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Toni Negri in Perspective

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If there were any doubt that the anti-capitalist movement represents a major revival of the left on a world scale, it was removed by the vast demonstration against the G8 summit in Genoa on 21 July 2001. [1] Around 300,000 people, the overwhelming majority of them from Italy itself, took part in the protest, despite the extreme violence displayed by the police. The youth, confidence and militancy of the demonstrators offered clear evidence that the Italian left – after nearly a quarter of a century of defeat and demoralisation – was in the process of being renewed.

This kind of revival is, however, a complex affair. It is easy enough to think that a new left necessarily bases itself on new ideas. The rhetoric of some of the leading figures in the anti-capitalist movement often expresses this thought. The stress that Naomi Klein, for example, lays on ‘the decentralised, non-hierarchical structure of the movement’ and its ‘web-like structure’ is intended to highlight the novelty of the contemporary movement against corporate globalisation. [2] But new struggles always involve elements of continuity as well as discontinuity with the past. Bodies of thought formulated in

different conditions, and marginalised in the recent past, can re-emerge to exert a major influence in a new movement.

Empire is a case in point. Written by the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Negri and the American literary critic Michael Hardt, this book has attracted since its appearance last year extraordinary media attention for an abstruse theoretical hardback published by Harvard University Press that concludes by evoking ‘the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist’. [3] On the eve of Genoa, **The New York Times** proclaimed **Empire** ‘The Next Big Idea’, while **Time** magazine called it the ‘hot, smart book of the moment’. [4] In an **Observer** profile of Hardt, Ed Vulliamy wrote:

How often can it happen that a book is swept off the shelves until you can’t find a copy in New York for love or money? The central library’s edition is reserved for the foreseeable future. Amazon’s promise that the volume ‘usually ships within 24 hours’ is rendered absurd. The publisher has sold out, is reprinting and gearing up for a paperback ... Hardt, with his co-author ... has become the unwitting sage (and critic) of the movement thrown up by demonstrations in Seattle, Prague and Gothenburg, and written a book about ... the theme dominating us and the headlines we read: globalisation. [5]

The American radical chic academy is notoriously prone to fashion. But the ideas of **Empire** are having a practical effect. One of the main currents in the anti-capitalist movement is autonomism. This has two main political characteristics: (1) the rejection of the Leninist conception of organisation; and (2) the adoption of substitutionist forms of action in which a politically enlightened elite acts on behalf of the masses. Autonomism is in fact a diverse political formation. The most notorious version is represented by the anarchist Black Bloc, whose pursuit of violent confrontation with the state played into the police’s hands at Genoa.

More attractive is the Italian autonomist coalition *Ya Basta!*, which combines an uncompromising rejection of the political

establishment – including the parties of the reformist left – with, on the one hand, the adoption of imaginative forms of non-violent direct action and, on the other, contesting municipal elections, sometimes successfully. *Ya Basta!*, which itself acts as an umbrella for different views and emphases, overlaps with the *Tute Bianche*, known after the white overalls they used to wear on demonstrations, most famously at the Prague S26 protests in September 2000. Naomi Klein calls the social centres that tend to provide *Ya Basta!* with its main base of activity ‘windows-not only into another way to live, disengaged from the state, but also into a new politics of engagement’. [6] The *Tute Bianche*’s statements are impregnated with the language of **Empire**. Thus their best known leader, Luca Casarini, said after Genoa:

We have talked of Empire, or better of an imperial logic in the government of the world. This means the erosion of national sovereignty. Not the end, but an erosion and its redefinition in a global, imperial, framework. In Genoa we saw this at work, with the scenarios of war this implies. On how to oppose this imperial logic we have all still been unprepared. [7]

Such evidence of **Empire**’s political influence should come as no surprise. For Toni Negri is the foremost philosopher of Italian autonomism. Born in 1936, he is currently serving a 20-year jail sentence in Italy for his alleged part in the Red Brigades’ campaign of armed terror during the late 1970s. His plight is an indication of the specific historical context in which autonomism first took shape, during the profound crisis that Italian society experienced during the 1970s. Any assessment of **Empire** therefore presupposes an understanding of that context, and of the development of Negri’s thought.

The Italian earthquake and the rise of autonomism

With the important exception of the Portuguese Revolution, the great upturn in workers' struggles that swept through Western Europe during the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s reached its high point in Italy. [8] The student revolt of 1967-1968 and the explosion of strikes in the 'Hot Autumn' of 1969 marked the prelude to a massive wave of workers' struggles that fed into a broader social radicalisation expressed, for example, in the defeat of the ruling Christian Democratic (DC) oligarchy in the 1974 referendum on divorce. This was a climate that favoured the emergence in the late 1960s of a substantial far left dominated by three main organisations – *Avanguardia Operaia*, *Lotta Continua* and PDUP (Party of Proletarian Unity for Communism). The far left exerted significant influence in the most militant sections of the working class. In the mid-1970s they could mobilise 20,000–30,000 people in Milan alone. By this time, however, Italy was caught up in a massive economic, social and political crisis. In Washington and Bonn the country was perceived as the sick man of Western capitalism. The corrupt and authoritarian DC regime was manifestly in a state of advanced decay. In the regional and local elections of June 1975 the left won 47 percent of the vote, while the DC's share fell to 35 percent. But within five years the Italian workers' movement had suffered a series of shattering defeats from which it is only now beginning to recover.

Two main factors were responsible for this disaster. [9] First, and more important, the Italian Communist Party (PCI) came to the rescue of the DC. Tobias Abse writes, 'For all its resistance to the worker and student rebelliousness of 1967-1969, and its equivocation over the divorce referendum of 1974, the PCI paradoxically profited from both as an electoral force'. [10] In parallel, the PCI-dominated trade union confederation CGIL absorbed much of the shopfloor militancy that had exploded in the late 1960s – for example, by establishing factory councils. [11] The restoration of PCI control was helped by the way in which, as unemployment began to rise in the mid-1970s,

workplace struggles became much more fragmented and defensive than they had been during the Hot Autumn.

In the June 1976 parliamentary elections the PCI's share of the vote peaked at 34.4 percent. But PCI leader Enrico Berlinguer responded by helping to bale Italian capitalism out. After the Chilean coup of September 1973 he offered the DC a 'historic compromise'. Though the PCI was blocked from actually taking office thanks to US intervention, in 1976–1979 the party gave its backing to a series of 'Governments of National Solidarity' headed by ultra-Machiavellian DC politician and ally of the Vatican Giulio Andreotti. The PCI used its dominance of the workers' movement to overcome resistance to the government's programme of austerity measures, thereby helping to stabilise Italian capitalism.

A secondary factor in this crisis was the weakness of the revolutionary left. The dominant version of Marxism on the Italian far left in the 1960s was Maoism. The idea that peasant guerrillas had overthrown capitalism in China opened the door to a belief that there were short cuts to revolution that could avoid the lengthy and difficult task of winning the support of the majority of the working class. In the climate of intense radicalisation at the end of the 1960s this had taken the form of building factory base committees (CUBs) outside the unions.

By the mid-1970s the three main far left organisations swung sharply to the right, developing a strategy based on the assumption that the 1976 elections would lead to a left government in which the far left might participate, and which would carry through a far-ranging programme of reforms. In the event, the DC vote actually rose, the revolutionary left only won 1.5 percent of the vote, and the PCI formed a coalition with the right rather than with the rest of the left. The result was the descent of *Avanguardia*, *Lotta Continua* and PDUP into crisis, and the astonishingly rapid disintegration of their organisations.

[12]

This was not, however, the end of mass struggle. Early 1977 saw the development of a new student movement that rapidly spread to unemployed youth, in which *Autonomia Operaia*, a loose federation of revolutionary collectives, exerted a growing influence. It began when students occupied Rome University in February 1977. Paul Ginsborg writes:

Autonomia Operaia, much to the disgust of the feminists, controlled the occupation and limited freedom of speech. On 19 February Luciano Lama, head of the CGIL, heavily protected by trade union and PCI stewards, came to address the occupation ... In a tragic scene of mutual incomprehension, Lama was shouted down, and violent clashes broke out between the *autonomi* and the stewards of the PCI. A fortnight later a demonstration of some 60,000 young people in the capital degenerated into a four-hour guerrilla battle with police. Shots were fired on both sides, and a part of the demonstrators chanted a macabre slogan in praise of the p. 38 pistol, the chosen weapon of the *autonomi*. [13]

The movement spread rapidly, with a series of violent confrontations with the forces of the state in which two young activists, Francesco Lorusso and Georgina Masi, were shot dead by the carabinieri in Bologna and Rome respectively. [14] As Abse puts it:

The original student unrest of early 1977 was a confused but authentic expression of the alienation and despair of large masses of Italian youth, a protest against the climate of economic crisis and political conformism that marked the regime of national solidarity. Its initial expression anticipated many elements of later British punk culture – a penchant for the deliberately but harmlessly bizarre that took the form of fantasmatic identification with ‘Indians’ (American rather than subcontinental). [15]

For all its attractive qualities, however, and the anger it expressed, the movement of 1977, developing as it did in the context of rising mass unemployment especially among young people, was inherently liable to come into conflict with the organised working class. This liability became reality as a result of the political influence of autonomism. *Autonomia Operaia*,

which first emerged in March 1973, was an internally heterogeneous formation on which Negri's writings exerted a particularly important influence. [16] His intellectual background lay in *operaismo* – 'workerism' – a distinctively Italian Marxist theoretical current whose most important figure was Mario Tronti. The focus of this Marxism was on the direct conflict between capital and labour in the immediate process of production. Tronti explored the interplay between capitalist and proletarian strategies. Thus he saw the Keynesian welfare state developed in the US under the New Deal as a response to, and an attempt to incorporate, the 'mass worker' forged during the second industrial revolution of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. [17]

Operaismo was merely one of a number of Marxist theoretical currents that came to focus during the 1960s and 1970s on what they called the capitalist labour process – the German 'capital-logic' school is another example. This preoccupation made sense at a time of intense industrial conflict in which strong workplace organisation defied bosses and trade union officials alike. In 1974 Negri could still write that the factory was 'the privileged site of both the refusal of labour and the attack upon the rate of profit'. [18] But in the late 1970s, as rank and file militancy crumbled in the face of economic crisis and the historic compromise, he preserved the theoretical categories of *operaismo* while, as Abse puts it, he turned it 'into virtually the opposite of its former ideological self'. [19] His key theoretical move was to replace the concept of the 'mass worker' with that of the 'social worker'.

Negri argued that the process of capitalist exploitation now took place on a society-wide scale, and that consequently socially and economically marginalised groups such as students, the unemployed and casual labourers must be counted as core sections of the proletariat. Indeed, relative to these groups, the old 'mass workers' in the big factories of northern Italy appeared like a privileged labour aristocracy. According to the following

passage, merely receiving a wage made a worker an exploiter on a par with management:

Some groups of workers, some sections of the working class, remain tied to the dimension of the wage, to its mystified terms. In other words, they are living off income as revenue. Inasmuch, they are stealing and expropriating proletarian surplus-value – they are participating in the social labour racket – on the same terms as their management. These positions-and the trade union practice that fosters them-are to be fought, with violence if necessary. It will not be the first time that a march of the unemployed has entered a large factory so that they can destroy the arrogance of salaried income! [20]

This kind of sophistry was more than theoretical nonsense. It offered an apparently ‘Marxist’ legitimation for the violent clashes that were developing between the autonomists and trade unionists. [21] The incitement to attack employed workers was part of a more general cult of violence. Negri wrote:

Proletarian violence, in so far as it is a positive allusion to communism, is an essential element of the dynamic of communism. To suppress the violence of this process can only deliver it – tied hand and foot – to capital. Violence is a first, immediate, and vigorous affirmation of the necessity of communism. It does not provide the solution, but is fundamental. [22]

Meanwhile others were taking this cult of violence to its logical conclusion. The Red Brigades (BR) were formed in the early 1970s, but it was in the climate of violence and despair of 1977-1978 that they were encouraged to escalate their campaign of armed terror against the Italian state. The BR’s most spectacular act was the kidnapping and murder of the DC leader and former prime minister Aldo Moro in the spring of 1978. The BR didn’t just target state officials, but also trade unionists whom they regarded as collaborating with the state. These tactics were given some spurious legitimacy by the strong support the PCI gave to governmental measures that drastically restricted civil liberties. But the effect was to isolate the entire far left, and to unleash a

wave of severe repression that destroyed the BR and swept many others into prison.

Faced with a divided and weakened left, and benefiting from the PCI's complicity, the employers went onto the offensive. In October 1979 Fiat succeeded in sacking 61 militants at its Mirafiori plant in Turin, accusing them of having been involved in violence. The following September it announced a plan to sack 14,000 workers in the most militant sections. Even the PCI leadership recognised that this attack would weaken them along with the rest of the workers' movement. Berlinguer went to the factory gates and declared his support for an occupation. But he had served his purpose. Exploiting divisions in the Turin workforce, Fiat won a crushing victory. A total of 23,000 workers, many of them militants, were sacked. Comparing the conflict to the great British miners' strike of 1984–1985, Abse writes, 'Fiat's real aim was to alter the whole balance of power in the factory, and to reassert a control over the labour force and the production process it had lost in 1969'. [23] Its success in achieving this objective set the stage for the resurgence of Italian capitalism in the 1980s whose greatest symbol would be the rise of Silvio Berlusconi.

Negri rewrites Marx as Foucault

Negri was one of the casualties of this defeat. He was arrested in Padua in April 1979 on trumped-up charges of master-minding the Red Brigades and Moro's kidnapping. Held without trial for four years, he was only freed in 1983 after having been elected to parliament as a deputy for the libertarian Radical Party, and then fled into exile in France. His jail sentence was handed out *in absentia* in 1984. [24] That same year **Marx Beyond Marx**, perhaps Negri's most important book, appeared in English. Based on seminars that Negri had given at Louis Althusser's invitation at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris in 1978, it

was written at precisely the moment of disaster for the Italian left.

The editor of the English edition of **Marx Beyond Marx** called it ‘one of the most crucial documents in European Marxism since ... well, since maybe never’. [25] This enthusiastic description at least captures the ambition of the book. For what Negri in effect seeks to do is narrow Marxism down from a comprehensive theory of the driving forces of historical change to a mere theory of power. He does so on the basis of a reading of the **Grundrisse** – the text, written in 1857–1858, that represents the first in the succession of huge manuscripts culminating in the first volume of **Capital** a decade later.

Negri, however, regards **Capital** as a flawed work that ‘served to reduce critique to economic theory, to annihilate subjectivity in objectivity, to subject the subversive capacity of the proletariat to the reorganising and repressive intelligence of capitalist power’. ‘Subjectivity’ is the key word here. For Negri, history is ‘reduced to collective relations of force’, the clash between rival class subjectivities – capital and labour: ‘The **Grundrisse** aims at a theory of the subjectivity of the working class against the profitable theory of capitalist subjectivity’. [26]

Negri is by no means the first commentator to have noticed the differences between the **Grundrisse** and **Capital**, though some have given the former precisely the opposite reading to his, arguing that the **Grundrisse** represents an excessively ‘objectivist’ version of Marxism that treats capital as an autonomous, self-reproducing entity. [27] The best commentaries have treated the **Grundrisse** as a kind of laboratory for Marx’s economic concepts, which are elaborated and revised in his later writings. [28] Negri is not unaware of these interpretations, but he dismisses them in the most cavalier of fashions. Thus he disposes of what he concedes to be the ‘pioneering work’ on the **Grundrisse** by the Ukrainian Trotskyist Roman Rosdolsky by saying that it is limited by ‘the ideology of the communist left in

the inter-war period: on the one side an extreme objectivism, on the other the necessity to found that objectivism by recuperating Marxist orthodoxy'. [29]

Negri's reading of Marx involves in fact a systematic rewriting of some of his key propositions. Three examples will suffice:

1. *The law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall:*
This theory is, of course, the basis of Marx's theory of capitalist crisis. But for Negri, here true to his 'workerist' past, the development of the capitalist mode of production is reduced to the direct conflict between capital and labour. Thus he asserts that 'the tendency to the fall in the profit rate bespeaks of the *revolt of living labour* against the power of profit'. Negri is perfectly well aware that Marx himself in **Capital** Volume III makes the tendency a consequence of the competitive accumulation of capital, which leads capitalists to invest more heavily in the means of production than in labour power, thus (since labour is the source of surplus value) causing a fall in the rate of profit, but he argues that when conceptualised in these terms 'the entire relation will be dislocated on an economic level and objectified improperly'. [30]
2. *The theory of wages:* Any theory that makes crises the direct consequence of the immediate conflict between capital and labour is likely to attach great importance to wages. This was true, for example, of so-called wage push or profit squeeze explanations of the first major post-war crisis during the 1970s, which attributed it to well organised workers taking advantage of full employment to push up wages and thereby reduce the rate of profit. [31] One implication of this kind of explanation is that wages must be treated as an autonomous factor. Consistent with this, Negri argues that when 'the wage actually does appear in the first volume of **Capital**, taking over a number of

themes explicitly launched in the **Grundrisse**, it appears as an “independent variable”. Its laws flow from the condensation into a subject of the revolt against work contained in capitalist development’. [32]

This is an astonishing passage. What Marx actually says in **Capital** Volume I is precisely the opposite: ‘To put it mathematically, the rate of accumulation is the independent, not the dependent variable; the rate of wages is the dependent, not the independent variable’. [33] Wages are the dependent variable relative to the accumulation of capital because capitalists, through their control over the rate of investment, also determine the rate of unemployment. When confronted by militant workers they can shift the balance of class forces in their favour by staging an investment strike and thereby forcing up unemployment. Workers, faced with the threat of the dole, come under pressure to accept lower wages and more generally an increase in the rate of exploitation. This is precisely what happened in Italy (and indeed in Britain, the other weak link of European capitalism) from the mid-1970s onwards.

3. *Labour as absolute subject*: Negri’s flagrant misreading of Marx’s wage theory is symptomatic of a deeper conceptual shift. Though he conceives capitalism as defined by the antagonistic relationship between labour and capital, he gives primacy in this relationship to ‘*labour as subjectivity*, as source, as potential of all wealth’. [34] Once again this directly contradicts Marx’s own views, most specifically his attack in the **Critique of the Gotha Programme** on the idea that labour is the source of all wealth: ‘Labour is not the source of all wealth. Nature is just as much the source of use values (and it is surely of such that material wealth consists) as labour, which itself is only the manifestation of a force of nature, human labour power’. [35]

Negri's transformation of labour into a kind of absolute subject is reflected in his theory of crisis. He argues that 'the law of fall of the profit rate derives from the fact that *necessary labour is a rigid quantity*' – that is, when capitalists seek to reduce the share of necessary labour (required to reproduce labour power) in the working day and thereby to drive up the rate of exploitation, they encounter 'a force less and less willing to be subjected, less and less available to compression'. This obdurate resistance signifies '*the autonomy of the working class from the development of capital*'. [36]

Now Marx isn't god. There is nothing sacred about his theories, and therefore there is no crime in revising them. The interesting questions concern the direction of Negri's revisions and whether or not they allow us more effectively to engage with the contemporary world. Critically Negri seeks to transform Marxism into a theory of power. Thus he argues that 'the capitalist relation is immediately a relation of power'. He attaches special importance to the fact that the **Grundrisse** begins with a lengthy discussion of money. Here Marx moves '*from the critique of money to the critique of power*'. [37]

Or it might be better to say that by focusing on money Marx directly engages with capital as a form of power. The development of money under capitalism, which reaches its climax in the credit system (what these days are called the financial markets), represents in a highly distorted and antagonistic form the socialisation of production. In starting with money in the **Grundrisse**, Marx operates with 'a tendential scheme of *social capital*'. He is thus able to anticipate the subsequent development of capitalism as 'a form of production which becomes increasingly more social, in which the modern function of value is transformed into a function of command, of domination, and of intervention on the social fractions of

necessary labour and accumulation. The state is here the “synthesis of civil society”.’ [38]

Thus, according to Negri, Marx in the **Grundrisse** anticipates the emergence of the Keynesian welfare state:

Marx indicated, and often too frequently, especially in the **Grundrisse**, that to say state is only another way of saying capital. The development of the mode of production leads us to recognise that to say state is the only way to say capital: a socialised capital, a capital whose accumulation is done in terms of power, a transformation of the theory of command; the launching into circuit and the development of the state of the multinationals. [39]

Here Negri rejoins the classical preoccupation of *operaismo* with the strategies pursued by the ‘collective capitalist’, increasingly through the state, to contain and dominate the ‘mass worker’ of Fordist assembly line production. But Negri gives a radically different spin to this analysis by replacing the ‘mass worker’ with the ‘social worker’:

The capitalist supersession of the form of value – what Marx calls the process of real subsumption – dislocates the relations of production as a whole. It transforms exploitation into a global social relation. Jail equals factory ... In reality, the operation of real subsumption does not eliminate the [class] antagonism, but rather displaces it to the social level. Class struggle does not disappear; it is rather transformed into all the moments of everyday life. The daily life of a proletarian is posited as a whole against the domination of capital. [40]

The class struggle is everywhere, therefore, and so too is the proletariat. Whoever in their conditions of life experiences the domination of capital is part of the working class. The logic of the class struggle within the process of production itself implies the ‘refusal of work’ – workers rebelling against wage relation itself. This is implicitly communist because communism is nothing but ‘the abolition of work’. In asserting themselves within the productive process, workers carve out a space under their own control. They become, as Negri puts it, ‘self valorising’, breaking the connection between wage labour and

the realisation of their needs. The confrontation between this refusal of work and ‘social capital’ is increasingly reduced to a relationship of force: ‘Once capital and global labour power have completely become social classes – each independent and capable of self valorising activity – then the law of value can only represent the power (*potenza*) and violence of the relationship. It is the synthesis of the relations of force’. [41]

This increasingly violent confrontation takes place everywhere: ‘The struggle against the capitalist organisation of production, of the job market, of the working day, of the restructuring of energy, of family life, etc., etc., all this involves the people, the community, the choice of lifestyle. To be communist today means *to live as a communist*’. [42] Thus, paradoxically, a form of Marxism that was originally obsessed with the struggle at the point of production flips over into its opposite, something much closer to the post-Marxist obsession with a plurality of power relations and social movements.

Indeed, Negri explicitly connects his version of Marxism with poststructuralism, declaring, ‘The theory of surplus value breaks down the [class] antagonism into a microphysics of power’. [43] It was Michel Foucault who in a series of key texts in the mid-1970s developed a critique of Marxism based on the idea that domination consists in a plurality of power relations that cannot be removed by means of some comprehensive social transformation (this would, as in Stalinist Russia, merely reinstate a new apparatus of domination) but only resisted on a decentralised and localised basis. [44] What Negri does here is to take over Foucault’s disintegration of the social totality into a multiplicity of micro-practices and claim that this is what Marx himself does, at least in the **Grundrisse**.

These allusions to Foucault are indicative of the extent to which Negri transforms historical materialism into a theory of power and subjectivity. This theory enabled him to observe the increasingly disastrous course taken by the class struggle in Italy

in the late 1970s with serene indifference. Thus he wrote in 1977:

The balance of power has been reversed ... the working class, its sabotage, are the stronger power – above all, the only source of rationality and value. From now on it becomes impossible, even in theory, to forget this paradox produced by the struggles: the more the form of domination perfects itself, the more empty it becomes; the more the working class resists, the more it is full of rationality and value ... We are here, we are uncrushable, and we are in the majority. [45]

One can, if one likes, find something magnificent in this defiant optimism. But if Marxist theory is to offer political guidance and responsible leadership, then it has to strive accurately to plot the oscillations of the class struggle. At much the same time, Tony Cliff was developing his analysis of the shift in the balance of class forces in capital's favour in Britain. [46] Cliff's appreciation of the situation of course proved much more accurate than Negri's. In Italy also, Negri's refusal to face facts came under sharp attack at the time even from within the autonomist movement – for example, by Sergio Bologna:

There have been many small (or big) battles, but in their course the political composition of the class has changed substantially in the factories, and certainly not in the direction indicated by Negri... In sum there has been a reassertion of reformist hegemony over the factories, one that is brutal and relentless in its efforts to dismember the class left and expel it from the factory. [47]

Bologna accused Negri, in inventing 'a different social figure with which to impute the process of liberation from exploitation', of simply evading the real process of defeat the Italian working class was experiencing. These misjudgements were indeed symptoms of a deeper theoretical flaw. Negri is an admirer of the great early modern philosopher Spinoza, and wrote an important book about him, **The Savage Anomaly**, when he was first in prison at the end of the 1970s. Spinoza was very critical of explanations that treat what happens as the result of an assertion of will, whether the will in question was that of

god or of humans. This way of proceeding was, Spinoza said, ‘to take refuge in ... the sanctuary of ignorance’. [48] But precisely this criticism can be applied to Negri’s rewriting of Marx. To reduce history to the clash of rival class wills – the ‘collective capitalist’ versus the ‘social worker’ – is to explain nothing. The nature and development of struggles can only be properly understood once their objective context is reconstructed.

Thus Marx integrates his account of the class struggle – both within the immediate production process and more broadly in society – into a theory of the capitalist mode of production as a totality. The clashes between rival classes are only comprehensible against the background of the broader tendencies of the mode of production. Negri attributes to capitalists no motivation other than an abstract urge to dominate. Marx by contrast conceptualises the bourgeoisie as an internally divided class caught up in competitive struggles among themselves. This is the sphere of what Marx – in the **Grundrisse** (though Negri ignores these passages) – calls ‘many capitals’. The tendency of the rate of profit to fall is not just a product of the conflict between labour and capital in the immediate production process, but also of this competitive struggle, which drives capitalists to invest in labour saving equipment. [49]

Negri’s voluntarist theory of crisis was superficially attractive in the 1970s, when the first major post-war slump developed against the background of rising workers’ struggles. Even then, however, it offered a wholly inadequate explanation of the crisis, which reflected a *general* fall in the rate of profit irrespective of the level of struggle in the society concerned. West Germany and the US were just as much victims as Italy or Britain, even though the level of class struggle was much lower in the first two countries than it was in the second two. [50] In any case, Negri’s theory can’t explain the currently developing global recession, which comes at time when working class combativity is still comparatively low.

Moreover, Marx is clear that – as long as capitalist relations of production remain in place – the capitalists retain the upper hand. They can, as they did in the late 1970s and the 1980s, use their control of the means of production to weaken workers by closing plants and laying people off. That is why it is not enough to rebel at the point of production – workers need a generalised political movement that can seize power at the level of society as a whole and expropriate capital.

To say all this is not to fall guilty of the charge of ‘objectivism’ that Negri constantly flings around. Marxism posits a dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity, not the reduction of one term to the other, whether it be subject to object, as in the Althusserian notion of history as ‘a process without a subject’, or object to subject, as in Negri’s voluntaristic rewriting of Marxism. Social structures – crucially the forces and relations of production – impose limits to what human actors can achieve, but they also constitute the capacities that these actors use when seeking to remake their world. [\[51\]](#)

From constituent power to Empire

Marx Beyond Marx represented an impasse in Negri’s thought, since it sought theoretically to articulate the guiding principles of a political movement that went down to crushing defeat at the end of the 1970s. In his writings of the 1980s and the 1990s that culminate in **Empire**, Negri sought to resituate and to develop the themes of **Marx Beyond Marx**. Many of these texts are devoted to the history of modern political thought, and as such are of value in their own right. But they also serve to reconstruct Negri’s system. A brief survey of this nature can only highlight some key points.

Already in **Marx Beyond Marx** Negri had stressed what he called ‘the principle of constitution’, by which he means the

capacity of struggle creatively to produce a qualitatively new structure that itself becomes the object of new struggles leading to further transformation. [52] In his later writings Negri greatly develops this idea. He traces the development of the idea of ‘constituent power’ – the collective capacity underlying specific constitutional forms to make and remake social and political structures – from its origins in Renaissance humanism, through early modern political thought (crucially Machiavelli and Spinoza) to its increasingly clear articulation in the era of revolutions, culminating in Marx. Involved here is a conflict between two kinds of power – *potenza* versus *potere* (in French *puiissance* versus *pouvoir*) – that is, the creative power of the masses (what Negri increasingly calls the ‘multitude’) versus the domination of capital. [53]

Negri offers a highly abstract conception of constituent power. It is ‘a creative power [*puiissance*] of being, in other words of concrete figures, of values, of institutions and orderings of the real. Constituent power [*pouvoir*] constitutes society in identifying the social and the political, in uniting them in a ontological bond.’ According to Negri, Marx saw constituent power at work in capital in the way in which it violently created a new form of society in the era of primitive accumulation but also drew on the creative capacities of co-operation inherent in the multitude. Negri writes:

Co-operation is in effect the living and productive pulsation of the multitudine ... Co-operation is innovation and wealth, it is thus the basis of the creative surplus which defines the expression of the multitudine. It is on the abstraction, on the alienation and on the productive expropriation of the multitude that command is constructed. [54]

In Marx, the co-operative labour that is appropriated and exploited by capital is, of course, that of the working class. By reframing Marxist themes in a more abstract philosophical vocabulary, Negri is able to take advantage of their resonances (for example, the idea that capital is parasitic on the creative

powers of others) while sidelining any straightforward class analysis. But the same tendency to absolutise the subjectivity of the masses that we saw in Negri's writings of the 1970s is present here: 'All practice of constituent power, from its beginning to its end, in its origin as in its crisis, reveals the tension of the multitude tending to make itself the absolute subject of the processes of its power [*puissance*]'. [55]

Negri, however, goes beyond the subjectivism of his earlier writings when he poses the question of how 'a subject adequate to the absolute procedure' of constituent power is to be identified. The answer, he believes, is to be found in the writings of the 'second Foucault', in particular in his **History of Sexuality**: 'Man as Foucault describes him appears as a totality of resistances which deliver a capacity of absolute liberation, beyond all finalism that is not the expression of life itself and of its reproduction. It is life that liberates itself in man, which opposes itself to everything that limits it and imprisons it'. [56]

The multitude when it strives to become the absolute subject of history is thus an expression of life. Negri thus seeks to ground his subjectivism in a form of vitalism – that is, in a metaphysical theory that sees the physical and social world in its entirety as expressions of some underlying life force. Negri is in fact indebted here less to Foucault, who is evasive if not confused when confronted with the philosophical implications of his theory of power, than to another key figure of French poststructuralism, Gilles Deleuze. [57] Particularly in **Mille plateaux**, the second volume of his major theoretical collaboration with Félix Guattari, **Capitalisme et schizophrénie**, Deleuze conceives desire as an expression of life that, though constantly confined and stratified in historically specific constellations of power, equally constantly subverts and outflanks them.

Deleuze openly avows his debt to the early 20th century French vitalist philosopher Henri Bergson. His is, however, a 'material vitalism', for there is 'a life proper to matter', in which

matter liquefies and flows. Matter indeed has the same structure as desire, which constantly outflows the boundaries of the stratified hierarchies of power. Therefore Deleuze treats the nomad as the model of all resistance to power. The drive of the state is that of ‘territorialisation’ – to confine desire within the constellations of power, to tie it down within a specific territory. The nomad’s drive is to ‘deterritorialise’, to cross borders, and to escape these stratifications. ‘The primary determination of the nomad, in fact, is that he occupies and holds a smooth space [*espace lisse*]’. But the modern capitalist world economy is also characterised by the same tendency towards deterritorialisation: ‘The world becomes again a smooth space (sea, air, atmosphere)’. [58]

This smooth space is that of Empire. Hardt and Negri explicitly acknowledge their debt to **Mille plateaux**. [59] More generally, Negri draws on Deleuze’s vitalism to provide his version of Marxism with the philosophical underpinnings that it previously lacked. But this is at a high price, since what Deleuze offers is a highly speculative form of metaphysics. Negri’s later writings thus reveal what Daniel Bensaïd has called a ‘strange mysticism without transcendence’. [60] Of none of Negri’s recent work is this more true than of **Empire**. It is a fine book in its way – beautifully written, full of lyrical passages and interesting insights. But **Empire** is, all the same, a deeply flawed work.

The scale and complexity of **Empire** mean that I can only focus here on its main themes. Three in particular stand out. In the first place, Hardt and Negri accept what is sometimes called the hyperglobalisers’ view – that economic globalisation has turned the nation-state into a mere instrument of global capital. Thus they write of the multinational corporations:

... they directly structure and articulate the territories and populations. They tend to make nation-states merely instruments to record the flows of the commodities, money and populations that they set in motion. The transnational corporations directly

distribute labour power over various markets, functionally allocate resources, and organise hierarchically the various sectors of world production. The complex apparatus that selects investments and directs financial and monetary manoeuvres determines the new geography of the world market, or really the new biopolitical structuring of the world. [61]

The decline of the nation-state does not, however, mean the disappearance of political power. Rather, a new form of political sovereignty emerges, what Hardt and Negri call Empire:

In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial centre of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a decentred and deterritorialised apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding powers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colours of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow. [62]

The language that Hardt and Negri use here – of ‘hybridity’, ‘plurality’, ‘flexibility’, etc. – is very much that of postmodernists for whom the terminology is intended to convey the idea that we have moved beyond capitalism, with its stark polarisation of exploiter and exploited. The metaphor of the network is widely used in more or less apologetic accounts of contemporary capitalism, for which it serves to evoke an absence of hierarchy and concentrations of power. [63] The twist that Hardt and Negri give is to use this language critically, and to argue that it represents a new phase of capitalist domination that operates not so much despite as through the hybridity and multiculturalism that are often celebrated as features of contemporary liberal societies: ‘The end of the dialectic of modernity has not resulted in the end of the dialectic of exploitation. Today nearly all of humanity is to some degree absorbed within or subordinated to the networks of capitalist exploitation’. [64]

Hardt and Negri borrow Foucault’s term ‘biopolitics’ to refer to forms of domination that operate from within, by shaping

individuals into subjects and endowing them with appropriate motives: ‘Power is now exercised through machines that directly organise the brains (in communications systems, information networks, etc.) and bodies (in welfare systems, monitored activities, etc.) toward a state of autonomous alienation from the sense of life and the desire for creativity’. [65] From this perspective Channel 4’s *Big Brother* is more dangerous than George Orwell’s, because it allows us to believe that engaging in highly stereotyped and manipulated forms of behaviour are genuinely pleasurable activities that we perform of our own free will.

But more ancient concepts and models are needed to grasp the nature of contemporary capitalism. The increasing use of force to override national sovereignty in the name of universal values such as human rights is symptomatic of the emergence of imperial sovereignty – or rather of its re-emergence. As the ancient Greeks and Romans understood, Empire knows no bounds. It is the property of no single state, even the United States. In the Gulf War the US intervened ‘*not as a function of its own national motives but in the name of global right*’. The new three-tier transnational structure of power corresponds to the portrait of the Roman Empire as a combination of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy painted by the Greek historian Polybius. At the apex are the ‘monarchical’ bodies – the US, the G7 and other international institutions such as NATO, the IMF, and the World Bank; then come an elite of ‘aristocratic’ actors – transnational corporations and nation-states; finally there are the ‘democratic’ organs that purport to represent the people – the UN general assembly, NGOs, and so on. [66]

How, secondly, do Hardt and Negri historically situate this Heath Robinson like structure? They ‘insist on asserting that 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.’ Though they compare this stance to Marx’s insistence on the historically progressive nature of capitalism itself, more is involved here: ‘The multitude called Empire into being.’ What Hardt and Negri call (again following Foucault) ‘the disciplinary society’ created by the New Deal, in which capital and the state regulated society as a whole, went into crisis in the late 1960s ‘as a *result* of the confluence and accumulation of proletarian and anti-capitalist attacks against the international capitalist system’. [67]

This claim about the origins of Empire implies a stronger version of the voluntarist theory of crisis that, as we have seen, Negri espoused in the 1970s: ‘The power of the proletariat imposes limits on capital but also dictates the terms and nature of the transformation. *The proletariat actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future.*’ In the case of Empire, the US working class played a vanguard role: ‘Now, in terms of the paradigm shift of international capitalist command, the US proletariat appears as the subjective figure that expressed most fully the desires and needs of international or multinational workers’. [68]

This general thesis reflects long standing emphases within operaismo: 30 years before the appearance of **Empire**, Tronti had argued that capital develops an understanding of its own interests thanks to initiatives from labour, and that ‘the European workers find before them, as the most advanced model of behaviour for their present needs, the way of winning, or the way of defeating the adversary, adopted by American workers in the 1930s’. [69] But the Keynesian welfare capitalism that Tronti sees as a creation of proletarian power in the era of the New Deal is what, according to Hardt and Negri, working class revolt destroyed in the 1960s and 1970s, making way for Empire.

What, thirdly, is the condition of the working class in this new phase of capitalist development? Hardt and Negri reject the idea that it represents an end to exploitation and oppression. The disciplinary society has been replaced by the ‘society of control’.

Instead of being shaped within specific institutions such as schools and factories, individuals find themselves under society-wide pressures to discipline themselves. At the same time, the new information technologies have made labour 'immaterial'. The working class must therefore be conceived in the very vague terms that Negri had already developed in the 1970s: 'We understand the proletariat as a broad category that includes all those whose labour is directly or indirectly exploited by and subjected to capitalist modes of production and reproduction.' [70]

Empire thus maintains the theoretical categories of Negri's version of Marxism, even if their content has changed. The social worker, for example, which in the 1970s Negri conceived as a result of what he would now call 'the disciplinary society', of the state regulation characteristic of Keynesian welfare capitalism, has become a product of the new 'informational capitalism': 'Today, in the phase of the worker militancy that corresponds to the post-Fordist, informational regimes of production, there arises the figure of the *social worker*.' [71] But Hardt and Negri prefer on the whole to use the Spinozan concept of the multitude when they seek to analyse the contradictions of Empire.

Here, where capital is genuinely global, it meets (as Rosa Luxemburg predicted) its limit. Under Empire 'the powers of labour are infused by the powers of science, communication, and language,' and 'life is what infuses and dominates all production'. Social activity as such is now the source of the economic surplus: 'Exploitation is the expropriation of co-operation and the nullification of the meanings of linguistic production.' Empire is a parasitic social formation, a form of corruption that lacks any positive reality compared to 'the fundamental productivity of being' that is expressed in the multitude. [72]

Once again, we see Negri reinterpreting Marxist concepts in looser, more metaphorical terms that permit their infusion with

Deleuze's metaphysics. Thus Hardt and Negri seek to bring out the negative and parasitic character of Empire as follows: 'When the action of Empire is effective, this is due not to its own force but to the fact that it is driven by the rebound from the resistance of the multitude against imperial power. One might say that in this sense resistance is actually prior to power.' As they acknowledge, this thesis of 'the priority of resistance to power' is derived directly from Deleuze, for which it is a consequence of the 'fundamental productivity' of life. [73] **Empire** is as much a work of applied poststructuralist philosophy as it is a piece of concrete historical analysis.

The limits of Empire

Naturally there is much that could be said about as complex and suggestive a book as **Empire**. I concentrate here on what seem to me its three central weaknesses. [74] The analysis it offers of contemporary capitalism is both generally vague and in certain specific respects badly misleading. Hardt and Negri situate themselves within the Marxist tradition of writing about imperialism, drawing on Luxemburg's argument that capitalism needs a non-capitalist 'outside' in order to purchase the commodities that workers cannot consume. [75] But beyond saying that Empire abolishes this outside, incorporating the entire world under the rule of capital, they say little about the crisis tendencies specific to this phase of capitalist development, unless the philosophical generalities cited above are supposed to constitute an account of these tendencies. Negri would no doubt dismiss the massive debate among Marxist economists provoked by Robert Brenner's interpretation of the history of post-war capitalism as 'objectivism', but **Empire** offers very little guidance to anyone interested in discovering the extent to which the mechanisms of capitalist crisis still operate today. [76]

Moreover, in one key respect it is positively misleading. Hardt and Negri deny that inter-imperialist conflict is any longer a significant feature of contemporary capitalism: ‘What used to be conflict or competition among several imperialist powers has in important respects been replaced by the idea of a single power that overdetermines them all, structures them in a unitary way, and treats them under one common notion of right that is decidedly postcolonial and postimperialist.’ In the place of imperialism, with its rival centres of power, we have an impersonal, decentred network of power, Deleuze’s *espace lisse*: ‘In this smooth space of Empire, there is no *place* of power – it is everywhere and nowhere’. [77]

Concealed here in what Ludwig Wittgenstein would call a cloud of metaphysics is a small nugget of truth. Hardt and Negri tend to define Empire as a form of sovereignty. [78] The problem of sovereignty is that of the *legitimation* of the exercise of power in moral and legal terms. Sovereignty is thus an ideological phenomenon, though, of course, like all instances of ideology, it has real effects. There has undoubtedly been a shift in ideological terms – thus the idea of humanitarian intervention asserts that it is permissible to violate the rights of other states not on grounds of national interest but in defence of the human rights and humanitarian needs of their subjects. More broadly, the development of what are called ‘forms of global governance’ such as the G7, NATO, the EU and the WTO suggests that sovereignty has become hybrid, so that state actions are often legitimised not on the basis of their national constitutional procedures, but rather under the authority of some international institution. [79]

This ideological shift does not, however, determine the actual distribution of geopolitical power. Not simply do the existing international institutions reflect the hierarchical nature of global power, in that they are dominated by the leading Western capitalist powers, but they are shaped by the conflicts that divide these powers, setting in particular the US against Japan and the

EU (itself a far from homogenous entity). Interlaced with these primarily economic and political forms of competition is the developing structure of geopolitical conflict that pits the US against both China and Russia. Not to recognise the depth of these antagonisms between rival centres of capitalist power is badly to misunderstand the nature of the contemporary world. [80]

It is also to come dangerously close to offering an apologetic view of this world. This tendency is indeed the second major weakness of Empire. The conception of **Empire** as a ‘smooth space’, a decentred network in which power ‘is everywhere and nowhere’, is not that far removed from the idea favoured by theorists of the Third Way such as Anthony Giddens that ‘political globalisation’ is accompanying economic globalisation and subordinating the world market to democratic forms of ‘global governance’. Hardt and Negri are critical of this idea, but some of their formulations lend themselves to appropriation for very different political purposes. Thus Mark Leonard, a particularly crass Blairite ideologue, published an enthusiastic interview with Negri in which he praised the latter for arguing that globalisation is an opportunity for ‘a left wing politics concerned with liberty and the quality of life, rather than for a reductive quest for equality between groups’ – which sounds more like Tony Blair than Toni Negri. [81]

Negri can’t be held responsible for the spin others put on his words, but he can be criticised for what he himself told Leonard: ‘The big shift is the impossibility of war between civilised nations. But it is not something that the industrialists brought about. It comes from the emancipation of working classes who were no longer willing to go to war’. [82] War is certainly highly improbable within the Western capitalist bloc, for reasons too complicated to explore here. But the spy plane crisis that pitted China against the US in the South China Sea in April 2001 is a symptom of a military build-up and developing geopolitical tensions in East Asia that could all too plausibly develop into

armed confrontation. Two American security analysts wrote recently of the tensions between the US and China over Taiwan, ‘Perhaps nowhere else in the globe is the situation so seemingly intractable and the prospect of a major war involving the US so real’. [83] This would be a war that pitted, Negri would presumably concede, ‘civilised nations’ against each other (one trusts that this terminology is intended ironically). Outside the advanced capitalist world, war shows no sign of disappearing – the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo alone has cost, on one estimate, 2.5 million lives since 1998. [84]

Hardt and Negri no doubt are aware of this kind of appalling suffering. Their point is that such progress as has taken place is a victory for the ‘multitude’. But even this thesis has apologetic overtones in a sense directly relevant to Negri’s own history. No one can deny that capitalism underwent a major restructuring in the 1970s and 1980s, one of whose main dimensions has been the greater global integration of capital. But is it really correct to see these changes as in some sense a conquest by the ‘multitude’? Viewing them thus writes out of history the real defeats that made possible the reorganisation of capitalism – the catastrophes at Fiat in 1979–1980, the Great Miners’ Strike in Britain in 1984–1985, and all the other struggles in which capital succeeded in breaking existing forms of working class organisation, weeding out militants, and re-establishing its dominion over areas where it had been under challenge.

Acknowledging this history does not require us to deny that, as Hardt and Negri put it, ‘globalisation, in so far as it operates a real deterritorialisation of the previous structures of exploitation and control, is really a condition of the liberation of the multitude’. [85] In a sense this is simply Marxist ABC – capitalism in its current form constitutes the context in which working class struggle develops. But this doesn’t mean we have to forget that the processes through which capitalism reformed itself involved serious defeats for the working class. The historical elision of these defeats may be convenient for Negri,

because it allows him to evade confronting how far his own theory and politics were found wanting in the decisive test of the late 1970s, but a real Marxism can't tolerate this kind of selective vision.

The most important reason for studying the history of past struggles is that it can help to clarify what strategy we should pursue in the present. But the third main weakness of **Empire** is that it offers its readers no strategic guidance. The book concludes with three demands for 'a political programme for the global multitude' – 'global citizenship', 'a social wage and guaranteed income for all', and 'the right to reappropriation'. [86] One can discuss the merits of these demands – the first and the third are, as formulated, very vague, while the second is commonplace in contemporary left-liberal politics. Much more serious, however, is the absence of any discussion of how to develop a movement that could implement this programme.

The strategic vacuum in **Empire** is no mere failure of detail, but reflects some of Hardt and Negri's deepest assumptions. In one slightly bizarre passage they argue that 'the most radical and powerful struggles of the final years of the 20th century' – Tiananmen Square, the first Intifada, the Los Angeles rising, Chiapas, the strikes in France in 1995 and in South Korea in 1996–1997 – did not share the 'recognition of a common enemy' or a 'common language of struggles'. [87] But, whatever may have been true of the other struggles, both the Zapatista rebellion and the French movement of November–December 1995 possessed the elements of a common political language, in both cases identifying the enemy as neo-liberalism. They therefore helped to forge the anti-capitalist consciousness that became visible at Seattle.

Hardt and Negri (who plainly wrote **Empire** before Seattle) comfort themselves with the following reflection:

Perhaps the incommunicability of struggles, the lack of well structured, communicating tunnels, is in fact a strength rather than a weakness – a strength because all of the movements are

immediately subversive in themselves and do not wait on any sort of external aid or extension to guarantee their effectiveness ... the construction of Empire, and the globalisation of economic and cultural relationships, means that the virtual centre of Empire can be attacked from any point. The tactical preoccupations of the old revolutionary school are thus completely irretrievable – the only strategy available to the struggles is that of a constituent counter-power that emerges from within the Empire. [88]

Elsewhere Negri has reversed Lenin's old adage, declaring, 'The weakest link of capitalism is its strongest link'. [89] Now if this were literally the case, if contemporary capitalism were genuinely a homogeneous 'smooth space' in which power was distributed uniformly, then the idea of strategy would indeed cease to have much application. But this is plainly false. Different parts of the globe are of varying importance to capital. As long as the natural wealth of sub-Saharan Africa continues to be extracted by fair means or foul, large parts of the continent can be left to the tender mercies of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The much smaller portion of the Earth where the vast bulk of the productive wealth of capitalism is concentrated – still primarily North America, Western Europe, Japan, and a few Asian and Latin American extensions – is a different matter altogether. The processes of what Trotsky called 'uneven and combined development' continue to operate in contemporary capitalism, creating huge concentrations of wealth and power at particular points of the system. This unevenness requires strategic analysis and debate in order to identify the enemy's points of vulnerability and our principal sources of strength.

Strategic thought is also necessary in order to respond to what Lenin called 'sharp turns in history', the sudden crises that offer unexpected opportunities for the revolutionary movement if they are recognised quickly. But Negri's entire view of history is curiously abstract – the multitude eternally confronts capital irrespective of the specific conditions, the accumulated contradictions, the subtle shifts in the balance of forces that the great political texts of the Marxist tradition are so masterly in

delineating. What is missing here is what Daniel Bensaïd calls ‘strategic reason’:

The art of decision, of the right moment, of the alternatives open to hope, is a strategic art of the possible. Not the dream of an abstract possibility, where everything that isn’t impossible will be possible, but the art of a possibility determined by the concrete situation: each situation being singular, the instant of the decision is always relative to this situation, adjusted to the goal to be achieved. [90]

This kind of strategic analysis is inseparable from the attempt to identify the agencies of transformation. Here Hardt and Negri have little helpful to say. It is perhaps one of the advantages of the concept of the multitude from their point of view that it identifies the oppressed and exploited as an anonymous, amorphous mass without any definite social location. Thus they celebrate immigrants and refugees, proclaiming ‘desertion, exodus and nomadism’ as a democratic force: ‘A spectre haunts the world and it is the spectre of migration.’ Through overflowing national borders and confusing all fixed identities the multitude constitutes a new ‘earthly city’ in opposition to the corrupt imperial city. [91]

Migration is undoubtedly a social and political reality of great contemporary importance. Talking it up, however, is hardly much of a novelty in the contemporary left-liberal academy, where for the past decade or so multiculturalism, hybridity, and nomadism have been deities assiduously worshipped by professorial pseudo-radicals such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha (both of whom are approvingly cited by Hardt and Negri [92]). This is not the only point where **Empire** runs the risk of breathing new life into postmodernist orthodoxy at a moment when it is showing all the signs of senile decay.

Beyond this general failure seriously to address problem of strategy, Negri shows some worrying signs of falling back into some of his older errors. He writes:

To attribute to the movements of the working class and of the proletariat this modification of the paradigm of capitalist power is

to affirm that men are nearing their liberation from the capitalist mode of production. And to take one's distance from those who pour out crocodile tears over the end of the corporatist accords of national socialism and syndicalism, as well as those who weep over the beauty of times past, nostalgic for a social reformism impregnated with resentment of the exploited and with jealousy that – often – seethes beneath Utopia. [93]

Challenged about this passage, Negri described trade unionists as 'kulaks' – the rich peasants whom Stalin sought to 'liquidate' with the forced collectivisation of agriculture at the end of the 1920s – and expressed nostalgia for 1977, when unemployed youth fought factory workers. [94] Hostility to the organised working class seems thus to have been preserved in aspic in Negri's thought for the past two decades.

Negri wrote in 1981, 'Proletarian memory is only the memory of past estrangement ... Communist transition is the absence of memory'. [95] One can see why he should say this, despite his undeniable gifts as a historian of any political thought: any attempt critically to probe his past would expose how he – and autonomism in general – failed the Italian left in the 1970s. This refusal to confront this past is not so much an individual moral failing as a symptom of the inherent limitations of Negri's version of Marxism.

Autonomism, as I sought to indicate at the beginning of this article, is a living political force. There are, thankfully, no contemporary versions of the Red Brigades. But the idea of exemplary action on behalf of the masses remains influential, whether in the Black Bloc's cult of street violence or the *Tute Bianche's* more peaceful tactics. These actions function as a substitute for mass mobilisation. In analyses such as Hardt's and Negri's the working class – reshaped in the transformations of the past few years but still very much a real force – is either dissolved into the amorphous multitude or denounced as a privileged labour aristocracy. The activists act in the name of one and try to bypass or confront the other.

Genoa exposed very clearly the limits of autonomist politics. On Friday 20 July 2001 the *Tute Bianche*'s direct action was attacked by large concentrations of police and stopped from reaching the Red Zone (the heavily fortified area of the old city where the G8 was meeting). Their leader, Luca Casarini, described what happened:

We were attacked in cold blood, when our march was totally peaceful. They charged us first with tear gas and then with armoured vehicles, closing off all escape routes. On Friday afternoon all hell broke loose, and people were afraid of dying ... when the charges with the tanks started, when we heard the first shots, we reacted by hiding behind garbage bins and throwing stones. [96]

All the special training and the body armour of the *Tute Bianche* could not match the armed power of the Italian state. Thousands of demonstrators, including sections of the revolutionary left, who had joined the *Tute Bianche*'s march found themselves reduced to passive onlookers at the battle. Before Genoa the *Tute Bianche* had announced the obsolescence of the traditional left:

At last Zapatism gets rid of the 20th century – this is an irreversible and unnegotiable break from the imagery of the European left wing. It gets beyond every classic opposition of 20th century political tradition: reformism versus revolution, vanguard versus movement, intellectuals versus workers, seizure of power versus exodus, violence versus non-violence. [97]

After Genoa, however, a humbler Casarini warned against the revival of 1970s-style terrorism: 'I'm really terribly afraid of it. There are individuals and small groups that could be tempted to turn themselves into armed vanguards ... This is the abyss that we might face in forthcoming months, if we don't change direction now.' [98] Casarini admitted that the *Tute Bianche* experience 'looks inadequate to face the imperial logic that is now before us', and advocated a move from 'civil disobedience' to 'social disobedience'. [99] If this involves a shift towards involvement in the working class movement, that will be a step forward. Genoa starkly exposed a truth of classical Marxism that

the *Tute Bianche* had so vaingloriously dismissed – only the mass mobilisation of the organised working class can counter the concentrated power of the capitalist state. In romanticising their own confrontations with this state, the autonomists have evaded the real task of revolutionary politics – the political conquest of the majority of the working class.

Toni Negri is still the key theorist of autonomism. We owe him solidarity as a victim of the Italian state. We may also respect his persistence as a revolutionary intellectual over the past four decades. But the fact remains that the influence of his ideas is an obstacle to the development of a successful movement against the global capitalism whose structures he seeks to plot in **Empire**.

Notes

1. This article originated as a talk at the Marxism 2001 event in July. I am grateful to Chris Bambery, Sebastian Budgen and Chris Harman for their help in providing material for it.
2. For example, N. Klein, *Reclaiming the Commons*, **New Left Review** 2:9 (May–June 2001), p. 86.
3. M. Hardt and A. Negri, **Empire** (Cambridge MA, 2000), p. 413.
4. E. Eakin, *What Is The Next Big Idea? Buzz Is Growing For Empire*, **The New York Times**, 7 July 2001; M. Elliott, *The Wrong Side Of The Barricades*, **Time**, 23 July 2001.
5. E. Vulliamy, *Empire Hits Back*, **The Observer**, 15 July 2001.
6. N. Klein, *Squatters In White Overalls*, **The Guardian**, 8 June 2001.
7. Interview in **II Manifesto**, 3 August 2001. See also *From The Multitudes Of Europe, Rising Up Against The Empire And Marching On Genoa (19–20 July 2001)*, 29 May 2001, www.qwerg.com/tutebianche/it. [Note by ETOL: This link has not been checked.]
8. There is a superb account of this period in P. Ginsborg, **A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943–1988**

(Harmondsworth 1990). For a general history of the upturn, see C. Harman, **The Fire Last Time** (London 1988).

[9.](#) For a very sharp analysis of the failure of the Italian left in this period, see T. Abse, *Judging the PCI*, **New Left Review** 1:153 (September–October 1985).

[10.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 25.

[11.](#) P. Ginsborg, **op. cit.**, pp. 320–332.

[12.](#) See C. Harman, *The Crisis of the European Revolutionary Left*, **International Socialism** 4 (Spring 1979).

[13.](#) P. Ginsborg, **op. cit.**, p. 382.

[14.](#) A collection of contemporary documents largely sympathetic to the movement will be found in *Red Notes (eds.)*, **Italy 1977–1978: Living with an Earthquake** (London 1978).

[15.](#) T. Abse, **op. cit.**, p. 30.

[16.](#) There is a useful study of his writing in this period in S. Wright, *Negri's Class Analysis: Italian Autonomist Theory in the Seventies*, **Reconstruction** 8 (1996). Negri had previously been a leading member of *Potere Operaio*, which organised along Leninist lines. A majority of its members joined the emerging autonomist movement.

[17.](#) See, for example, M. Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, in Conference of Socialist Economists, **The Labour Process and Class Strategies** (London 1976).

[18.](#) Quoted in S. Wright, **op. cit.**

[19.](#) T. Abse, **op. cit.**, p. 30.

[20.](#) Quoted in J. Fuller, *The New “Workerism” – the Politics of the Italian Autonomists*, **International Socialism** 8 (Spring 1980), reprinted in this journal.

[21.](#) For a clear account of the difference between exploitation and the oppression suffered by, for example, the unemployed, see E.O. Wright, *The Class Analysis of Poverty*, in **Interrogating Inequality** (London 1994).

[22.](#) A. Negri, **Marx Beyond Marx** (South Hadley MA, 1984), p. 173.

[23.](#) T. Abse, **op. cit.**, p. 35.

[24.](#) Negri returned to Italy in 1997 to serve out his sentence, which he is doing under fairly relaxed conditions. He is now allowed to live in

his flat in Rome but subject to a curfew between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m.

[25.](#) J. Fleming, *Editor's Preface*, in A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. vii.

[26.](#) A. Negri, **op. cit.**, pp. 19, 56, 94.

[27.](#) Ironically, given their other differences, this was the view of both E.P. Thompson and Althusser: see L. Althusser, Preface to G. Duménil, **Le Concept de loi économique dans *Le Capital*** (Paris 1978), and E.P. Thompson, **The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays** (London 1978), pp. 251–255.

[28.](#) See V.S. Vygotsky, **The Story of a Great Discovery** (Tunbridge Wells 1974), R. Rosdolsky, **The Making of Marx's *Capital*** (London 1977), and J. Bidet, **Que faire du *Capital*?** (Paris 1985).

[29.](#) A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. 17.

[30.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 91, 101.

[31.](#) For a sophisticated version of wage-push theory, see P. Armstrong *et al.*, **Capitalism Since World War Two** (London 1984).

[32.](#) A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. 131.

[33.](#) K. Marx, **Capital**, vol. I (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 770.

[34.](#) A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. 69.

[35.](#) K. Marx and F. Engels, **Collected Works**, vol. XXIV (London 1989), p. 81.

[36.](#) A. Negri, **op. cit.**, pp. 100–101.

[37.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 138, 140.

[38.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 27, 25.

[39.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 188.

[40.](#) **Ibid.**, p. xvi.

[41.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 172.

[42.](#) **Ibid.**, p. xvi.

[43.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 14.

[44.](#) See M. Foucault, **Discipline and Punish** (London 1977), and M. Foucault, **Power/Knowledge** (Brighton 1980).

[45.](#) Quoted in S. Wright, **op. cit.**

[46.](#) T. Cliff, [*The Balance of Class Forces in Recent Years*](#), **International Socialism 6** (Autumn 1979).

[47.](#) Quoted in S. Wright, **op. cit.**

[48.](#) Spinoza, **Ethics in Works of Spinoza**, vol. II (New York 1955), Appendix I, p. 78.

[49.](#) This argument is developed much further in A. Callinicos, **Is There a Future for Marxism?** (London 1982), which was written in response to the ‘crisis of Marxism’ of which Negri’s writings of the 1970s were a symptom.

[50.](#) See, for critiques of what Robert Brenner calls ‘supply-side’ theories of crisis, C. Harman, **Explaining the Crisis** (London 1984), pp. 123–126, and R. Brenner, *Uneven Development and the Long Downturn*, **New Left Review** 1:229 (May–June 1998).

[51.](#) See A. Callinicos, **Making History** (Cambridge 1987).

[52.](#) A. Negri, **op. cit.**, pp. 56–57.

[53.](#) See M. Hardt, *Translator’s Foreword*, in A. Negri, **The Savage Anomaly** (Minneapolis 1991). Negri derives the idea of the multitude from Spinoza’s political writings, where it plays a much more ambivalent role than Negri is willing to acknowledge. See E. Balibar, **Spinoza and Politics** (London 1998).

[54.](#) A. Negri, **Le Pouvoir constituant** (Paris 1997), pp. 429, 435.

[55.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 401.

[56.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 37, 40. In invoking Foucault’s **History of Sexuality**, Negri ignores the very significant differences between the first volume, which appeared in 1976, and the second and third, published shortly before their author’s death in 1984.

[57.](#) Deleuze’s **Foucault** (Paris 1986), which Negri cites in support of his interpretation of Foucault, is in fact a rewriting of Foucault’s thought on the basis of Deleuze’s own distinctive ontology of life and desire. For a critical discussion of Deleuze and Foucault’s treatments of resistance, see A. Callinicos, **Against Postmodernism** (Cambridge 1989), pp. 80–87.

[58.](#) G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, **Mille plateaux** (Paris 1980), pp. 512, 510, 583. Deleuze and Guattari develop a highly complex theory of the social and psychic dimensions of territorialisation and deterritorialisation in the first volume of **Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L’Anti-Œdipe** (Paris 1972). Deleuze is also the author of an important study of Spinoza, **Spinoza et le problème de**

l'expression (Paris 1968), that heavily influenced Negri's own treatment of the same philosopher in **The Savage Anomaly**. For anti-Hegelian Marxists Spinoza tends to act as an alternative reference point to Hegel. This tendency, already evident in Althusser, is taken to its extreme by his pupil Pierre Macherey in **Hegel ou Spinoza?** (Paris 1979). Though by no means an Althusserian, Negri is consistently hostile to both Hegel and the dialectic, an attitude he shares also with Deleuze and Foucault.

[59.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. 423, n23.

[60.](#) D. Bensaïd, **Résistances** (Paris 2001), p. 212.

[61.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, pp. 31–32. On hyperglobalisers, see D. Held *et al.*, **Global Transformations** (Cambridge 1999), ch. 1.

[62.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, pp. xii–xiii.

[63.](#) For a relatively sophisticated version, see M. Castells, **The Rise of the Network Society**, second edn. (Oxford 2000). Deleuze's role in promoting the metaphor of decentralised networks is stressed in L. Boltanski and E. Chapiello, **Le Nouvel esprit du capitalisme** (Paris 1999), for example, pp. 220–221.

[64.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. 43.

[65.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 23. Negri's notion of biopolitics has been taken up by *Ya Basta!*, for example to justify their use of body armour: 'The biopolitical is a form of politics that, from within the post-disciplinary paradigm of control, reconstructs the possibility of a collective acting. The danger lies in mistaking the epoch, returning to the only collective action that we believe we know: that of face to face, the facing off which is so clearly a part of the old conflict-form of discipline. The padding of comrades' bodies signifies instead the passage to another political grammar.' J. Revel, quoted in *Changing The World (One Bridge At A Time)? Ya Basta! After Prague*, www.geocities.com/swervedc/ybasta.html. [Note by ETOL: This link has not been checked.]

[66.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. 180, ch. 3.5.

[67.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 43, 259. See also, on the disciplinary society, **ibid.**, ch. 3.2.

[68.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 268–269.

[69.](#) M. Tronti, **op. cit.**, p. 104.

[70.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. 52.

[71.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 409.

[72.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 364, 365, 385, 387. See also **ibid.**, ch. 4.1 and 4.2.

[73.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 360, 469, n13. Compare G. Deleuze, **op. cit.**, pp. 95, 98.

[74.](#) A useful critique, albeit from an excessively orthodox Trotskyist standpoint, will be found in J. Chingo and G. Dongo, *Empire or Imperialism?*, **International Strategy 1** (2001), also available at www.ft.org.ar/estrategia/. [Note by ETOL: This link has not been checked.]

[75.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, ch. 3.1.

[76.](#) See the symposium on Brenner in **Historical Materialism 4** and **5** (1999).

[77.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, pp. 9, 190.

[78.](#) For example, ‘The radical qualitative shift should be recognised rather in terms of sovereignty.’ M. Hardt and A. Negri, *A Possible Democracy in the Age of Globalisation*, text due to appear in French in **Contretemps** (I am grateful to Daniel Bensaïd for supplying a copy).

[79.](#) See M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, ch. 1.1. The most influential modern treatment of sovereignty is by the right wing theorist of Weimar Germany Carl Schmitt. See especially **Political Theology** (Cambridge MA 1985). Negri’s **Le Pouvoir constituant** is to some extent his alternative theory of sovereignty to Schmitt’s.

[80.](#) See A. Callinicos *et al.*, **Marxism and the New Imperialism** (London 1984); G. Achcar, *The Strategic Triad: USA, China, Russia*, in T. Ali (ed.), **Masters of the Universe?** (London 2000); and A. Callinicos, **Against the Third Way** (Cambridge 2001), ch. 3.

[81.](#) M. Leonard, *The Left Should Love Globalisation*, **New Statesman**, 28 May 2001, p. 36.

[82.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 37.

[83.](#) K.M. Campbell and D.J. Mitchell, *Crisis In The Taiwan Strait?*, **Foreign Affairs**, July–August 2001, p. 15.

[84.](#) **The Guardian**, 31 July 2001.

[85.](#) M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, p. 52.

[86.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 400–406.

87. **Ibid.**, pp. 54, 56, 57.

88. **Ibid.**, pp. 58–59.

89. Title of paper delivered (*in absentia*) at the conference *Towards a Politics of Truth: The Retrieval of Lenin*, **Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut NRW**, Essen, 3 February 2001.

90. D. Bensaïd, **Les Irreductibles** (Paris 2001), p. 20.

91. M. Hardt and A. Negri, **op. cit.**, pp. 212, 213, 396. The reference is to St Augustine’s two cities, divine and earthly. This is one of a number of passages where Hardt and Negri draw analogies between the contemporary multitude and early or egalitarian versions of Christianity. **Empire** concludes by offering St Francis of Assisi as a model for ‘the future life of communist militancy’. **Ibid.**, p. 413.

92. **Ibid.**, pp. 422 n17, 143–145.

93. A. Negri, “*L’Empire*”, *stade supreme de l’impérialisme*, **Le Monde diplomatique**, January 2001, p. 3.

94. Remarks during a telephone discussion at the Lenin conference cited above in note 89.

95. Quoted in S. Wright, **op. cit.**

96. Interview in **La Repubblica**, 3 August 2001.

97. *Why are White Overalls Slandered by People who Call Themselves Anarchists?*, 8 July 2001, www.italy.indymedia.org. [Note by ETOL: This link has not been checked.]

98. Interview in **La Repubblica**, 3 August 2001.

99. Interview in **Il Manifesto**, 3 August 2001.

