

Empire and Multitude

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Post-Imperialist Empire or Renewed Expansion of Imperialism?

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have chosen to call the current global system “Empire.”* Their choice of that term is intended to distinguish its essential constituent characteristics from those that define “imperialism.” Imperialism in this definition is reduced to its strictly political dimension, i.e., the extension of the formal power of a state beyond its own borders, thereby confusing imperialism with colonialism. Colonialism therefore no longer exists, neither does imperialism. This hollow proposition panders to the common American ideological discourse according to which the United States, in contrast to the European states, never aspired to form a colonial empire for its own benefit and thus could never have been “imperialist” (and thus is not today anymore than yesterday, as Bush reminds us). The historical materialist tradition proposes a very different analysis of the modern world, centered on identification of the requirements for the accumulation of capital, particularly of its dominant segments. Taken to the global level, this analysis thus makes it possible to discover the mechanisms that produce the polarization of wealth and power and construct the political economy of imperialism.

*Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) and *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004). These authors do not directly take up a great number of fundamental issues of “what is new” in capitalism, such as those concerning “cognitive” or financial capitalism, the organization of work and production, and geopolitics. I want to make clear that I do not reproach them for that, but only for having drawn unwarranted conclusions in support of their ideas from these unexamined new developments. Very different readings of the transformations in question exist that I will discuss on other occasions. *Empire* was written before September 11, 2001, which does not justify in any way Hardt and Negri’s acceptance of Washington’s vulgar propaganda discourse, claiming that it intervenes only at popular request, for humanitarian reasons, for the defense of democracy—without the least consideration of self-serving material interests!

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Hardt and Negri studiously ignore every analysis that has been written in this regard, not only by Marxists but also by other schools of political economy. Instead, they take up the legalism of a Maurice Duverger or the vulgar political science of Anglo-Saxon empiricism. Thus "imperialism" becomes a common characteristic shared across space and time by various "Empires," such as the Roman, Ottoman, British or French colonial, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Soviet. The inevitable collapse of these empires is related to "analogous causes." This is much closer to a superficial journalism than to any serious reading of history. But again, they pander to the current fashion (after "the fall of the Berlin Wall").

There is no question that the evolution of capitalism and the world system in the course of the last twenty years has involved qualitative transformations in all areas. It is another thing to subscribe to the dominant discourse according to which the "scientific and technological" revolution will, by itself, produce forms of economic and political management of the planet that "surpass" those associated, until recently, with the defense of "national interests" and, further, that this evolution would be "positive." This discourse proceeds on the basis of serious simplifications. The dominant segments of capital indeed operate in the transnational space of world capitalism, but control of these segments remains in the hands of financial groups still strongly "national" (i.e., based in the United States or Great Britain or Germany, but not yet in a "Europe" that does not exist as such on this level). Moreover, the economic reproduction of the system is, today as yesterday, unthinkable without the parallel implementation of the "politics" that modulate its variants. The capitalist economy does not exist without a "state," except in the ideological and empty vulgate of liberalism. There is still no transnational, "world" state. The true questions, evaded by the dominant discourse of globalization, concern the contradictions between the logics of the globalized accumulation of central capitalism's dominant segments (the "oligopolies") and those governing the "politics" of the system.

Hardt and Negri's system, presented under the pleasant-sounding term "Empire," proceeds, then, from the naïve vision of globalization offered by the dominant discourse. In this vision, transnationalization has already abolished imperialism (and imperialism in conflict), replacing it with a system in which the center is both nowhere and everywhere. The center/periphery opposition (that defines the imperialist relation) is already "surpassed." Hardt and Negri here take up the commonplace discourse in which, since there is a "first world" of "wealth"

in the “third world” and a “third world” of poverty in the first, there is no point in opposing the first and third worlds to each other. Certainly there are wealthy and poor in India, just as in the United States, since we all still live in class divided societies integrated into world capitalism. Does that mean that the social formations of India and the United States are identical? Does the distinction between the active role of some in shaping the world and the passive role of others, who can only “adjust” to the requirements of the globalized system, have no meaning? In reality, this distinction is more pertinent today than ever. In the earlier phase of contemporary history (1945–1980), the relations of force between the imperialist countries and the dominated countries were such that the “development” of the peripheries was on the agenda, leaving open the possibility for the latter to assert themselves as active agents in the transformation of the world. Today these relations have changed dramatically in favor of dominant capital. The discourse of development has disappeared and been replaced by that of “adjustment.” In other words, the current world system (the “Empire”) is not less imperialist but more imperialist than its predecessor!

Hardt and Negri would have realized this if they had only taken note of what the representatives of dominant capital have written. As incredible as it may appear, they have not done that at all. However, all major parts of the U.S. establishment (Democrats and Republicans) make no secret of the objectives of their plan: to monopolize access to the planet’s natural resources in order to continue their wasteful mode of life, even if this is to the detriment of other peoples; to prevent any large or mid-sized power from becoming a competitor capable of resisting Washington’s orders; and to achieve these aims by military control of the planet.

Hardt and Negri have simply taken up the current discourse in which, “nationalism” and “communism” having been definitively defeated, the return of a globalized liberalism constitutes objective progress. The “insufficiencies” of the system, if there are any, can only be corrected from within the logic of the system itself and not by combating it. Thus it is easy to understand the reasons why Negri has joined the ranks of Atlanticist Europe and called for supporting its project of an ultra-liberal constitution subservient to Washington. But the real history of “nationalism” and “communism” has nothing in common with what liberal propaganda says about it. The social transformations inspired by nationalism and communism across three decades in the welfare state of the western social democracies, in the countries of really existing social-

ism, and in the experiences of radical national populism in the third world forced capital to make adjustments to the social demands arising from the logic of its own domination and pushed back the ambitions of imperialism. These transformations were huge and largely positive despite the limits imposed by the insufficiently radical character of the projects in question. The (provisional) return of liberalism made possible by the erosion and then collapse of the projects from the preceding period of contemporary history is not a “step forward,” but a dead end.

The true questions concerning the contemporary world can only be formulated by abandoning Hardt and Negri’s liberal discourse. Important and, of course, diverse theses have been produced on these questions, among others from the perspective of a renewed historical materialism, which Hardt and Negri ignore. I will be satisfied here with recalling the broad outlines of the theses I have proposed on the subject. In the past, imperialism appeared as the permanent conflict among the imperialist powers (in the plural). The growing centralization of oligopolistic capital has now given rise to the emergence of a “collective” imperialism of the triad (the United States, Europe, and Japan). In this respect, the dominant segments of capital share common interests in the management of their profit from this new imperialist system. But the unified political management of this system comes up against the plurality of states. The contradictions within the triad have to do not with the divergence of interests among the dominant oligopolistic capitals but with the diversity of interests represented by the states. I have summarized this contradiction in a phrase: the economy unites the partners of the imperialist system, politics divide the nations concerned.

The Multitude—Constituting Democracy or Reproducing Capital’s Hegemony?

The liberal ideology specific to capitalism places the individual in the forefront. It does not matter that in its historical construction during the Enlightenment the individual in question had to be an educated and property-owning man, a bourgeois capable, as a result, of making free use of Reason. This was an indestructible liberating advance. As a movement beyond capitalism, socialism cannot be conceived of as a return to the past, as a negation of the individual. Bourgeois democracy, despite the narrow limits in which capitalism encloses it, is not “formal,” but quite real, even if it remains incomplete. Socialism will be democratic or it will not be. But I add to this phrase its necessary complement: there will be no more democratic progress without calling capitalism into

question. Democracy and social progress are inseparable. The really existing socialisms of the past certainly did not respect this requirement and thought they could achieve progress without democracy or with as little democracy as in capitalism itself. But it is also necessary to add that the great majority of democracy's defenders today are hardly more demanding and think that democracy is possible without any visible social progress, let alone calling into question the principles of capitalism. Do Hardt and Negri leave this category of liberal democracy behind?

The individualist basis of liberal ideology establishes the individual as the subject of history in the last resort. That assertion is not true, neither for the history of earlier systems (which by the Enlightenment definition were unaware of the individual) nor even for the history of capitalism, which is a system based on the conflict between classes, the true subjects of this chapter of history. But the individual would be able to become the subject of history in a future advanced socialism.

Hardt and Negri think that we have arrived at this historical turning point, that classes (along with nations or peoples) are no longer the subjects of history. Instead the individual has become such (or is in the process of becoming such). This turning point gives rise to the formation of what they call the "multitude," defined in terms of the "totality of productive and creative subjectivities."

Why and how would this turning point occur? Hardt and Negri's texts are quite vague on these questions. They talk about the transition to "cognitive capitalism" or the emergence of "immaterial production," the new "networked" society or "deterritorialization." They make reference to Foucault's propositions concerning the transition from the disciplinary society to the society of control. Everything that has been said over the past thirty years, whether good or bad, depending on one's viewpoint, whether indisputable because platitudinous or strongly debatable, is thrown pell-mell into a great pot in preparation for the future. A compendium of current fashions does not easily lead to conviction. The similarity to the theses formulated by Manuel Castells concerning the "networked society" and to the ideas popularized by Jeremy Rifkin, Robert B. Reich, and other American popularizers is such that one is entitled to pose the question: what is new and important in all this hodgepodge of ideas?

I will propose then another hypothesis to account for the invention of the "multitude" in question. Our moment is one of defeat for the powerful social and political movements that shaped the twentieth century (workers', socialist, and national liberation movements). The loss of per-

spective that any defeat involves leads to ephemeral unrest and the profusion of para-theoretical propositions that both legitimate that unrest and give rise to the belief that it constitutes an “effective” means for “transforming the world” (even without wanting to), in the good sense of the term moreover. One can only gradually solidify new formulations that are both coherent and effective by distancing oneself from the past, rather than proposing a “remake” of it, and by effectively integrating new realities produced by social evolution in all its dimensions. Such contributions, both debatable and diverse, certainly exist. I do not include Hardt and Negri’s discourse among them.

The propositions that Hardt and Negri draw from their discourse on the “multitude” bear witness, even in their very formulation, to the impasse in which they are trapped. The first of these propositions concerns democracy that, for the first time in history, is supposedly on the verge of becoming a real possibility on the global scale. Moreover, the multitude is defined as the “constitutive” force of democracy. This is a wonderfully naïve proposition. Are we moving in this direction? Beyond a few superficial appearances (some elections here or there), which obviously satisfy the liberal powers (particularly Washington), democracy—both necessary and possible—is in crisis. It is threatened with losing its legitimacy to the advantage of religious or ethnic fundamentalisms (I do not consider the ethnocratic regimes of the former Yugoslavia as democratic progress!). Do elections that overturn the power of one criminal gang (for example, one in the service of the Russian autocracy) to replace it with another one (financed by the CIA!) constitute progress for democracy or a manipulated farce? Is not the unfolding of the imperialist project for control of the planet at the origin of the frontal attacks that are reducing basic democratic rights in the United States? Is not the liberal consensus in Europe, around which the major political forces of right and left have united, in the process of delegitimizing electoral procedures? Hardt and Negri are silent on all these questions.

The second proposition concerns the “diversity of the multitude.” But the forms and contents that define the (diverse) components of the multitude are barely specified any more than are the forces that produce and/or reduce this diversity. Major contradictions consequently traverse all of Hardt and Negri’s texts. For example, the current globalization, according to them, is supposed to reduce the “differences” between centers and peripheries (otherwise this globalization would remain imperialist). The real world is evolving in the exact opposite direction by

accentuating “differences” and constructing apartheid on a world scale. The diversity within the local components of the system cited by Hardt and Negri (in fact only in North American and Western European societies) is itself of a “diverse” nature: there are (sometimes, as in the United States) ethnic or para-ethnic “communities,” there are diverse religious or linguistic regions, there are also classes, perhaps (!), that it would be good to redefine on the basis of the transformation of social realities! Even when all these diversities have been lined up, nothing much has been said. How are they articulated with one another in the production, reproduction, and transformation of social systems? It is impossible to respond to these fundamental questions without conceptualizing what I call “political cultures.” There are serious and positive contributions in these areas also. Certainly, they are debatable, but they cannot be ignored. Hardt and Negri have contributed nothing here that one can mention in support of their thesis.

The reversal establishing the individual as the subject of history and the multitude as the constitutive force of its democratic project is an “idealist” invention. It supposes that a reversal has occurred in the world of ideas without a transformation of real social relations. I am not suggesting here that ideas are always only passive reflections of reality. I have developed the opposite point of view, founded on the recognition of the autonomy of “instances.” Ideas can be in advance of their time. The question here does not concern this general proposition. It concerns postmodernist ideas in vogue today (inclusive of the ideas of Hardt and Negri themselves): are they in advance of their time? Or are they only the naïve, confused, and contradictory expression of the reality of the moment, a moment of defeat not yet surpassed? In these conditions the “multitude” may become a constitutive reality of indecisive, various, and disjointed “diversities.” It can take on the appearance of acting as a “real force” (a strong electoral majority, for example). But this is no more than ephemeral, destined to give way to a contradictory articulated structure, as always in history. In several years, the page of the “multitude” will probably have turned, as happened with the workerism (*opéraïsme*) of the 1970s and for the same reason: the fixation on the partial and the ephemeral, as noted by Atilio Boron in *Empire and Imperialism* (Zed Books, 2005).

The political culture that stands out behind Hardt and Negri’s discourse is that of American liberalism. This political culture considers the American Revolution and the Constitution adopted at that time as the decisive event in the opening of modernity. Hannah Arendt, the inspira-

tion for Hardt and Negri, writes that this revolution opens the era of the “unlimited quest for political liberty.” Today, the emergence of the multitude, the constitutive force of a democracy “possible for the first time on the world scale,” crowns the (positive) victory of the “Americanization of the world.”

The rallying to American liberalism is necessarily accompanied by the devaluation of the different paths of other nations, in particular of “old Europe,” as formulated by Hannah Arendt when she counterposed the American Revolution to the “limited struggle against poverty and inequality” to which she reduces the French Revolution. In the Cold War era, all the great revolutions of modern times (French, Russian, and Chinese) had to be denigrated. They were vitiated from the beginning by their “totalitarian tendency,” according to the American liberal discourse that became the spearhead of the counterrevolution after the Second World War. The exclusive survival of the “American model,” whose pioneering revolution and constitution did not question any of the necessities of capitalist development, implied that the heritage of those revolutions that had indeed questioned capitalist exigencies (as was the case beginning with the Jacobin radicalization of the French Revolution) was repudiated. The denunciation of the French Revolution (François Furet), banal anti-Sovietism, and the charges brought against Maoism constitute some of the major planks of this counterrevolution in political culture.

Now in this area Hardt and Negri remain utterly silent. They systematically ignore all the critical literature (a large part of it from the United States, moreover) on the American Revolution that established a long time ago that the Constitution of the United States was systematically constructed to rule out all danger of a “popular” deviation. The success in this sense is real, arousing the envy of all the European reactionaries who never succeeded in doing it (Giscard d’Estaing said that the constitution of the ultra-liberal European project was “as good” as the U.S. Constitution!).

The “aspirations” of the multitude established as the constitutive force of the future are reduced to very little: freedom, particularly to emigrate, and the right to a socially guaranteed income. In the undoubted care not to venture outside what is permitted by American liberalism, the project deliberately ignores everything that could be qualified as the heritage of the workers’ and socialist movement, in particular the equality rejected by the political culture of the United States. It is difficult to believe in the transformative power of an emerging global (and

European) citizenship while the policies implemented fundamentally deprive citizenship of its effectiveness.

The construction of a real alternative to the contemporary system of globalized liberal capitalism involves other requirements, in particular the recognition of the gigantic variety of needs and aspirations of the popular classes throughout the world. In fact, Hardt and Negri experience much difficulty in imagining the societies of the periphery (85 percent of the human population). The debates concerning the tactics and strategy of building a democratic and progressive alternative that would be effective in the concrete and specific conditions of the different countries and regions of the world never appear to have interested them. Would the “democracy” promoted by the intervention of the United States permit going beyond an electoral farce like the one in the Ukraine, for example? Can one reduce the rights of the “poor” who people the planet to the right to “emigrate” to the opulent West? A socially guaranteed income may be a justifiable demand. But can one have the naiveté to believe that its adoption would abolish the capitalist relation, which allows capital to employ labor (and, consequently, to exploit and oppress it), to the advantage of the worker who would from that point on be in a position to use capital freely and so be able to affirm the potential of his or her creativity?

The reduction of the subject of history to the “individual” and the uniting of such individuals into a “multitude” dispose of the true questions concerning the reconstruction of subjects of history equal to the challenges of our era. One could point to many other important contributions to oppose to the silence of Hardt and Negri on this subject. Undoubtedly, historic socialisms and communisms had a tendency to reduce the major subject of modern history to the “working class.” Moreover, this is a reproach that could be leveled at the Negri of work-erism. In counterpoint, I have proposed an analysis of the subject of history as formed from particular social blocs capable, in successive phases of popular struggle, of effectively transforming the social relations of force to the advantage of the dominated classes and peoples.

At the present time, to take up the challenge implies that one is moving forward in the formation of democratic, popular, and national hegemonic blocs capable of overcoming the powers exercised by both the hegemonic imperialist blocs and the hegemonic comprador blocs. The formation of such blocs takes place in concrete conditions that are very different from one country to another so that no general model (whether in the style of the “multitude” or some other) makes sense. In this per-

spective, the combination of democratic advances and social progress will be part of the long transition to world socialism, just as the affirmation of the autonomy of peoples, nations, and states will make it possible to substitute a negotiated globalization for the unilateral globalization imposed by dominant capital (which *Empire* praises!) and thus gradually deconstruct the current imperialist system. The deepening of debates on these real questions is, without a doubt, far more promising than pursuing the examination of what the “multitude” could be.

Is the Political Culture of Empire and Multitude Equal to the Challenge?

The fashion today is “culturalism,” a vision of human plurality founded on some supposed cultural invariants, particularly religious and ethnic. The development of “communitarianism” and the invitation to recognize “multiculturalism” are the products of this vision of history. Such a vision is not that of the historical materialist tradition, which attempts to articulate the class struggles of modern times with the forms and conditions of the participation of peoples affected by the system of globalized capitalism. The analyses produced within the context of these questions make it possible to understand the variety of paths traveled by different nations and to identify the specificity of the contradictions that exist within the societies in question and at the level of the global system. These analyses, then, revolve around what I call the formation of the political cultures of the peoples of the modern world.

The question I pose here concerns the political culture underlying the writings of Hardt and Negri. Does it lie within the historical materialist tradition or in that of culturalism? I proposed in my book *The Liberal Virus* (Monthly Review Press, 2004) a reading of two itineraries “European,” on the one hand, and American, on the other, forming the political cultures of the peoples in question. I will only very briefly recall the broad outlines of my argument here.

The formation of the political culture of the European continent is the product of a succession of formative great moments: the Enlightenment and invention of modernity; the French Revolution; the development of the workers’ and socialist movement and the emergence of Marxism; and the Russian Revolution. This succession of advances certainly did not ensure that the successive “lefts” produced by these moments would assume the political management of European societies. But it did form the right/left contrast on the continent. The triumphant counterrevolu-

tion imposed restorations (after the French and Russian Revolutions), a retreat from secularism, compromises with aristocracies and churches, and challenges to liberal democracy. It successfully induced the peoples concerned to support the imperialist projects of dominant capital and, to this end, mobilized the chauvinistic nationalist ideologies that experienced their greatest glory on the eve of 1914.

The succession of moments constitutive of the political culture of the United States is quite different. These moments are: the establishment in New England of anti-Enlightenment Protestant sects; control of the American Revolution by the colonial bourgeoisie, in particular by its dominant slave-holding faction; the alliance of the people with that bourgeoisie, founded on the expansion of the frontiers that, in turn, led to the genocide of the Indians; and the succession of waves of immigrants that frustrated the maturation of a socialist political consciousness and substituted “communitarianism” for it. This succession of events is strongly marked by the permanent dominance of the right, which made the United States the “surest” country for the unfolding of capitalism.

Today one of the major battles that will decide the future of humanity turns around the “Americanization” of Europe. Its objective is to destroy the European cultural and political heritage and substitute for it the one that is dominant in the United States. This ultra-reactionary option is that of the dominant political forces in Europe today and has found a perfect translation in the project of the European constitution. The other battle is that between the “North” of dominant capital and the “South,” the 85 percent of humanity who are the victims of the imperialist project of the triad. Hardt and Negri ignore the stakes in these two decisive battles.

The ill-considered praise that they make of American “democracy” strongly contrasts with the writings of analysts critical of North American society, rejected up front because their “anti-Americanism” disqualifies them (in the eyes of whom? the American establishment?). I will cite here only Anatol Lieven’s *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2004) whose conclusions largely coincide with mine despite our different ideological and scientific starting points. Lieven links the American democratic tradition (the reality of which no one would contest) to the obscurantist origins of the country (which is perpetuated and reproduced by successive waves of immigrants). U.S. society in this respect ends up resembling Pakistan much more than Great Britain. Further, the political culture of

the United States is a product of the conquest of the West (which leads to considering all other peoples as “redskins” who have the right to live only on condition of not hindering the United States). The new imperialist project of the U.S. ruling class requires a redoubling of an aggressive nationalism, which henceforth becomes the dominant ideology and recalls the Europe of 1914 rather than the Europe of today. On every level, the United States is not “in advance” of “old Europe,” but a century behind. This is why the “American model” is favored by the right and unfortunately by segments of the left, including Hardt and Negri, who have been won over to liberalism at the present time.

Beyond the two theses of *Empire* (“imperialism is outmoded”) and *Multitude* (“the individual has become the subject of history”), Hardt and Negri’s discourse exhibits a tone of resignation. There is no alternative to submission to the exigencies of the current phase of capitalist development. One will only be able to combat its damaging consequences by becoming integrated into it. This is the discourse of our moment of defeat, a moment that has not yet been surpassed. This is the discourse of social democracy won over to liberalism, of pro-Europeans won over to Atlanticism. The renaissance of a left worthy of the name, capable of inspiring and implementing progress for the benefit of the people, requires a radical rupture with discourses of this type.

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tradition. Those interested in learning more about the Debs Foundation can go to: www.eugenevdebs.com.



We were sad to learn of the death at age 87 of Alice Thorner, a long-time friend of *MR*. Alice and her husband Daniel devoted their lives to critical engagement with the development of modern India. The Thorners, like numerous other U.S. radical activists and intellectuals, came under attack in the United States during the McCarthy era of the 1950s. Called upon in 1952 to go before the U.S. Senate inquisition, Daniel, then in India, refused to return to the United States and testify. As a result the Thorners were in effect political refugees from the United States. For many years they divided their time between Paris, where they both taught, and India. A full tribute to Alice by the noted Indian economist Utsa Patnaik can be found in the commentary section of the *MR* Web site at www.monthlyreview.org.

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