularity that gradually makes itself into the multitude” (3). As a disaggregated network and a “militarist pluralist assemblage” (Connolly 2017: 129), the notion of the multitude has taken the place of the old leftist figure of “the people” and functions like the designation of a non-hierarchical religious order with many denominations and minorities.

The first, French edition of Negri's three one-act plays (2009) was called "trilogy of difference," perhaps because of its focus on the mendicant singularity of the militant which cannot be assimilated into any monastic homogeneity. Through poverty and nakedness, the comrade frees himself from ideology, the "religion of necessity" (24), and achieves ascetic militancy within the immanence of the swarm, "the common of the multitude" (28). The notion of the swarm as a cooperative distribution and militant configuration of the varied multitude came from the "Swarm Intelligence" section of the *Multitude* (2004), written during the same period with the play *Swarm*. Recalling St. Francis' famous sermon to the birds, we may imagine that flocks taught by the saint turn into God's militant swarms.

In his spiritual pilgrimage through "the stations of the cross" of the revolutionary vices and virtues, the Man receives political instruction ("Didactics") through a catechistic introduction to the moral principles of the multitude. The catechumen asks a series of basic questions about what to do, and the chorus answers them, guiding him from the vengeance of solitude to the resistance of the common, and from the prison of solitary impotence to the freedom of collective action, until he accomplishes the "verification of virtue" (31) by joining the "we" of the swarm, the polyphonic collective of singularities living in the immediacy of its decisions.

When Nicolier mentioned "dialectics," Negri responded immediately with "patristics," and constructed a scheme. Brecht, where the militant believes in the revolution because it is absurd, was Tertullian. Müller, where the militant dies for the revolution but cannot accept its absurdity, was John of Damascus. Negri would be St. Francis, "rebuilding an idea of the revolution in which the idea of singularity is rich, strong, powerful, and cooperative. This is a classical process in patristics" (Tuaille 2013: 174). Thus, Negri's central question is the soteriological possibility of faith in revolution, the secular salvation. Instead of the trial in Brecht and Müller, here the chorus takes the militant through an initiation whereby he is admitted to a Franciscan swarm. There is no Kantian question of obedient freedom as ethics and politics are reconciled in the new socio-political identity which makes any tragic aporia superfluous.

Because of its many religious debts, *Swarm* is a failure on many levels. There is nothing postmodern, dialectical, tragic, or even theatrical in this thoroughly didactic play.

The same applies to the other two one-act plays of Negri's *Trilogy of Resistance*, *The Bent Man: Didactics of the Rebel* (2005) and *Cithaeron: Didactics of Exodus* (2006). This explains why they have been produced mostly for teaching/academic purposes. It is fair to conclude that "these scripts fall prey to the bourgeois impulses they seek to subvert. [] These are oppressive scripts that want to free us, but can't" (Maxwell 2011). Part of the problem is the age-old question of whether a messianic tragedy is possible. Another part is the very limited interest of the modern Italian stage in tragedy as well as Negri's lack of interest in the theater. Above all, the absence of any dialectical tension leaves the play exposed to sentimental moralism: *Swarm* is not a tragedy of revolutionary decision but a catechism of militant morality.

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