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'The Passage from Imperialism to Empire': A Commentary on *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri

The formation of capitalism, as Marx emphasised, went hand in hand with the creation of a world market.¹ Capital has always resisted confinement within national boundaries, and, in that sense at least, there is nothing new about globalisation. Yet it is a fallacy to leap from that truth to the conclusion that all we are witnessing today is simply an echo of the past, or just another phase in a long history of systemic cycles of internationalisation and national hegemony. As Hardt and Negri insist, in a digression criticising the work of Giovanni Arrighi, from this perspective, the history of capitalism 'becomes the eternal return of the same'.²

¹ Author's Note: the original draft of this article was completed shortly before September 11. If it had been written subsequently, this introduction would have been very different. Yet, as it captures a particular moment in the reception of the book, I have left it unchanged – but added a few comments on the relevance of the work to analysing the 'war on terrorism' in the text and a short postscript written in early November 2001. My thanks for comments and discussions, stretching over many years, to Matthew Caygill and Jim Kincaid – and to Matthew, in particular, for feeding me a stream of materials from his explorations of the web and for a tape of the Radio 4 discussion between Michael Hardt and Nigel Harris referenced at the end.

² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 239. The criticism refers to Arrighi 1994.

Too many Marxists, haunted, perhaps, by the spectre of revisionism or repelled by the follies of postmodernism, have allowed their imaginations to be crippled by a fear of the new. Others, of course, have simply abandoned Marxism in the name of a 'new' that turns out to be a recurrence of the same, if not worse. Meanwhile, a movement from below that is truly without precedent has outstripped the theoreticians – cutting across old divisions, and identifying, in practice if not in theory, the old enemy (capitalism) in its latest form ('Empire').

The passage from Seattle to Genoa, with its intermediary stations marked across the globe, is unprecedented neither in its scale nor in its depth of mobilisation. In both respects, we could draw comparisons with 1968 or 1919 or even 1848 and find the movement wanting. The novelty and the creativity of the anticapitalist movement is twofold. It lies in the location of the enemy, which is neither a particular national capitalism nor US imperialism, but the institutional embodiments and servants of the power of transnational Capital: the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, the EU and G8 summits. It lies, also, in the way a movement, still so frequently mislabelled as 'anti-globalisation', has, in practice, revealed both the necessity and the possibility of globalising resistance.³

Although it first appeared in hardback in the spring of 2000, *Empire* was obviously written before the upheaval at Seattle, to which it contains no direct reference. Yet, its call 'to forge a project of counter globalization, counter-Empire'⁴ has met with an extraordinary response. It is only in this context that we can explain the degree of attention that the work and its authors have received, not just in the journals of the Left but also in the bourgeois media.

Some journalists, unsurprisingly, have sought to personalise the story and present Negri in particular as the guru or prophet of the new movement. Negri's own political trajectory certainly warrants serious appraisal. He was a prominent figure in the Autonomia movement in Italy in the 1970s, before his arrest on trumped-up charges of being the mastermind behind the terror of the Red Brigades, but has re-emerged as a theoretician linked to the Ya Basta organisation that figured so prominently in the protests at Prague and

³ The literature on this movement is already large. See, in particular, Bircham and Charlton (eds.) 2001, and Brecher, Costello and Smith 2000, and the Z-Net site commentaries.

⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 115.

Genoa. This reviewer, however, will leave that task to others who are in a position to be better informed about those events.⁵

Much more important, for our purpose, is the political message transmitted on the eve of Genoa. It is critical to those of us who have insisted on the realities of capitalist globalisation and resisted the now rather dated attempts to dismiss that process as a myth. We have frequently been accused of pessimism about the prospects for struggle, or told that we were in thrall to the ideological constructs of the 'Third Way'. So, listen carefully to the words of Hardt and Negri in an 'op-ed' piece published in the *New York Times* of all places, on the 20 July 2001.

If we understand one thing from the multitude of voices in Genoa this weekend, it should be that a different and better future is possible. When one recognises the tremendous power of the international and supranational forces that support our present form of globalization, one could conclude that resistance is futile.

But those in the streets today are foolish enough to believe that alternatives are possible – that 'inevitability' should not be the last word in politics. A new species of political activist has been born with a spirit that is reminiscent of the paradoxical idealism of the late 1960s – the realistic course of action today is to demand what is seemingly impossible, that is, something new.

⁵ There is a useful but uncritical account in the epilogue written by Michael Ryan to Negri 1991a. See also the collection of writings from the 1960s and 1970s in Negri 1988 and two compilations of articles from various authors in Red Notes 1977, 1978. The most illuminating account I have found in English, however, is Steve Wright 1996, which traces the relationship of Negri's work to both the shifting balance of class forces in Italy in the 1970s and the parallel debates and splits within the autonomist movement itself. Wright exposes how Negri's shift from the concept of the mass worker to the socialised worker was a response to the decline in the rank-and-file movement in the factories, and was criticised by other autonomist thinkers such as Sergio Bologna for abandoning that terrain of struggle. The socialised (sometimes confusingly translated as social) worker idea rested on locating the state as completely integrated with capital, and thus embraced the unemployed, students and the various social movements that were still on the rise in Italy at that time but would soon also be affected by the workers' defeat in the factories. Yet, Negri, in the late 1970s, refused to acknowledge the scale of the defeat, regarding it as merely the prelude to an open confrontation of two 'class titans'. That apocalyptic moment in Negri's thought closes, however, with the arrest of himself and other leaders of the movement in 1979. 'Do You Remember Revolution' (in Negri 1988), written in 1983, and including a critique of both the Red Brigades and the 'historic compromise' of the Italian Communist Party, is very different in tone.

Empire certainly needs to be read politically, but it was never intended as a handbook for the movement, or as 'a rewriting of the *Communist Manifesto* for our time'. That description, by Slavoj Žižek, which appeared on the cover of the original edition, has been explicitly disowned by Michael Hardt, and did the book a disservice. It has been too easy for critics seeking to dismiss the core argument, to respond with remarks about the difficulty of the text and its high level of abstraction, or the absence of any empirical support for so many of its sweeping assertions. These criticisms have substance, yet are untrue to the spirit of the work.

Empire demands assessment on its own terms. It requires, in other words, an immanent critique. The difficulty stems, in part, from the labyrinthine structure, from a text that winds its way in and around its subject-matter like the serpent which appears at one point as an alternative image of the movement of struggle to Marx's 'old mole'. Hardt and Negri seem to have little time for the categorial progression, or movement from the abstract to the concrete as the concentration of many determinations, operative in Marx's *Capital*. Indeed, their approach appears more indebted to the 'rhizomatic' method – if it can be called a method at all – of the French post-structuralist philosophers Deleuze and Guattari.⁶ A rhizome is a root-complex, but what matters is that it extends horizontally, rather than vertically. Another image sometimes invoked is of a burrow or rabbit warren. It may be a poor metaphor for scientific analysis, but it has proved to be more illuminating as a description of the 'decentred character' of the new movement from below.⁷

For Hardt and Negri, there is no single privileged position for an observer to survey the terrain of *Empire*, but a multiplicity of possible routes through which that decentred structure can be explored. So, this is a book that, in its opening chapter, can unapologetically plunge almost immediately into the arcane discipline of international legal theory. What emerges is a perceptive exposé of how *Empire* seeks to exercise its 'right of the police' in the name of humanitarian intervention and 'universal values'. The Gulf War, the inter-

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari 1987 in particular. See, also, the rather strange fruit of collaboration between Guattari and Negri 1990. Hardt and Negri also observe critically that 'Deleuze and Guattari discover the productivity of social reproduction . . . but manage to articulate it only superficially and ephemerally, as a chaotic, indeterminate horizon marked by the ungraspable event' (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 28).

⁷ See Dyer-Witheford 1999, pp. 182–3.

vention in Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia are the explicit points of reference. Anything less like the opening pages of the *Communist Manifesto* would be difficult to conceive.

Hardt, in a fascinating interview, has insisted, with some justification, that

Dedicating a tradition to a single thinker, rather than a set of methods, principles and ideas, always runs the risk of precluding innovation and creating a new dogmatism. . . . In fact, the tradition of communist thought and practice has perhaps been too dominated by the name of Marx, eclipsing its various alternatives and possibilities. Communist thought in other words is much bigger than Marx. We claim, for example, that Spinoza was a communist thinker long before Marx – how else can we understand his proposal of an 'absolute democracy' – and Deleuze was a communist thinker even if he did not conceive of himself as one.⁸

It is one thing to acknowledge Spinoza's importance as a radical critic of Cartesian dualism and abstract morality, and thus as a pioneer of the philosophy of immanence.⁹ It is quite another to join Deleuze in rejecting not just Hegel's teleology of history but the systematic dialectics derived from Hegel's *Logic* and found in Marx's *Capital*.¹⁰ The problematic treatment of capital accumulation that results has to be traced back to Negri's highly selective, and idiosyncratic, reading of Marx's *Grundrisse* as a theory of radical subjectivity in his *Marx Beyond Marx* written in the late 1970s.¹¹ If there is a pervasive flaw in *Empire*, it has its roots in that earlier work, which generates some of the weaknesses discussed in the final section of this article. It is

⁸ Interview between Michael Hardt and Thomas Dumm, Hardt 2001.

⁹ A critical reference, but extremely dense and difficult, is Negri's own work on Spinoza, Negri 1991b, which was, in turn, heavily influenced by Deleuze 1990 (original French edition in 1968). An exceptionally lucid discussion of Spinoza's influence on contemporary thought is Norris 1991. See also, on Spinoza and Marx, Holland 1998.

¹⁰ For a useful account of Deleuze's antipathy to Hegel, see Marks 1998, pp. 15–18.

¹¹ Negri 1991a. In English, at least, this reading of the *Grundrisse* has not received the detailed critical attention it deserves. Instead, there have been uncritical appropriations by followers such as Harry Cleaver (1992 in Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis (ed.) 1992, which also contains a relatively accessible article by Negri himself on 'the end of the law of value') and relative neglect elsewhere. Callinicos 2001b, pp. 39–44 is, however, right to suggest that Negri was rewriting Marx 'as Foucault', that is as a 'theory of power and subjectivity' – which, however, does not preclude a number of interesting ideas emerging through what Negri acknowledges as a very 'selective' appropriation of Marx.

not rooted in the attempt to engage with a whole variety of Marxist and non-Marxist thinkers on the question of the emergence of new forms of sovereignty for a globalised capitalism. That engagement has proved extraordinarily fertile and stimulating.

For anyone steeped in the classical Marxist tradition, a text that seeks to weave into our hallowed ways of thinking other, arguably incompatible, modes of discourse can be profoundly disconcerting. Yet, Hardt and Negri's reliance on a terminology commonly labelled as postmodernist should not be misunderstood. They have no time for those who indulge in a posturing relativism, evoking as witness against, among other examples, the role of the Truth Commission in South Africa in exposing the barbarity of the apartheid régime.¹²

In the context of state terror and mystification, clinging to the primacy of the concept of truth can be a powerful and necessary form of resistance.¹³

The term 'postmodernity' is deployed more in the critical manner of the Marxist Fredric Jameson, as an attempt to characterise the latest phase of capitalism and in recognition of the system's ability to absorb, commodify, and reproduce 'difference' and 'hybridity'.¹⁴ They argue that those who celebrate difference and fragmentation as a challenge to the 'binaries and essentialism of modern sovereignty' have 'been outflanked by the strategies of power'.¹⁵ With a surprising touch of humility, they can also write:

From imperialism to Empire and from the nation-state to the political regulation of the global market: what we are witnessing, considered from the point of view of historical materialism, is a qualitative passage in modern history. When we are incapable of expressing adequately the enormous importance of this passage, we sometimes quite poorly define what is happening as the entry into postmodernity. We recognise the poverty of this description, but sometimes prefer it to others because at least postmodernity indicates the epochal shift in contemporary history.¹⁶

¹² Use of the example should not be taken as an uncritical endorsement of the Truth Commission as such, whose role in South Africa was also about 'reconciliation' with the structures of economic power bequeathed by the apartheid régime.

¹³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 156.

¹⁴ Jameson 1991.

¹⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 138.

¹⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 237.

The note of hesitancy here is symptomatic of a difficulty the authors have in locating the dynamics and timing of a qualitative shift they are nevertheless right to emphasise. Empire is a global order that is still emerging, yet, perhaps, is already here, fully constituted with its own structures. Hardt, in the interview already quoted, acknowledges that, if Foucault could seem absurd for marking an 'epochal break' with a 'very specific date', '... we might seem equally absurd for indicating too many events as the marker of this passage'.

Elements of Empire's new forms were already apparent, at least in the core of Western capitalism, in the Cold-War epoch. The Vietnam War was decisive, however, for its impact on the strategists of US imperialism, pushing them in a different direction. The construction of Empire is a response to the explosion of struggles during and after 1968, but also to a process of economic globalisation that accelerates in response to the crisis of the 1970s. Yet this Empire has only begun to absorb the whole world in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the uprising of the multitude across Eastern Europe that finally destroyed the last of the old imperialisms. All this is sketchy, to say the least, but history will always be resistant to facile periodisation. The authors have accurately located some of the decisive moments of rupture. Others will perhaps follow and use their ideas to write richer, more concrete, histories of the ongoing process of emergence of Empire.

The purpose here, however, is not to stress the weaknesses of the work, which many critics are already doing to purely negative effect. It is to highlight what is really new and valuable in Hardt and Negri's text – the constellation of concepts used to outline Empire as 'a new form of sovereignty'.

The concept of sovereignty has been pivotal in modern political theory since the Renaissance, and it is as an inquisition into political theory (rather than political economy, although a whole literature on this is presupposed) that *Empire* is most impressive. In Part 2 of the book, Hardt and Negri narrate 'The Passages of Sovereignty' primarily, in their words, 'from the standpoint of the history of ideas and culture'.¹⁷ It is quite impossible to adequately summarise the wealth of insights contained in this section of the book. What can be done in the space available is to highlight what is really the object of attention – the historical trajectory of the nation-state as the dominant form of

¹⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. xvi.

sovereignty under capitalism, and the passage from that 'modernity' to the new forms of global rule they call Empire.

A question of sovereignty

For Hardt and Negri, the nation-state and the system of states are part of the problem, not part of the solution. At a time when so much of the Left still seems fixated on the nation-state as an agency of change and development, they remind us of the 'refrains of the *Internationale*' and the slogan that 'the country of the proletariat is the entire world'.¹⁸ Indeed, a restatement of the imperative of international solidarity lies at the heart of the book – a message shamefully ignored by some reviewers.¹⁹ As they also insist, and, in this respect, they remain impeccably Marxist, this is not a matter of charity or altruism or a question of an abstract morality, but inseparable from a recognition that

... the nation-states were key agents of capitalist exploitation and that the multitude was continually drafted to fight their senseless wars – in short that the nation-state was a political form whose contradictions could not be subsumed and sublimated but only destroyed.²⁰

It is on this basis that they make the claim that seems to have confused some commentators and antagonised others. If globalisation and the construction of Empire are undermining the nation-state and its frontiers, this is a 'step forward'²¹ in exactly the same way that Marx saw capitalism as a step forward from earlier modes of production. To the extent that Empire 'does away with the cruel regimes of modern power', it 'also increases the potential for liberation'.²² This is, undeniably, a grand narrative comparable to those of the classical Marxist tradition. As such, it is deeply critical of the obsession with the local or the micrological that has influenced many in the movement, and

¹⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 49.

¹⁹ Notably Kraniauskas 2000, who, however, usefully relates Negri's thought to that of some of other radical Italian thinkers, some of whose work is collected in Virno and Hardt (eds.) 1996.

²⁰ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 49.

²¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 43.

²² Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 43–4.

is more usually associated with 'postmodernist' thought.²³ As Hardt and Negri rightly affirm, it is not globalisation as such that should be named as the enemy, but global capitalism and what they define as 'a specific regime of global relations that we call Empire'.²⁴

The historical story into which the authors immerse themselves in Part 2 of their work seeks to provide a stronger foundation for this political position. As this is a history approached on the plane of 'ideas and culture', and, in particular, through a deconstruction of the philosophical concepts of modernity and sovereignty, it might well seem to a superficial reader to be an idealist as distinct from a materialist account. The charge would be foolish. Hardt and Negri repeatedly emphasise that the emergence of the nation-state system and 'European modernity' are inseparable from capitalism. Their argument is developed via a penetrating critique of the idealism of those theoreticians (Vico, Herder, and, not least, Hegel) who sought to ground a theory of sovereignty and the state in the historically constructed categories of 'the nation' and 'the people'.

As they write, in a very suggestive section, 'the concept of nation in Europe developed on the terrain of the patrimonial and absolutist state'.²⁵ As the feudal bases of the patrimonial state (defined as the property of the monarch) were eroded by the processes of primitive capital accumulation, the crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries generated the absolutist reaction. A period of stabilisation and repression of the revolutionary forces unleashed during the crises was accompanied by a reworking of the theory of sovereignty, which was now grounded in the construct of the nation rather than the divine body of the king. The bourgeois revolutions, and the French revolution in particular, demanded and produced a further development, the identification of the nation with the people.²⁶ This was a potent device through which the bourgeoisie could consolidate its power. Sovereignty is an expression of the constituted power of the state, through which the constituent

²³ Callinicos 1982, p. 109, makes precisely this connection between the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari and a turn to localised struggle. It is not a criticism that could fairly be applied to Hardt and Negri.

²⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 45–6.

²⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 93.

²⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 99–105.

power of the masses, or – as they would prefer, in using, once again, a term derived from Spinoza – the multitude, is both channelled and suppressed.

The opposition of the two modes of power, and the stress on the foundational character of constituent power, or the collective capacity of the multitude in relation to the modern state, are critical. They refer back to Negri's more detailed examination of critical moments in the development of political theory, in his earlier work *Insurgencies*.²⁷ In that work, Negri establishes that theoretical transformations since the sixteenth century have been a response, not simply to the demands of capital, but to crisis and collective struggle from below – most obviously in the revolutionary upheavals in Britain, America, France and Russia. Hobbes, Rousseau and Hegel are identified and denounced as theorists of constituted power – those who, by one means or another, seek to legitimate the construction of the nation-state and a notion of sovereignty that remains transcendent. Readers should understand that the transcendent, as distinct from the immanent, is, for Negri, a term that fuses together in a single concept all that towards which he is most antagonistic – whether it be God, an abstract morality, the Absolute Spirit of Hegel or the state as a repressive apparatus pretending to stand above civil society and beyond class. In opposition to all that, stand the philosophers of immanence and the theorists of constituent power, or the productive capacities and collective potential of the multitude – most notably, in Hardt and Negri's pantheon, Machiavelli, Spinoza and Marx. Hence the striking idea that there are two modernities in European history. The first was a revolutionary modernity present at the very beginning in renaissance Italy, and never completely repressed thereafter, which poses 'humanity and desire at the centre of history'.²⁸ The second is the counterrevolutionary modernity of national sovereignty and bourgeois hegemony, which 'poses a transcendent constituted power against an immanent constituent power, order against desire'.²⁹

Yet, as they also insist, 'although modern sovereignty emanated from Europe . . . it was born and developed in large part through Europe's relationship with its outside, and particularly through its colonial project and the resistance of the colonized'.³⁰ This is the 'dark Other of the European enlight-

²⁷ Negri 1999 and the illuminating review by Montag 2001.

²⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 74.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 70.

enment' that serves as its foundation, just as 'the productive relationship with the "dark continents" serves as the economic foundation of the European nation-states'.³¹ All this is driven by the spread of capitalism, which could incorporate within itself new systems of slavery that, for a long period, proved perfectly compatible with, indeed necessary to, capitalist production in Europe and the Americas. As the authors insist, referencing Robin Blackburn's magisterial survey, only the revolt of the slaves themselves obliged European capital to dismantle the slave régimes.³²

Yet the example of Haiti and the slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture also points to the grim irony of history. That inspirational revolt came to an end with the emergence of another repressive régime managing an economy still locked into a subordinate position within the world market. The authors do not use the example, but they persuasively delineate the manner in which decolonisation in the twentieth century reproduced the same general pattern. They do not deny the progressive function of 'subaltern nationalism' as a mode of resistance to imperialism, but argue there should be no more illusion on this matter in the light of what has happened since. As they assert, in a section which has already antagonised some still trapped in the old 'third-worldist' politics:³³

The very concept of a liberatory national sovereignty is ambiguous if not completely contradictory. While this nationalism seeks to liberate the multitude from foreign domination, it erects domestic structures of domination that are equally severe. The position of the newly sovereign nation-state cannot be understood when it is viewed in terms of the rosy U.N. imaginary of a harmonious concert of equal and autonomous national subjects. The postcolonial nation-state functions as an essential and subordinated element in the global organization of the capitalist market. . . . From India to Algeria and Cuba to Vietnam, the state is the poisoned gift of national liberation.³⁴

³¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 115.

³² Blackburn 1988.

³³ See, in particular, the intemperate critique by Proyect 2001. There is an interesting parallel between the quote which follows and the critique of third-world nationalism in Harris 1990, a book, however, which is not referenced by Hardt and Negri themselves.

³⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 133–4, their emphasis.

The global order of capital is, of course, a hierarchical order, characterised by systematic unevenness, growing inequality within and between 'nations' and in places unmitigated barbarism. This is certainly, in part, the legacy of the older imperialist régimes. Could it also perhaps be characterised as simply a neocolonial order sustained by the military power of US imperialism? Hardt and Negri acknowledge the appeal of such a description, yet reject it as unsatisfactory for good reason. Something new has emerged, and simply reworking the old concepts developed in the classical theory of imperialism to make sense of the contemporary world can obscure as much as it reveals.

Empire beyond imperialism

This argument critically depends upon the logic of globalising capital and the tendency towards unification of the world market. In terms of references to the text, we have to leap forward at this point, to the third part. In Chapter 3.6, a fundamental contradiction is suggested between the deterritorialising logic of capital and the territorialising nature of nation-states.³⁵ These concepts derive, once again, from Deleuze and Guattari, but, here, at least, they take on a clear and precise meaning.³⁶ The capacities of nation-states depend upon their ability to demarcate geographical territory – including, of course, the boundaries of colonies and dependencies – and to fix the mass of the labouring population within those borders. For much of its history, capital, too, has relied upon that fixing of labour-power and the disciplinary measures associated with it, not least in the context of colonialism and slavery. Yet it is also true that capital itself refuses, by its very nature, to accept the restrictions of national borders. Its impulse is to sweep away not simply the fixed barriers of precapitalist societies but, as Marx persistently asserts, to create a world market. 'The tendency to create the world market is directly given in the concept of capital itself'.³⁷

³⁵ The use of the term contradiction is one of several instances where Hardt and Negri as they say themselves 'flirt' with Hegelian terminology (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 42) – despite their Deleuzian rejection of the 'dialectic' as such.

³⁶ Deleuze and Guattari 1987, especially the central section on nomadologies, which was published separately as Deleuze and Guattari 1986. Paul Patton emphasises the centrality and elucidates the complexity of the concept of 'deterritorialisation' in those texts (Patton 2000, especially pp. 88–108).

³⁷ The quote is from the *Grundrisse*, Marx 1973, p. 408 – a passage that also figures prominently in Negri 1992.

Or, as the authors also suggest:

The transcendence of modern sovereignty thus conflicts with the immanence of capital. Historically, capital has relied on sovereignty and the support of its structures of right and force, but those same structures continually contradict in principle and obstruct in practice the operation of capital, finally obstructing its development. The entire history of modernity that we have traced thus far might be seen as the evolution of the attempts to negotiate and mediate this contradiction. The historical process of mediation has not been an equal give and take but rather a one-sided movement from sovereignty's transcendent position towards capital's plane of immanence.³⁸

Historically, the most important way in which this contradiction was 'mediated' was through imperialism. Capitals linked to the core European powers were able to expand, whilst retaining the protection of the nation-state at home and securing the mobilisation of armed force when necessary to guarantee their profits abroad. Yet, imperialism, they correctly observe:

... also created and reinforced rigid boundaries among the various global spaces, strict notions of inside and outside that effectively blocked the free flow of capital, labor and goods – thus necessarily precluding the full realization of the world market.³⁹

And the authors, in a neat twist, follow this argument with the suggestion that Rosa Luxemburg's view – that imperialism would culminate in the collapse of capitalism – was 'essentially right', as 'imperialism would have been the death of capital had it not been overcome'.⁴⁰ The immense destruction of the Second World War, and the threat of nuclear Armageddon during the Cold War, surely confirm the point. If the dawning of Empire implies that there is 'no outside', in the sense of nowhere outside the reach of capital, they also suggest it may now mean 'no outside' in a military sense. We have arrived at the end of a history of interimperialist conflict and, in that sense, reached the 'reign of peace'.⁴¹ That bluntly optimistic assertion does not deny

³⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 237.

³⁹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 332.

⁴⁰ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 333. See the Junius pamphlet in Luxemburg 1970, especially p. 330, but also Luxemburg's more problematic argument about the necessity of imperial expansion to the reproduction of capital in Luxemburg 1963.

⁴¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 189.

that there are still many bloody conflicts in the world. Rather, they suggest that every imperial war is now internal, a civil war or a police action – whether it be in Mogadishu or Los Angeles, Genoa or Afghanistan.⁴²

One can hear the critics' protest that this is all still far too abstract, too detached from the ongoing brutality of the system, and oblivious to the persistence of capitalist rivalry on the world stage. Indeed, it would be fair to say that the authors leave themselves wide open to such a critique, precisely because, at a theoretical level, competition between capitals seems to have only a marginal significance in their account of the system's dynamic. Yet, as we will explore further below, it is no longer valid to leap from the plane of competition for profit to the plane of interimperialist rivalry in the model of Lenin and Bukharin.

Let us leave the argument over the fate of imperialism to one side, for the moment, and consider where the logic of capital has taken us. As suggested earlier, Hardt and Negri can be weak and hesitant when it comes to specifying the historical pre-conditions for the emergence of Empire. On one central point, however, they are fundamentally right. If the old imperialisms constituted an obstacle to the free flow of capital – and this was particularly evident in the deep crisis of the Great Depression, when the world market disintegrated and international flows of capital dried up almost completely – all that has changed in the post-war period.

Firstly, one legacy of the Second World War was the decisive weakening of the old imperialist powers, whether through defeat or, as in the case of Britain, the economic cost of victory. The USA emerged as the dominant power, engaged in a bitter rivalry with the Soviet Union, which, as the authors write, 'distorted and diverted' the process of decolonisation in the Third World.⁴³ Nevertheless, the longer-term consequences, after a series of often bloody struggles and wars, were, on the one hand, the victory of the national liberation movements almost everywhere, and, on the other, the recreation of the world market and a new global division of labour. The US role in all this was deeply ambivalent. In part, it pushed for the deconstruction of the old empires and the principle of the 'open door', and simultaneously it

⁴² The original passage here actually states 'from Los Angeles and Granada to Mogadishu and Sarajevo', but it seemed more appropriate in 2001 to refer to Genoa and Afghanistan.

⁴³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 246.

assumed the mantle of the former colonisers, not least in countries such as Vietnam. Yet the Vietnam War was itself another turning-point, they argue, finally blocking any move to recreate an old-style imperialism by the US and opening a new phase in which 'the army of command wielded its power less through military hardware and more through the dollar. This was an enormous step forward toward the construction of Empire'.⁴⁴

Secondly, 'the world market as a structure of hierarchy and command became more important and decisive in all the zones and regions in which the old imperialisms had previously operated'.⁴⁵ Curiously, the authors suggest that this only happens 'after the Vietnam War',⁴⁶ when, in fact, it can be dated back well before, as, of course, can the exercise of the 'command of the dollar'. Yet there is a shift in the 1970s accompanying the break-up of the old Bretton Woods order set up in 1945. A massive increase in flows of global capital and international bank lending is accompanied by a deepening debt-crisis and an expanded role for institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, about which, however, Hardt and Negri have surprisingly little to say. The debt-crisis, in particular – and this applies as much to Eastern Europe as to the former colonies – is then used in the 1980s as a lever to open up relatively closed or protected economies to the exigencies of the world market.⁴⁷

The process of unification of the world market should not be confused with the seriously mistaken thesis of 'homogenisation' of the world economy. The authors seem reluctant to invoke Trotsky's thesis of combined and uneven development, but they do insist on the unevenness of capitalist development. As they emphasise, what is at stake here is not just a matter of trade and finance, but also a process of entry of great masses of workers into the disciplinary régime of modern capitalist production, and the emergence of new patterns of labour migration. There has been a 'decentring' of industrial production as part of the new global division of labour – even if some parts of the globe, especially in Africa, remain peripheralised in the traditional sense of relying on exports of one or two primary commodities and the import of manufactures. One consequence that they highlight is that:

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 250.

⁴⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 246.

⁴⁷ See, for an early analysis, Green 1983, and, for more recent work focusing on the role of the IMF and World Bank, Danaher (ed.) 1994 and Toussaint 1999.

The Third World does not really disappear in the process of unification of the world market but enters into the First, establishes itself at the heart as ghetto, shantytown, favela, always again produced and reproduced. In turn the First World is transferred to the Third in the form of stock exchanges and banks, transnational corporations and icy skyscrapers of money and command. Economic geography and political geography both are destabilized in such a way that the boundaries among the various zones are themselves fluid and mobile.⁴⁸

Thirdly, there is a much less satisfactory argument about the change in the conditions of production that arose out of the deep systemic crisis into which the system entered in the 1970s. The objection is not to their stress on the significance of the process of technological innovation as one capitalist response to that crisis. They correctly link the information technology (IT) revolution to the acceleration of globalisation, noting that the costs of global communications have fallen dramatically.⁴⁹ The problem lies, rather, with their repeated insistence that the proletariat has a 'determinate role' in inventing 'the social and political forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future'.⁵⁰ Indeed, at one point, the claim appears to be even stronger and more specific: the cultural experimentation of the 1960s 'had very profound political and economic effects',⁵¹ as it anticipated the capitalist need for a shift in the paradigm of production towards a more flexible and informational model, and even 'dictated its form and nature'.⁵²

This approach derives from the more general thesis of radical subjectivity noted earlier as characterising Negri's work since the 1970s – a position that,

⁴⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 253–4. Once again, there is an interesting parallel with the work of Nigel Harris notably, on this occasion, Harris 1986, which is much more empirically grounded.

⁴⁹ For a sober, empirically grounded, Marxist assessment of the IT revolution, which avoids uncritical boosterism, but rightly compares the potential impact of the Internet with the railways, see Harris 2001. For a very different view, which may well look rather dated in ten years time, see Callinicos 2001a, p. 42, commenting on Castells 1996. Whilst Callinicos is correct to argue that Castells's analysis suffers from a degree of theoretical incoherence (see also Castree 2001), he fails to register the accuracy of Castells's claim that 'the complexity of the web of strategic alliances, of subcontracting agreements and of decentralized decision-making for large firms would have been impossible to manage without the development of computer networks' (Castells 1996, p. 169).

⁵⁰ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 268.

⁵¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 274.

⁵² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 275.

in stressing the ontological primacy or constitutive power of labour, tends to deny any independent dynamic and creativity to capital itself. Bill Gates has certainly made a fortune exploiting (or suppressing) the inventions of others, but the pioneers of computer software and the Internet cannot be blamed for the oligopolistic form of much of today's computer industry. It is a strange argument that can acknowledge that the IT revolution was sponsored by the Pentagon as a function of military rivalry and the Cold War,⁵³ and yet still insist that it was primarily a function of the creativity of the social movements of the 1960s, without which the authors claim we would never have had any shift in the 'paradigm of production' at all.⁵⁴ What is also missing from *Empire* is any sense that much of the so-called flexibility of the new paradigm is predicated on the casualisation and intensification of labour imposed in the wake of a serious defeat for the proletarian struggles of the 1970s and early 1980s, not least in the USA.⁵⁵

Let us, however, bracket that problem off, for the moment, and return to the question of the state and capital in the new global order. Critics of a neoliberal model of globalisation have rightly insisted that capitalism cannot simply abolish the state. Indeed, as the World Bank belatedly acknowledged in the late 1990s, where states do disintegrate – where, in their terms, effective governance is replaced by gangsterism or civil war, as in parts of Africa – capital ceases to function (what they do not acknowledge, of course, is the degree to which their own policies along with the legacy of colonial pillage have contributed to this situation).⁵⁶ Hardt and Negri would not dissent from that critique. They underline the limitations of any view that simply counterposes the state and capital, or fails to register the function of states in managing the collective interests of individual capitals. That relationship, which they describe in a felicitous phrase as 'the virtuous dialectic of conflict between state and capital', has changed dramatically, but it is not at an end.⁵⁷ It is

⁵³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 299.

⁵⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 275.

⁵⁵ See Harrison 1994 – an argument that is acknowledged by Castells 1996. Callinicos 2001b, p. 53, makes a similar point when he accuses Hardt and Negri of writing 'out of history the real defeats that made possible the reorganisation of capitalism'. He is less accurate on other aspects of *Empire*, as I argue further on in the text.

⁵⁶ World Bank 1997 – which, however, bore the imprint of Joseph Stiglitz, then chief economist, but since forced to resign for his criticisms of the IMF role in East Asia and the Washington consensus generally.

⁵⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 325.

inadequate to conclude simply that 'the state has been defeated and corporations now rule the earth'.⁵⁸ Indeed, if that were the case, 'the capitalists ought to be the ones most fearful of the future'.⁵⁹ Something much more complex and less obvious has taken place, which they summarise as follows:

Although transnational corporations and global networks of production and circulation have undermined the powers of nation-states, state functions and constitutional elements have effectively been displaced to other levels and domains. We need to take a much more nuanced look at how the relationship between state and capital has changed. . . . Government and politics come to be completely integrated into the system of transnational command. Controls are articulated through a series of international bodies and functions. . . . Politics does not disappear; what disappears is any notion of the autonomy of the political.⁶⁰

Typically, the insistence on a more nuanced form of argument is then followed by a series of absolute claims, with little attempt at qualification, such as 'completely integrated' and 'any notion'. One can admire the boldness and provocative character of the style, but question the wisdom of pursuing the argument by such means. Yet there is a profound insight here that needs to be articulated and defended more concretely. The end of the nation-state as the dominant form of sovereignty does not mean the disappearance of either, but a restructuring of states and a structural displacement of sovereignty. The result, as Saskia Sassen has explored in detail, has been both a disarticulation of state structures and a reinforcement of those discipline-and-control functions of the state necessary for the functioning of transnational capital, wherever it seeks to operate.⁶¹ Thus, central banks become 'independent', following the US model, removed from even the semblance of democratic control, and thereby, of course, even more responsive to the dictates of international bankers. At the same time, the local police functions of states continue to expand, along with privatised prisons and border controls. Nation-states have not been replaced so much as displaced – reallocated a subordinate role within the global structure Hardt and Negri call Empire.

⁵⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 324.

⁵⁹ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 306–7.

⁶⁰ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 307.

⁶¹ Sassen 1996, and reformulations of that argument in two important articles 1999a and 1999b.

Yet there is still a hierarchy, or, as Hardt and Negri configure it, a pyramid, with the United States unequivocally located as the one superpower at the tip of the pyramid with hegemony over the use of military force – a status posed by the end of the Cold War and confirmed in the Gulf War. On a second level, but still within the 'first tier', are those nation-states that control the primary global monetary instruments and so have the ability to regulate international exchanges. These states are bound together in 'organisms' such as the G7, the Paris and London Clubs, Davos and so forth.

Other nation-states and transnational corporations both operate on a second tier, 'in which command is distributed broadly across the world'.⁶² Finally, on a third tier, one finds mediatory institutions such as political parties, the media, religious groups and NGOs – all helping to incorporate the multitude into the structures of Empire.

There is something unsatisfactory about the artificial and overschematic character of this construction that fits very uneasily with the emphasis, elsewhere in the book, on the immanence of capital and the fluidity of categories. The schema raises far more questions than it could possibly answer, without adding even more qualifications than they provide – what of the hierarchies within transnational capital itself, and the role of international finance for example?⁶³ But its central figure of a pyramid, with the USA at the tip, should suffice to establish that this is not, in any sense, a crude picture of a globalised world in which all states are powerless or ineffective in the face of market forces and the TNCs.⁶⁴

What they do argue is something rather different and much more accurate. The idea that economies could delink or isolate themselves from the world market – and thus the 'global networks of power' – has become not simply implausible but a recipe for 'a reduction to powerlessness and poverty'.⁶⁵ To give examples they seem reluctant to invoke directly: North Korea and Cuba have, after all, long ceased to be models for any aspiring élite in the

⁶² Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 309–10.

⁶³ François Chesnais, in particular, has highlighted the emergence of new oligopolistic structures at a global level, and the reassertion of the centralised power of finance capital – Chesnais 1994 and the edited collection on finance, Chesnais (ed.) 1996.

⁶⁴ Callinicos 2001b is, therefore, rather misleading when he associates Hardt and Negri with a hyperglobalisers' view, when that term is more usually associated with those, such as Ohmae, who do argue that states are becoming irrelevant in a world of global markets.

⁶⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 284. The reference here is to Amin 1990.

less developed world, whilst China has shown that a different route can generate rapid growth, even if at a massive cost to its workers and peasants (a sacrifice, however, no greater, and possibly less, than that made in the days of Maoist autarchy).

This is not an argument that simply applies to the LDCs. As Hardt and Negri also point out: 'Even the dominant countries are now dependent upon the global system; the interactions of the world market have resulted in a generalized disarticulation of all economies.'⁶⁶

One could respond that this is not new, and that the imperialist economy of Britain was also reliant upon the proceeds of world trade and finance, and thus dependent upon the world market. Yet, this is a difference that would require the authors to move to a different level – a level of political economy – to establish. Here, we can only touch on two of the issues. One is that trade is no longer primarily an exchange of manufactures for raw materials as it was for nineteenth-century Britain. Instead, trade is both intra-industrial and intra-firm, so that even the USA is locked into an elaborate international division of labour within the manufacturing process itself. If one wants to explain why, despite some prominent exceptions (agriculture, steel and textiles), the US has not adopted a protectionist strategy in response to its serious trade deficits, as it did in the 1930s, one has to recognise that most of the importers are directly (Intel or Nike), or indirectly (Wal-Mart and Gap), themselves US-based firms.⁶⁷

Secondly, British capitalism was running a trade deficit financed by a huge return on overseas investment and lending throughout the second half of the century. That net flow – amounting, at its peak, to some nine percent of GDP – has no parallel in the world today.⁶⁸ For over a decade, the USA, as a national economy, has been a net debtor to the rest of the world, paying out more in interest and dividends than it receives. As such, it has been totally reliant on ongoing inflows of capital, especially from Japan, to finance its

⁶⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 284.

⁶⁷ For an insightful analysis comparing the opposition of multinational corporations to protectionism in the 1970s and 1980s, with the situation in the 1930s, see Milner 1988.

⁶⁸ Zevin 1992, along with Hirst and Thompson 1996, conclude from this that financial markets were significantly more open before 1914 than today. But this way of making the comparison conceals the fact that net flows (outflows minus inflows) could be zero, but gross flows enormous, in a highly integrated global economy.

trade deficit and sustain the strength of the dollar. If dependency is defined, as some would argue, in terms of reliance on inflows of capital, the USA is indeed the most dependent economy in the world.⁶⁹ Yet, all those who deduced from the emergence of this situation in the late 1980s that Japanese capital would replace American as financial hegemon turned out to be hopelessly wrong.⁷⁰ Throughout the 1990s, US-based investment banks revealed that they could make just as much profit managing the inflows of capital as they could the outflows. What mattered for them was not the financial health of the US government (as long as it paid its debts), or some notional 'national economy', but their pivotal position as controllers of financial flows across all the world's money markets.

Both those points serve to support the argument in *Empire* that transnational corporations 'tend to make nation-states merely instruments to record the flows of the commodities, monies and populations that they set in motion'.⁷¹ Yet, the vulnerability of the dollar, and the chronic instability on the world currency markets, raise an issue that the authors do not discuss concerning the 'command of the dollar'. The dollar may be, by far, the world's most important reserve currency, but it can still be subject to crises of confidence that drive its holders across the globe to switch into yen, Swiss francs, euros, or even gold, as they did in the late 1970s. There persists a deep contradiction between the globalisation of finance and the divisions of nation-states with separate currencies.⁷² The creation of the euro has been one response to that contradiction and, despite its weakness since 1999, it still constitutes an alternative and, as such, a potentially rival store of value to the dollar. The deep obstacles to international agreement on measures to stabilise and regulate the global currency markets, despite the wealth of proposals by international Keynesians, and especially since the 1997/98 crisis in East Asia, are another indicator of the same contradiction.

This is also an example of how the emergent structures of the Empire are far from being fully consolidated, of how, in the words of William Robinson, 'the political and institutional concomitants' of globalisation are lagging

⁶⁹ For a detailed statistical breakdown, see Godley 2000.

⁷⁰ See Arrighi 1994 for the mistaken prediction – but he was scarcely alone in that respect.

⁷¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 3.

⁷² See, in particular, the excellent Marxist work by Bryan 1995.

behind – and of how there persist serious divisions over a strategy for the way forward within the camps of both US and European globalisers.⁷³ Yet, it is also true that the G7 states, and most of the states on the second tier, are now almost inextricably locked into structures that they themselves have created, which do not simply serve the interests of US capitalism, or any other particular capitalism, but transnational capital in general, regardless of its origin.⁷⁴ Finally, Hardt and Negri arrive at the point where they indicate the significance of:

the evolution of a whole series of global juridico-economic bodies such as GATT, the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF. The globalization of production and circulation, supported by this supranational scaffolding, supercedes the effectiveness of national juridical structures.⁷⁵

The argument could be generalised to embrace a multiplicity of global regulatory régimes for industries such as telecommunications, insurance and banking, as well as the spread of the US model of accountancy standards and copyright and patenting law.⁷⁶ States may still have the right not to sign up to these régimes and, in that sense, retain a degree of ‘sovereignty’ in the traditional sense. Yet, the costs of exclusion from the global order are such that the element of choice over this is highly constrained, as the number of third-world states that have signed up to the WTO indicates.

As I suggested earlier, Hardt and Negri do not spend a lot of time on the

⁷³ Robinson 1996, p. 372. However, Robinson’s own analysis of the US role in promoting both globalisation and its political counterpart ‘polyarchy’ (formal democracy emptied of substance by the power of transnational capital) especially in the traditional domains of US control (Latin America and East Asia) fits very well with the thesis of *Empire*. See also Robinson and Harris 2000 for an intriguing analysis of the different fractions within what they term a ‘transnational capitalist class’.

⁷⁴ It is sometimes argued that institutions such as the IMF are, in reality, ‘completely an agency of US will’ (Gowan 2001, p. 84) and, certainly, there have been occasions, as in the Mexican crisis of 1995, when the US overrode the objections of other members to a bail-out package. But Gowan’s argument ignores the extent to which IMF interventions act in the interests of all creditors, regardless of their nationality – and structural adjustment packages open up economies to foreign investment from any source, including multinationals from the Newly Industrialising Countries themselves.

⁷⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 336.

⁷⁶ On insurance and accountancy, Strange 1996 is, as usual, perceptive. For a more comprehensive account of the patterns of global business regulation, see Braithwaite and Drahos 2000, which concludes with some relevant reflections on the ‘paradoxes of sovereignty’, but a strategy which focuses on the need to ‘ratchet-up’ standards globally.

evidence for any of this. The amount of attention given to bodies such as the WTO is so cursory, despite their obvious significance for the argument in general, that some readers may well feel cheated. But the authors have not set themselves that sort of task, which others are better equipped to deal with. Instead, they rely heavily, but with some justification, on those such as Sassen, Harvey, Arrighi and Castells who have all contributed in very different ways to a political economy of globalisation.⁷⁷ Those who remain sceptics about the novelty or even the existence of 'globalisation' will respond by insisting that Hardt and Negri's whole argument rests on a false premise. Those who recognise that globalisation is the dominant form of the latest phase of capitalism are faced with a more challenging task. How far can we go with the figure of Empire itself? One difficulty has already been emphasised. Empire is, at most, an emergent structure, still characterised by internal contradictions and political tensions, which the authors may not deny, but which their theoretical construction of Empire as a 'smooth space'⁷⁸ seems to ignore. Yet, as they go on to say, once again disarming the criticisms, the space of imperial sovereignty:

... might appear to be free of the binary divisions or striation of modern boundaries, but really it is criss-crossed by so many fault lines that it only appears as a continuous uniform space. In this sense the clearly defined crisis of modernity gives way to an omni-crisis in the imperial world. In this smooth space of Empire there is no place of power – it is both everywhere and nowhere. Empire is an ou-topia or really a non-place.⁷⁹

The obvious objection to the assertion that there is no place, or no territorial centre, of power within Empire, concerns the position of the United States.⁸⁰ Addressing that issue adequately requires that we also devote some space to alternative perspectives on the 'new world order'.

⁷⁷ Sassen 1991 and 1996; Harvey 1982 and 1989; Arrighi 1994; Castells 1989 and 1996.

⁷⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 190.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ In his contribution to a debate on *Empire* organised by *Historical Materialism* (SOAS, 26 October 2001), Michael Hardt acknowledged two pervasive ambiguities in the work – Empire/US Imperialism and the Multitude/Proletariat couplet. The position he outlined clearly expressed his dissatisfaction with any reduction of Empire to an expression of US national power but did not deny the leading or 'hegemonic' role of the US as the world's sole superpower.

‘A New World Order’?

Since it can be easy to lose one’s way in the labyrinthine structure of *Empire*, it is always worth referring back to the remarkably concise and lucid preface in which the authors summarise the basic argument. There, they insist that, over the past several decades, ‘we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges’.⁸¹ This is not simply, as the neoliberal model would have it, about the liberation of the capitalist economy from political control.

Even the most dominant nation-states should no longer be thought of as supreme and sovereign authorities, either outside or even within their own borders. The decline in sovereignty of nation-states, however, does not mean that sovereignty as such has declined. Throughout the contemporary transformations, political controls, state functions and regulatory mechanisms have continued to rule the realm of economic and social production and exchange. Our basic hypothesis is that sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire.⁸²

The fundamental contrast with the era of imperialisms is that Empire is capable of incorporating the entire global realm, and, especially since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union’s barriers to the ‘world market’, seems to be doing precisely that. The United States continues to act as the world’s sole superpower exercising its ‘power of the police’ against the marginalised ‘rogue states’, and against the ‘barbarians within’. Yet, despite the obvious parallel with the ancient Roman empire, this Empire, they insist, has no single centre. The USA has ‘a privileged position’,⁸³ or ‘a position of primacy’,⁸⁴ but this privilege ‘derives not from its similarities to the old European imperialist powers, but from its differences’.⁸⁵

It is tempting, but mistaken, to understand Empire as some form of ‘quasi-state’, which is a term more applicable to a structure like the EU, which has

⁸¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. xi.

⁸² Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. xi–xii.

⁸³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. xiv.

⁸⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 309.

⁸⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. xiv.

its own bureaucracy, parliament and courts.⁸⁶ Instead, they suggest, in an argument likely to baffle those still trapped in a conventional notion of sovereignty as inseparable from the power of nation-states, that this is a 'special kind of sovereignty' which is 'virtual' and 'discontinuous' and 'realised at the margins'.⁸⁷ It may be helpful to see this 'virtuality' (which is counterposed not to the real but to actuality) as a structure or machine that is permanently immanent in its effects, but only becomes actual or manifest at moments of breakdown or emergency.⁸⁸ The events of 11 September 2001 and their aftermath have dramatically illustrated what they mean by this. The reality of Empire suddenly appears both in the brutal exercise of military force on the margins against Afghanistan and in the way a unilateralist US régime was immediately obliged to construct a coalition for the 'war against terrorism' that included (to varying degrees) Russia, China, Pakistan and Iran, all of which had at one time or another also been on the 'margins'.

It is easy to question whether a term such as 'sovereignty', which is laden with so many connotations of transcendent or overriding authority, should be applied to a structure which is essentially virtual and cannot be located in any one place of power. Certainly, Hardt and Negri's use of the term has been a source of confusion for many critics. However, we should not become fixated on the semantic question and recognise that, by posing the argument in this way, the authors have issued a powerful challenge to the conventional state-centric wisdom that still prevails, paradoxically, among many of those who regard themselves as Marxist.⁸⁹

Any critical assessment should begin by acknowledging that the US position today is different from any previous exercise of hegemonic power within the world system of capitalism. It is both more global and more inclusive than even the British Empire, with which it is too often crudely compared. Its military power relative to potential rivals is more absolute than any in

⁸⁶ This is my comparison not one made by Hardt and Negri who pay virtually no attention to the structures or economic significance of the EU.

⁸⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 39.

⁸⁸ The authors actually refer to 'a very high tech machine . . . built to control the marginal event' (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 39) where, however, the term machine is used in the Deleuzian sense of a dynamic social or psychic structure.

⁸⁹ Matthew Caygill has suggested correctly that, at the very least, *Empire* provides a new research programme that others need to explore more concretely, and we are both indebted to Callinicos 1982 for his persuasive defence of the ideas of Lakatos on research programmes.

history, although Rome at its height came close. Yet, that power has been deployed on behalf of a global capitalist system and not to establish exclusive control over markets and resources in the manner of all the classical imperialisms. One indication of that was certainly the Gulf War, when the US/British intervention was not simply on behalf of Anglo-American oil companies but about guaranteeing the Middle East oil supplies that are much more vital for the economies of Japan and Europe than they are for the US itself. The mercenary dimension of the US action was indicated by the subsidies the USA received from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Japan and Germany, so that, on one estimate, it made a profit on the operation.⁹⁰

Hardt and Negri, at the very beginning, rule out two common conceptions of how Empire might have arisen. One sees the new order as arising spontaneously as a function of the world market. This neoliberal view ignores the active role played by the US state, aided and abetted by the other core powers of the G7, in sustaining and extending the neoliberal project of deregulation, privatisation and the removal of barriers to the free flow of commodities and capital.⁹¹ The dominant states have played an active role as agents of globalisation. There is, for example, nothing in Hardt and Negri's account incompatible with the evidence, usefully assembled by Peter Gowan, of a conscious economic/geopolitical strategy, jointly operated by the EU and the US, with respect to the countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁹²

But the authors might have had Peter Gowan in mind when they reject the alternative conception of the creation of Empire: '... the idea that order is dictated by a single power and a single centre of rationality transcendent to global forces, guiding the various phases of historical development accord-

⁹⁰ See, for the estimate, Freeman 1991, p. 159.

⁹¹ Helleiner 1994, provides a rich analysis of how and why this happened with respect to financial markets. However, his conclusion, that what states have helped to engineer they can therefore reverse, does not follow and ignores the implications of path dependency theory. As Helleiner 1999 himself notes elsewhere, deregulation was a response to the difficulties for central banks generated by the deterritorialisation of financial markets (offshore centres, euromarkets and the like) and it follows that reregulation would have to be a collective exercise by at a minimum all the G7 states and probably the Swiss as well. That is unlikely, given the hostility of the US Treasury and Wall Street to any such project, though not impossible – as more limited measures over money laundering since September 11 indicate – but it would not represent a retreat from 'globalisation'.

⁹² Gowan 1999, especially Chapter 9, pp. 187–248.

ing to its conscious and all-seeing plan, something like a conspiracy theory of globalization'.⁹³

Gowan has produced a frequently perceptive and well-documented account of US strategies for the creation of what he labels the 'Dollar Wall-Street Régime'. Yet, there are two lacunae that pervade this work. Firstly, there is the identification of globalisation as simply a political project, an instrument of US 'supra-imperialism'. The account virtually ignores the profit-motivated drive of all transnational capital, regardless of its origins, to break down national and regional barriers. The globalising response of capitals to the deep crises of the 1970s and 1980s was driven by the need to restore profitability and it is only in this context that we can understand the turn to neoliberalism across the core economies, regardless of the political stance of governments. Secondly, there is Gowan's interpretation of the evident complicity of the EU and Japan in this process as a function of political and military weakness in the face of US exercise of its hegemonic resources. What is missing here is any sense that moves towards greater 'liberalisation' within both the EU and Japan, or elsewhere in the world, have not been driven primarily by external pressure, although that has played a role. Instead, we have witnessed the active participation of Europe- and Japan-based transnational corporations and banks in the construction of the world market and a global order. More recently, they have also been joined by the new bourgeoisie in much of the so-called Third World and Eastern Europe, who would rather buy in to that order, even on unfavourable terms, than risk the consequences of exclusion.⁹⁴ Crises in this context, such as the financial collapse in East Asia in 1997–8, have only served to accelerate the process, at the behest of the IMF and the US Treasury, and, although points of resistance persist, as in Mahathir's Malaysia, their strength should not be exaggerated.⁹⁵

In a situation in which US military spending in total exceeds that of the next eight military powers combined, there can be no doubt about the issue of relative military weakness. Hesitant moves towards a European defence force, or the moves towards greater military spending in Japan encouraged

⁹³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 3.

⁹⁴ See, once again, Robinson 1996.

⁹⁵ Wade and Veneroso 1998 have successfully exposed the role of the IMF and the US in this process – but Wade, in particular, has had a tendency to idealise the East Asian states as promoters of 'development' and to underestimate their internal contradictions.

by the US itself, are not going to alter that picture. Its origins lie in the comprehensive defeats of German and Japanese attempts to create their own imperialisms in the Second World War. The ruling classes of those countries have certainly not forgotten the lesson of that devastating defeat which was followed by decades of military occupation.⁹⁶ It is in this context that Hardt and Negri are right to affirm boldly that the era of interimperialist wars has come to an end.

Certainly, there are tensions within Empire that Hardt and Negri do not attempt to explore. One problem is their exaggeration of the degree to which this emergent new world order has been successfully consolidated. On the one hand, we could point to those regional conflicts that Empire has had great difficulty in keeping under control. Conflicts within the Balkans may eventually be terminated or repressed by external intervention. That seems much less likely in the Middle East, or in central Africa, or with the potentially nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan. On the other hand, there are the tensions generated by the new Bush régime in Washington and its hostility towards any international body or treaty that might constrain its freedom of manoeuvre.

There is a fascinating section in *Empire*, where Hardt and Negri compare and contrast the two 'proposals' or strategies pursued by the US state at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹⁷ One is represented most prominently by Theodore Roosevelt, and amounted to the US pursuing its own European-style imperialist project. It found expression in the Spanish-American war of 1898, and the subsequent US occupation of Cuba and the Philippines. The other project was represented by Woodrow Wilson, architect of the League of Nations, which they argue would prove more powerful and effective in the long run. Wilson was naïve in his utopian vision of a world peace enforced by a League of Nations in which the US did not even participate, following opposition from a Republican Senate.⁹⁸ Yet, Hardt and Negri are to the point

⁹⁶ Cumings 1997 p. 155, argues effectively that Japan, along with Taiwan, South Korea and the Philippines, has been only a semi-sovereign state since 1945, and all four are still 'deeply penetrated by US military structures . . . and incapable of independent foreign policy or defense initiatives'.

⁹⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 174–6.

⁹⁸ See, however, Mayer 1968 for a superb account of how Wilson was also responding to the threat posed by the Russian Revolution and how this governed the debate at Versailles in 1919.

when they suggest that Wilson's vision ('the foresight of a great idiot'), unrelaisable at the time, would still prove to be 'an efficient promoter of the passage to Empire'.⁹⁹ Less convincing, however, is the suggestion that the US defeat in the Vietnam War marked the end of the Roosevelt Republican tendency in US politics. The initial months of the régime of Bush junior indicate that it is still alive – capable of pursuing an 'America first' strategy not least over Nuclear Missile Defence, which risks undermining the 'new global constitution'. But the contradictions in that strategy are also evident, not least with respect to China – as the US is simultaneously targeting China as a potential enemy and still seeking to incorporate it into structures such as the WTO.¹⁰⁰

The continuing tensions between the USA, China and Russia have been highlighted by Alex Callinicos, who has sought to defend the continuing relevance of a Bukharin/Lenin model of classical imperialism to the world today. In his most recent work, *Against the Third Way*, Callinicos has briefly discussed *Empire* in an extended footnote.¹⁰¹ Whilst acknowledging the 'brilliance' of much of the analysis, he locates Hardt and Negri as offering 'a far-left variant' of the left-liberal analysis of forms of global governance associated with David Held and Anthony McGrew in particular.¹⁰² He notes that, whilst Held and his associates have illusions in the new 'global politics', Hardt and Negri

⁹⁹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 176.

¹⁰⁰ The contradictions were also evident in the wake of September 11, as suggested in the postscript to this article. But it is also worth noting the rapid abandonment of the pre-election Republican position on reducing finance for the IMF, which did not survive the crises in Argentina and Turkey during the first year of the Bush government, a shift comparable to that of the Reagan government in response to the debt crisis of 1982. In both cases, what mattered was not the ideology but the demands of the global order and the needs of international creditors.

¹⁰¹ Callinicos 2001a, pp. 137–8 – but there is a more extended and differently focused critique in Callinicos 2001b, that appeared soon after the first draft of this article.

¹⁰² Held et al. 1999. One difficulty with this comparison Callinicos does not mention is that Held and McGrew's method is thoroughly Weberian, evident in the elaborate typologies they construct, and, as such, incapable of grasping adequately the historical dynamic of capitalism as a global system. In that respect, Hardt and Negri are distinctly superior. By contrast, Held and McGrew, along with Giddens, are vulnerable to the accusation by Rosenberg 2001 of confusion between use of globalisation as a descriptive term and as an independent explanatory category, abstracting from capitalist relations of production. In his more recent article on Negri, Callinicos 2001b takes a different tack and identifies *Empire* as the work of 'hyperglobalisers'. This is the term used by Held and McGrew in order to differentiate themselves from the likes of Ohmae, and is even less adequate as a description of Hardt and Negri's position, which simply does not fit into that sort of conceptual grid.

recognise that Empire is a new form of capitalist domination. The difference, of course, becomes critical when one is confronted with events such as the Kosovo war, where Nato's intervention was cloaked in the rhetoric of human rights.

Yet, Callinicos goes on to argue that:

... there is no evidence that the development of multilateral political forms that allow the leading capitalist states to co-ordinate their policies and negotiate their differences is bringing about the disappearance of major conflicts of interest among the great powers or of the relative predominance of the United States among these powers. At most we see the emergence of a hybrid form of sovereignty in which the pursuit of nationally constituted interests is legitimized through appeal to transnational institutions (for example the UN, NATO, and EU) and the values they affirm.¹⁰³

It is worth noting in response that a 'hybrid constitution' is a phrase coined by Hardt and Negri themselves to characterise the peculiar character of the constitution of Empire. Callinicos is also wrong, as we have already shown, to imply that Hardt and Negri fail to acknowledge the 'relative predominance of the United States'. Indeed, if anything, they overstate the capacity of the US to act as a global policeman on behalf of Empire. The deeper issue concerns the 'major conflicts of interest among the great powers'. It has long been possible to locate sources of tension between, for example, the USA and the EU – trade disputes, especially over agriculture, differences over how to respond to the break-up of Yugoslavia or the extension of NATO into Eastern Europe. Are these really indicators of 'interimperialist rivalry' in the classical sense of the term? Callinicos's account suffers from a lack of perspective – and fails to recognise that, despite all these tensions, the process of extension and deepening of global forms of judicial regulation in the interests of international capital in general, continues to be pursued by all the 'great powers' in a whole variety of fora. The Kyoto agreement on global warming has been disowned by the USA; conflicts over agriculture or intellectual property rights may yet prevent a new trade round being launched at the next WTO summit; disagreements over the direction of the IMF may hamper efforts to stabilise the international currency markets. None of this

¹⁰³ Callinicos 2001a, p. 137.

is likely to signal a reversal of the processes of global integration or trigger a collapse of the institutions themselves comparable to the 1930s disintegration of both the world trade conference and the League of Nations.

The Bukharin/Lenin model of imperialist rivalry rested on the consolidation of geographically distinct blocs of nationally integrated state capitals, as Callinicos himself has ably explained elsewhere.¹⁰⁴ Economic competition between those blocs required monopolising access to markets and raw materials, and this process led inexorably to two world wars. It was quite justified to retain a variant of that model to explain the Cold-War military competition between the USA and the USSR after 1945 and connect that to the state-capitalist character of the Soviet régime. Indeed, Hardt and Negri's account of the post-war period and the significance of the Cold War would have been significantly improved by incorporating that analysis. Within the Western bloc itself, the re-emergence of intense economic competition in the 1960s certainly did not translate into military rivalry. In recent decades, that disassociation of economic and military competition has deepened, precisely because of the integration of capital across the Triad of the advanced industrial regions. Economic competition between capitals can only in exceptional cases (most notably, agriculture, steel and the arms/aviation complex) now be mapped onto the national or even regional divisions of the globe. Instead, we find Daimler/Chrysler, Renault/Nissan, Ford/Mazda, Volkswagen/Seat/Skoda and General Motors/Fiat all slogging it out over shares of the world market, each with production systems which are regionally concentrated but still cut across national borders. One could extend the description to many other sectors – and to the emergent complex of electronics, telecommunications and the global media baronies in particular.¹⁰⁵ Are the interests of those corporations simply 'nationally constituted'?

In *Against the Third Way*, Callinicos quite correctly emphasises the persistence, indeed the reassertion, of US hegemony, and, like Gowan, locates the extension of NATO into Eastern Europe and the Kosovo War as an expression of this. Yet, he also wants to reject the view that all other nation-states

¹⁰⁴ Callinicos 1991a and 1991b.

¹⁰⁵ Herman and McChesney 1997 provides a model of how to combine economic, political and ideological analysis of the global media. Herman has also contributed vigorously to a debate with those around *Monthly Review* in the US, such as William Tabb and Ellen Meiksins Wood, who are 'globalisation sceptics' (DuBoff and Herman 1997, Herman 1999).

lie 'prostrate before US ultra-imperialism'.¹⁰⁶ There are two problems with this mode of argument. One is the rhetorical use of the word 'prostrate', that occludes the possibility of states accepting subordinate positions in the structure of Empire in exchange for a share in the power of that system – which does not imply that they are simply 'vassals'. Israel comes to mind in the current conjuncture. Indeed, Callinicos himself rightly points to the need to understand the exercise of US hegemony as requiring a 'variety of methods – coercion, persuasion, bribery, alliances, the impersonal functioning of economic mechanisms etc', rather than absolute political domination.¹⁰⁷

More critically, at this point in his argument, Callinicos shifts from a focus on the triad of the US, EU and Japan, to the very different issue of US relations with Russia and China. There is a serious question over whether those two large and recalcitrant nuclear powers can be effectively integrated into the structures of Empire, like Germany and Japan before them. Certainly, it is a question that Hardt and Negri fail to address. The Bukharin/Lenin model of interimperialist rivalry locates military tension as a function of national economic rivalry over exclusive control of markets and raw materials that, as Susan Strange argued some time ago, has no relevance to a non-territorial empire.¹⁰⁸ Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal of the 1930s, as Hardt and Negri observe in passing, included as its foreign policy dimension the principle of the 'open door', challenging the closed territorial barriers of the British and other empires of the time.¹⁰⁹ The open door, although much qualified in practice, has been the operative principle of US foreign economic policy ever since. Hardt and Negri perhaps overplay the significance of the US constitution as a model suited for the structures of Empire, but they are absolutely right to recognise that, like the Roman Empire before it, this Empire is inclusive not exclusive in its mode of expansion. In other words, states that play by the rules of the game and open their doors also gain access to the world market and the fora of global regulation like the WTO.

There are still issues of geopolitics on the agenda – not least in the Middle East and Central Asia, with their huge oil reserves. That is very different, however, from suggesting that what is at stake in the tensions between the

¹⁰⁶ Callinicos 2001a, p. 90.

¹⁰⁷ Callinicos 2001a, p. 89.

¹⁰⁸ Strange 1989.

¹⁰⁹ Gardner 1971.

USA, Russia and China is a matter of economic rivalry in the Bukharinite sense. Russia is a 'basket-case' economically and will probably remain so for many decades to come. China is growing rapidly, but that growth has become conditional upon access to the world market, and thus entry into the WTO. Indeed, China's economic relationship with US and Japanese capital is much better characterised as that of a cheap sub-contractor rather than as an economic rival – and China's competitors in this role are the other NICs of South and East Asia. They might want to see the elimination of China as a competitor. The globalised and dominant fraction of US capital, which continues to press for China's admission to the WTO, does not.

This debate will, no doubt, continue for some time to come. Hardt and Negri can be criticised for overstating, at times, the uncontested character of US hegemony on a global scale. Yet, they are surely right to insist, however, that the most serious threat to the stability of Empire comes from below, from the diverse protests and modes of resistance of the multitude, from the streets of Genoa to the Palestinian camps in Gaza and the West Bank. The figure of Empire remains attractive to this reviewer at least, precisely because it captures a critical dimension of the structures of global capitalism far more effectively than other accounts. The core economies of the Triad have become integrated to an unprecedented degree since 1945, and this has been accompanied by the creation of global institutions and patterns of regulation, such as the WTO, which have proved capable of being extended to embrace almost all national economies. Despite many predictions, we have not seen the disintegration of global capitalism into rival regional blocs. 'Fortress Europe', in particular, has proved a misnomer in all respects other than immigration controls. That failure of prediction itself demands explanation from all the neo-realists – sometimes termed, quite accurately, neo-mercantilists – such as Robert Gilpin, whose analyses remain so wilfully state-centric that the globalising logic of capital itself escapes them.¹¹⁰

Callinicos and Gowan are more sensitive to the realities of globalising capital than Gilpin, as one would expect from those who are still avowedly Marxist. Yet, they share a perspective that seems to attribute the dominant agency in the projects of globalisation to states rather than capitals. Both are

¹¹⁰ Gilpin 1987. Neorealism here, of course, refers to the current within international relations theory, not to any philosophical discourse.

happy to invoke the comments on the 'global chessboard' by another neo-realist and former US state department hawk, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who abstracts from capitalism completely in his stress on the geopolitical balance of forces.¹¹¹ Both, in a sense, simply attach a negative sign to what Brzezinski regards positively – the emergence of the US as an unchallenged superpower. What Hardt and Negri have tried to do, in contrast, is to pose the question of how Empire differs in its functioning, as well as its legitimation, from the imperialisms of the past – and that, at the very least, is a critical question.

But we must also return, with Hardt and Negri, to Lenin and confront the spectre of the revisionist Kautsky. Lenin, they argue, in a passage likely to scandalise the orthodox, agreed with Kautsky that:

... there is a trend in capitalist development towards the international co-operation of the various national finance capitals and possibly towards the construction of a single world trust. What he objected to so strongly was the fact that Kautsky used this vision of a peaceful future to negate the dynamics of the present reality; thus Lenin denounced his 'profoundly reactionary desire to blunt the contradictions' of the present situation.¹¹²

The reference is to Lenin's preface to Bukharin's *Imperialism and World Economy*, and readers should check it if they are in any doubt about the accuracy of this account.¹¹³ They go on to suggest, more tenuously, that Lenin also recognised that imperialism, in suppressing capitalist competition and imposing fixed boundaries 'actually creates a straitjacket for capital'.¹¹⁴ In summary, Hardt and Negri have the audacity to claim Lenin as a precursor of their own analysis of this contradiction, as outlined earlier. Lenin himself was always alert to the different tendencies within capitalism, and always insistent that Marxists had to examine the concrete development in all its contradictions. What he believed was that capitalism would be 'transformed into its oppo-

¹¹¹ Brzezinski 1997 is certainly revealing about the mentality of US strategists. Geopolitical considerations are, of course, relevant to the historical balance of power between states, as Engels frequently observed, but their relationship to the logic of capital demands more theorisation than that provided by either Callinicos or Gowan, who simply take their significance for granted. Interestingly, Brzezinski himself downplays any notion that China could soon become 'truly competitive in the key dimensions of *global power*' (p. 164).

¹¹² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 230.

¹¹³ Bukharin 1972, pp. 11–15, or any English edition with Lenin's Introduction.

¹¹⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 234.

site' long before Kautsky's vision could be realised. That transformation has yet to happen, whilst capitalism has not ceased to change and develop. It is still not a matter of a single world trust. Capitalist competition persists, in some respects, in a more intensified form across the terrain of the world market. The Bukharin/Lenin analysis of imperialism is a deep but empirically grounded explanation of the conditions that led to the First World War, and has itself become a straitjacket constricting the imagination of Marxists today.¹¹⁵

The question of labour

There is a whole other dimension of the text of *Empire* that has been virtually ignored up until this point, and there is insufficient space here to do justice to its themes. These embrace such issues as the ontology of labour, the role of the general intellect, and their reliance on a concept of the growing immateriality of labour. There is also the question of their conception of biopolitics and the figure of the multitude. Their treatment of all of these is suggestive – and deserves a more extensive critique than is possible here. These are themes, however, which are not peculiar to *Empire*, having been developed in some detail in earlier work by Negri and others of his associates in the autonomist tradition, especially in Italy and the USA. There are other texts which provide extremely useful summaries of these debates, most notably Nick Dyer-Witheford's *Cyber-Marx*, which, however, appeared before the publication of *Empire* itself.¹¹⁶

Here, one can only indicate some of the difficulties and hope to avoid distorting in summary a position that is complex, sometimes ambivalent and, on occasion, obscure. We must begin by referring back to the criticism made earlier of Negri's account of the dynamic of capital, and the continuity here with Negri's work of the 1970s, especially *Marx Beyond Marx*. In that work, as in *Empire*, Negri identifies worker resistance, or class struggle in the widest

¹¹⁵ Although, with its stress on the export of capital, the centralising character of finance capital and the expansion of the rentier element of the capitalist class, Lenin's *Imperialism* has regained a relevance to the contemporary world it lost in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹¹⁶ Dyer-Witheford 1999. This is particularly commendable for its stress on the liberatory potential of new technologies, a theme which also appears in *Empire* but is rather obscured by the language of 'machinic virtuality' (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 367).

sense of the term, as itself the driving force of capitalist innovation. From an absolutely correct starting-point – that living labour is ontologically constitutive of capital, as Marx insisted in his theory of value, Negri derives a conclusion that is certainly a false reading of Marx himself. Capital certainly can only sustain itself by continuously sucking like a vampire the blood and energy of the mass of workers, an image the authors invoke to characterise *Empire* as well.¹¹⁷ This does not mean, however, that the forms of capital as a social relation have no real significance, or are simply a matter of fetishism.¹¹⁸ To put it simply, the dynamic of capital accumulation is driven as much, if not more, by the competition between capitals as it is by class struggle.

It would be possible to provide many examples of how the one-sidedness of Negri's analysis – and, here, the rejection of dialectics is part of the problem – limits and distorts the interpretations within *Empire* itself. However, the interpretation of crisis is a critical issue. It may have been plausible in the 1970s, especially in Italy, to interpret the end of the long post-war boom and the advent of a protracted economic crisis as essentially a function of class struggle. This was understood by Negri not simply as a matter of rising wages but of a more generalised refusal of work (strikes, sabotage, slowdowns, absenteeism) and he was, indeed, correct to emphasise the significance of those struggles at that time. Yet, whilst struggles may make a crisis more intractable for capital, they do not govern the rhythms of the system. Underlying this thesis, most obviously in *Marx Beyond Marx*, lies Negri's deep-rooted hostility to any form of objectivist Marxism. In the Italian context of the 1960s and 1970s, objectivism was associated by Negri, and the autonomists generally, with the crudities of a Stalinist view on overarching laws of history and the inevitability of a final collapse of capitalism independent of human practice. But this is to misinterpret Marx himself, and reveals, for example, an inability to grasp the structure of Marx's argument about tendency and counter-tendency with respect to the rate of profit.¹¹⁹

In any event, it would be difficult to attribute the recent global plunge into the fourth serious recession of the last thirty years to an upsurge of

¹¹⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 62.

¹¹⁸ See, among many possible references, Marx 1973, pp. 308–9.

¹¹⁹ An inability from which Robert Brenner 1998 also suffers, but his work does provide evidence as to why levels of class struggle cannot explain the generalised global crisis of the 1970s and 1980s. See, also, the wide range of critical responses to Brenner in *Historical Materialism*, 4 and 5.

working-class militancy. Nor can one effectively analyse with this approach the dynamics of financial speculation, evident in the course of 1997–8, or, indeed, the current precariousness of the dollar suggested earlier. Missing here is also any sense of mediation within the structures of capitalism itself – for example, the role of credit and interest rates (although Hardt and Negri repeatedly use the term ‘mediation’ in other contexts).¹²⁰ Indeed, taking Hegel more seriously as a model of systematic dialectics, as distinct from a teleological dialectic of history, might well have prevented the authors making the rash claim that ‘... as the twentieth century draws to a close capitalism is miraculously healthy, its accumulation more robust than ever’.¹²¹

One could also explore here, at some length, their claim that the law of value is no longer operative in the conditions of postmodern capitalism, precisely because labour is no longer ‘measurable’. This flows from their thesis about the growing immateriality of labour. They hasten to add that this does not imply that labour no longer involves corporeal action.¹²² The claim is one of the growing significance of intellectualised labour, on the one hand, (including, for example, workers running automated production systems, as well as workers in the media, advertising, fashion etc.), and what they term ‘affective labour’ (health, and care workers in particular), on the other.¹²³ It is certainly true that it is impossible to measure the productivity of the labour of workers

¹²⁰ Money and credit do feature prominently in autonomist-influenced accounts of the world economy (e.g. Bonefeld and Holloway (eds.) 1995), but they tend to emphasise the role of money as ‘command’, or as an exercise of violence – see also Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 346, on ‘money as the imperial arbiter’ – to the exclusion of any adequate consideration of money and credit as both forms of capital and the source of constraints upon individual capitals. This can also be traced back to Negri’s study of the Keynesian state of 1976 translated in Hardt and Negri 1994.

¹²¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 270. On the distinction between systematic and historical dialectics, Arthur 1993. Yet Arthur goes too far in rejecting any applicability of value categories historically, before capitalism has emerged as a consolidated system with all labour-power turned into a commodity.

¹²² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 364. There has been a wide-ranging debate among autonomist thinkers themselves on the related concepts of the general intellect and immaterial labour, as Dyer-Witheford helpfully reveals (Dyer-Witheford 1999 pp. 230–4, and Dyer-Witheford 1997). In response to criticism of some of his earlier formulations (see Guattari and Negri 1990, especially the postface written by Negri alone in 1990, five years after the original edition), Negri seems to have shifted his position in *Empire* away from any suggestion that intellectual labour has a privileged position in the struggle against capitalism.

¹²³ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 290–4. For further clarification on the concept of immaterial labour, Maurizio Lazzarato is useful (Lazzarato 1996).

such as teachers or nurses, or website designers and musicians, although their labour-power is still commodified and, as such, subject to the form of value (and to spurious measures of productivity). Yet that type of labour remains only a small, if growing, fraction of the global labour force.¹²⁴

In the realm of traded goods on the world market, it would be more accurate to assert that the law of value in Marx's sense has never been more fully implemented. That is one consequence of the elimination of barriers to the movement of goods and capital that the authors themselves highlight elsewhere in the text. The law of value, as Marx also explained, asserts itself only in and through crises that serve to eliminate the less productive capitals and drive down prices to the level set by socially-necessary labour-time.¹²⁵ That is precisely what is happening, as this is being written, to the producers of computers and all their components on the global market.

But Hardt and Negri can also claim that crisis, in a rather different sense of the word, is a permanent characteristic of the system today, indeed, 'immanent to and indistinguishable from Empire'.¹²⁶ In one sense, this is because the whole system is rotten and parasitical, pervaded by corruption, not just according to the obvious meaning, but in the sense of a system that has no intrinsic vitality, which survives only by absorbing and thereby corrupting the desire and energy of the multitude. In another, the crisis is seen as a function of the system's increasing dependence upon the co-operative power and intellectual creativity of labour – whilst, at the same time, it is obliged 'to obstruct and control this co-operative autonomy so as not to be destroyed by it'.¹²⁷

In passages like this, in the closing part of the book, Hardt and Negri reaffirm that, whilst Empire may represent progress, it is still the enemy. It is even more so because it has further developed the conditions for human

¹²⁴ The absence of any statistics in the text makes any claim by the authors about the composition of the proletariat difficult to assess. Hardt and Negri might well respond that the standard statistical categories can frequently obscure the situation, as, for example, intellectual activity can be as much a characteristic of so-called manual labour as bodily action is of most white-collar work. Nevertheless, the objection remains that they underestimate the degree of deskilling and routinisation of labour that has also accompanied the spread of new technologies (Dyer-Witheford 1999, p. 234).

¹²⁵ Marx 1981 – especially Chapter 15.

¹²⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 386.

¹²⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 392.

liberation, and, yet, mobilises all its ideological and disciplinary capacities to suppress that possibility. These are powerful, frequently lyrical, yet often difficult to decipher, passages. They combine rage against the system with a strong sense of the creativity and potentiality of all human beings. But, almost out of nowhere, the final chapter conjures up a list of demands designed, as they put it, to facilitate the transformation of the multitude into a political subject.¹²⁸ There are three demands, in particular, each posed at a high level of generality: the right to global citizenship (and, thus, an end to all immigration controls); the right to a social wage, or a guaranteed income for all; and the right to reappropriation of the means of production in general. This latter includes the means of what they call biopolitical production such as knowledge, information, communication and affects.

This is not just a utopian wish list, but neither is it a concrete elaboration of a political alternative that, anyway, the authors insist can only arise in practice. Each of the demands has a resonance, and each can be linked to particular contemporary struggles raging around the globe – whether it be over the rights of asylum-seekers, against water privatisation in Bolivia, or the campaign around anti-Aids drugs and so-called intellectual property rights in South Africa. Yet, to speak of demands, and to speak of the multitude becoming a political subject, raises questions about agency and organisation that the authors do not adequately address. As Doug Henwood has asked, in a sympathetic review, with respect to the guaranteed income demand – who will write the cheques?¹²⁹

Those who would dismiss all this because the authors decline to speak any more of the primacy of the industrial working class are in danger of missing the point.¹³⁰ For, Hardt and Negri are making the justified claim that:

... the very subject of labour and revolt has changed profoundly. ... The proletariat is not what it used to be, but that does not mean it has vanished.

¹²⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 394.

¹²⁹ Henwood 2001 – one of the few reviews to emphasise, as we have here, Hardt and Negri's critique of the nation-state. He also argues that they are 'often uncritical and credulous in the face of orthodox propaganda about globalization and immateriality', which may be correct about immateriality but not about globalisation. Henwood's own account of US finance in Henwood 1997, although very useful, suffers badly in places from the absence of any global dimension, e.g. in discussing the rise in US interest rates in the early 1980s, which began as a response to a fall in the US\$.

¹³⁰ For example, Ashman 2001.

It means rather that we are faced once again with the analytical task of understanding the new composition of the proletariat as a class.¹³¹

The multitude is nothing but the proletariat conceived in the widest sense of the term, '... the general concept that defines all those whose labor is exploited by capital, the entire co-operating multitude'.¹³² They are still the producers, not just of wealth in the traditional sense but of the general intellect, 'a collective, social intelligence created by accumulated knowledges, techniques and knowhow',¹³³ which is also appropriated by capital – a notion that directly derives from Marx.¹³⁴

Yet, we should not pretend that this is merely a classical Marxist position reworked with a few new concepts from thinkers such as Deleuze and Guattari. One difficulty is their concept of biopolitical production and the assertion that it 'becomes very more difficult to maintain distinctions among productive, unproductive and reproductive labour'.¹³⁵ This is an idea closely linked to Negri's earlier concept of the socialised (or collective) worker. To emphasise the depth and scope of capitalist 'disciplinary power', in the sense used by Foucault, including its penetration of our everyday lives and subjectivity, is one thing.¹³⁶ To obliterate the still very real distinctions between different types of labour (all of which are, however, part of the working class) is quite another. Their argument appears to suggest, for example, that there is no significant difference between housework or child-rearing in the home, and labour performed directly under the command of capital.

Another, but perhaps related, problem is the deep hostility Negri, in particular, has repeatedly revealed towards the traditional organisations of the labour movement, and his identification of all forms of 'mediation', meaning, here, organs of representation, as doomed to incorporation. Once again,

¹³¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 52–3.

¹³² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 402.

¹³³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 364.

¹³⁴ Marx, most notably, in the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1973, p. 705), and also *Capital*, Volume III (Marx 1981, p. 375). Marx, of course, regarded labour as the sole source of value, but not of wealth in the sense of use-values (to which nature also contributes). Hardt and Negri blur that particular difference.

¹³⁵ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 402.

¹³⁶ Foucault 1978 – but it should be noted that Hardt and Negri, following Deleuze 1988, prefer to talk of a transition from Foucault's disciplinary society to a society of control as characterising the emergence of Empire – a society in which power becomes 'entirely biopolitical' extending 'throughout the depths of the consciousness and bodies of the population' (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 24).

there is a lamentable one-sidedness – a failure to appreciate the contradictory character of trade-union organisation in particular. This can lead to some very surprising claims such as the suggestion that the weakness of the union movement in the United States is actually an index of the strength of working-class power.¹³⁷ It can also lead not simply to invoking the legacy of the 'Wobblies', that can certainly be defended as inspirational, but to elevating 'desertion, exodus and nomadism'¹³⁸ as modes of resistance, a stance confirmed for them by the exodus of workers from East Germany in 1989.¹³⁹ Is this really intended as a model of revolutionary activity, even with the persistence of barriers, such as immigration controls, which they rightly condemn? Is this why they conclude with a homage to that nomadic figure St. Francis of Assisi, 'posing against the misery of power the joy of being'?¹⁴⁰

It was not the intention of this commentary to explore those particular questions in any depth. That would require another article of similar length, at least. *Empire* will come in for a lot of criticism in the wake of all the attention it has received, and some of it will be deserved. The purpose of this intervention is to clarify why, despite its weaknesses, this is a highly innovative and often brilliantly perceptive work on the contemporary world order. We should conclude on a political note, with a quotation that, in its own inimitable way, summarises why Hardt and Negri have also made a significant intervention in the debate about where the movement of resistance to Empire – or to global capitalism, for the terms become interchangeable – should be heading:

We believe that toward the end of challenging and resisting Empire and its world market, it is necessary to pose any alternative at an equally global level. Any proposition of a particular community in isolation, defined in racial, religious or regional terms, 'delinked' from Empire, shielded from its powers by fixed boundaries, is destined to end up as a kind of ghetto. Empire cannot be resisted by a project aimed at a limited, local autonomy. We cannot move back to any previous social form, nor move forward in

¹³⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 269.

¹³⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 212.

¹³⁹ The Wobblies, formally known as the Industrial Workers of the World, were especially successful at organising workers in the USA at the beginning of the twentieth century who were frequently on the move between jobs – hence their nomadic character, which Hardt and Negri find so appealing.

¹⁴⁰ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 413.

isolation. Rather we must push through empire to come out the other side. . . . Globalization must be met with a counter-globalization, Empire with a counter-Empire.¹⁴¹

Postscript: November 2001

Any attempt to assess the 'war against terrorism' launched by the US government after September 11 may well be premature. But this is less a moment for prediction than for explanation and protest. The course of events already reveals both the strengths and limits of *Empire*. Any analysis is complicated by the fact that there are two 'wars' taking place, although both can be subsumed under Hardt and Negri's account of military action that 'is dictated unilaterally by the United States', against enemies who 'are most often called terrorist, a crude conceptual and terminological reduction that is rooted in a police mentality' and in which 'military deployment is presented as an internationally sanctioned police action'.¹⁴²

One war really is about crushing the Al-Qauida network, a war against 'terrorism' which demands the deployment of a wide variety of Empire's resources, including the intelligence services and bank regulators of many states, and the global media. As even the Bush government quickly recognised, this war could not be conducted unilaterally by the US, precisely because the enemy is a network, operating across the global space of flows, deterritorialised and decentred in the manner outlined by Deleuze and Guattari in their discussion of the nomad. Yet, in waging that war, the US was quick to receive the support of all the global élites who felt threatened in one way or another by what had happened on September 11 – and the active engagement of police forces across the globe in tracking down suspects and connections.

The other war, though legitimated by the first, is about control of Afghanistan, echoing the Great Game of the nineteenth century conducted by Russia and Britain, and with an obvious territorial connection to the strategic prize of access to the oil and gas supplies of Central Asia. If one reason for that is to deny Russia 'exclusive control' over those supplies, this is also a war in which,

¹⁴¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 206–7.

¹⁴² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 37.

for its own reasons, Russia has aligned with the USA, and perhaps secured its place on the top table of Empire as a result.¹⁴³ Yet, within the Middle East and Pakistan, the prosecution of this second war by bombing Afghanistan itself threatens to divide the coalition constructed for the first war, to undermine longstanding allies of the US in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and to risk further destabilisation of the whole region.

The relevance of the concept of Empire to all this was confirmed from a surprising quarter. In the *Financial Times*, the influential columnist Martin Wolf issued an explicit call for 'a new Imperialism', and thus a 'transformation in our approach to national sovereignty'.¹⁴⁴ Afghanistan, he argued, was merely an extreme case of a more general problem – the failed or 'pre-modern' state operating in a zone of chaos that both fails its own people and threatens the rest of the world (as a cradle of disease, source of refugees, provider of hard drugs or haven for terrorists). To tackle the challenge, it appears what is required is 'an honest and organised coercive force', capable, as in the former Yugoslavia, of imposing a new form of government from the outside. Leave aside for a moment the monumental hypocrisy and historical myopia of this perspective on a country like Afghanistan, which was already ravaged by the interventions of external powers, including both Russia and the USA, for over twenty years. The article is significant in its own right, legitimating other blueprints for a more assertive Empire with a discourse Hardt and Negri had already registered, and exposed, in their book.

In a radio discussion with Nigel Harris, Michael Hardt commented on the difficulties facing a sovereign power trying to fight a network and also affirmed that those who saw the World Trade Center and the Pentagon as the centre of the global system were, in some sense, equally mistaken. These were 'two mistakes which in some way mirror each other'.¹⁴⁵ Yet, as Harris responded, we also need to understand the specifics of US policy in the region, its support for Israeli oppression of the Palestinians and the bombing of Iraq, and that, for Bin Laden, the US is the enemy that had to be targeted. The US does not rule the world, he agreed, but it has had a specific role in the Middle East and there is rationality in Bin Laden and his supporters' objective to

¹⁴³ A bargain spelt out in a Special Report on Putin's Russia in *Business Week* 2001.

¹⁴⁴ Wolf 2001.

¹⁴⁵ BBC Radio 4 2001.

drive it out, even if they will not easily succeed. Hardt did not appear to dissent.

The limits of *Empire*, in this context, are the limits of what any analysis at their level of abstraction can achieve. Their brief discussion of fundamentalism, a concept whose indiscriminate use they rightly question, as the postmodernism of the excluded – because of ‘its refusal of modernity as a weapon of Euro-American hegemony’¹⁴⁶ – indicates the problem. It is a typically provocative generalisation. However, it takes no account of the way in which the US, along with the Saudi régime and Pakistan, actively encouraged Islamist political currents in much of the Middle East, as an alternative to the left secular forces, who were more inclined, disastrously, to look to the former Soviet Union for support. Bin Laden, in consequence, is both a creation of Empire and its enemy, both within and without, and we need a little dialectics to make sense of that. Yet Hardt and Negri have provided invaluable insights into the logic of a war that looks likely to take a very different course to the great game of the nineteenth century, when Russia and Britain sparred in the mountain passes. This time, they can reach a deal over the oil – controlling the multitude of the Middle East is proving rather more difficult.

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¹⁴⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 149.

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