

# Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri interviewed by Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman

## THE GLOBAL COLISEUM: ON *EMPIRE*

### Abstract

In this interview with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Brown and Szeman press the authors of *Empire* on a number of questions which have arisen both out of their own use of *Empire*'s theoretical and political framework and, given *Empire*'s immense popularity both within the academy and outside it, out of more widespread controversies surrounding the book. What is the relationship between the theory of Empire and the new American Empire which some US political and military leaders are proclaiming? How is Empire different from globalization? How does the theory of Empire relate to classical Marxism? Why do we need a political theory of globalization? What are the philosophical stakes of constructing such a theory? How is resistance possible in a globalized world? And perhaps, most significantly: what are the possibilities for the future?

### Keywords

Empire; imperialism; globalization; nation-state; resistance; sovereignty; mediation; Marxism

**M**ICHAEL HARDT AND ANTONIO NEGRI'S *Empire* is one of the most important books – of political science? cultural studies? critical theory? – to emerge in recent years. *Empire* is a sweeping rethinking of the phenomenon ordinarily called 'globalization'. Globalization, however, is generally conceived as primarily an economic (and secondarily a cultural) phenomenon; if it is considered in political terms at all, it is usually thought of as simply a threat to

(nation-based) politics as such. Against this conventional wisdom, Hardt and Negri suggest that what we are witnessing in globalization is the constitution of a new political order, a new form of sovereignty, which forms itself at the expense of what we are accustomed to think of as 'our' paradigm of national sovereignty. 'Empire' is not to be confused with imperialism; indeed, imperialism is only possible within the paradigm of national sovereignty, as nation-states compete amongst each other for resources and territory. Empire, on the other hand, *is* the global; it has no outside and, therefore, no state that would be transcendent with respect to the social field itself. As the authors are quick to point out, the decline of the nation-state is not the same as its disappearance; instead, it refers to the subsumption of the nation-state into the 'mixed constitution' of that form of sovereignty called 'Empire'.

This notion of 'mixed constitution' comes from the second-century BC Greek historian Polybius, whose history of Rome – particularly the notion that Rome owed its success to its complex constitutional form – has influenced political thinkers from Cicero to the authors of the *Federalist*. But 'Empire' in this context is not a metaphor that would compare the Roman Empire with, let's say, a kind of US or Market Empire and draw appropriate lessons from its history. Instead, Empire is the solution to a problem: how to conceptualize the profound economic and political changes that are currently taking place as a *tendentially* global order becomes *actually* global? Existing accounts of these changes conceive the global order as either a kind of conspiracy perpetrated by more or less mysterious agents of multinational capital, or as the expression of an anarchic market that somehow 'wants' to be free of state control (in other words as the action of none other than the 'invisible hand' of the marketplace). In a more dialectical way, one might think of the new global order as resolving the tensions that characterized the previous state of the world system. *Empire*, on the other hand, takes a different approach, conceiving contemporary sovereignty neither as having a single subject nor as being without a subject, but rather as a 'mixed constitution' that consists of the interplay of various forms of political agency: 'monarchic' entities like the Pentagon or the WTO; 'aristocratic' entities like the multinational corporations; and the 'democratic' forces of the NGOs.

The missing term here, what would correspond to the 'people' in the national framework, is the 'multitude'. In the interview that follows, Hardt and Negri are critical of their own conception of the 'multitude' in *Empire*, and promise in their future work to develop the concept more fully. Nevertheless, their vision of the multitude already has profound consequences for the way we think about globalization. The multitude is at the heart of their proposition that 'resistance precedes power'. Hardt and Negri are not the first to think this relation; when Marx proposed in *Capital* that 'it would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt', he was not saying anything that industrialists did not already know (Karl Marx (1976) *Capital*, Vol. I,

trans. Ben Fowles, New York: Random: 563). However, when Hardt and Negri raise this relation to the status of an axiom, it becomes a powerful new way to theorize globalization and the development of capital itself. If 'resistance precedes power', the well-known relentless dynamism of capitalism does not then reside in capital, but in living labour, that has at every step *forced* capital to reorganize. On this model, the current reorganization of capital called globalization is an essentially reactive regrouping after the disintegration of classical imperialism at the hands of the anti-colonial movements. One might read *Empire* as a re-writing for our time of George Lukács's great essay on reification: an analysis of the philosophical implications of the current situation, revealing the already-existing, but latent, agency of the multitude.

Since the sovereignty of *Empire* extends over social life in its entirety, nothing is left untouched by the passage to *Empire*. Hardt and Negri show us *Empire* by taking us through a dazzling number of topics – from postcolonial theory to Foucault's notion of biopower, from love to the informatization of production – and by drawing on a fascinating array of sources, not only from the usual suspects – Machiavelli, Hobbes, Marx, Foucault – but also from a number of less-consulted thinkers who are bound to be more frequently read and taught in the future. It is hoped that the following interview will, for those who have read *Empire*, answer some questions or address some doubts they may have had; for those who have not, it will serve as an introduction to some of the key issues in a book which unabashedly reclaims Utopia for the multitude.

Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman

**Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman:** Because it takes none of the old assumptions for granted while being also a very complex (and very long) book, *Empire* has become, far more quickly than one might have imagined, a very controversial book – both among people who have read it and among people who have only heard more or less approximate renderings of some of the main theses. Are there any common misperceptions of the book that you would particularly like to dispel?

**Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri:** A series of misunderstandings seems to have arisen around the complex position of the USA in our analysis. Since an anti-US position is a staple of radical Left thought and politics, particularly when confronting global questions, it seems to have been somewhat disorienting for many readers that we set out from the claim that the contemporary *Empire* is *not* a form of US imperialism. One of the reviewers for the press who read our manuscript assumed, therefore, that our book is a celebration of the USA, which shocked us a bit. It is more common, however, for those on the Left to feel that we are minimizing or overlooking the evils of the USA.

It is easiest to explain our position in this regard by beginning with our claim that the global extension of power today no longer takes the form created by the imperialisms of the great European powers, which rose to global dominance in

the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were defeated in the second half of the twentieth. In other words, the USA has not simply donned in unchanged form the mantle the European powers laid down. That imperialism was based on the sovereignty of the nation-state and consisted basically in an extension of that sovereignty beyond the national boundaries. Empire, we argue, takes an entirely different form, operates through a different type of sovereignty and does not rest on the nation and its borders in the same way. This Empire cannot be a US Empire the way the British imperialist project was British or French imperialism French, because it is not based on the sovereignty of the nation-state. This Empire has no centre and it has no outside. (We do recognize, on the other hand, that US history does occupy a privileged position in the formation of Empire and that is where our analysis of the US role becomes much more complex, but that is a somewhat different matter and allow us to set that aside for the moment.)

The point that the Empire is not centred on the US nation-state has serious consequences. What we have recognized in several of the reactions to our book is how important the anti-US position is to different strains of Left theorizing. We have been very interested, for example, that close friends have objected both from a European perspective and from a Chinese perspective that this claim that Empire has no outside and that the US is not its centre has taken away for them the possibility of conceiving an alternative. The Europeans hope that the construction of a united Europe can form a political alternative to the power of the USA, an outside to challenge its global hegemony, and the Chinese similarly conceive of China or an East Asian bloc as a possible democratic alternative to US domination. When we cease to conceive the USA as the hegemonic power, however, and claim there is no outside to Empire, then the foundation under any such regional alternatives becomes suddenly precarious. This is a very interesting question and one that deserves serious consideration.

**B&S:** We can imagine a related criticism coming from those who would see *Empire* as offering too grand and sweeping a history of the development of capitalism, one that might be described as overtly *historical* at the expense of being *genealogical* (in Foucault's sense of these terms), or, indeed, accused of offering up a history of ideas and concepts in place of a materialist history.

**H&N:** It is certainly true that our framework in this book is very large both spatially and temporally. On one hand, our hypothesis is that since Empire is itself a universalizing phenomenon, it can be conceived adequately only in a global perspective. The object of study itself demands this large-scale framework. On the other hand, we understand the nature of Empire through a periodizing argument, as the successor to the modern, imperialist form of capitalist power. Such periodizing arguments always require a significant historical sweep and, specifically, our notion requires that we theorize in some detail the modern period that we claim has come to an end. Our book seeks to give new names to a series of

phenomena that can no longer be conceived adequately using our old categories. The fact that we are working with concepts and inventing concepts, however, does not mean that this is a history of ideas as opposed to a materialist history – or that it is a historical rather than a genealogical method. What we are attempting to do is precisely to give new names to new phenomena, a paradigmatically materialist operation.

**B&S:** Your invention of the concept of ‘Empire’ itself would have to be the master example of this operation, and the older category it challenges is, of course, ‘globalization’. The phenomenon that ‘globalization’ refers to has, for the most part, been treated as an empirico-historical event that requires intellectuals to consider how the speed of the present relates to the past, but which doesn’t seem to require a wholesale invention of new concepts to make sense of it. Do you think you could encapsulate, briefly, what it is that ‘Empire’ allows us to think that ‘globalization’ is unable to encompass?

**H&N:** It may be right, as you imply, that globalization, especially in its economic guise, has often been conceived in quantitative terms – the increasing number, speed or distance of exchanges – rather than in qualitative terms and this been an obstacle to understanding the real novelty of our contemporary situation. However, this may also be an indication of the limitation of the concept of globalization itself as the marker of our era. Many authors today, particularly on the Left, point out that globalization is nothing new or even that the quantity of global economic exchanges is lower than it was 50 or 100 years ago. This may be true from this limited perspective, but we think it is largely beside the point. We insist on the fact that what goes under the label ‘globalization’ is not merely an economic, financial or commercial phenomenon, but also and above all a *political* phenomenon. The political realm is where we most clearly recognize the qualitative shifts in contemporary history and where we are confronted by the need to invent new concepts. But, really, this distinction between the political and the economic (and the cultural) is no longer very satisfying either. We attempt to use the concept of biopower to name the zone characterized by the intersection of these old fields – an economy that is eminently cultural, a cultural field that is equally economic, a politics that comprehends the other two equally, and so forth. From this perspective, the concept ‘globalization’ is clearly too vague and imprecise. Empire seems to us a much more adequate concept for the new biopolitical order.

**B&S:** This vagueness or imprecision in the concept ‘globalization’ may explain why analyses based on it always seem to come down to the relatively banal question of periodization, that is, whether it indeed marks a genuine break with the past or whether it is merely the same old wolf in a new sheepskin. *Empire* insists on the need to abandon certain concepts and modes of critique in order to make

sense of the present conjuncture. In particular, you point to the need to give up a form of critical thinking characteristic of Marxism and of postcolonial and post-modern critique – critique in general, for that matter – which was conceived as a challenge to a specific tradition of modern sovereignty that is tendentially extinct: the old wolf is in fact a dead horse. How easily can we give up our old habits of critical thought – not just concepts like ‘globalization’ but the very habits and structures of our current modes of thinking – and what are the consequences if we can’t?

**H&N:** It does seem to us that posing the question in terms of sovereignty clarifies a variety of contemporary debates, such as those about the powers of nation-states in the age of globalization. There is no doubt that nation-states (at least the dominant nation-states) are still important political actors and exert significant powers. We argue, however, that the nation-state is no longer the ultimate form of sovereignty as it was during the modern era and that nation-states now function within the imperial framework of sovereignty. The nature and locus of sovereignty have shifted and this, we believe, is the most significant fact that must be taken into account. This has a whole series of consequences that extend throughout the social field well beyond questions of the nation-state.

The consequences of recognizing this shift are indeed very high for both political thought and political action. Political arguments and strategies aimed against old forms of sovereignty may be ineffective against the new forms or they may even unwittingly contribute to its functioning. For example, propositions of hybrid identities or multiculturalism can seem like liberatory projects when one assumes that the power being confronted rests on pure notions of identity and stark oppositions of self and other. But when the sovereign power no longer resides on pure identities but rather works through hybridization and multicultural formations, as we claim it does in *Empire*, then those projects lose any necessary relation to liberation or even contestation. In fact, they could be complicit with imperial power itself. We do not mean to say because *Empire* works through multiculturalism and hybridity that we need to reject those strategies – rather we mean simply that they are not sufficient in themselves. In the face of the new forms of sovereignty, new strategies of contestation and new alternatives need to be invented.

**B&S:** On a more abstract plane, could one describe this shift in sovereignty as the decline of mediation and the rise of immanence?

**H&N:** Yes, *Empire* is certainly a philosophical fable about the decline of metaphysical mediation and the rise of a practice of ontological immanence. By mediation here, we mean primarily the mechanisms of the transcendence of power. Think, for example, of how Engels and Marx conceive of the state as transcendent

with respect to society, that is, separate from and superior to the social field. That transcendent state functioned through its mediation of social forces.

It is tempting, then, to view mediation/transcendence in a purely negative light and immanence in a purely positive light. Once again, however, the passage to Empire complicates such a perspective, because Empire, in contrast to the modern state, functions in significant respects on the plane of immanence. Such simple mappings from philosophical distinctions and political values are often tempting but seldom hold true. This does not mean that we have to abandon the plane of immanence as the terrain of liberation, but it does mean that we have to articulate more clearly what constitutes liberation on the plane of immanence.

**B&S:** This brings us squarely to the possibility of counter-Empire, and we will want to return to that question shortly. First, it seems to us that your critique of the dialectic, which follows quite clearly from this eclipsing of metaphysical mediation, might be more complex than it sometimes appears. ‘Dialectic’ in *Empire* seems to mean at least three things. First, that the movement of history is somehow ‘really’ dialectical; that is, that the neat progression of dialectical historiography is somehow really there in the world or in some transcendent quality above it. It is the spectre of teleology conjured up by this version of the dialectic that is at the core of your critique. But at other times it seems that there are things in history that are dialectical, but that history is not: colonialism was dialectical, capitalism has always been dialectical until now, the US Constitution sets up a dialectic between Empire and imperialism. In this case, contemporary history is *for the first time* non-dialectical, and we need to invent wholly new ways of thinking about it. Third, *thought* is dialectical; that is, the dialectic is a powerful representational tool, condensing great amounts of information into powerful heuristic figures. With all of the ‘unexpected turns’ and ‘sudden reversals’ that turn up in the prose of *Empire* – ‘the tendency toward a global market of labor power’, for example, ‘construct[ing]. . . the possibility of its antithesis,’ or the Ruse of Reason by which postmodernist critique turns out to be assisting the power it believes to be attacking – we find it hard to believe that the dialectic is to be abandoned altogether!

**H&N:** You are certainly right to differentiate among these various meanings of dialectics and we do not mean to argue against the dialectic in all of its possible figures. Our polemic against dialectics does not have in mind, in fact, the dialectic as the maieutics of knowledge or as the relational play of ideas; it is aimed primarily at the dialectic as historical teleology, which succeeds in making even the negative an element of progress. *Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht* – world history is the judgement on (the history of) the world. This is the figure that we consider the fundamental axis of any bourgeois and idealist dialectic and against which our polemic is aimed. In certain respects, Eurocentrism too is implicated in this same notion of dialectical teleology. Moreover, the various socialist notions of progress

are not too distant from these bourgeois, capitalist, and Eurocentric ideologies of development. All of these teleological dialectics pose an idea of becoming that simultaneously justifies and annuls the weight of the suffering of history and the significance of revolt. All such dialectics can only see history from above not from below.

It is probably true that, despite our polemic, we too remain prisoners of various rhetorical strategies and linguistic formulations that echo dialectical terminology. Maybe it is not so easy to free ourselves from this dialectic. Maybe all of European philosophy back to the ancient Greeks has been characterized by the dialectic, if by the dialectic we understand *the teleology of the being of the dominant class*. In any case, we think that this critique of the dialectic (and thus also of teleology) constitutes a fundamental element of the critique of capitalist development and Eurocentrism.

**B&S:** Back to the notion of counter-Empire: You refuse categorically the now more or less accepted wisdom that globalization signals a crisis for agency and for politics. Instead, you suggest that Empire has produced the conditions of possibility for the production of new identities, collectivities and radically democratic polities – what you memorably describe as ‘*homohomo*, humanity squared, enriched by the collective intelligence and love of the community’. It is for this reason that you caution against a misplaced nostalgia for older forms, such as the nation-state, that might be imagined as protecting groups and individuals from the harsh winds of globalization. As we touched on earlier, this positive characterization of globalization might be resisted by many on the Left as a form of wishful thinking. Can you point us toward any situations or movements that exemplify the politics involved in the production of counter-Empire? It is tempting to see the protests against the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank as examples of such a politics. But even while these struggles are remarkable for the fact that they are directed precisely towards those institutions and organizations that help to ‘structure global territories biopolitically’, their politics still seem to be constructed around a modern idea of sovereignty insofar as it is built around the idea of an ‘outside,’ a space or logic other than Empire.

**H&N:** Our primary point in the book is that a counter-Empire is *necessary*, even before considering how it is *possible*. In other words, our analysis leads us to the conclusion that the only effective contestation of global imperial power and the only real alternative to it must be posed on an equally global scale. Hence, the admittedly uncomfortable analogy, which runs throughout much of the book, with the rise of Christianity during the decline of the Roman Empire. Like then, a Catholic (that is, global) project is the only alternative.

Sometimes political theorizing runs up against obstacles that only practice can solve. Deleuze and Foucault, in their wonderful discussion on intellectuals and power, thought of this relation between theory and practice as a series of



relays, passing back and forth the lead in the project. The example that strikes us as most significant in this regard is that way that Marx responded to the Paris Commune. Ever since his early writings he had been very sceptical of giving any positive content to the notion of communism, but suddenly the Parisian proletariat storms the heavens establishing its Commune and he learns from them more clearly in practical terms what communism can mean, how the state can be abolished, how democracy can be extended absolutely, and so forth. His thought could not move forward without the practical advances of the Parisian proletariat.

Well, we are not suggesting that we need today to wait for a new Paris Commune, but simply that practical experiences – like the protests against the global institutions of capital in Seattle, Washington, Prague, etc. – may suggest unexpected solutions. One of the great surprises in Seattle, for example, was that a variety of groups that we thought were irreconcilably antagonistic to one another suddenly appeared to have a common project: ecologists with labour unions, anarchists with human rights advocates, church groups with gays and lesbians. In our terms, we saw these developments as the construction of a *new place* within the dominant non-place of Empire, a new organization of the multitude. Or, at least, these events were allusions to that. It is very difficult to construct a new place of liberation within the non-place of Empire and nothing guarantees that it will not end up in a new kind of mystification. (Here is the negative side of our analogy to early Christianity.) Yet, the emergence of these struggles will undoubtedly contain the lessons for our moving forward both practically and theoretically.

One of our major criticisms of our book is that the concept of the multitude remained too indefinite, too poetic. In part, that is due to our primary focus on Empire and the length required to address its nature and structures. In any case, the multitude is the focus of our current work and we hope to be able to develop the concept more fully in the future.

**B&S:** This difficulty you just referred to, of constructing a place of liberation, was easier – at least conceptually! – when one was not restricted theoretically to the non-place of Empire, when one had uncomplicated recourse to the notion of an ‘outside.’ It seems to us that there is a real question to be raised here, one that opens up a much older fault line in Left thinking. There are those who will claim that radical change *cannot* come from within Empire but can only come about through an ‘outside’, through older subjectivities and ways of life that Gayatri Spivak has described as ‘deficient for capitalism’. This might also be phrased as a question about the formal versus the real subsumption of labour under capital: are we certain that there is no revolutionary potential in that which is, as yet, still only formally subsumed – or are we too sanguine about its real subsumption, as though the pain of such extinction were justified by a dialectic which is supposedly exhausted?

**H&N:** It may be more helpful to say that the distinction between nature and culture or that between nature and history are no longer useful for understanding our contemporary situation. We and our world are thoroughly artificial or, rather, there is no longer a way to differentiate between what is artificial and what natural. Abandoning the notion of nature means, once again, refusing any possible pretence of purity and accepting our corrupt and contaminated state.

This is similarly the case when we try to pose the passage from the formal subsumption to the real subsumption of society under capital. Capital tends to envelop or control all forms of production and all social relations. This does not mean that capital establishes uniform relations everywhere – on the contrary, radically different formations and relations are subsumed under and even produced by capital. Even zones of the world that are effectively excluded from global capital's financial and commodity flows – parts of sub-Saharan Africa are certainly excluded in this way – are nonetheless controlled within the dynamics of capital's control.

This analysis means for us that we should abandon any search for an outside and construct the potential for radical change within the terrain of Empire and global capital. We should remember that what is within capital or even what is produced by capital does not function necessarily for the support of capital. Capital, as Marx argued repeatedly, produces its own internal contradictions. Therefore, we could happily accept the formulation that subjectivities and ways of life that are 'deficient for capital' may be sources of powerful anti-capitalist projects with the understanding that these deficiencies are not outside but within the domain controlled by capital itself. And we would be quick to point also to subjectivities and forms of life that are not 'deficient' but push capital too far. This can be an equally powerful anti-capitalist project. Both of these have the potential to play the role of gravedigger for capital.

**B&S:** A concrete example might be recent emergence of the movement of landless people in Brazil, the MST (*Movimento Sem Terra*), a kind of extreme case that might shed light on other protests around the world against the principal agencies responsible for the economic regulation of Empire. The primary goal of the MST, the redistribution of land from large estates to smallholders, might be accused by neo-liberal apologists for globalization as anachronistic, or even by some on the Left as nostalgic. Certainly the notion of a smallholder economy seems far removed from the dominant image of globalization, and perhaps also from the general picture of Empire one gets from your book.

**H&N:** We don't think the struggle for land should be thought of as anachronistic in the context of Empire. The landless have been deprived of their means of production and therefore, logically, struggle for land. Those who consider this struggle anachronistic no doubt believe that that rural smallholders belong to an older agricultural paradigm and, therefore, are out of sync with immaterial

labour and the contemporary production of information. However, it is a mistake to think of an economy in such uniform and homogenous terms. What characterizes the contemporary economy in particular is the fact that different forms of production coexist side by side and act together.

In fact, perhaps the very notion of anachronism should be questioned here. Behind the notion of anachronism generally lies the implicit hypothesis of a history that develops in stages, a presupposition that is typical of various forms of Eurocentrism. The idea is that subordinated areas of the world are always lagging anachronistically in relation to the dominant regions, which are the only ones fully to occupy the present. To oppose this hypothesis we must abandon the notion of anachronism and instead try to comprehend the simultaneity of heterogeneous forms that act together in the present.

**B&S:** To change the subject a bit, we are curious about how you situate the project of *Empire* with respect to its philosophical forebears. It is clear that the book is written within the broad framework of Marxism, though a Marxism that has had some of its key concepts substantially reconfigured. It seems to us that *Empire* is written at the intersection of Marxism and three other intellectual formations: Foucault's notion of biopower, which you mentioned earlier; Deleuze and Guattari's nomadism; and, perhaps most significantly, Spinoza's philosophy of immanence. How do these various philosophies come together in *Empire*?

**H&N:** Our argument does represent undoubtedly a certain synthesis of some Marxist traditions with French poststructuralist philosophy. We were particularly conscious of this combination because in the last decade, particularly in the USA, it has often been assumed that Marxism and poststructuralism are incompatible and even competing discourses. We, on the contrary, see no conflict whatsoever between these two discourses and streams of thought and think that they are only enriched by contact. Beyond the link between Marxism and poststructuralism, however, we are interested in the tradition of materialist political thought, which extends clearly back to Spinoza and Machiavelli.

**B&S:** We were intrigued by your inspiration in Spinoza. You characterize modernity as a reaction to the revolutionary humanism encapsulated in Spinoza's philosophy, an immanent politics that affirmed the democracy of the multitude and the power of human practice, and which thus threatened the powers that be. The political possibilities that accompany *Empire* arise due to production of a new immanence, a world without boundaries and without an outside. Would it be right to say that we are finally in a position to take up ontological and political possibilities that have been deferred for half a millennium?

**H&N:** In effect, we wanted to say that there were two modernities in Europe: a first characterized by immanence and absolute democracy of the multitude and

a second, which arose in reaction to the first, that culminated in the construction of the nation-state and its colonial projects. The latter path of European modernity won, but the potential of the former has always remained.

Perhaps it is right, as you suggest, to view the contemporary political situation as resurrection of some of the ontological and political possibilities of that first modern spirit that emerged in the period of revolutionary humanism. This is how we could understand Benjamin's proposition of a weak messianic hope – weak because it expels any transcendental elements from the communist project. A weak messianism in this sense would be constituted by a strong attachment to reality and realistically exclude any mystical or political faith in the *outside*. We remember well the dangers tied to political versions of strong messianism, which have arisen at different times from thwarted political will, fanatical ethical purity or unbridled hatred. In every strong messianism there is the stink of terrorism. In contrast, if we are to be associated with messianism, it will have to be joyful and able to live in the plural figures of the multitude.

**B&S:** We'd like you to say some more about this 'joyful messianism'. Its fundamental source seems to be your insistence that 'resistance precedes power'. This powerful narrative engine not only overturns the dominant way of describing the development of capitalism, but in so doing changes the valence of Left critique from negative (in the common sense of cynical or despairing) to positive (or joyful). Far from simply asserting this reversal, you demonstrate it concretely in your analysis of the historical shifts in the nature of imperial power. However, we can anticipate that it is this account of history that might attract the most serious criticisms of the book. Do you worry that too many Left thinkers are addicted to a more or less Adornian mode of intellectual practice whose pessimism valorizes critique for itself while demanding little of us in terms of responsibility for the future?

**H&N:** Optimism and pessimism may be misleading concepts here. We have never been satisfied with the formulation Gramsci made famous, advocating a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will. Too often, pessimism is understood as the lucid understanding of how bad things really are and optimism, in contrast, designates a naïve and unreasonable form of hope.

Really, when we look at the tradition of materialist interpretations of history, it is not very useful to distinguish between optimistic and pessimistic currents. Walter Benjamin's conception of history, for example, would certainly be labelled pessimistic, but it nonetheless involves an extraordinarily powerful constitutive activity of the subject in history. Optimism and pessimism (along with hope and despair) may finally be too sentimental to be useful here, and thus unable to grasp the real and operative distinctions. It is better to differentiate in terms of constitutive perspectives or objective ones. Our perspective is better understood, in other words, not as optimistic but as constitutive.

We do recognize the objectivity of the global and regional formations of capital, but we also highlight the subjective movements of the multitude as constitutive of the historical process. In effect, our notion that resistance precedes power and that the activity of the multitude is prior to *Empire* is in line with the Marxist tradition that views class struggle as the motor of history. In this regard, one must establish a fundamental difference in the tradition of materialism and Marxist analysis between those who consider the proletarian class struggle as an autonomous and creative power and those who instead consider it a product, a residue, or an internal element of the composition of capital. If there is to be hope or optimism, it must rest firmly on the real constitutive power of the multitude.

**B&S:** One form of a (sometimes) joyful messianism goes by the name ‘Third-Worldism’, which you dismiss as a general phenomenon. But in its most powerful expressions, literary Third-Worldism sometimes came close to affirming the constitutive power of something very like what you call the ‘non-place of exploitation’. In Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’aventure ambiguë*, for example, what initially seems to be a more or less naïve celebration of a disappearing space outside capitalism ends up as a call not necessarily for armed revolution, but for the construction of humanity for the first time as a totality, precisely through the activity of the ‘underdeveloped’ both in the dominated and dominant countries. Do you see any forbears in the prophetic texts of the Third World 1960s?

**H&N:** Kane is a wonderful example and there are undoubtedly numerous other prophetic texts to be cited as our forebears in the Third World literature and philosophy of the 1960s, in addition, of course, to the political practices that also constitute an enormous heritage. Our argument against Third-Worldism was really only against those who posed the potential for revolution *only* in the Third World. This may have been an understandable reaction to the dominant First-Worldist assumptions, but an unacceptable one nonetheless. During the Cold War, there were theoretical and practical revolutionary instances in the First, Second and Third Worlds. It is useless and even damaging to try to valorize one terrain at the expense of the others. In any case, however, these prophetic texts and struggles are part of our heritage, but they are not directly applicable to our contemporary context.

**B&S:** We’d like to ask you a few questions about *Empire* as a book. Is *Empire* meant to be taken primarily as a theoretical manifesto – that is, as a text that forces us to rethink concepts, such as sovereignty, immanence, dialectics, labour, class, etc. – or should we take it as a political manifesto that tells us how things stand and what is to be done at the outset of the twenty-first century? It may not be possible to separate out these two levels at which the book operates, but perhaps you could tell us something about how you folded your theoretical and empirical insights together in the process of writing *Empire*.

**H&N:** You rightly point out it is difficult to distinguish between the two, but this is certainly a theoretical manifesto more than it is a political manifesto. Our book points toward the necessity of an alternative to the contemporary imperial order, but a political manifesto would have to articulate the subject and the structures that would animate such an alternative. Today that is still, perhaps, beyond our grasp.

**B&S:** We found one of the most intriguing parts of *Empire* to be the theoretical asides, two or three pages long, that appear in italics at key points throughout the book. These seem to be condensed explorations of the rhetorical function of certain concepts, their theoretical and practical utility in the present, and so on. In these asides, you take on the political manifesto, humanism, the poor, refusal, cycles, primitive accumulation, etc. How do these asides function with respect to the rest of the book, both rhetorically and theoretically?

**H&N:** Originally there was one of these brief italicized sections, which we call inserts, at the end of each chapter, but we had to cut several of them when our publisher pressured us to reduce the length of the book. They functioned for us as a relief from the more or less academic style of argumentation of the book. They also allowed us to adopt a different perspective on the problems at hand. We had Spinoza's *scholie* in mind as model. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza frequently interrupts the geometrical progression of propositions and axioms with *scholie* that have a more literary style and are focused more on the singularity of ethical becoming. The *scholie* typically reflect on the point of the previous proposition from a different perspective and elaborate its implications, but they also point elsewhere, to unforeseen possibilities of thought. Deleuze has a beautiful analysis of the differences between the styles: the propositions build systematically one on the next but the *scholie* explode like volcanoes and, consequently, the *scholie* link to one another through subterranean passages of thought. Deleuze thus recommends that as an alternative reading of the *Ethics* we simply leap from one *scholium* to the next. It would be a nice way to read our book too, moving from one italicized insert to the next.

**B&S:** In your introduction, too, you say that a book of this length can be read in a number of ways – front to back, back to front, skipping around, and so on. This may turn out to be a banal question, but we're curious about how the book was *written* – whether there was a kernel that grew more or less organically or whether there was a ground-plan that determined the shape of your research.

**H&N:** We did begin the writing process with a very detailed and highly structured outline. What we elaborated first, in fact, was an elaborate formal architecture for the book, before we really understood its contents. There would be nineteen chapters, three introductory, three concluding, and an intermezzo in

the middle. The chapters would refer to one another in a complicated system that would reflect the historical passage at the centre of the book. Each chapter would be 30 manuscript pages, starting with two epigraphs and ending with an italicized insert. A delirious and restrictive system! But sometimes formal restrictions are actually helpful, the way the restrictions of the sonnet form can inspire the poem.

The contents of the book and the substance of the argument, however, emerged in the process of writing. We began really with the bitter taste left in our mouths at the end of the Gulf War and the sense that we no longer understood the form of power that dominated the world. We wanted to use the concept *Empire* and distinguish it from the old European imperialisms – to argue, specifically, that US imperialism is not an adequate concept for theorizing the contemporary global order – but we only had the vaguest sense what they meant. The rest emerged in the process of research and the interactions of collaboration. In some respects, the process was like a relay system. One began writing where the other left off and then at the next obstacle passed it back.

**B&S:** Now might be the time to bring up the untimely question of value. On one hand, as we've known since Adorno, culture is increasingly caught up in capitalist production, and this infiltration is traditionally viewed as a Bad Thing, resulting in Britney Spears and, more gravely, the ideological power of what we call the media. On the other, as *Empire* points out, production itself is increasingly cultural; that is, the Utopian desire for life embodied in the new demands of the multitude, expressed in dramatic changes in the quality and quantity of non-work time, is precisely what drives up the cost of necessary labour and causes the mutation of Capital. This is, plainly, a Good Thing. But the distinction between the two depends on a notion of mediation: one is the immediacy of desire and the other is the mediation of that desire through the culture industry. When mediation disappears in immanence, the distinction between the two disappears. Indeed, with the disappearance of an 'outside' to mediate, the notion of the 'media' becomes nonsensical and no longer available for critique. Is it still possible to assign values – and plainly, we are speaking here not only of narrowly aesthetic value – to cultural practices?

**H&N:** What a wonderful question! What is most interesting in the way you pose it is the fact that you play on the conceptual intermingling of transcendental *mediation* and communicative *media*. And you seem to regard this conceptual intermingling as a strange, enigmatic hybrid. Perhaps we should view this instead in terms of an historical passage: what transcendental mediation was for the modern, communicative media has become for the postmodern. Or, to put it in Foucauldian terms, the single point of sovereign rule and even the plural archipelago of disciplinary institutions have been distributed throughout the networks of the society of control. This is what we mean when we define imperial

sovereignty in terms of network power. (Should we say, then, that mediation has not really declined but rather in the passage to media has exploded and become omniversal?)

If there is no outside of the media, then how can we critique the situation? From what standpoint can we assign value to political and cultural practices and expressions? That is indeed an important problem. The path of a solution lies not only in the immediacy of desire but more importantly in the capacity of desire to express itself as constituent power, to construct a new place, an alternative within the networks of imperial power. This path could remain abstract if it is only pursued as a theoretical project; it must, on the contrary, be primarily practical. This is another point when it is important to come back to Marx's mandate that we not only interpret the world but seek moreover to transform it.