



## Review: Can Immanence Explain Social Struggles?

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# CAN IMMANENCE EXPLAIN SOCIAL STRUGGLES?

ERNESTO LACLAU

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *EMPIRE*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.

In a recent interview<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière opposes his notion of “people” (*peuple*)<sup>2</sup> to the category of “multitude” as presented by the authors of *Empire*. As is well known, Rancière differentiates between *police* and *politics*, the first being the logic of counting and assigning the population to differential places, and the second the subversion of that differentiating logic through the constitution of an egalitarian discourse which puts into question established identities. “The people” is the specific subject of politics, and this term presupposes a sharp division in the social body which cannot be led back to any kind of immanent unity. *Empire*, on the contrary, makes immanence its central category and the ultimate ground of the multitude’s unity.

The main lines of Rancière’s critique provide a good starting point for what we have to say about the book. The immanentism of Hardt and Negri would be linked, according to Rancière, to their Nietzschean/Deleuzian ethics of affirmation, which does away with any reactive or negative dimension. *Empire* would belong, in that respect, to the whole tradition of modern political philosophy, which is profoundly metapolitical: “the kernel of metapolitics is to lead back the precarious artifices of the political scene to the truth of an immanent power which organizes beings in a community and identifies the true community with the grasped and sensible operation of this truth” [“*Peuple ou multitudes*” 96]. From Hardt and Negri’s rejection of any inherent negativity in political subjects, it follows that the power inherent in the multitude has to be a disruptive power, “lodged in all states of domination as its ultimate content, a content destined to destroy all barriers. ‘Multitudes’ have to be a content whose continent is *Empire*” [“*Peuple ou multitudes*” 97]. Disruptive forces operating through a purely immanent movement are what Marxist theory called “productive forces,” and there would be, according to Rancière, a strict homology between the place of productive forces and that in which multitudes, as described in *Empire*, act. Rancière points out that productive forces should not necessarily be understood in any narrow productivist sense: there has been a constant widening of the concept from the strict economism of classical Marxism, to the recent attempts to introduce in it the ensemble of scientific and intellectual abilities, passing through the Leninist attempt to supplement via political intervention a role that productive forces refused to fulfill.

I think that Rancière has rightly stressed what I see as the main source of several weaknesses of *Empire*, including a central one: that within its theoretical framework politics become unthinkable. So I will start from a discussion of its notion of immanence and move later to various other theoretical and political aspects of the book.

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1. See Rancière, “*Peuple ou multitudes: Question d’Eric Alliez à Jacques Rancière*.”

2. See Rancière, *La Méésentente*.



Let us start with the authors' discussion of the origins of European modernity. While the usual insistence is on the secularization process, that process would be, "in our view . . . only a symptom of the primary event of modernity: the affirmation of the powers of *this* world, the discovery of the plane of immanence. 'Omne ens habet aliquod esse proprium'—every entity has a singular essence. Duns Scotus' affirmation subverts the medieval conception of being as an object of analogical, and thus dualistic predication—a being with one foot in this world and one in a transcendent realm" [*Empire* 71]. Duns Scotus's insistence on the singularity of being would have initiated an assertion of immanence that the authors describe as a process whose representative names would have been Nicholas of Cusa, Pico della Mirandola, and Bovillus—other names quoted are Bacon and Occam—and whose point of arrival is Spinoza. "By the time we arrive at Spinoza, in fact, the horizon of immanence and the horizon of the democratic political order coincide completely. The plane of immanence is the one on which the powers of singularity are realized and the one on which the truth of the new humanity is determined historically, technically, and politically. For this very fact, because there cannot be any external mediation, the singular is presented as the multitude" [73]. The revolution, however, ran into trouble. It had its Thermidor. The Thirty Years' War was the outcome, and the need for peace led to the defeat of the forces of progress and the instauration of absolutism.

The first striking thing that one finds in this analysis is that it gives us a truncated narrative. For the assertion of a radical immanentism does not start, as Hardt and Negri seem to believe, at the time of Duns Scotus but much earlier, during the Carolingian Renaissance—more precisely, in Scotus Erigena's *De divisione naturae*. And in its initial formulations it had nothing to do with secularism, for it was an answer to strictly theological difficulties. The attempt to go back to those origins does not obey a purely erudite scruple; on the contrary, to clarify the context of theological alternatives of which immanentism was only one has direct relevance to the political issues that we are discussing today. The original theological question—which occupied the mind, among others, of no less a thinker than Saint Augustine—was how to make compatible the worldly existence of evil with divine omnipotence. If God is responsible for evil, he cannot be absolute Goodness; if he is not responsible for evil, he is not Almighty. Immanentism in its first formulations is an answer to this question. According to Erigena evil does not really exist, for things we call evil are necessary stages that God has to pass through in order to reach his divine perfection. But this is obviously impossible without God being, somehow, internal to the world.

From that point onward, immanentism had a long career in Western thought. It is very much present in Northern mysticism and in some of the authors discussed in *Empire*, like Nicholas of Cusa and Spinoza, and it will find its highest point in Hegel and Marx. Hegel's cunning of reason closely follows the argument that Erigena formulated one thousand years before. As he asserts in the *Philosophy of History*, universal history is not the terrain of happiness. The Marxian version is scarcely different: society had to supersede primitive communism and pass through the whole hell of class division to develop the productive forces of humanity, and it is only at the end of the process, in a fully developed communism, that the rationality of all of this suffering becomes visible.<sup>3</sup>

What is important, however, in reference to these theological debates are the alternatives that remain in case the immanentist route is *not followed*. For in that case evil is not the appearance of a rationality underlying and explaining it but a brute and irreducible fact. As the chasm separating good and evil is strictly constitutive and there is no

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3. I have discussed these matters in more detail in my essay "Beyond Emancipation."

ground reducing to its immanent development the totality of what exists, there is an element of negativity which cannot be eliminated either through dialectical mediation or through Nietzschean assertiveness. We are not very far here from the alternatives referred to by Rancière in his interview. (Let us observe that, strictly speaking, the category of *excess* is not incompatible with the notion of a nondialectical negativity that we are proposing. Only if we try to combine excess with immanence will the nonpolitical turn that we will presently discuss be unavoidable.)

In the same way that, with modernity, immanence ceased to be a theological concept and became fully secularized, the religious notion of evil becomes, with the modern turn, the kernel of what we can call “social antagonism.” What the latter retains from the former is the notion of a radical disjuncture—radical in the sense that it cannot be reabsorbed by any deeper objectivity which would reduce the terms of the antagonism to moments of its own internal movement—for example, the development of productive forces or any other form of immanence. Now, I would contend that it is only by accepting such a notion of antagonism—and its corollary, which is radical social division—that we are confronted with forms of social action that can truly be called *political*. To show why this is so, I will consider an early text by Marx that I have discussed fully elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> In it, Marx opposes a purely human revolution to a merely political one. The differential feature is that in the former a *universal* subject emerges in and for itself. In the words of Marx: “By proclaiming the *dissolution of the hitherto world order* the proletariat merely states the *secret of its own existence*, for it is *in fact* the dissolution of that world order.” To put it in terms close to Hardt and Negri’s: the universality of the proletariat fully depends on its *immanence* within an objective social order which is entirely the product of capitalism—which is, in turn, a moment in the universal development of the productive forces. But, precisely for that reason, the universality of the revolutionary subject entails the end of politics—that is, the beginning of the withering away of the State and the transition (according to the Saint-Simonian motto adopted by Marxism) from the government of men to the administration of things.

As for the second revolution—the political one—its distinctive feature is, for Marx, an essential asymmetry: that between the universality of the task and the particularism of the agent carrying it out. Marx describes this asymmetry in nonequivocal terms: a certain regime is felt as universal oppression, and that allows the particular social force able to lead the struggle against it to present itself as a universal liberator—universalizing, thus, its particular objectives. Here we find the real theoretical watershed in contemporary discussions: *either* we assert the possibility of a universality which is not politically constructed and mediated, *or* we assert that all universality is precarious and depends on a historical construction out of heterogeneous elements. Hardt and Negri accept the first alternative without hesitation. If, conversely, we accept the second, we are on the threshold of the Gramscian conception of hegemony. (Gramsci is another thinker for whom—understandably, given their premises—Hardt and Negri show little sympathy.)

It is interesting to see the consequences that *Empire* draws from its approach to immanence. There is an actual historical subject of what they conceive as the realization of a full immanence: it is what they call the “multitude.” The full realization of the multitude’s immanence would be the elimination of all transcendence. This can only be accepted, of course, if the postulate of the homogeneity and unity of the multitude as an historical agent is not put into question—a matter to which we will return shortly. But some of the results of this strict opposition between immanence and transcendence can

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4. See my essay “Identity and Hegemony: The Role of Universality in the Constitution of Political Logics.” The text by Marx to which I am referring is “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction.”

quickly be detected. Let us take their way of dealing with the question of sovereignty. For them, modern political sovereignty—well anchored in the counterrevolutionary trend of the second modernity—is reduced to the attempt to construct a transcendent political apparatus.

*Sovereignty is thus defined both by transcendence and by representation, two concepts that the humanist tradition has posed as contradictory. On the one hand, the transcendence of the sovereign is founded not on an external theological support but only on the immanent logic of human relations. On the other hand, the representation that functions to legitimate this sovereign power also alienates it completely from the multitude of subjects. . . . Here [in Bodin and Hobbes] the concept of modern sovereignty is born in its state of transcendental purity. The contract of association is intrinsic to and inseparable from the contract of subjugation. [Empire 84]*

So, sovereignty was an essentially repressive device to prevent the democratic upsurge of an unspecified multitude. What a beautiful fabula! For as anyone acquainted with the modern theory of sovereignty knows, its practical implementation entailed a far more complicated process than the story proposed by Hardt and Negri. In the first place, the multitude they are speaking about is a purely fanciful construction. What we had in early modernity was an estamental society, profoundly fragmented, which did not move at all in the direction of constructing a unified political subject capable of establishing an alternative social order. Royal sovereignty was established, fighting on a double front: against the universalistic powers—the Church and the Empire—and against local feudal powers. And many newly emerging social sectors—bourgeois, especially—were the social base that made possible the emergence of royal sovereignty. That the transference of control of many social spheres to the new social states is at the root of the new forms of biopower is incontestable, but the alternative to that process was not the autonomous power of some hypothetical multitude but the continuation of feudal fragmentation. Furthermore, it was only when this process of centralization had advanced beyond a certain point that something resembling a unitary multitude could emerge through the transference of sovereignty from the king to the people.

This leads us to the second aspect of Hardt and Negri's dichotomy: the question of representation. What are the conditions for the elimination of any form of representation? Obviously, the elimination of any kind of asymmetry between actual political subjects and the community as a whole. If the *volonté générale* is the will of a subject whose limits coincide with those of the community, there is no need for any relation of representation, nor for the continuation of politics as a relevant activity. That is why, as we mentioned earlier, the emergence of a universal class heralded, for Marxism, the withering away of the State. But if the society is internally divided, the will of the community as a whole has to be *politically* constructed out of a primary—constitutive—diversity. In that case, the *volonté générale* requires representation as its primary terrain of emergence. This means that any “multitude” is constructed through political action—which presupposes antagonism and hegemony.

Hardt and Negri do not even pose themselves this question, because for them the unity of the multitude results from the spontaneous aggregation of a plurality of actions which do not need to be articulated with one another. In their words: “If these points were to constitute something like a new cycle of struggles, it would be a cycle defined not by the communicative extension of the struggles but rather by their singular emergence, by the intensity that characterizes them one by one. In short, this new phase is defined by the fact that these struggles do not link horizontally, but each one leaps vertically, directly to the virtual center of Empire” [58].

One cannot avoid finding it difficult to understand how an entity that has no boundaries—"The concept of Empire is characterized fundamentally by a lack of boundaries: Empire's rule has no limits" [xiv]—can still have a virtual center, but let it pass. What we are told, anyway, is: (1) that a set of unconnected struggles tend, by some kind of *coincidentia oppositorum*, to converge in their assault on a supposed center; (2) that in spite of their diversity, without any kind of political intervention, they will tend to aggregate with each other; (3) that they could never have aims that are incompatible with each other. It does not take long to realize that these are highly unrealistic assumptions, to put it mildly. They clash with the most elementary evidence of the international scene, which shows us a proliferation of social actors fighting each other for a variety of religious, ethnic, or racial reasons. And the assumption that imperialism is over ("*The United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project. [ . . . ] No nation will be world leader in the way modern European nations were*" [xiii–xiv]) does not fare any better, as events in the world after September 11 easily show. What is totally lacking in *Empire* is a theory of *articulation*, without which politics is unthinkable.

This gap in the argument is particularly visible if we consider the way in which *Empire* deals with the distinction strategy/tactics. For our authors the distinction collapses, but it is clear that the autonomous vertical struggles belong to the sphere of tactics rather than to strategic calculation. I want to be very precise on this point of my critique because I also think—although for reasons different from those of Hardt and Negri—that the distinction between strategy and tactics as inherited from the socialist tradition cannot be accepted any longer. For classical socialism there was a clear differentiation between them and a strict subordination of tactics to strategy. Now, a basic assumption in this vision was that the class identity of the strategic actors remained unchanged throughout the political process. For Kautsky the strict working-class identity of the socialist actors was a basic dogma. For Lenin class alliances did not transform the identities of the intervening forces ("to strike together and to march separated"). And for Trotsky the whole strategy of the permanent revolution makes sense only if the taking up of democratic tasks by the working class does not contaminate the aims and nature of the latter.

It is precisely this assumption, in my view, that has to be put into question. For the present proliferation of a plurality of identities and points of rupture makes the subjects of political action essentially unstable and thus makes impossible a strategic calculation that covers long historical periods. This does not mean that the notion of strategy becomes entirely obsolete, but it does mean that the strategies have to be short-term ones and that the various tactics become more autonomous. It is clear, anyway, that what becomes increasingly central is the moment of political articulation—the moment, precisely, that is entirely absent from Hardt and Negri's analysis as a result of their conception of struggles *spontaneously* converging in their assault on a systemic center.

Another feature of Hardt and Negri's multitude that requires consideration is their inherent nomadism, which they explicitly link to the Deleuzian rhizomatic movements. What is proper to the multitude is being-against: "One element we can put our finger on at the most basic and elementary level is *the will to be against*. In general, the will to be against does not seem to require much explanation. Disobedience to authority is one of the most natural and healthy acts. To us it seems completely obvious that those who are exploited will resist and—given the necessary conditions—rebel" [210]. Today, however, the very ubiquity of Empire—which is no longer an *external* enemy—would make it difficult to identify those whom the multitude is against. The only solution would be to be against everything, in every place. The main pattern of this new kind of struggle is desertion. "Whereas in the disciplinary era *sabotage* was the fundamental notion of

resistance, in the era of imperial control it may be *desertion*. Whereas being-against in modernity often meant a direct and/or dialectical opposition of forces, in postmodernity being-against might well be most effective in an oblique or diagonal stance. Battles against the Empire might be won through subtraction and defection. This desertion does not have a place; it is the evacuation of the places of power” [212].

This desertion takes the form of nomadic migrations—economic, intellectual, and political exodus creates an essential mobility which is the new pattern of class struggle. Mobility would have been the privileged terrain of republicanism since early modern times (the examples quoted are the Socians of the Renaissance, the religious transatlantic migrations of the seventeenth century, the WW I agitation in the United States in the 1910s, and the European autonomists of the 1970s). These nomadic actors are the new barbarians. The concept of migration can, however, be expanded: it is not only a question of physical, literal migrations, but also of figural ones—the transformation of bodies can also be considered as an *anthropological exodus*.

*We certainly do need to change our bodies and ourselves, and in perhaps a much more radical way than the cyberpunk authors imagine. In our contemporary world, the now common aesthetic mutations of the body, such as piercing and tattoos, punk fashion and its various imitations, are all initial indications of this corporeal transformation, but in the end they do not hold a candle to the kind of radical mutation needed here. The will to be against really needs a body that is completely incapable of submitting to command. It needs a body that is incapable of adapting to family life, to factory discipline, to the regulations of a traditional sex life, and so forth. [216]*

From this perspective the proletarians of the nineteenth century could be seen as nomads, for although they did not displace themselves geographically “their creativity and productivity define corporeal and ontological migrations” [217].

What are the difficulties with this rather triumphalist vision? There are several. In the first place, the assertion that “the will to be against does not seem to require much explanation” is mere wishful thinking. Here the alternative is clear: either resistance to oppression is some kind of natural and automatic mechanism which will spontaneously operate whatever the circumstances, or it is a complex social construction which has conditions of possibility external to itself. For me the second is the correct answer. The ability and the will to resist are not a gift from heaven but require a set of subjective transformations that are only the product of the struggles themselves *and that can fail to take place*. What is missing in *Empire* is any coherent theory of political subjectivity—psychoanalysis, for instance, is entirely absent. Largely for that reason, the whole notion of being-against does not resist the slightest examination. It is easy to see the role that it plays in the economy of Hardt and Negri’s argumentation: if one is “against” without defining an enemy, the idea that struggles against Empire should take place everywhere finds its justification (and, a fortiori, we have the guarantee that vertical struggles would coalesce around a single target without any need for their horizontal articulation). Unfortunately social struggles do not follow this simplistic pattern. All struggle is the struggle of concrete social actors for particular objectives, and nothing guarantees that these objectives will not clash with each other. Now I would agree that no overall historical transformation is possible unless the particularism of the struggles is superseded and a wider “collective will” is constituted. But this requires the implementation of what in our work we have called the *logic of equivalence*, which involves acts of political articulation—precisely the horizontal linking that Hardt and Negri put aside. The “being-against” is, once more, a clear indicator of the antipolitical bias of *Empire*.



Finally, the notion of “anthropological exodus” is hardly more than an abusive metaphor. The role attributed to migration is already extremely problematic. It is true that the authors recognize that misery and exploitation could be determinant of the will of people to move across frontiers, but this element of negativity is immediately subordinated to an affirmative will to migrate, which ultimately creates the possibility of an emancipatory subject. Needless to say, this martial conception of the migratory process does not correspond to any reality: reasons for various groups to migrate are very different and are not unified around any anti-Empire crusade. But when we are told that the rebellion against family life or the development of proletarian capacities in the nineteenth century have also to be conceived as migratory acts, the notion of migration loses all specificity: any kind of historical change—for better or worse—would be conceived as migration. A good metaphor is one that, through analogy, reveals a hitherto concealed aspect of reality—but that hardly happens in the present case.

It is toward the end of their book that the authors address, to some extent, the question that we have been posing throughout: that of political articulation. Let us quote them:

*How can the actions of the multitude become political? How can the multitude organize and concentrate its energies against the repression and incessant territorial segmentations of Empire? The only response that we can give to these questions is that the action of the multitude becomes political primarily when it begins to confront directly and with an adequate consciousness the central repressive operations of Empire. It is a matter of recognizing and engaging the imperial initiatives and not allowing them continually to reestablish order; it is a matter of crossing and breaking down the limits and segmentations that are imposed on the new collective labor power; it is a matter of gathering together these experiences of resistance and wielding them in concert against the nerve centers of imperial command. [399]*

But how is “gathering together these experiences of resistance and wielding them in concert” going to operate? Hardt and Negri assert that about the specific and concrete forms of this political articulation they can say nothing. They, however, formulate a “political program for the global multitude” which is organized around three demands: the demand for global citizenship (so that the mobility of the working force under the present capitalist conditions is recognized and that groups of the population like the *sans papiers* have access to a full citizenship); the right to a social wage (so that an income is guaranteed to everybody); the right to reappropriation (so that the means of production are socially owned).

I can only say that I do not disagree with any of these demands—although it is clear that they do not amount to a fully fledged political program—but what sounds strange, after a whole analysis centered on the need to strike everywhere from a position of total confrontation with the present imperial system, is that these three political aims are formulated in a language of *demands* and *rights*. Both demands and rights have to be *recognized*, and the instance for whom that recognition is requested *cannot be* in a relation of total exteriority vis-à-vis the social claims. Each of the three demands, in order to be implemented, requires strategic considerations concerning changes in the structure of the State, autonomization of certain spheres, political alliances and incorporation into the historical arena of previously excluded social sectors. That is, we are in the terrain of what Gramsci called “war of position.” But this political game is strictly incompatible with the notion of a plurality of unconnected vertical struggles, all targeting—through some unspecified mechanism—an assumed virtual center of the Empire.

Perhaps the ultimate incoherence of this book is that it proposes fragments of a perfectly acceptable political program, while its conditions of implementation are denied by the central theoretical and strategic categories on which its analysis is based. Multitudes are never spontaneously multitudinarian; they can only become so through political action.

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