Chapter Seven

The Radical Homiletics of Antonio Negri

What a sublime and, at the same time, sordid vocation this theological discipline has.¹

I close this book with Antonio Negri since he is one of the few that deeply and thoroughly engages me, drawing me back, time and again, to read one more time. It is not just the energetic joy and enthusiasm that suffuses his texts (even the most dense and involved), nor the effort to reconstruct Marxism for our times, but that he has not, like so many, become fixed and opinionated. Instead, he links rigour with a refreshing openness of mind that is always prepared to consider a new position, explore a blockage and enthuse over a discovery. And he has been a militant as few of us will ever be.

In this chapter, my major concern is Negri’s recently translated *The Labor of Job*,² a detailed philosophical exegesis of the ‘marvellous’ biblical book of Job.³ Five features of Negri’s analysis stand out, at least for one trained in that arcane discipline of biblical criticism: radical homiletics, philosophical

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¹ Negri 2009, p. 29.
² Negri 2009. This chapter is a much expanded version of the afterword I wrote for the publication of *The Labor of Job*.
³ Negri and Defourmantelle 2004, p. 157. In offering a careful reading of a biblical book, Negri enacts an older form of freedom – free access to the Bible that was once considered so dangerous by the authorities. The analogous form of freedom in the present is access to knowledge and language, especially by the poor. See Negri and Defourmantelle 2004, p. 63.
commentary, the opposition of *kairós* and *ákairos*, one between measure and immeasure and then the politics of cosmogony. Let me say a little more about each one, as I follow the ropes that moor Negri’s *The Labor of Job* to the Bible and biblical criticism.

At the heart of the book is what I would like to call a radical homiletics. A discipline much neglected these days, homiletics is really the art of connecting a text like the Bible with the realities of everyday-life, moving from the intricacies of textual analysis to the application to life. Negri’s homiletics is radical for two reasons, one political, resting on Marx, and the other textual, reading Job as a pre- eminent document for our time. Job both describes our time and offers a way through the impasse of left action. Further, this book is a philosophical commentary. Caught in the rough ground between two camps – radical philosophy and biblical criticism – it is not conventional biblical criticism, if such a thing actually exists. Negri does not come to the text with all of those unquestioned assumptions, methods and skills that characterise all too many of your garden-variety biblical critics. Is he then a lone philosopher making a foray into biblical analysis? Without a sense of what may be called the ‘mega-text’ of biblical criticism, is he bound to trip up? Not quite, for there is another patchwork-tradition of what may be called philosophical exegesis or commentary. Some texts of the Bible – Genesis 1–11, the letters of Paul, Job – continue to call forth commentary from philosophers and sundry critics of other persuasions. Negri’s text falls in with this group.

Third, Negri broaches the theme of *kairós* and time, Job being a challenge to mechanical, dead and chronological time. At this point, I turn to some other works, especially *Kairós, Alma Venus, Multitudo*,4 where Negri develops his argument for *kairós* in much greater detail. However, I find Negri wanting on *kairós*, mainly for missing the subversive side of *ákairos*. And the reason I do so is that the base-senses of *kairós* and *ákairos* connect with the fourth major theme, namely measure and immeasure, arguably the major organising axis on the commentary on Job. After exploring the permutations of this opposition, moving as it does from negative measure and immeasure to a positive and creative immeasure and measure (in that order), I seek to reshape that tension as one between chaos and order, opting for the former rather than the latter. Political cosmogony, or, more specifically, the political dimensions

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