

**Antonio Negri's *Empire and Beyond*:
The Reformation of the Lexicon of Modernity
and the Imagining of a Postnational Imaginary**

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In "Theory, Democracy, and the Public Intellectual," R. Radhakrishnan argues that the accusation that theory has been generating what Edward Said has called "wall-to-wall discourses" (786) cannot be properly addressed if theory is not contemplated as the epistemological but also political task of a theorist who is accountable to the world. Radhakrishnan transforms the question of theory by shifting attention to the complex position of the theorist before and in the world:

The challenge theorists face, particularly when they are committed to addressing the collective human condition, is that of critical alignment: how to line up the coordinates of their theoretical model with the contradictory, heterogeneous, and contingent whereabouts of life, existence, reality. Is reality to be addressed in the light of one's chosen theory, or should it be the other way around? Or should thinking bravely open up the space between? (793-94)

Despite its limitations and "blind spots," Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's controversial and widely acclaimed work on *Empire* and the multitude, which was inaugurated with the publication of *Empire* (2000) and continued with *Multitude* (2004), makes such a "brave" effort for it undertakes the task of theorizing globalization as a historical and discursive event and phenomenon while inventing the vocabulary for a future that can be imagined and possibly lived otherwise. In *Empire and Beyond*, Antonio Negri returns to his and Michael Hardt's theses in *Empire* and *Multitude* and develops them

in view of the critical responses that their work has received since their publication and before different audiences worldwide.¹ This collection of speeches that were delivered between 2003 and 2004, after Negri was finally granted a passport in April 2003, repeats and clarifies the use of a number of terms that derive from their controversial and much debated “political lexicon” that not only addresses the historical and political transformations that occur in the present but also aims at “establishing a genealogy internal to the process which has led from modernity to postmodernity (a genealogy which is also able to grasp continuities and discontinuities, facts and innovations)” (Negri 191-92) in order to critique the political vocabulary of modernity and, in the process, define “a programme for the future” (39).

The disintegration of the sovereignty of the nation-state, which, despite its persevering presence, is being debilitated, the transformation of labor, and the rise of a new social force, capable of forming postnational alliances and forging movements of resistance against the exploitation of transnational capitalism, are the formative, historical, and social conditions that remap the world and necessitate the creation of a new cartography that can best represent the ongoing political and social transformations on the global terrain. Empire is one of the founding elements of Hardt and Negri’s lexicon. Defined as a “non-place” rather than a center that has always already included its outside, margins, and peripheries (5), Empire (capitalized to be differentiated from the empires of modernity and their competitive forces and their subsequent transformations into nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) is both a structure and a process.

As a structure regulated by transnational capitalism that still feeds off the decaying but still persistent sovereignty of the nation-states, Empire is the realization of the world as one; by subsuming the conflicts and contradictions of the competing nation-states and the various localities, Empire “obfuscates” the previously represented as clear and distinct borders between “the inside and the outside” (Negri 125). In this particular speech, “A Post-Socialist Politics within Empire,” Negri undertakes the difficult task of defending their definition of Empire as the thoughtless announcement of the end of nations and conflicts. He instead argues that their definition of Empire as a “web of sovereignty” (122) acknowledges the history of the nation-state and

1. Since the publication of *Empire* (2000), Hardt and Negri’s work has evoked numerous and conflicting responses from a great number of intellectuals that represent various fields and disciplines. See *Debating Empire* (Gopal Balakrishnan, ed.) and *Empire’s New Clothes* (Paul A. Passavant and Jodi Dean, eds.).

its sovereignty and the ongoing events of conflicts and wars but accounts for them as “internal to the imperial structure itself” (125). The power of Empire to internalize conflicts and oppositions is, however, a disseminating one; it creates a heterogeneous rather than a centralizing structure as it affords space to the rise of a plurality of singularities that constitute an active social body, what Hardt and Negri call the multitude, capable of transforming the structure of Empire through new forms of resistance, and claims for a new kind of democracy no longer subject to the nation-state but conditioned by the shared property of the multitude, the common.²

Hardt and Negri define the multitude as a new political subjectivity, a new social force generated by the transformation of labor and its new immaterial conditions that produce not only knowledges subsumed by capitalism but also inventiveness and creativity that can attempt new forms of resistance and create the conditions of a counter-empire.³ The multitude, they aver, is the signifier of a polyvalent, international political subjectivity that is capable of representing different interests that share a common goal, the “promise of democracy” (Negri 13); this promise is radically transformed in a postmodern, globalized world, liberated from the restrictions of the structures of the nation-state and its bourgeois politics (10). The multitude acquires its body and soul within a rhizomatic structure of resistance (to invoke Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s influence on Hardt and Negri’s theory)⁴ formed by insurgent singularities that create alliances across the borders of nations, trade unions and economic interests; “the workers’ struggles,” “the independent cultural insurgencies of the subjected countries,” “the revolt of indigenous peoples,” and

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2. See “Democracy of the Multitude” in *Empire* (328-58) and *In Praise of the Common* (Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri); the “common” is defined as a heterogeneous field of differences that the multitude tries to “reappropriate” by “claim[ing] back and seiz[ing] not only its products but also its means of production, that is, the common as its own self-positing and self-referential production” (Casarino and Negri 17).
 3. In “The Italian Ideology,” Timothy Brennan argues that Hardt and Negri’s reading of Marx’s allusion to the “general intellectual” (104) in *Grundrisse* is a misconception of Marx’s analysis of “managerial planning” that does not refer to what Hardt and Negri call “immaterial labor” (104). For Brennan, Marx’s analysis and accurate prediction of the growing sophistication of the management of labor practices—what Marx calls “intellect” while “speaking of the role of industrial planning” (104)—that will regulate labor and maximize profit is radically different from the “immaterial values” (knowledges and affects) that Hardt and Negri see as the radical product of the rising multitude.
 4. For an analysis of the rhizomatic flow of capital, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. See also Brennan’s account of Hardt and Negri’s use of Deleuze and Guattari in “The Italian Ideology.”

“the desire for ‘another modernity’ than that imposed by imperialism” (12), are some of the multifarious manifestations of the multitude. Capable of producing not only material but also “immaterial labor” that generates concepts, discourses, new informations, and new imaginings of the world, the multitude can also produce “dis-utopias [dis-utopie], that is to say, a capacity for living within them, the possibility of carving out languages from the inside and of facilitating an emergence of the material desire for transformation” (63).

Despite the persuasive tone of these speeches on empire and multitude that effect a clarification of their terms and theses, certain questions remain.⁵ How can the various forces of the multitude overcome their conflicting economic and political interests in their reappropriation and invention of the common? The poor manual worker, a national subject with documents, is as much part of this multitude as the illegal immigrant without documents, the “sans papier”; how will they negotiate in the same space, national, state or the dis-utopian “non place” (Negri 29), which they inhabit unevenly and disjunctively and not at all “smoothly”?⁶ How will the material converse with the immaterial forces of production in a world rife with class antagonisms and conflicts, especially when bio-power (the forces of capitalism and imperialism that police the subject) has always already interpellated the biopolitical force (imaginative, intellectual, creative and, hence, resistant) of the multitude? Can the intellectual or immaterial worker easily speak to and be addressed by the manual worker in the “sweat factories” of the Empire?

As Giovanni Arrighi aptly remarks in “Lineages of Empire,” “Hardt and Negri’s idealized and idealistic view, not just of the multitude, but of capital and Empire as well” (37) does not reckon with the dismantling force of the capital that, by “intensifying competitions in the global market—including and especially intensification through labour migration—could well strengthen the patriarchalist, racist and national-chauvinist disposition of the world proletariat” (37). Arrighi’s warning is, alas, an already fulfilled prophecy; the rise of xenophobia and racism, and the growing conflicts in various urban centers and communities all over the world are manifestations of the unresolved competing interests that threaten the rise of the multitude and its social and political singularities forming alliances across their national, religious, ethnic and other differences. The resurgence of fundamentalisms in the post-September 11th world and the continuous dissemination of discourses of racism and hatred that

5. I have engaged with these questions before. See my essay “The Global, The Local and the Spectral: Contemplating Spectral Politics.”

6. See Malcolm Bull’s “Smooth Politics” in *Empire’s New Clothes*.

they have generated can threaten (or maybe have already threatened) the model of the multitude as a potentially transformative social actor.

These questions are prevalent in Europe, the topic of the speeches comprised in the second part of Negri's book, entitled "Europe: an Opportunity for Struggle" (83-115). Seen as a "necessity" (83) that can be projected against the monarchic rule of the US and its imperial strategies, Europe can be the alternative model to US imperialism and its "unilateralism" (85); a heterogeneous space open to the "expression of a democratic conflictuality" (84), Europe, Negri claims, can operate as a "terrain for the construction of a new political subject" (85). Negri believes that Europe can become a "counter-empire" under the condition that a different kind of Europe can be conceptualized and even invented against the "building of a European Community as a superstate" (84). Against "American unilateralism" (85), Europe can operate as a counter-hegemonic force, if only it affords space to the multitude that is rising in its terrain and fighting against its supranational constitutional order and the policies of the European Community that have imagined and invented its constitution as a "United States of Europe" rather than a "united political Europe" (95) that serves the interests of "those social strata who want to construct an absolute democracy at the level of Empire" and "propose themselves as counter-empire" (95). Europe can thus be reinvented, imagined and practised as the manifestation of empire as a "non-place" (86). Multilateral and "multitudinarian" as a "potenza against Empire" (86), it can be the manifestation of a space regulated by "a continuous encounter between multitudinarian forces" (86).

Such a utopian vision of Europe that functions rather as a counter-imperial and counter-hegemonic "potenza"⁷ than a "demos," the centralizing democracy of the nation-state, cannot be seriously engaged, not even at the level of imagination and experimentation, without a systematic genealogy of the discourses of exceptionalism that have informed and consolidated the European hegemony. Obsolete as they appear to be, these discourses are embedded in the foundations of the nation-states that are still competing in the terrain of Empire and regulate the biopolitical production of the multitude. The remains, even ruins of old imperialisms, haunt the present, even, or

7. For a clarification of Negri's use of this term, see Malcolm Bull's "You Can't Build a New Society with a Stanley Knife." According to Bull, Negri discovers in Spinoza's *Political Treatise* a "distinction between *potentia* (strength, force, creative activity) and *potestas* (authority, command, sovereignty)" (84) that becomes a foundation concept in his definition of the multitude that is forged out of the transformation of the "potestas of the sovereign" into "the potentia of the people" (84).

maybe more so, in Europe. The recent removal acts of the Roma gypsies in France, the 2008 December riots in Greece, the rise of neofascist and neoracist groups all over Europe are a few of the recent events that signify the urgency to contemplate the continuity between the old empires and the coming Empire that Hardt and Negri see as the “future anterior” of globalization.

Étienne Balibar’s *We, the People of Europe?* narrates a different present and future of Europe. The surfacing of neo-nationalisms, racism and xenophobia and the creation of new forms of discrimination against minority groups that designate the “foreign foreigner” (44); the making of “homme jetable” or “human garbage to be thrown out of the global cities” (128); the consequent rise of “communities of fate” where immigrants and non-immigrants, citizens and denizens, wanted and unwanted peoples are forced by history to live together and are called forth to invent the rules of their co-existence (44); and the “socially discriminatory function of borders” in a broadly unified world that needs borders more than ever “to segregate wealth and poverty in distinct territorial zones” thus operating as “essential institutions in the constitution of social conditions on a global scale where the passport or identity cards function as a systematic criterion” (113) complicates Negri’s representation of Europe as the promising manifestation of Empire that can be rendered benign once reclaimed and transformed by the immaterial forces of its multitude.

Negri’s use of Europe as a good example of how such a transformation can indeed take place on a global scale reveals how this cannot be the case, at least not without a systematic genealogy of the discourses of exceptionalism and a critique of the policies of racism and discrimination that they have generated. The forgetting and abandonment of such a necessary critical exercise have produced, in Europe at least, what Paul Gilroy calls the phenomenon of “postimperial melancholia.” “Postimperial melancholia . . . identified as the morbidity of heritage” (109) originates from the loss of Empire and the inability of post-imperial nation-states like the United Kingdom and France, to mention two vivid examples, “to work through the grim details of imperial and colonial history and to transform paralyzing guilt into a more productive shame that would be conducive to the building of a multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness” (108).

Although Gilroy refers to the controversial politics of multicultural policies and discourses in Britain, his term is also applicable to the contemporary political situation in Europe. The residue of the imperial inheritance that has not been processed within the framework of the contemporary conditions marked by the unchecked waves of immigrants and laborers not only from the former colonies but from countries inside the territory of Europe (the for-

mer Eastern block) still haunts the present. The road to Hardt and Negri's Empire is not open nor strewn with rose petals, especially not in Europe, a space still marked by the ruins and monuments of its empires, "where the notion of public good and the practice of politics seem to be in irreversible decline—undone by a combination of consumer culture, privatization and the neoliberal ideology" (Gilroy 155).

The reformation of the political vocabulary of modernity and the reconceptualization of its structures, capital, empire, the nation-state, and the singularities or multitudes that constitute the old and new, national and postnational communities, require more systematic genealogies of discourses of exceptionalism that still inform the global order and the nation-states, despite their decline and/ or transformation. Before one either fully rejects or endorses Hardt and Negri's vision of the future, one has to carefully consider a genealogy of the "lexicon" that translates this vision into language. As promising, attractive or infuriating as their vision of the future of globality might be, it has to be thought along the trajectory of the history of exceptionalism, as the nationally and culturally shared product of colonial modernity, a product that founds the Western and non-Western, imperial and postcolonial, formations of the nation-state. Exceptionalism needs to be reconfigured and studied not only as a "paradigm" of singular nations and/ or empires but as a network of discourses proliferated all around the world and disseminated through the channels of capitalism and imperialism.⁸ Such a proposition would enable a more effective and critical use of Hardt and Negri's Empire and multitude, the foundational concepts of the postnational imaginary which their reformed lexicon attempts to articulate. Without such a self-reflexive critique that intertwines the residues of old imperialisms with the exceptionalist discourses of global capitalism, their thesis that globalization can disseminate rhizomatic flows and structures, which produce a new space, a "non place," that the multitude can transform to its benefit, thus effecting a rupture in the hegemonic structure of Empire and a reawakening of justice and global democracy, will remain wishful thinking.

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8. See Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception*, which inaugurates such a concurrent genealogy of exceptionalism, in the context of a "contrapuntal reading" of Carl Schmidt and Walter Benjamin's theories of the political. See also Donald E. Pease's *The New American Exceptionalism* and William V. Spanos' *American Exceptionalism in the Age of Globalization*.

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