

## Book Review

**Massimo Modonesi**, *Subalternity, Antagonism, Autonomy: Constructing the Political Subject*, New York: Pluto Press, 2014, pp. 208.

The contemporary scholarship in social science in India is debating on the possible configuralities of subaltern politics, whether it has run its course, therefore exhausted its radical scope or whether the emergent differential paradigms of governmentality have created its own coercive hegemony to constitute new domains of exclusion and subalternization. There is this hunch that all seminal tools of progressive anti-imperial politics have completely given in to bourgeois democratic passivity that only encourages politics of identities and sectarian interest within the fold of governmentality apparatuses. So the discourse of politics within India is now imagined along two serialities of organized/bounded, state-centric protests by range of parliamentarian parties and non-party organisations and the unbounded affiliational politics devoid of prefigured leadership and ideology, that petition before the State to persuade and demand rights and entitlements. Significantly, the entire spectrum of politics that emerges between these two axial poles is averse to ideals of ideology politics that calls for radical and transformative change. Within this widespread perception of pessimism/defeatism that has been further bolstered by the corporate-driven media houses and the extremely depoliticised civil society, this new book, *Subalternity, Antagonism, Autonomy: Constructing the Political Subject* written by Massimo Modonesi and translated by Adriana V. Rendon Garrido and Philip Roberts comes as a refreshing and timely contribution to restore some radicalism to the idea of political. The book in nutshell opens up new vistas for antagonistic and progressive politics, especially in the aftermath of the Zapatista uprising, the French strikes and the anti-globalization protests in Seattle. One can add the Occupy Wall Street, London Riot and closer home, the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement in that league of dissents across the globe. If these resistant multitudes are taken into consideration, something that this book intends to argue about, a new panorama of political based on fundamental demands of social justice and emancipation can be glimpsed unfolding. This theoretical engagement by Modonesi, one who is a known name within the Latin American critical scholarship, is directed after finding new ideological and epistemological coordinates that can refashion the radical politics in countries where the enchantment of constitutional democracy with the hegemonic working of capital have completely snuffed out all possibilities of alternative politics. What are the constituents/modalities of this neo-subaltern politics that can resist this absolute hegemony of the finance capital? How can the neo-subaltern counteract the tremendous amnesia regarding question of

equality and justice among the upwardly mobile classes that has blocked all alternatives and dialectics?

Modonesi takes up this cudgel to define a possible trajectory of ideology politics as he explains, *Subalternity, antagonism and autonomy are born then as 'precepts', instruments of struggle, conceptual tools that, to the extent they seek to understand the processes of political subjectivation* (p.133). Modonesi views these three discrete analytical tools, working both diachronically and synchronically, as constituting the neo-radical subjectivity in the contemporary world. He in a way burrowed through the critical reservoirs of neo-Marxian thinkers like, Antonio Gramsci (whom he refers to as an exemplar of 'intelligence of pessimism'), Antonio Negri (whom he calls 'Toni' and then applauds as 'intelligence of optimism'), Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, as three prime interpreters of radical subjectivity, and John Holloway (who has incidentally written the foreword), Rosa Luxemburg, E.P. Thompson, Henry Lefebvre, Harry Cleaver, Ernst Bloch and others in passing to argue his central thesis: Subalternity, Antagonism, and Autonomy are three connecting principles that can give birth to a radical subjectivity in this age of *Empire*. All these three critical coordinates are detached from the original idea of proletariat in the Marxian lexicon to mean how in a non-working class set-up, politics can organize around ideals of emancipation and autonomy. In fact, the whole pattern of capitalism, the nature of industrial labor and the potential collective imaginaries have undergone huge tectonic shifts in the post-industrial societies. This book measures these changes and shows how resistant movements across France, Italy, Hungary, Denmark and Latin America are throwing up newer coordinates and language of dissents.

The book has four chapters excluding a much focused introduction which foreshadows the central argument of the book and an explanatory afterword, which is added in the English translation. If the first chapter deals with the Gramscian idea of Subalternity, the succeeding two chapters are premised on Negri's works to theorise the agency of the antagonist subject and the idea of autonomy in works of Castoriadis and Lefort respectively. The fourth chapter is a kind of summation of the points to show how each of these ideas anticipate the other to re-radicalize politics with a coherent logic. So, if the idea of being the subaltern in Gramsci means a specific type of subjectivity formed within a structure of domination with moments of subordination and insubordination, the word antagonism, as Negri has pointed out, refers to a recurrent mode of politics of struggle and confrontation. Negrian antagonistic subject is born in a condition of subordination and hence is saddled with the political expediency of confronting and struggling with the prospective futuristic dream of emancipation. The idea of 'autonomy' in Castoriadis and Lefort is aimed after that prospect for rejection and emancipation. The idea is to reject the productive chain of the Capitalist economy to then create a space of beyond the capital or post-capital. For them, the 'autonomy' is simultaneously the means and the end

of politics to give birth to agential subjectivities. However, according to Modonesi, Lefort is more prolific than Castoriadis in reposing faith in the discourse of autonomy (p.104-110). Lefortian hypothesis shares a close proximity with the Luxemburgian mass line of opposing the party centrality. Therefore, autonomy in Lefortian schema of things is predicated around an antagonistic space of protest of the mass.

In words of Modonesi, all these discrete forms, which he calls *homologous categories*, share the same origination in the *Marxian roots* (p.135). But the difference that they all share lies in their emphasis on political subjectivation. Modonesi with quotes from *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* proves that how instrumentally these notions figure in the whole Marxian dialectic. Autonomy and antagonism were postulated as two stages in establishing the class independence in the impending communist society. However, both Negri in works such as *Empire*, *Multitude*, *Labor of Dionysus*, *Marx Beyond Marx*, and Castoriadis in his essays in the magazine *Socialism or Barbarism* see antagonism and autonomy respectively as constituting the radical subjectivity which then reconstructs the structure. There are several overlaps between autonomy and antagonism in the Marxian literature. However, antagonism is seen by Modonesi as the most important axiom to form the constituent singular subjectivities. These constituent subjectivities then lead to Negrian *multitude*. *Multitude* both sustains and contests the *Empire* which is deterritorialised and dispersed. Modonesi counts this multitude of singular subjectivities as the most essential political subjectivity that in place of the subalternity kicks off the process of insubordination and liberation (p.128). In fact, by drawing upon Spinozian notion of power over/power against/power to, Modonesi draws his conclusion that subalternity, antagonism, autonomy performs these three acts of power-over, where by the power is exerted over the subaltern, power-against, whereby the hegemonic power is challenged and confronted, and the power-to, whereby the power is acquired to establish the autonomy. In fact, Modonesi also detects an instability in the notion of autonomy as it also means a poetic temporal frame of 'not yet', a futural possibility of exploring relative autonomous conditions.

There are several subtle differences between these analytical categories that Modonesi carefully deals with in constituting this linkage between three concepts that were born of three distinct backgrounds. If the Gramsci's radical, worker-based politics and the subsequent imprisonment inspired his idea of hegemony and the subaltern, for Negri the immediate context was the Workerist movement in Italy in 1970-80. Castoriadis derived his notion from the French *autogestion movements* in the aftermath of the 1968's student agitation which gradually involved factory workers and formed autonomous groups. The entire *Socialism or Barbarism* group in Italy also worked as inspiration for Lefort and Castoriadis to experiment with the political imaginary. These contexts provide us an insight into the connectivity between material uprisings and the theoretical

abstractions. In fact this book poses an important challenge before the social scientists in India that whether after similar uprisings in Haripur, Nandigram, Kalinganagar, Srikakulam, Polavaram, Kudankulan, Kandhamal, a new politico-theoretic paradigm can be identified, to imagine a constituent antagonistic politics in Indian realities. The book ends with references to the recent political developments in Latin America and how the three Gramscian ideas of *passive revolution*, *transformismo*, and *Caesarism* are playing out in the Latin American left politics, which again helps us to assess similar developments back home. Be it in the context of the emergence of Aam Admi Party or the National Advisory Council along with the rise of Civil Society movements in cities like Kolkata, Mumbai and Delhi, such Gramscian coordinates can facilitate newer analysis and understanding.

At the end, this theoretical engagement by Modonesi is undoubtedly providing a much-needed manual on how to revalidate some of the precepts of radical politics in an increasingly post-political milieu. But, having said this, there is no gainsaying of the fact that the book is not liberated from the Euro-centricism and its vantage. Even though it brings in the Latin American political scenario almost at the fag-end, the thesis of the book tends to be grand in scope so that it can correspond to all conditions of subjugation and subordination. The book rightly criticized the Subaltern Studies Group in India in confusing the difference between spontaneity and consciousness in the Gramscian thinking, but falls short of realizing how the non-European social structures/political practices can unravel many out-of-the-beaten-track coordinates of dissident politics. One can cite the notion of *world of the third* or *margin of margin* as two such analytical categories that in many ways mark definite departures from the European understanding of the political.