



Review: Return of the Meta-Narratives

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William Vaughan

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Review Essay

Return of the Meta-Narratives

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2000. xvii + 478 pp. \$40 (cloth); \$19.95 (paper).

Marxism's initial hostile encounter with postmodern theorists seems to have given way to new dialogues, even synthesis. Such efforts have concentrated on identifying certain aspects of postmodern culture as manifestations of capitalist restructuring. I take Hardt and Negri's work, *Empire*, to be in this vein, a recombinant postmodern/autonomist Marxism, a view which takes the postmodernists seriously as theorists without sacrificing emphasis on class struggle. The result is an important opening of perspectives on the postmodern proletariat condition, a return of the meta-narratives with a vengeance.

The hostilities between postmodern theory and marxism have important historical roots. Many of the Parisian progenitors of postmodern theory, Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard, Kristeva, were one-time marxists for whom the defeats such as the student-worker uprisings of 1968 and the French PCF were a watershed of disillusionment. The theories they subsequently developed can in part be seen as an attempt to understand the nature of the conflicts apparently beyond the horizons of any orthodox marxism, and why these movements failed in their revolutionary aspirations. There was thus implanted at the root of postmodern theory an anti-marxist tendency which both turned in outwardly reactionary directions and contained strong radical impulses.

In their attempt to grasp the problems marxism had apparently failed to address, the dissident Parisian intellectuals looked, of all places, to conservative American sociology, and concepts of postindustrialism. Just as according to postindustrial theory, contemporary societies are passing beyond industrialism to informationalism, so, according to the prophets of postmodernity, we are now speeding past the limits of modernity, with its confidence in reason, progress, and universal political projects, into utterly unknown territory. Among the most important features of this postmodern territory is its communicational texture, where signifiers are supreme over referents, images overpowering of substance, and symbolic exchange turning the real into a procession of simulacra. The real is constituted by a play of texts, discourses, language-games, or codes. This has intensified into a society saturated with technologically reproduced images which have broken down the solidity of the material world into an immaterial flow of digits and data subjected to infinite

processings and reprocessings. The result is an ambience multiplicitous in the extreme.

In such postmodern theorizations, marxism gets depicted as fatally anachronistic, an obsolete and tedious meta-narrative still holding that the economic sphere constitutes a ground-level base of which other cultural superstructures are mere epiphenomena. These claims expire as it becomes apparent that the real is made, not in the material transformation of the world, but in the immaterial play of signification. Consequently, the importance attributed by marxists to class, locations with relationships of production, gets dissolved in favor of concepts of social identity as decentered, transitory, and heterogeneous.

Negri seems well-positioned for the moving of a version of postmodern marxism into the mainstream of theory. He emerged from that marxism identified with the *autonomia* movement of Italian workers, students, and feminists of the 1960s and 1970s, including Panzieri, Tronti, Bologna, Alquati, Dalla Costa, and Berardi. In the late 1970s *autonomia* was destroyed in a forceful episode of political repression, and Negri variously linked to the Red Brigades terrorist faction in Italy, imprisoned from 1979-1983, and exiled. Yet over the 1980s and 1990s the movement continued to develop, undergoing new mutations and making fresh international connections. Groups within the orbit of *autonomia* were among the first to analyze the postindustrial restructuring of capital as a weapon aimed against social dissent. Since that time certain autonomist theorists, most notably Negri, have devoted increasing attention to the vast new informational apparatus of contemporary capitalism. What makes their perspective notable is that it grasps the new forms of knowledge and communication not only as instruments of capitalist domination, but also as potential resources of anticapitalist struggle.

At the heart of the autonomist analysis lies Marx's familiar examination of the relation between labor and capital: a relation of exploitation in which workers, separated from the means of production, are compelled to sell the living labor power from which the capitalist extracts surplus value. In elaborating this account, however, most western marxisms have emphasized only the dominant and inexorable logic of capital. Its accumulative logic, unfolding according to ineluctable laws, figures as the unilateral force shaping the contemporary world. The autonomist's rediscovery was that Marx's analysis affirms the power, not of capital, but of the creative human energy of labor, the form-giving flame of constitutive society.

Marx had referred to the way technological change results in a change in the organic composition of capital focused on the power of capital to direct production through the accumulation of machines. In autonomist theory, however, this emphasis is reversed: the analysis of

"class composition" is aimed at assessing the capacity of living labor to wrest control away from capital. It starts from workers' struggles: how they arise, how they are connected or divided, their relation or lack of relation to official workers' organization, and their capacity to subvert capitalist command. Class composition is thus in constant change. If workers resisting capital compose themselves as a collectivity, capital must strive to decompose or break up the threatening cohesion. It does this by constant revolutionizing of the means of production—by recurrent restructurings involving organizational changes and technological innovations that divide, deskill, or eliminate dangerous groups of workers.

The autonomy of autonomist marxism thus came to affirm labor's fundamental otherness from capital and also the recognition of variety within labor, a radical polycentric understanding of anticapitalist alliances. Working-class composition and capitalist restructuring re-compose and decompose in turn, chasing each other over ever widening and more complex expanses of social territory. As long as capital retains the initiative, it can actually harness the momentum of struggle as a motor of development, using workers' revolts to propel its growth. The revolutionary counterproject is then to rupture this recuperative moment, unspring the dialectical spiral, and speed the circulation of struggles until they attain an escape velocity in which labor tears itself away from the gravitational pull of incorporation within capital, in a process autonomists refer to as autovalorization. Labor in this respect is potentially autonomous from capital.

By extending the analysis of class composition to include reproductive as well as productive labor, and unwaged as well as waged work, autonomists opened up marxism to radically new theoretical and organizational horizons. Unlike the Frankfurt School theorists, they did not find the scope of the social factory grounds for despair. If capitalist production now requires an entire network of social relations, these constitute so many more points where its operations can be ruptured. Waged and unwaged workers are not just passive victims of technological change but active agents who persistently contest capital's attempts at control. This contestation can take two forms, the first of which is sheer refusal, the theme of perhaps the most famous and most reviled of autonomist texts, Negri's *Domination and Sabotage*. Written in the context of the Italian industrial struggles of the 1970s in the giant Fiat plants and elsewhere, Negri here proposed that, confronting the introduction of huge systems of semiautomated technological control, there could be no question of accepting the necessity of modernization, as official trade unions insisted. Instead workers should stop the innovations used against them by sabotage if necessary. The other side to

autonomist analysis, that gives it a greater dynamism, is its affirmation of the possibility of workers' creative capacity to reappropriate technology. In its attempt to technologically control labor, capital cannot but create scientifically literate workers who could eventually reverse the cycles of information into collective organizations.

The basis of Negri's analysis of political alignments derives from his readings in and writings on philosophy, particularly his prison work as well as his analysis of the *Grundrisse* in *Marx beyond Marx*. They also pay allegiance to Negri's fascinating reading of Spinoza in *Savage Anomaly*, whose exposition of power is both a political critique and an ontological transformation. In book two of *Ethics*, Spinoza distinguished between God's power as *potentia*, inseparable from its actuality, and the legislative power of *potestas*, which is predicated on the separation between will and intellect. That is, Spinoza's is an assault on *potestas* as the analogy of divine and legislative power. Spinoza is denying that God has any power (*potestas*) analogous to that of a tyrant, or even an enlightened prince. For Negri, this political critique has as its consequence the development of an immanent ontological organization that is directly opposed to transcendent order. This new sociality constitutes a different politics from the traditional thematics of constitution and legislation maintained with the "bourgeois tradition," by whom Negri would identify the political philosophical tradition of from Hobbes to Rousseau to Hegel, which has primarily thought constitutive power from the standpoint of the constituted—from the law, the state, sovereignty, or the necessity of transcendental mediation. The political question has been, what is the legitimate foundation of power (*potestas*) as transcendent authority? Order has been thought and maintained, whether in the form of law, the general will, the state, or the market—as the absolute other of disorder. Negri develops it in different directions: what are the possibilities of a sociality of constitutive power that no longer produces constitutions separate from itself but is itself constitution? Negri has long suggested that these new practices can be grasped within the history of ontology and politics, within a countertradition that subsists alongside bourgeois thought that involves a genealogy of divergent strands and a return to modernity. For Negri the two figures who stand out in this terrain are the Spinoza of the *Tractatus* and not the *Ethics*, and the Marx of the *Grundrisse* and not *Capital*.

In particular, Negri's insistence on the link between knowledge and productive forces is evident in his readings of the old lensgrinder. Spinoza's metaphysics rejects the critical rupture of the market as an arcane and transcendental episode, that instead interprets (immediately) the relationship between appropriative tension and

productive force as the fabric of liberation. The thematics of the Spinoza study are to be understood in the context of Negri's attempt to rethink such concepts as materialism, production, force, crisis, power, and collectivity. The emphasis on the liberation of productive forces, its appropriation by the people, and its antithesis to the capitalist mode of production are derived by Negri from Spinoza's writings. Through Spinoza, Negri conspires to unsettle the notion of the absolute nature of truth and reason considered requisite to most bourgeois analyses of human behavior and change. In Negri's terms, illusion and imagination are central to the ways in which truth functions. Rather than think in rigid and binary terms about illusion and truth, Negri wants to reinforce the fluid and constitutive nature of perception and constructions of reality. In reconfiguring the role of power in relation to the state in bourgeois society, Negri uses Spinoza to challenge expressions of natural-right philosophy and especially notions of a social contract, both of which are at the basis of the legitimation of the state.

Perhaps it is only Negri who can recapture today why the term *spinozism* was so castigated in earlier centuries, although the outlines for its radicality should be sufficiently familiar: the Bible is not the work of one author, it contains various histories later assembled by one or more compilers without regard to the concordance of those histories with one another; miracles and prophecies occurred in such a way so as to impress the vulgar; and the superiority of the ancient Jews over others confined itself to their form of government. If all of this was true, then all distinctions between the sacred history of the chosen people and the history of the heathens collapses and the idea of an incarnation of the meaning of universal history in the particular history of the Hebrew people is destroyed. No doubt Hardt and Negri's *Empire* will be met with similar response as the culmination of an all-out assault on the sacredness of everything once held dear and true.

Hardt and Negri extend all of this into the heart of the globalized present characterized by an emerging postcolonial and post-imperialist form of sovereignty they christen *empire*. The book is content with tracing the pre-history of all of the tributaries which have led now to the flood. Part One sets out the legal and bio-political coordinates of the new imperial order. Parts Two and Three make up the main body of the text and narrate the history of Empire in and out of modernity in processes of political decolonization, economic recentering, and globalized administration, at the levels of sovereignty and production. Part Four looks into the possible fall of Empire, and sets out an anti-imperial political philosophy grounded in the potential of the multitude, the political correlate of living labor. The text, to employ a crude commodification, is a one stop shopping place for every

contemporary marxist theme, from the exclusion mechanisms and crisis of Jeffersonian space in the colonial U.S., to the sovereignty elements of the cold war, theormonuclear weapons, monetary controls, the productions of alterity, globalism, soviet decline, a scorecard to dozens of de-territorializations and re-territorializations of the last 30 years.

The larger accomplishment of the book seems to me to be the importance of the marxists finally having overcome their withering hostility to postmodernism and acknowledged, at least to some degree, its successes. Thus Hardt and Negri are thoroughly immersed in, and mark the benefit of, the work of Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard; *Empire* has chapters on virtualities, disciplinary governability, and Wittgenstein. The marxists had for years pointed to the many self-contradictions into which postmodernism lapsed as it dismissed totalizing theories while itself indulged in ornate gestures of historical speculation. The marxists challenged the credibility of the information society theory whose accuracy so much postmodernist theory simply assumed, and chortled at the suggestion that capital has quietly succumbed to ineffable postindustrial evaporation. But Hardt and Negri also understand how such theories have identified aspects of life in an information-intense, technologically enveloped society that have previously escaped marxist analysis, that Foucault's panopticism and Baudrillard's hyperreality cannot be lightly dismissed. They also acknowledge how these theories have revealed serious problems with the specific metanarrative of classical marxism, and how its central protagonist, the industrial proletariat, seems to have vanished. Hardt and Negri's *Empire* seeks nothing less than to have taken great measure of the postmodern and still locate agents of contestation and practices of opposition, that the game is not over even under acknowledged postmodern conditions.

A key moment prior to this *detente* was Derrida's startling affirmation, in his 1994 *Specters of Marx*, of the unsurpassability of marxism's horizon for contemporary thought. While claiming a new importance for certain features of marxist analysis, Derrida's was also a challenge for marxism to come to terms with its own past, political and theoretical, to admit frankly and openly the crimes committed in its name, the errors in which it indulged, the massively undemocratic forms of organization which it tolerated. In turn, the marxists argued that the effects of deconstruction, for example, have been to give aid and comfort to the enemy. Deconstruction too has a history of a politics of difference that can only be said to have been ineffective and in fact coincide with practices of imperial rule, as the authors charge several times in their current text. Derrida's reply to Negri's criticisms of *Specters of Marx* was how, in Negri's demand that philosophical

discourse take on a dimension of practicality, Negri, Derrida insists, re-ontologizes a now spectralized "value" in both exploitation (the social organization of labor) on the one hand, and communism (constitutive resistant) on the other. Negri, for his part, insists that his is a new post-deconstructive ontology, now centered on the multitude. Unlike the poststructuralists Negri does not want to endorse the notion of the process without a subject, which he sees as necessary for revolution.

Hardt and Negri's *Empire* is a more full-blown response to Derrida's challenge for greater articulation of the postmodern proletarian condition, and it is largely successful, but such a return to meta-narrative is fraught with difficulties. There must be demonstrated that the importance attributed by marxists to class is not dissolved in favor of concepts of social identity as decentered, transitory, and heterogeneous. In a world which to the postmoderns contains innumerable and incommensurable accounts of the real, the marxist ambition to grasp the totality, to gain a comprehensive overview of the societal whole, remains suspect. It is seen as a manifestation of a dominative drive the equal to any totalitarian schemes of social control done in marxism's name. To turn in such a way as to think the total annihilation of capital is to continue to turn in the manner of the first turning, and to lap it. The logic of leaving postmodernism behind is the failure to resist the impulse of presence, which claims that whatever is behind is no longer present. Just as imperial racist theory attacks modern anti-racism from the rear, and actually co-opts and enlists its arguments, now *deconstruction* has become the property of capitalism—the event character of its activity now reified into the performances of agents who carry on their business within the technological economy, shaped in accordance with market forces that tell us our capacities and talents and products are useless unless commodified. Just as the marxists can now say that finally Derrida has, after long silence, addressed the specter of Marx, so too now the derridians can reply how Hardt and Negri are finally tapping into the resistance character of *differance* without saying the same.

William Vaughan
Ashland University