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WAITING FOR THE MULTITUDE

A review of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Penguin, 2004. 427 pp. \$27.00 cloth; \$16.00 paper. ISBN: 1-5942-0024-6.

ANTONIO NEGRI OPENS A CHAPTER OF HIS *Time For Revolution* with a quote from Pascal's *Pensées*: "Judith, God speaks at last during the ultimate oppressions." This reference to the apocryphal savior of the Jewish people, a heroine who was beautiful, confident, and almost gratuitously violent, is perhaps more telling than Negri realizes. Our task is to review the significance of his and Michael Hardt's recent work and to consider its bold, though welcome, claim to have discerned a promising new form of subjectivity. An earnest appreciation for their analysis of the current global situation does not preclude us from doubting whether a heroine such as Judith could ever emerge within their schema.

In the years since the publication of *Empire*,¹ the authors have been faced with a barrage of criticism which is stunning in its intensity and surprising in its scope. Cast as defenders of al Qaeda,² denounced as obscurantist charlatans,³ and disavowed as betraying the proletariat,⁴ the authors have since set about clarifying their project. *Multitude* certainly does this: it addresses these criticisms, along with other concerns that have been raised, such as the claim that recent U.S. unilateralism disproves the existence of a global capitalist Empire and the question of whether fundamentalist terrorist groups would possibly count as part of the resisting multitude. *Multitude* is also written for a general readership, eschewing many of the debates internal to academia which concerned them in *Empire*. This means, for example, that many of the Deleuzian concepts which the authors previously deemed necessary are no longer emphasized; if this makes for a less intricate argument, it also increases the readability of the narrative.

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000).

² Peter Beinart, "Sidelines," *The New Republic*, September 24, 2001, 8.

³ Brian C. Anderson, "The Ineducable Left," *First Things* 120 (February 2002).

⁴ Bashir Abu-Manneh, "The Illusions of *Empire*," *Monthly Review*, 56:2 (June 2004).

On two points, however, this commitment to clarity finds *Multitude* making claims for which it provides little theoretical basis. First, the authors do not support their repeated assertions of having established an ontology of the multitude: at most, the authors have a kind of postmodern collective anthropology. Second, it is not at all clear that the multitude is the ineluctable response – even effect – of Empire’s realization, given the absence of a theory of how this multitude could actually *act*. When the authors concede that the emergence of the multitude is dependent upon a “strong event,” we wonder whether such an unforeseeable rupture is possible within their framework.

I

Recall that the argument of *Empire* was structured around two transformations: the “passages of sovereignty,” or the emergence, decline, and replacement of the nation-state, and the “passages of production,” or the transition out of modernity understood from the standpoint of economic and social production. *Multitude* is structured similarly, with the first two sections of the book elaborating on these questions of sovereignty and production.

War

The first division argues that the global “state of exception” has become a permanent state of war, in which the sovereignty of Empire extends not only across all national boundaries but into the depths of each human life. By “war” the authors do not mean only military action or even the “war on terror”: “War, in other words, becomes the general matrix for all relations of power and techniques of domination, whether or not bloodshed is involved. War has become a *regime of biopower*, that is, a form of rule aimed not only at controlling the population but producing and reproducing all aspects of social life.” (13) The biopolitical status of imperial power is shown not just in the objective military and economic subjugation of the planet, but in the growing importance of “producing and reproducing” who these subjects are, as is manifested in the emphasis the Pentagon placed in 2003 on “winning the hearts and minds” of Iraqi citizens. The truly global reach of Empire, already discussed in the first book, means that these social and psychological operations cannot be restricted to the “outside” enemy populations, but must be conducted equally against a state’s own citizens. Words like “freedom,” “democracy,” and the doctrine of American exceptionalism have served this purpose recently. Again, the state of permanent war means that every conflict is conducted on every level. It is

conducted as military engagement and economic confrontation, but also as police action and the defense of civilization itself. The authors claim therefore that when “life itself [is put] on center stage, then *war becomes properly ontological*” (19).

Many of us understood the argument of *Empire* to be weakened somewhat by the re-emergence of U.S. unilateralism in 2002. But Hardt and Negri claim that U.S. aggression over the last few years has only confirmed their thesis: that since the postmodern transformation of sovereignty, no model based on the nation-state will remain dominant for long. “The necessity of the network form of power thus makes moot the debates over unilateralism and multilateralism, since the network cannot be controlled from any single, unitary point of command” (61). Let’s take as an example the Bush administration’s attempt throughout 2003 to persuade both the Iraqi and American peoples of its good intentions. The government quickly realized that “winning hearts and minds” would be impossible without the appearance of firm, multilateral support *on every level*: soldiers from a “broad coalition” of countries were necessary militarily, but also economically and perceptually. Although the importance of Iraqi oil reserves was downplayed, everyone understood that the long-term economic health of the oil-consuming West was certainly at issue. Although it did not take place with the Iraqi public, ideological discourses on “freedom” and “democracy” were crucial, and were echoed by any Western leaders that could be bribed. And immediately after the American invasion, the primary concern became withdrawing troops as soon as possible so that international forces could assume responsibility. And of course, having cut itself off from the network, the unilateral nation-state found itself without support. When even the richest, most powerful nation-state in the world can commit itself to no more than one or two major conflicts at any one time (we note how quickly talk of intervention in Syria or Iran was universally dismissed as impossible politically, but also economically and militarily), how can the demise of the nation-state’s primacy be doubted? In a later aside titled “A New Magna Carta,” Hardt and Negri explain that a “monarchical,” U.S.-centered global order is unsustainable because the current “aristocracy”—other powerful nation-states, multinational corporations, and supranational institutions—can and will unite to leverage their support to prevent further unilateralism and constant war (320-4).

An additional confirmation of *Empire*’s thesis comes in the domain of production: this permanent “state of exception” has accelerated the collapse of the modern distinction between the political and the economic. A central theme of *Empire* was the rise of “immaterial labor,” the intellectual, linguistic, and affective forms of work which, often unwaged, have also gone uncounted in traditional economic analysis. The authors argue here that in *Empire*, this “informatization

of production" means exploitation can be extended beyond the working day and into one's dreams, relationships, and thoughts. As war and administration extends across all of life, so does unrestricted economic activity: immaterial labor passes beyond the economic and becomes productive of life as a whole. Where war becomes an ontological threat, calling into question not merely the existence but the meaning of the being of humanity, production becomes the "production of subjectivity" (66).

Even readers skeptical of the authors' description of Empire itself may concede that in recent years the imperial tendency toward extensive reach and intensive control over subjects has become more characteristic of our situation, not less. The problem, therefore, is to find a form of resistance which "does not rely on the sovereignty of the people [which would only replicate existing problematic forms] but is based instead in the biopolitical productivity of the multitude....Is there an immanent mechanism that does not appeal to any transcendent authority" (79)?

Multitude

The second division explores this possibility of production as a form of resistance. It extends *Empire's* analysis by showing that the resistance automatically generated by war is capable of self-transformation, and it considers these transformations in their economic, social, and political capacities, arguing that the multitude is the only political form capable of resisting imperial sovereignty's comprehensive assault. In this section the authors review many of the concrete topics already raised in *Empire*, including problems with the IMF and World Bank and the weakness of international law, the importance of migration for their analysis, and the new depths of capitalist exploitation. The accounts of successful efforts at gaining private patents on types of mice, ancient strains of seed in India, and the T-cells of a living human being are extremely chilling. But we will focus on what are their first attempts to give a firmer shape to the concept of multitude.

Hardt and Negri define multitude as "composed of a set of singularities – and by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different" (99). "The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference) but on what it has in common" (100). Thus they seek to navigate the poles of unity, found in the classical Marxist simplification of categories, and plurality, seen in the liberal insistence on the irreducible multiplicity of classes. Which is to say that "multitude is a class concept" (103), and that "class is really a biopolitical concept

that is at once economic and political" (105). There are two immediately visible benefits to this analysis: economic struggles may no longer be depolitized and delivered into the hands of technocrats at the Federal Reserve, and likewise political problems may no longer be abstracted away from the economic conditions that cause them. The concept of multitude therefore retrieves the audacious claim that economic problems have a political solution, and vice versa!

The charge of orthodox Marxist economism would no longer make any sense, because in this era the authors find that immaterial labor has become hegemonic. This is not to minimize the plight or relevance of the industrial or agricultural workers of the world; "hegemonic" only means that immaterial labor exerts a tendency on all other forms of labor and society. It forces them to become more communicative, affective, and intelligent, just as industrialized labor (at its historical emergence a numerical minority) forced changes in older forms of work. The result is that the sphere of the economic is increasingly indistinguishable from the social and political. That immaterial labor exhibits an informatizational *tendency*, however, and that Empire itself is still in the initial throes of formation, means that the description of multitude "is based not so much on the current empirical existence of the class but rather on its conditions of possibility" (105). From this point on a more philosophical component emerges, and it becomes clear that earlier critiques of multitude centered around anti-globalization movements and mobilized resistance in developing countries will have been insufficient.

The hope is obviously that the multitude will constitute itself as an agency powerful enough to work against and through the contradictions of Empire. The authors assert, for example, that "the poor are not merely victims but powerful agents" (129). And the multitude gladly takes on the description of the demons cast out by Jesus Christ: it "is legion; it is composed of innumerable elements that remain different, one from the other, and yet communicate, collaborate, and act in common" (140). The language of composition and constitution is crucial: "from this ontological perspective, the flesh of the multitude is an elemental power that continuously expands social being, producing in excess of every traditional political-economic measure of value" (192). One of the most important features of Hardt and Negri's analysis, in contrast to other contemporary thinkers of community and commonality, is they reclaim ontology from the *shibboleth* instituted by the critique of onto-theology.

Democracy

If this ontological multitude is "latent and implicit in our social being," the authors also realize that "it will require a political project to bring it into being"

(221). While the preceding discussions deepen our understanding of exactly how the new global order entails an exhaustive, permanent war and intensive new forms of exploitation, it is the final section, "Democracy," that gives a more detailed analysis of the possibility of resistance.

Hardt and Negri set out to reclaim the concept of democracy from its representative and historically-realized formulations, in order to achieve the "unrealized democracy of socialism" (249). They link the critique of existing forms of representation, the fight against poverty, and opposition to war together as the three conditions for any kind of truly democratic world (269). They use an "ontological foundation" to consider such crises as the economic and ecological destruction wrought by neoliberal IMF policies and the silence of the American pharmaceutical industry in the face of the global AIDS epidemic. In this way, each point of conflict is linked to all the others: "a democratic project lives in each of these grievances, and the struggles are part of the flesh of the multitude" (285). In this context, "there is no conflict here between reform and revolution;" even conservatives can see the "dangers of revolution in even modest reform proposals" (289). We begin to understand that in an important sense the multitude *is* what it *does*: it is brought into being by resisting the oppressions that define it.

The problem at this point is: if reform and revolution are the same thing, if a long march through the institutions is the same as storming the Winter Palace, then where do we begin the militant reform? Well, the authors are not *so* equivocal: they argue, for example, that reforming the UN, WTO, IMF, etc. will not solve much, since these institutions necessarily replicate existing forms of representation (290-296). Additionally, the complex experiment taking place in the Europe Union provides little consolation. "The multilevel federal model, in fact, seems only to undermine traditional forms of representation without creating new ones" (296). It turns out that revolutionary compromise cannot happen unless there is first the emergence of a new agent. "What is necessary is an audacious act of political imagination to break with the past" (308). Having rejected all existing forms of representation and sovereignty, it remains only for Hardt and Negri to embrace Spinoza's description of absolute democracy as the unacknowledged basis of every society (311). This is a crucial thesis, because it elicits the thought that every sovereign power depends on the consent of the governed not only in a contingent legal sense but as a matter of fact and of power: sovereign power can never be absolute. Militarily, suicidal actions make even overwhelming force irrelevant; economically, strikes and sabotage illustrate how much capital depends on labor (331-336). Since capital and sovereignty overlap completely in Empire, the multitude possesses enormous political power at every site of economic and social activity. As important as they are, however,

destructive and defensive measures do not engender a positive political program.

At this point the authors return to the “biopolitical productivity of the multitude” and claim for it an inherent decision-making capacity, that the “economic production of the multitude is not only a model for political decision-making, but also tends itself to become political decision-making.” Just as linguistic conventions mutate in an infinite number of ways according to the demands of usage, so can the multitude conform itself to the requirements of its actualization. More clearly: “[E]xpression gives a name to an event. Just as expression emerges from language, then, a decision emerges from the multitude in such a way as to give meaning to the whole and name an event” (339).

This “audacious act” or “event” is what causes the multitude to emerge as a viable agent of change, although the text seems somewhat torn between affirming the multitude’s fluctuating desire and insisting on an event as the ultimate condition for the multitude’s existence. On the one hand, the multiplicity of the multitude is described as “a process of self-transformation, hybridization, miscegenation...not just a matter of being different, but also of becoming different. Become different than you are” (356)! At the same time, we find that “we have to recognize the decision also as an event—not the linear accumulation of *Chronos* ... but the sudden expression of *Kairos*.” “Revolutionary politics must grasp ... the moment of rupture or *clinamen* that can create a new world” (357). In the final paragraph, the authors leave us in a moment of hopeful anticipation:

After this long season of violence and contradictions, global civil war, corruption of imperial biopower, and infinite toil of the bio-political multitudes, the extraordinary accumulations of grievances and reform proposals must at some point be transformed by a strong event, a radical insurrectional demand.... In time, an event will thrust us like an arrow into that living future (358).

II

Multitude’s ambivalence toward immanent flows of desire and the rupturing event is no accident. About halfway through the text we find a comment about the multitude which, thankfully, is *not* posed in relation to some concrete social movement: “In philosophical terms we can say that these are so many singular modes of bringing to life a common laboring substance: each mode has a singular essence and yet they all participate in a common substance” (125). Philosophically, this is the most helpful sentence in the book, since it shows that

we should take the frequent invocations of Spinoza very seriously indeed.⁵

The two most significant problems with *Multitude* are in fact easily clarified once the underlying Spinozist framework is revealed. First, for all their claims to have provided an ontology of the multitude, Hardt and Negri expect us to be satisfied with only a handful of sentences which could be identified as making ontological determinations. While their insistence on the question of political ontology is welcome and indeed timely – the ethics of alterity having provided no viable political articulation – a philosophical argument cannot rest on the back of references to the Zapatistas and the Seattle protests. At first glance, it seems the authors may simply have sacrificed some intellectual depth for the sake of broader appeal, an understandable goal given the contested reception of *Empire*. Perhaps interested academics should assume this work to be a continuation of Negri's *The Savage Anomaly*?⁶ But how then are we to interpret the total absence of any reference to Negri's foundational work anywhere in *Multitude*?

Moreover, there are clues that the ontology the authors now have in mind may be somewhat different from the earlier theoretical work. As cited above, in the multitude “each mode has a singular essence and yet they all participate in a common substance.” This is consistent with the authors’ reading of Spinoza’s political theory in the sense that absolute democracy, or the absolute sovereignty of the multitude, is the unacknowledged substance of all society, and individual classes and laborers are particular modes of that substance. The direct relationship between mode and substance is a departure from Spinoza’s *Ethics*, in which particular modes are mediated by the category of the attributes, but so far this coheres with Negri’s earlier writing.⁷ What suggests a departure, however, is the claim that the activation of the multitude requires an “audacious act...to break with the past” (308). If the flux of production and desire internal to the multitude as it currently exists—if it exists—is insufficient, what would be the ontological status of this rupture? As neither the phenomenal labor of the modes nor the primary substance of multitude itself, any transforming event would have to correspond to the absent category of attribute.⁸ In short, there is sufficient

⁵ Compare with a key definition from the *Ethics*: “E1D4: By mode I understand the affections of a substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived.” Benedict Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, ed. and tr. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 85.

⁶ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*, tr. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁷ “To the extent that the *Ethics* opens to the constitutive problem as such, the function of the attribute will become more and more residual. In effect, Spinoza’s philosophy evolves toward a conception of ontological constitution that...eliminates that ambiguous metaphysical substratum [attribute] that emanationist residues, translated from the new culture, retain.” Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, 59.

⁸ Negri characterizes the attribute “as a transgression of being,” (*Savage Anomaly*, 56) but rejects both possible interpretations of it as either a subjectivist moment of “logical emanation” that assigns value to being, or as an objective function of productive spontaneity.

reason here to wonder whether the ontology of *Multitude* marks a new development, in which case the text is severely lacking. If it does not, we deserve further explanation of how this event-function fits within the existing theory.

With the second problem we bring the question of the attributes to its conclusion. How can anything like a “strong event” (358) ever happen within the closed ontology of a Spinozist universe? The problem is not one of materialism versus idealism, but rather of the status of subjectivity. This is not only a criticism: it is to the authors’ credit to have realized that in history substantive political transformations have often required some kind of abrupt catalyst to initiate the process, if this is in fact what they have done. If we interpret their talk of event as a muted recognition of the inadequacy of gyrating desiring-production, this marks a major development in the authors’ political theory. But it is also incongruous with a metaphysics derived from Spinoza.

The impossibility of a Spinozist subject is not a new critique. On Hegel’s view,

the freedom of the subject protests vehemently against the Spinozistic substance, since the fact that I exist as subject, as individual spirituality and the like, is, according to Spinoza, nothing but a modification or transient form. This is what is shocking in the inner content of Spinoza’s system...the moment of the negative is what is lacking and deficient in this one, rigid, motionless substantiality.⁹

Or what amounts to the same basic critique in a more recent idiom:

[T]he message of collaboration-in-differences is ideology at its purest – Why? Because any notion of a ‘vertical’ *antagonism* that cuts through the social body is strictly censored, substituted by and/or translated into the wholly different notion of ‘horizontal’ differences with which we have to learn to live, because they complement each other. And the key question is: Does the Deleuzian theory that forms the philosophical background of *Empire* provide the conceptual apparatus properly to conceive this antagonism?¹⁰

It is not at all clear in *Empire* or even in the first three hundred pages of *Multitude* that the emerging multitude would need anything other than itself, its productivity and animal vitality, in order to resist Empire. What the comments quoted above confirm is that Negri’s earlier dismissal of Spinoza’s category of attribute, a move which Deleuze also made,¹¹ was in fact the consistent move to

⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume III: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Robert F. Brown (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 160-161.

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, “The Ideology of Empire and Its Traps,” in *Empire’s New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, ed. Paul A. Passavant & Jodi Dean (New York: Routledge, 2004), 258.

¹¹ Discussion of the attributes in his *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza disappears when Deleuze begins constructing an original philosophy*. Cf. *Difference and Repetition*, tr. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), 40: “Substance must itself be said of the modes and only of the modes.”

make. Whether attribute is taken as a consciousness that assigns value to being or as an independent source of spontaneous production, and Negri rejects both these interpretations as images of the “bourgeois world,”¹² attribute is definitely a vertical “transgression of being” and is thus on the order of a superstition to be dissolved. Hardt and Negri’s glorification of multiplicity means that the violent punch of a “strong event” would be, if not immediately a sign of some proto-fascism, at least a structural impossibility. On the smooth Spinozist plane of pure immanence, where subjects and desires slide in all directions, something as eruptive and ontologically foreign as an event is precisely that which can never happen.

This critique does not preclude us from wondering exactly what the authors are hoping for in the “event”. We notice that *Multitude* continues the practice begun in *Empire* of appropriating religious concepts and themes for the purpose of illustration. Some readers have suggested that these references to St. Francis and Iconoclasm are evidence of an incipient yearning for the theological, that in fact the Church – the church-to-come, of course, not the Actually Existing Church, with its reactionary sexual policies and fundamentalist “Low-Church” relatives – is exactly what the authors are calling multitude. We wonder: does *Multitude*’s references to vampires and *Star Trek* also therefore betray the essential primacy of science fiction?

The authors’ metaphorical use of religious concepts in no way confirms the “Radically Orthodox” thesis that worthwhile philosophy is (at the very least implicitly) theological, and that the unpilferable remainder is simply invalid. On the contrary, a more attentive read suggests that, if anything, Negri and Hardt are employing a centuries-old textual strategy begun by their master, who reversed the common sacralization of divine creation so that instead divine being was only understood as the immanent realm of attributes: “God, or Nature”.¹³ Just as Spinoza’s critique of religion began not with an outsider’s condemnation but with the subtle subversion of theological concepts from within, if the authors’ work has any theological significance at all it is to suggest that the failure of the Church to combat global capitalism entails a situation in which previously rich theological notions are wholly bereft of their original meaning, useful only as metaphors for the struggle of the oppressed and often irreligious multitude. Their invocation of Judeo-Christian love, for example, is not a genuflection before the altar of the virtues but simply a concrete example of how affective labor (caregiving, nurturing social relationships) is an ontological and therefore political concept (351). As with any critique of religion, there is always

¹² *Savage Anomaly*, 59.

¹³ Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, p. 198.

potentially space for pastoral and prophetic appropriation; but any kind of theological reading to identify the resisting multitude with the Church would be risky at best and at worst the epitome of hermeneutic violence.

We opened with a quote from Pascal, and perhaps we should read that same quote a little further: "If the cooling of love leaves the Church almost without believers, miracles will rouse them. This is one of the last effects of grace." What Hardt and Negri cannot account for, what their oft-claimed ontology does not provide for, is precisely a way in which something like a laicized miracle could occur. *Multitude* is an unqualified success in the way that it sharpens and updates *Empire*'s analysis of the new global order, and the book deserves sustained attention for this analysis alone. But Hardt has suggested in public appearances that there are already some ideas forming for a third book; so it seems that for a robust theory of the multitude's emergence we, like the multitude, must wait.

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