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TOO POOR FOR MEASURE:
WORKING WITH NEGRI ON POVERTY AND FABULATION

I
The Power of Poverty

The classic question of the Left has been, 'Why did the revolution not take place?' This pessimism is lacking in the work of Antonio Negri, for whom the question is why does constituent power, the power behind every revolution in history, stagnate into the constituted power of the State, the power that reacts against further revolution? Negri's work can be read as an attempt to answer that question, focusing on a critique of the State-form of politics, and to name a way out of stagnation and towards a productive vitality. One such name is poverty and the poor that embody it. In the course of this essay we work with the material of Negri's conception of poverty, because it is radical in its valorization of what, from the perspective of capital, is the embodiment of weakness and lacking in potential.

What is involved in being poor? In order to fully conceptualize poverty, we must describe adequately the actual condition of poverty. At the same time, there are questions and determinations, exceeding this minimum description, capable of being determined only through ontological decisions about the potentialities of specific conditions. The Latin *potentia* denotes the capacity of a being to do something, to become something, to move. For Negri this ontological capacity takes place in conditions of material concreteness. The ontological *potentia* and the concrete specificity are kept consonant by virtue. Such being enacts the ontological *potentia* internal to its specific conditions and way of being through virtuous activity.

How then does Negri's ontology account for the *potentia* and virtue of the material body of the poor? While he has briefly discussed the concept of poverty

once before, a more rigorous elaboration emerges only in his most strictly philosophical work of late, *Kairós, Alma Venus, Multitudo* (KAM). While KAM remains relatively neglected by critical reception, one reviewer has not failed to notice its religious tonalities, particularly insofar as the concept of poverty is central to the text. The reviewer, Malcolm Bull, responds with a simple, sardonic dismissal: 'Negri has written a series of meditations on poverty almost Franciscan in tone.'¹ The analogy is not adulatory, for the implication is that recourse to religious tonalities is an alibi for a faltering political philosophy. But we see it quite differently. For us, poverty, with its religious tonalities, does not evade politics, it stands at its heart. That is not to say that politics must turn to some form of orthodoxy, whether it be "radical" or "generous", but that poverty is a name for the process of *potentia*, which both the State-form of politics and the Orthodox-form of religion attempt to contain and kill.

We aim to work with the material of religion in a way that aims to free its radical aspects for the construction of more powerful (in the sense of *potentia*) ways of thinking and acting. Therefore we stand in opposition to the orthodox theological determination of religion. We call this method of working with religion "non-theology", which is disinterested in the dogmatic content of religious thinking found in theological determination.² It seeks instead to construct something out of religion that is neither religion's friend nor enemy, but its liberation from its own self-enclosure in order that we might begin to believe in this world. Our non-theological approach, in this essay, receives its fundamental orientation from Negri's account of poverty, for this account presents the possibility of giving new, non-theological sense to a purportedly theological concept. Bull's dismissal is to be rejected, then, because it demands that we either simply reject or accept theology, and by doing so fails to address the possibility of a politics that draws on theology yet is not simply theological. However, while we unreservedly stand against Bull's demand, we do believe that Negri's concept of poverty is in need of further elaboration and supplementation.

How do we advance this task of elaboration? We do so, first, by turning to Philip Goodchild's innovative treatment of 'piety'. Negri succeeds in demonstrating the existence of a link between the poor and the immeasurableness of the *to-come*. Yet the nature of this link – that is, the question of how the poor as given and the poor as common name of the *to-come* relate – remains somewhat indeterminate in his work. Goodchild's piety, and particularly his discussion of apocalyptic piety, allows us to navigate beyond Negri's indeterminacy. This is because the chaotic interval of apocalyptic piety, in being given, opens up the *to-come*.

¹ Malcolm Bull, 'You Can't Build a New Society with a Stanley Knife,' *London Review of Books* 23 (19): 2001. [Available online: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n19/bull01_.html]

² Our understanding of non-theology shares much in common with François Laruelle's conception of non-philosophy but is not beholden to it as model. For a fuller, though still incomplete, conception of non-theology differentiated from other forms of political theology see Anthony Paul Smith, "The Judgment of God and the Immeasurable: Political Theology and Organizations of Power" in *Political Theology* (Forthcoming 2010).

If our first supplementation of Negri occurs by way of Goodchild, our second supplementation occurs through an encounter with Henri Bergson's concept of fabulation. Our turning to Bergson, though specifically to his conception of fabulation, may appear controversial to readers familiar with Negri's antipathy towards Bergson. Yet we must note, first, that this antipathy towards Bergson is located more in Negri's rejection of vitalism than in any of the particularities of Bergson's work. Second, Bergson's conception of fabulation is far more original and a clearer working with religion than early conceptions of "imagination," which is always seen as dependent upon reason even if it is ultimately ethical. Bergson's fabulation is one of the most powerful, though neglected, lines of inquiry through religion produced in the 20th Century, and so we are putting it to use here in understanding the religious tonalities of poverty in Negri's philosophy. How, exactly, does Bergson's fabulation advance Negri's poverty? Primarily because the *to-come*, in Negri, lacks a means by which immeasurable *content* would be articulated. There must be some way of enabling the content of this world to achieve an immeasurable quality. This demand is all the more pressing insofar as the immeasurable belongs not to the transcendent but to the immanence of concrete, material existence. Our claim, then, is that fabulation allows us to understand how Negri's poverty can come to bear the particular means to articulate the immeasurable within the fabric of this world.

We therefore seek to demonstrate, in what follows, that the concept of poverty, while in many ways theological, achieves its greatest intensity when approached in a non-theological manner. Such an intensity is lost as long as poverty is apprehended from a purely theological or anti-theological vantage. Poverty, we contend, can engender a novel grasp of the theologico-political relation, but only by way of a non-theological analysis. Such an analysis begins with Negri's own formulation, but it also recognizes the need to elaborate and supplement these formulations through contributions selected from Goodchild and Bergson. If there is a unity to this development, it lies in the consistency of our non-theological analysis. Let us then proceed to this analysis.

II

Poverty as the Subjectivity of the Immeasurable

Negri's philosophy is thoroughly materialist. But the question is what kind of materialist is Negri? He opposes his materialism to transcendence and the logic that such transcendence fosters. In the logic of transcendence, especially the logic of transcendence that calls itself materialist, there is nothing but stratified Power – a theological *dispositif*. In his way Negri is like Diogenes the Cynic, who fostered a cynical materialism in response to the Platonism of his day: he responded to Plato's definition of man as a featherless biped by bringing a plucked fowl to the academic lecture room. During the delivering of a set speech, Diogenes began to eat lupins – taking attention away from the orator and causing him to express feigned surprise that the assembled should be so distracted by the eating of lupins. His origin legend concerned the defacing of coinage or what was used to transcendently express the value of material as a

general equivalent. Thus, rather than allowing philosophers to be concerned abstractly with eternal ideas, Diogenes directed their attention to materiality – the edible lupins and the mortal chicken.³

Negri follows in this tradition when he refuses to see poverty as the lack of wealth. This is because wealth is a generic, quantitative measure. As long as we remain concerned with quantitative measure, we fail to see something that is of much greater value—namely, the qualitative power of poverty. According to Negri:

‘It is not wealth – which is forever a *quantitate signata* – but poverty that has always represented the common name of the human. From Christ to Saint Francis, from the Anabaptists to the Sans-culottes, from the communists to the Third-World militants, the needy, the idiots, the unhappy (i.e. the exploited, the excluded, the oppressed) is they who exist under the sign of the eternal. Their resistance and their struggles have opened the eternal to the immeasurableness of the *to-come*. The teleology and the ethics of materialism have always been related to this naked and powerful community whose name is “poverty”.’⁴

The force, but also the ultimate ambiguity, of Negri’s concept of poverty can be exhibited by two moments of its articulation. The first appears in a text on

³ Alain Badiou has labeled this materialism ‘democratic materialism’. Claiming that it is the dominant ideology of the age, Badiou says that the axiom of democratic materialism is, ‘There are only bodies and language.’ Badiou posits his own materialism, dialectical materialism, as concentrated in the axiom, ‘There are only bodies and language, except that there are truths.’ (See Alain Badiou, *Logiques des Mondes* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 9-17.) How seductive Badiou is being here, for who does not want to be for truth? The seduction continues, for the implicit claim is that his philosophy of materialism opens up to truly revolutionary politics that moves beyond the community and the individual, while the materialism of Negri, and his philosophical allies like Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, is complicit, if not collaborative, in the dominant postmodern and neo-liberal regime. But the logic of Badiou’s dialectical materialism, the materialism of the void, the materialism of contingency, is not so dissimilar from Negri’s. At the heart of both is an affirmation of contingency. Both affirm a contingency of bodies and language, a subject or subjectivity that comes after the event (Badiou), or a more radically open event, *kairos* (Negri), and, despite Badiou’s attempt to make Negri untruthful, both affirm eternal truths. So why, given these similarities, does Badiou draw a distinction? Badiou would want us to wage our struggle at the level of abstraction – a materialism of the void or a materialism of the flesh. While we reject the very terms of debate, Negri’s philosophy could be called something like a materialism of the flesh if the purpose was not to disfigure it and wage a negative campaign against it on the basis of this disfigurement. For the true difference between Badiou’s modern day Plato and Negri’s modern day Diogenes is between *quantia* and *qualia*. While Badiou goes further than St. Paul and subsumes the poor under a universal truth, Negri’s poor *constitute* the truth of the common, which is to give humanity the common name of the poor.

⁴ Antonio Negri, ‘Kairos, Alma Venus, Multitudo’, in *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 195.

Machiavelli from 1992. Machiavelli's Renaissance, according to Negri, was fundamentally 'the rediscovery [...] of the virtue of constructing, of inventing: at the same time it was the discovery of the possibility and the capacity of accumulating.'⁵ But this accumulation, made possible by the virtue or power of construction and invention, can turn against virtue. The corruption of virtue takes place when the aim of accumulation gains precedence over the aim of creation. Or, to put it in terms we will advance later, it takes place when attention is given to the capture and maintenance of wealth, rather than to the construction or creation of what is *to-come*. In the face of this corruption, virtue resists by turning into poverty. Machiavelli here serves as a somewhat counterintuitive example. 'The fact that Machiavelli [...] supports a drastic reduction of needs, Spartan clothing, the struggle against luxury, and so on cannot but surprise us.'⁶ But in fact there is no surprise at all: first, because poverty amounts to freedom from mediatic relation to the given form of accumulation; and second, because poverty frees one for an immeasurable potency—that is, the very virtue of construction and invention. Thus poverty, regardless of its divestment, is always an affirmation of strength. Although it abandons the excess it produces, poverty nonetheless retains its productive potency, and in direct resistance to the mode of accumulation or capture. Through poverty, virtue arms itself with quantitatively smaller but qualitatively immeasurable 'wealth.' Virtue, the capacity to invent and construct, is the source of all wealth, and therefore the being that becomes-poor is the same that produces wealth.

It is not difficult to discern the fit between Negri's poverty and a Marxist ontology, especially when this last emphasizes that labor is always anterior to capital because it is labor, rather than capital, which produces. Whatever wealth is accumulated through capitalization arises from labor. This does not mean that capital cannot command labor to produce, nor does it mean that capital cannot promote an organization of production beneficial to itself. Yet it does mean that there is a potentiality of being, a power of production, that capital cannot invoke. Capital can measure and extract wealth, but it cannot make that which it measures, which we call the immeasurable. Poverty, however, because it resists the wealth measured by capital, provides an approach to the immeasurable. It gives attention to the immeasurable, to a qualitative rather than quantitative wealth. It is in this sense that poverty, or the subjectivity of the poor, marks a break with the given state of affairs.

Let us now turn to Negri's 2000 discussion of poverty in *KAM*.⁷ This later account is largely continuous with the earlier one. He asserts, for example, that poverty is by no means a simple privation of wealth, but is, on the contrary, 'the singular possibility of all wealth.'⁸ It is an affection of, but also an effectuation of, a qualitatively different wealth, the immeasurable. What is novel in this account, however, is the relation he articulates between the immeasurable and time.

⁵ Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*, trans. Maurizio Boscagli (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 76.

⁶ Negri, p. 78.

⁷ 2000 was the year the text was written in Italian.

⁸ Negri, *KAM*, p. 203.

Indeed, it is this relation that allows us to conceive of poverty as both an affection of and an effectuation of the immeasurable.

Let us specify this relation between time and the immeasurable. Negri, we have observed, claims that the poor 'exist under the sign of the eternal.' But this eternity is not an absence of time. Eternity is never without what we might call a productive power, which is the immeasurable. And this immeasurableness is actualized temporally. Time is that which is immeasurable within a given state of affairs, and as such is that which enables a break with that state of affairs. The poor, because they exist under, or are affected by, this immeasurable temporality, are the subjects of the *to-come*. The poor's virtue of invention and construction is then an effectuation of 'the immeasurableness of the *to-come*'—an effectuation capable of changing history. It is for this reason that there can be no simple opposition between temporal immeasurableness and history. In short, affection of time's immeasurableness within the measure of a given historical formation is the condition for the effectuation of a new historical course.

If one follows Negri up to this point, as we do, then one is left with the task of determining the relation between this immeasurable productive power and the activation of its immeasurableness. It is a question of subjectivation: How does the immeasurable advance from a *to-come* to an actuality? This is where one approaches the aforementioned ambiguity of Negri's concept of poverty. One can discern in his account a slightly indeterminate oscillation between the claim that the poor are subjects of the immeasurable *to-come*, and the claim that, in our present biopolitical conjuncture, the poor is already our common name. This can give rise to the notion that the same concept is adequate to both what is given and what is *to-come*. Such a notion would be misbegotten, but, in order to fully dispel it, it becomes necessary to find a way of developing further the subjective passage of poverty that mediates the *to-come* and the body of the given.

Towards forging this way we may supplement Negri's analysis by looking at Goodchild's philosophical analysis of piety. Goodchild argues that 'modes of piety are syntheses of time' where attention is paid to distinct aspects of time and thereby time is distributed in a particular way.⁹ He locates three such pieties (ritual, historical, and apocalyptic), but he is clear that they are rarely practiced in purity and that actual religions will express aspects of other forms of piety even if, for example, the ritual form is dominant. In what follows below we trace the contours of the first two forms of piety, ritual and historical, before turning to a deeper analysis of apocalyptic piety, for this last is the more intensive form and the one that allows us to augment Negri's conception of poverty. Uniting our summary of the three forms of piety is a focus on what each form pays attention to.

Ritual piety pays attention to the divinely given origin of the community, to the source of values that hold the community together, as the resistance "to crisis,

⁹ Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 191

upheaval, discontinuity, excess and uncertainty.”¹⁰ The practice of ritual piety resists the violence of history, the site of chaos as change, by attempting “to repeat, to make present, a perfect past as the source of power and order.”¹¹ While the creation of meaning that arises out of the practice of ritual does provide a resistance to the chaos of history, it is itself precarious. As Goodchild says, “Ritual time is neither labour-time nor lived-time: it is given time.”¹² The perfect past that gives form to the chaos of history cannot arise out of that chaotic history, but must be given by the gods—it must be divine. Thus, when a farmer plants his seed and gives the requisite prayer for a plentiful harvest, the farmer inscribes the chaos underlying agriculture into the perceived source of fertility itself. This sort of piety can easily collapse into pure instrumentality where one demands from the gods, not meaning, but a just, material measure for the ritual performed.¹³ This creates an unbalanced economy, where those who are wealthy have been blessed and continue to grow in their wealth and those who are not wealthy are impious and to be blamed if the entire economy of the community fails.¹⁴ Once this impiety has been righted, through some form of real violence, the balance is restored and the community subsists on the blood offering of the impious. In short, ritual piety inscribes suffering, the experience of the chaos of history, within the never ending cycle of the economy of the community.

Historical piety puts limits to the exchange by giving attention, not to the past, but to the future and the consummation of the chaos of history. It marks the final outcome or reward for one’s ethical life, not in this life as wealth accumulated in the community, but at the end of this life as wealth accumulated in heaven as an individual before God. In a society orientated around a perfect past through the practice of ritual piety one’s success “may be ensured in practice by custom or morality,” but in the practice of historical piety “success appears to be gratuitous [...] if one is honest and becomes wealthy, this goes against rational expectations of the superior value of cheating.”¹⁵ Here one does not hope in the immediacy of the gods, but waits upon the reward promised to come in the future by God. Here the past is not given attention to, but rather it is sacrificed “so that God alone will be the mediator between one’s conduct and its outcome” in the future.¹⁶ Thus historical piety protects itself from the chaos of history, not by inscribing that chaos in its origin, but by looking to the final eschatological consummation of that chaos in the coming of God. One hopes for their reward in the future and creates an ethical economy based on credit rather than accumulated wealth. Both forms of piety resist the chaos of history by splitting time itself: ritual piety by giving attention to the perfect origin in the past and historical piety by giving attention to the future reward to come. These two modes of piety split experience – ritual piety splits it into the sacred and the profane and historical piety splits it into one’s finite ethical conduct and the

¹⁰ Goodchild, p. 183.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Goodchild, p. 184.

¹³ Goodchild, p. 185.

¹⁴ Goodchild, p. 186.

¹⁵ Goodchild, p. 188.

¹⁶ Goodchild, p. 190.

infinite outcome of that conduct. It is the aporia of deciding for the past or the future, for the splits in experience they engender, that opens up our analysis of apocalyptic piety.

Apocalyptic piety synthesizes the times of the former two: the sacred no longer merely repeats itself as if it were already given only to be given again and again, rather it comes to live a historical life; whereas historical life is connected back to the sacred. Apocalyptic piety does not then split human experience, it pays attention to the split *of* human experience. Goodchild calls this split the chaotic interval, which is the experience of in-between moments. It is the experience of time in its immeasurableness, for while the interval is between moments, it cannot be measured by these moments, or by their relation. The body of the poor, stripped of the wealth that quantifies and thus homologizes moments, is exposed to this split in experience, to the chaotic interval. To give attention to this split is to become-poor. It is important to note that this chaotic interval of experience is also the splitting of a given state-of-affairs by the immeasurableness of the *to-come*. For this reason, when apocalyptic piety gives attention to the chaotic interval in experience, it also opens the body of the poor to the immeasurable *to-come*.

This helps us to understand the constitution of the poor as both *to-come* and already the common name of humanity: the chaotic interval is given in the experience of poverty—an experience that is in principle available to all of humanity, or common to humanity—but because of the nature of the chaotic interval, what is thus given immediately belongs to the immeasurableness of the *to-come*. In the historical religions this chaotic interval is evidenced by apocalyptic awareness – that is, the expectation that the Messiah will come but has not yet come. Or that Enlightenment will come but has not yet come. Or that the revolution will be successful, but has not yet been successful. At the same time, apocalyptic piety is not to be confused with eschatological completion, for the apocalypse names a certain dystopia, a common language of poverty.¹⁷ The horror of apocalypse, that a child is beaten, an old woman dies alone, a homosexual is excluded from seeing his lover as he lays dying, a people has been subjected to genocide – all of this speaks to the chaotic interval, for even if the Messiah comes, Enlightenment is found, or the revolution realizes itself, the horror will have already happened.¹⁸

The decision of the poor-as-common-name to go on living in the face of this suffering evidences a kind of apocalyptic piety to the poor-as-*to-come*. And the poor person's suffering is not reducible to pain, for it is from within this suffering that the poor person produces the commons. Suffering names a decision to 'stand with'; suffering is essentially an act of the commons. Suffering then names another technology, and a more immediate one, of the praxis and desire of the commons – what Negri calls love.

¹⁷ cf. Negri, *KAM*, p. 236.

¹⁸ Cf. Goodchild, p. 212.

This technology of love and suffering, or the awareness of that suffering (apocalyptic piety), is thus the immanent mediation of the poor-as-common-name and the poor-as-*to-come*. We say immanent mediation because the poor person is both already constituted as poor and constitutive via its production of the *to-come*, and therefore has no need for mediation as understood by way of some wholly other transcendent. The failure to see that suffering is technology of production amongst the poor is to repeat one of the greatest evils of Christian philosophy – that the person is the object and not the subject of love. The poor includes at varying levels of potency every human being born naked into the world. Indeed, Negri says, ‘He who is born is a naked and poor being.’¹⁹ In this sense, life itself rises forth as production by the poor. When we grasp poverty under the name of apocalyptic piety we see the reality of Negri’s statement that ‘The poor person is then not someone constituted by pain, but is *in reality* the biopolitical subject. [...] he is the naked eternity of the power of being.’²⁰ In the body of the poor the common name and the *to-come* are present as awareness of suffering, as awareness of the chaotic interval of expectation and present reality, and as generative power capable of innovating being itself.

Apocalyptic piety, by giving attention to the chaotic interval, provides a creative technology of poverty’s suffering and love. Here we find the poor as subjective motor of a teleology of the *to-come* – but let us qualify this teleology. First, it is not the sort of teleology that guarantees its outcome. The virtue of poverty is to bring forth something immeasurable within a given state-of-affairs by splitting that state – but what follows from this splitting is contingent upon the production of the poor. So the poor pose a problem exceeding the state-of-affairs, but the resolution of this excess is not guaranteed. Second, it is not the sort of teleology that would make up for previous sufferings – as we have said, the *to-come* is not a utopia, but rather rises on the back of a dystopia. This notion of dystopia can be taken further than Negri does in his text.

For Negri, dystopia is opposed to a utopia in which the future is fully determined. The dystopic *to-come*, however, remains empty, and projects the power of innovation into that void.²¹ For dystopia to fully be a virtue of poverty, it must be placed in conjunction with an account of fabulation. Dystopia must not amount to a mere negation of utopia. The apocalyptic split or tear in experience is certainly irreducible to a utopic redemption. Yet it is equally certain that apocalypse is not the opposite of utopia. Negri affirms dystopia primarily in order to separate himself from utopia, with all of the organic and teleological connotations it entails. Whereas utopia seems to invoke hopes of resolution and fulfillment, dystopia does not attempt to resolve suffering—to give it the “just” measure—so much as it attempts to hold open the immeasurable. The split within experience is intrinsically open, and it is up to apocalyptic piety to attend to this essential splitting or open interval. One could say that, while dystopia opens the chaotic interval beyond any utopic assurance, apocalyptic piety gives

¹⁹ Negri, p. 195.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Negri, p. 236.

attention to this chaotic interval, it makes thought and practice revolve around this chaotic tear. But this is where fabulation becomes important: if apocalyptic piety gives attention to the split within experience, then it is fabulation that produces on the basis of this attention, and that weaves a determinative fabric out of the interval.

III

Fabulating the Immeasurable

The provenance of this concept of fabulation lies in Henri Bergson's early-twentieth century work, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. He aims, in this text, to describe the origin of religion, and he does so by way of the 'myth-making' faculty, the enactment of which is fabulation.²² The novelty of this concept lies in its capacity to provide an autonomous faculty for the production of religion, for its 'superstitions,' its myths and fables. These latter are not epiphenomena or errors of a rational faculty. On the contrary, they are the products of a faculty that is distinct from that of reason. Indeed, the relation between fabulation and reason is in many ways complementary. At base, the complementarity is as follows: reason will often diagnose a situation as extremely dire, the conclusion then being that one's desires and hopes are highly improbable, to the point of becoming groundless and irrational; fabulation is able, in the face of such a scenario, to produce images that oppose reason's idea about the situation. In this sense, fabulation is not a privation of reason, but rather a kind of intelligence distinct from reason. It is autonomous from, and not derived from, reason. Fabulation produces images which ground a hope that reason's ideas tend to destroy. When we understand religion within the terms of fabulation, we can grasp the aim of Bergson's claim that 'religion is then a defensive reaction of nature against the dissolvent power of intelligence.'²³ But again, this is not to see religion as a sort of alibi, for religion belongs to a real power of production, to the faculty which fabulates. Fabulation is not a mere fantasy deprived of intelligence, it is a kind of intelligence irreducible to reason. It is thus truly able 'to set up intelligence against intelligence.'²⁴

We wish, in order to pursue the reality of the capacity for fabulation, to link its production to the immeasurable, to the power of time. The immeasurable, we have said, belongs to the power of time. It is this temporal power that cannot be measured in terms of the given state-of-affairs, even as we already find ourselves in a given state-of-affairs. How, then, is time's immeasurableness – the power of the *to-come* – to be accessed, within the given coordinates? We accede to time's immeasurableness by apocalyptic piety. The immeasurable excess to given measure is found not above the given, but within the given – more precisely, within the tearing or splitting of the given. Apocalyptic piety demands attention to this split, but fabulation demands that we produce in virtue of time's

²² Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Brereton with the assistance of W. Horsfall Carter (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), p. 108.

²³ Bergson, p. 122.

²⁴ Bergson, p. 129.

immeasurableness, which is found in this split. The reality of fabulation is then said not only in terms of a subjective capacity, but also in terms of a temporal power. Fabulation finds its 'objective' character in time's immeasurableness, which is immeasurable even to reason. In this way, fabulation latches on to something that reason, by virtue of its representational character, cannot grasp. Against ideas that rationally represent the given, measurable state-of-affairs, fabulation produces images that aim to give content to that which is immeasurable within this state-of-affairs.

Of course, we must caution against the notion that fabulation somehow licenses ignorance of the given. For instance, when poverty and suffering are given, fabulation does not deny the reality of poverty and suffering. It does something much less, but also much more: it seeks to give determination to a power to move beyond poverty and suffering, or really, to a power – a virtue – found within the experience of poverty and suffering. Indeed, the teleology of the poor-as-common-name is inseparable from the power of fabulation. For this teleology does not make sense of suffering, as if it were providential. It does, however, fabulate the *to-come* from the vantage of poverty and suffering. We find, in fabulation, a passage between the material body of the poor and the power of the *to-come* – and it is in this passage that we can locate the poor's production of the future. Fabulation tells the story of suffering, or of the chaotic interval. It does not turn away from suffering, but neither does it attempt to give a purely empirical account of suffering. It makes a path from the given state-of-affairs to the future by telling simultaneously the story of suffering and the story of the *to-come*. The fable conceives the reality of suffering, but its concept gives rise to another reality. It provides a link between the suffering body of the poor and the immeasurableness of the *to-come* because, on one hand, it goes beyond the empirical fact of suffering into time's immeasurableness, and, on the other, it gives consistency to the promise of the *to-come*. The power of time, the *to-come*, is a fabulation whenever it is given content.

It is worth noting that, for Bergson, fabulation's relation to content, to images, destined it for the lower level of the implicit hierarchy within his two sources of religion. The higher level is inhabited by 'dynamic' religion, which somewhat iconoclastically liberates itself from myths, fables, and images and achieves a mystical (an imageless, and even wordless) contact with the divine. While Bergson does indeed give autonomy to fabulation – which belongs, on the contrary, to 'static' religion – he still denigrates it, at least relatively. For us, however, this hierarchy must be melted down and recast. Why must the 'creative energy' derived from sight of 'the very essence of God' and the production of images and fables be mutually exclusive?²⁵ Bergson's creative energy of the divine, which we have approached in terms of time's immeasurableness, need not be inversely proportional with determinative content. Quite to the contrary, it seems that the failure of a divine power to take hold in this world of ours lies precisely in the failure to give divine power content, to give it temporally innovative determination. Against Bergson's incipient iconoclasm, which sees

²⁵ Bergson, p. 254.

fabulation as a congestion of the divine, we would call for fables capable of becoming immanent icons of the divine.

One instance in which time's immeasurableness is given content – in other words, one instance of fabulation – can be found elsewhere in Negri's work (though Negri himself in no way designates this as a fable). In a text on the biblical book of Job, Negri retells this religious fable with a focus on the relation between Job's suffering, theodicies which claim to make sense of this suffering, and Job's fabulation of the Messiah.

Job relates to God just as the poor relate to accumulated wealth. In each coupling, the former refuses to be measured in the terms provided by the latter. Just as the poor refuse to see themselves as lacking in wealth, and instead see themselves as the power to produce wealth, so Job refuses to see his suffering as a failure to obey God, and instead sees himself as capable of generating a new kind of piety and a new kind of religious production. In each case, the measure of mediation is refused and the immeasurable is affirmed. In the case of Job, the measure of mediation is found in a theodicy, which is proposed by his interlocutors, his 'friends,' who claim that there must be some kind of reason for his suffering. This theodicy finds its measure in the justice of God, and thus attributes Job's suffering to his injustice before God. Job's grandeur, however, lies in his refusal of such a measured reason. There is no measure, and in this sense no reason, for Job's suffering. There is only the immeasurable. It is on the basis of the immeasurable that Job unveils his antagonism towards such a God. While this antagonism provides the opening for the innovation of life, it is not without its price, for his suffering, the pain in his flesh, perdures. As Negri says, 'Job protested against measure and he suffered from the incommensurability of life.'²⁶

It is in this moment, when Job throws off the measure of theodicy yet is thus thrown back on the immeasurableness of his pain, that we see his apocalyptic piety. He gives attention not to some transcendent meaning by which he is supposed to measure his pain, but rather to the reality, the excess and immeasurableness, of his pain. Of course, precisely because this pain is immeasurable, because it is the split within his experience, his attention to it provides a passage to openness. Yet, at least at this point, there is nothing more and nothing less than this openness, this tearing open of experience.

There is nobility enough in this apocalyptic piety, but there is more within the fable of Job – indeed, this 'more' is his own fabulation. Job's rejection of theodicy, of the God of measure, does not lead to an oppositional atheism. It does lead to a dystopia, but this dystopia itself leads to fabulation. Job fabulates the Messiah – that is, he opposes God, but constructs a new divinity on the basis of a piety to the immeasurable. As Negri notes, 'The idea of the Messiah is that of an attempt

²⁶ Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, Forthcoming 2009), p. 6. The authors thank Matteo Mandarini for sharing a working draft of the forthcoming English translation of the book. Page numbers refer to the unpublished manuscript.

to experience the relationship of man to God outside all determination, outside all teleology.²⁷ We would add two clarifications: first, it is a relationship outside determination insofar as determination is given by measure, but it is also the production of a new determination, on the basis of the immeasurable; second, it is outside teleology insofar as the telos is already measured, but it is also the production of a new, 'auto'-teleology grounded in temporal creation.

The idea of the Messiah is found preeminently when, amidst the simultaneous force of his suffering and his antagonism towards God, Job declares: 'I know that my redeemer liveth [...] and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God (Job 19: 25-26).'²⁸ What is the nature of this God that Job will see? It is not the God of measure, but rather a new divinity, a divinity produced from within the split of his experience, within his suffering. Job calls forth the vision of God not through an ascent beyond his body, but through an affirmation of his body – 'in my flesh' – the very same body that suffers, the body that 'worms destroy.' This redeemer, the Messiah, exists within – furthermore, is generated by and seen through – Job's immeasurable pain.

Negri calls the Messiah an 'idea,' but in fact it is more precisely an image. It is something which is *seen* by Job, who fabulates the image. As Bergson said, fabulation supersedes reason's measured representation, the ideas, of a hopeless scenario. As we added, fabulation does this by drawing on the immeasurable, making an image of it and giving content to it. It is in this sense that Job fabulates the Messiah. His particular fabulation arises within the poverty of his existence, but within this pain he gives content to the *to-come*. Job opposes the theodical God for whom, as Negri puts it, 'Time becomes a form of being,' instead of 'a force constitutive of being'²⁹ (as it should be), and instead fabulates a new divinity in virtue of time's excess, found in the immeasurable pain of his flesh. Job's Messiah is called forth by 'the concreteness of time, pain declares it implacably.'³⁰

The religious fable of Job is of extreme value because it circulates around Job's own act of fabulation. It is a fable that witnesses to the power of fabulation. According to Bergson, 'religion is a defensive reaction of nature against the representation, by intelligence, of the inevitability of death.'³¹ Certainly this is the case with Job, who stands amidst the loss of his loved ones and the pains of his own body, yet still declares the power of life. But Bergson fails to emphasize the affirmative and creative – the not simply 'defensive' – character of fabulation. Job's situation and affirmative response exemplifies a passage for all of humanity. Life, Negri claims, 'is dominated by the great forces of destruction and death. But man reorganizes himself so as to resist this disease. Creation is the going beyond death. Creation is the content of the vision of God. Creation is the

²⁷ Negri, p. 125

²⁸ Following Mandarini's translation all quotations from Job come from the King James Version of the Bible.

²⁹ Negri, p. 149.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Bergson, p. 131.

meaning of life.’³² And Job creates this vision of God through fabulation. Furthermore, this fabulation is made possible because of his apocalyptic piety, wherein he gives attention not to theodicy’s measure but to the immeasurable poverty of his suffering flesh. He sees his impoverished flesh, but in doing so he sees the power of the divine. Apocalyptic piety develops sight, and sight develops power. Seeing here does not mean to see an object, rather it is by seeing that one creates new objects. As Negri remarks, “‘To see’ is an act,’ it ‘renders life powerful. It does not activate power [...] but makes power powerful’ and accumulates action’s ‘potential energy.’”³³

IV

Poverty as Novel Theologico-Political Relation

For those interested in the political and intellectual path of Negri’s philosophy the question of poverty must become central. It is from poverty that Negri has begun to answer the question of why the revolution of constitutive power stratifies into constituted power. Contrary to Bull’s polemic, Negri turns to the resources found in the history of religion and theology because it is here that humanity has most clearly and creatively expressed its real suffering under the conditions of poverty. Towards the task of elaboration and supplementing Negri’s philosophy we have sketched out schematically, and from a non-theological vantage, some further tools and notions of and for analysis – namely the notion of the chaotic interval, the piety thereof, and technology of fabulation. Perhaps more importantly than understanding Negri’s philosophy, in our contemporary situation, where we find a rapid and apparently unceasing impoverishment of the globe, where poverty emerges as a globally common condition, the conception of an ontology of poverty becomes increasingly urgent. One cannot begin to think politically about this contemporary situation without thinking about an ontology of poverty. Such an ontology, in our mind, requires – indeed, it revolves around – concepts such as the immeasurability of time, apocalyptic piety, and fabulation. The religious character of these concepts does not call for their delimitation, in favor of a post-religious politics. On the contrary, it calls for a renewed, non-theological conception of the relation between the theological and the political beyond its current, inadequate forms and towards the production of a new theologico-political fable.

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³² Negri, p. 166.

³³ Negri, p. 169. Some readers may have noticed that we have implicated the vision of God as the content of the process of creation and then rendered this vision of God an effect of a particular creation. In other words it may appear as if we have rendered creation an effect of itself. We have, in fact, done this very thing by following Negri’s immanent ontological formulations where there is a given vision of God that is nevertheless not “merely given” and that is immeasurably given in the creature’s creation of creation (Job’s creation of the vision of God in the example above). In short, the creature is immanent as cause and effect to the vision of God (or what is called elsewhere the arrow of time) and not merely subject to it.

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