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For Toni. An early and very personal remembrance

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It is difficult to write about Toni Negri on the day he died. At least it is difficult for me. Too many images crowd into my mind: the vacations we took together, the trips to Latin America, endless meetings and discussions, but also the first readings of his books, Il dominio e il sabotaggio of course and then Dall'operaio massa all'operaio sociale, just after April 7, 1979. And I remember that day well, when I learned from the television after returning home from school that the leader of the Red Brigades had finally been arrested. It is well known that of what was presented as the "Calogero theorem" nothing remained standing after the trials. What remained, however, were broken lives and the endless years of pre-trial detention, which Toni shared with hundreds of his comrades and companions.

I would like here to sketch an initial portrait of Toni, very personal and certainly entirely partial. I will do so by highlighting what at least in my eyes defined his singularity, while distinguishing him from many radical intellectuals I have known over the years in

different parts of the world. It will suffice for now to mention two aspects of his person and life that have always struck me.

The first is his inexhaustible intellectual and political curiosity, which, if that is possible, has even grown over the years. It is certainly normal for the opposite to happen, for those in particular who have significant experience and a respectable intellectual scope of production behind them to become complacent in managing what they have accumulated over time. With Toni this has never happened; rather the opposite is true. Curiosity, the desire to know, the wish to learn the new accompanied him until the last days of his life. And if anything, he highlighted the limitations of his own work, spurring friends and comrades not to stop, to go beyond established assumptions and paradigms. Whether talking about digital platforms, mass migration, or global disorder Toni was never satisfied with what he was told (or what he read), he always wanted to understand better and more.

The second aspect consists of his political passion, which was also unquenchable. After Empire, in particular, invitations to prestigious universities and institutes around the world were uncountable, and there was no shortage of honors. Toni looked at the latter now with annoyance, now with irony, while he certainly did not disdain confrontation in academic circles. But what really captured him was the possibility of encountering real movements: then, the very expression on his face and the tone of his voice would change - signaling that he was serious about it. Seeing Toni, long past his eighties, sit in cold rooms in social centers and discuss for hours the new forms taken by the class struggle is an experience that I certainly did not have alone. It was normal for him: it does not seem to me to be normal for many intellectuals of his stature.

After all, the two things I mentioned are but two aspects of the same desire that Toni defined as communist. What I called curiosity was nothing more than a tension to understand the world in order to transform it, starting with the identification of the tendencies that run through it, the antagonisms that mark it, and the subjectivities that are formed in and against regimes of exploitation. And every occasion of encounter with real movements was for him at the same time an occasion of knowledge production. Forged in the workers' struggles of the 1960s, this political nature of Toni's was refined on the axis defined by the works of Machiavelli, Spinoza and Marx, only to be continually renewed and enriched in the confrontation with the movements of the last fifty years. It seems to me that, what he would have called in his classicality the entirely political ontology of the life he lived is one of Toni's most precious legacies.

Concluding the third volume of his autobiography (Storia di un comunista), Toni spoke serenely of his death. He was less serene, however, about a world in which he saw the resurgence of fascism. He commented, «We must rebel. We must resist. My life is fading, and fighting after 80 becomes difficult. But what is left of my soul leads me to this decision.» Reconnecting ideally with many generations of virtuous men and women who had preceded him in the «art of subversion and liberation», he did not forget-with the optimism of reason that always characterized him-to mention «those who will follow.» Here is unveiled, in this art, Toni's political ontology: we will treasure it, we will continue to practice it.

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