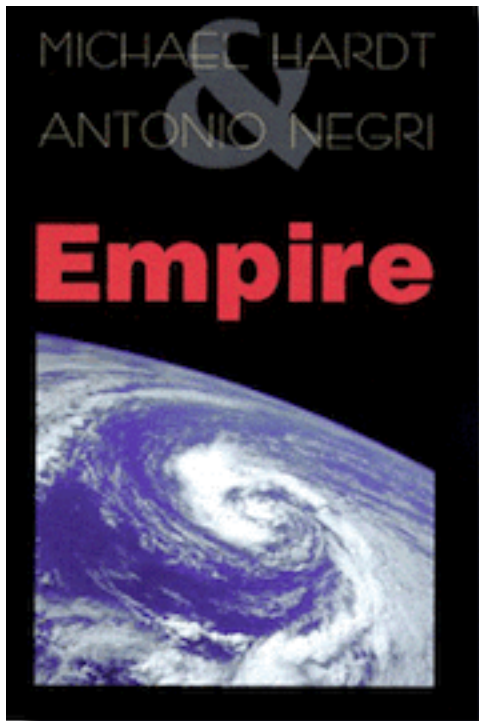


## Review

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Hardt, M and Negri, A (2000) *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass,  
Harvard University Press, 478 pp.



Certain books are opportune because of their theme, their timing or their potential political impact. *Empire* is just such a text. It is a pleasure to see Antonio Negri back in full flow (albeit from a Roman prison) and in partnership with Michael Hardt, a *literati* from Duke University. Between them they have crafted a profound and most readable text which will surely be influential.

Empire is neither a figure of speech nor a form of imperialism, rather it is "a *decentred* and *detritorialising* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers" (xii). This would seem to be a radicalised version of current understandings of "globalisation." Indeed, one of the most striking political aspects of this book is its refusal of "traditional" Marxist understandings of U.S. imperialism. Instead, with a vision of a

"postmodernised global economy," Hardt and Negri do not believe that any nation-state, even the U.S., can act as a centre for an imperialist project today. Debatable as many points in this book are, it is certainly a thought-provoking point.

Having worked around the maze of literature and opposed political stances on "globalisation" I was personally pleased to see *Empire's* bold, if iconoclastic, position. Hardt and Negri "insist on asserting that the construction of *Empire* is a step forward in order to do away with any nostalgia for the power structures that preceded it and refuse any political strategy that involves returning to that old arrangement, such as trying to resurrect the nation-state to protect against global capital" (p. 43). In the post-Seattle wave of thinking and acting on democratising globalisation I think we may find here a useful avenue of enquiry. Localist opposition to globalisation may well be politically well intentioned but, according to Hardt and Negri it rests on false assumptions and is therefore damaging. It assumes that the local is "outside" of globalisation, that it

represents difference as against the homogenisation of the latter. It also misidentifies the enemy insofar as the production of locality is also an effect of the globalisation processes. The local cannot represent a stable barrier against the new accelerated global capital flows; only an internationalist strategy can counter-hegemonise or at least seek to democratise capital's globalisation project.

At a more specific level I was struck by *Empire's* characterisation of workers' struggles today. The basic point they make is that "in our much celebrated age of communication, *struggles have become all but incommunicable*" (p. 54). Tiananmen Square, Chiapas, Los Angeles, France, the Intifada and South Korea seem struggles which not only have no connection or communication with one another, but which are actually incommensurable. Hardt and Negri are correct in my view to argue that "the proletariat is not what it used to be, but that does not mean it has vanished" (p. 53). Even so, I found the analysis of the new global working class somewhat disappointing and dated, seemingly based on Negri's famous 1970s theorising of the "mass worker" typical of the Fordist/Taylorist epoch and characterised by their refusal of work. The new Post Fordist "social worker" seems rather under-theorized and there is very little concrete information on the changing nature of work world-wide. The issue of labour struggles' "incommunicability" is a serious and interesting one though. The conclusion reached -- that these struggles "blocked from travelling horizontally in the form of a cycle, are forced instead to leap vertically and touch immediately on the global level" (p. 55) -- is suggestive if somewhat underdeveloped. The social movement of labour -- with other "new" social movements -- must be a key actor in the democratic movement to central globalisation.

Having started with some of my enthusiasms arising from a first reading of *Empire* I should now try to lay out some of its main themes. Given the complexity of this book and the richness of its sources I will necessarily provide a partial reading. The first part of *Empire* deals with the political constitution of the new "world order" and then with the new forms of sovereignty which have emerged. The authors' basic hypothesis is that sovereignty is now "composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule" (pxii). If the declining sovereignty of the nation-state is a familiar theme in globalisation studies, Hardt and Negri give it a new spin with their rejection of the de-regulation approach in favour of a view of interlocking regulatory frameworks which create the transnational figure they call Empire. There appears, to me at least, a certain contradiction between their view of Empire as a coherent constitutional structure and their "Poulantzian" view elsewhere that it is in fact a "permanent state of exception." Clearly, if Empire is coherent and constitutionally based it cannot also be seen in the same way which Nicos Poulantzas, in the 1970's, viewed the capitalist state as always being a "state of exception," akin to fascism or authoritarianism. Nevertheless, there is here a rich and imaginative re-reading of the political economy of globalisation.

Following an Intermezzo which acts as hinge, the authors shift from the realm of ideas to that of production in part 3, self-consciously mirroring Marx's passage in *Capital* from the noisy sphere of exchange to the hidden abode of production. The shift from modernity to postmodernity, or from imperialism to Empire as they prefer to read it, is

now examined in relation to the realm of production. The authors argue that we can now at last complete the missing volumes of *Capital* and deal with the state and the world market in the eye of Empire. Though not terribly novel (to someone who knows the literature) these sections do sketch in what a Marxist perspective on the political economy of globalisation could look like. Against any lingering attachment to dependency on the left Hardt and Negri argue that: "The tendential realization of the world market should destroy any notion that today a country or region could isolate or de-link itself from the global networks of power in order to re-create the conditions of the past and develop as the dominant capitalist countries once did" (p. 284). There is clearly less and less credibility in any political perspective which advocates some form of "de-linking" from the world economy, though some authors such as Samir Amin still seek to advance that argument. Nostalgia is not something Hardt and Negri encourage.

Hardt and Negri may write like Marxists at times but on the whole this work is theoretically, and architectonically, based on Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaux*. They cut across disciplinary boundaries freely, and sometimes disconcertingly, from politics to economics, from culture to law, from European classical philosophy to contemporary U.S. social science. Notions of biopower and disciplinarity are not optional extras in Empire but core concepts. As with Foucault they read the new paradigm of power as essentially biopolitical in nature. They define biopower as "a form of power that regulates social life from the interior . . ." (p. 23), and its function is to give power an effective command over the entire life of people. Following Deleuze and Guattari, they argue that the paradox of this new power is that while it unifies every element of social life, it leads to resistance no longer being marginal as it becomes active in the very centre of a society that opens up in networks. Not all readers will agree that "Deleuze and Guattari present us with a properly poststructuralist understanding of biopower that renews materialist thought and grounds itself solidly in the question of the production of social being" (p. 28) but it is at least a refreshing break from any lingering notions of "superstructure."

In conclusion, then, what are the political implications of this book for the post-Seattle anti-globalisation strategists and activists? I have a definite problem with the conjuring away of the U.S. as pre-eminent guardian of the capitalist order world-wide. Is globalisation just a network? What about military power? Is any attack on any part of the global network of Empire equally effective? Can we so lightly dismiss the Leninist concern with "imperialist chains" and "weakest links"? It seems that while the post-1989 disenchantment and cynicism of many on the left has been successfully banished something rather utopian has been put in its place. The book seems to mirror some of the Seattle counter-culture beliefs that the virtual Empire of globalisation can be attacked anywhere, equally effectively, without regards to the balance of power or political strategizing. *Empire* sees great possibilities for creation and liberation: "The multitude, in its will to be against and its desire for liberation, must push through Empire to come out the other side" (p. 218). Will "common experience" of the new regime simply lead to this revolt, and into what on "the other side"?

Empire is a millenarian call to arms, a visionary text, an optimistic end to the defeatism of the 1990s. But is it an adequate guide to action today? Is it sufficient to follow St. Francis of Assisi in "posing against the misery of power the joy of being" (p. 413). Who exactly are the "multitude" that Hardt and Negri see inexorably arising against *Empire* as some primeval flow? While overtly critical of postmodernism, Hardt and Negri seem to have visited some of its more esoteric reaches, with great enthusiasm for the "society of the spectacle" and for the mobilisation of desires and the fleeting experiences of agency. And yet I think I can end on a positive note. Hardt and Negri are undoubtedly correct to argue for "the impossibility of traditional forms of struggle": the world is changing and so must the strategies for social transformation. I believe they are also correct in not viewing the world with despondency, as a result of defeat, and instead to stress how the revolutions of the twentieth century were in fact successful and that they have transformed the terms of the class struggle and generated new forms of political subjectivity. *Empire* starts us on the way to analyse the new configuration of economic and political power and the means for their undoing.