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GRASS-ROOTS GLOBALISM

Reply to Michael Hardt

CHAOTIC, DISPERSIVE, unknowable—Michael Hardt’s uncertainty in the face of the multilingual mass of global oppositionists—‘a sea of people’—thronging to Porto Alegre for the World Social Forum last spring is entirely understandable.¹ There were anywhere between fifty thousand and eighty thousand participants, and at least ten thousand official delegates—activists, students, intellectuals, trade unionists, environmentalists, rural workers, Argentinian *piqueteros*, plus the representatives of scores of NGOs—crowding into seminars, round-table sessions and workshops, or marching through the sweltering streets in celebratory parades or ad-hoc protest demonstrations. Twenty-seven conferences on broad socio-economic themes were running simultaneously, together with over a hundred seminars on more specific questions—food sovereignty, ‘the illusion of development’, the World Bank and IMF, indigenous peoples and sustainability—and more than five hundred specialist workshops; not to mention the music, the films, the plays.

The first question, in Hardt’s view, is how such a widely differentiated mass can begin to work together—for the various movements ‘cannot simply connect to each other as they are, but must rather be transformed through the encounter by a sort of mutual adequation . . . not to become the same, or even to unite, but to link together in an expanding network’. The second is to distinguish the major issues they confront. For

Hardt, the opponents of neoliberal globalization are faced with a choice between two primary positions: 'either one can work to reinforce the sovereignty of nation-states as a defensive barrier against the control of foreign and global capital, or one can strive towards a non-national alternative to the present form of globalization that is equally global'.²

Hardt and Negri have already made a passionate case against the first position in the pages of *Empire*. The modern state—born as a counter-revolutionary, absolutist response to Renaissance humanism, boosted with the toxic ideology of an exclusionary, homogenizing nationalism—has always been a tool for repression, even when posing as the champion of anti-colonial liberation. Over the past two decades, however, the powers of this reactionary instrument have been drained away by the flow of global networks of production and exchange across its borders, while sovereignty is reconstituted at the higher level of a (still somewhat misty) 'Empire'. The authors resolutely refuse any nostalgia for the power structures that preceded the global age. Strategies of local resistance—dreams of liberated zones, outside Empire—'misidentify and thus mask the enemy', just as they obscure the potential for liberation within it. The national-sovereignty defence against the forces of international capital, Hardt now suggests, presents 'an obstacle' to global democracy.³

But it was this position, he claims, that dominated the official platforms and plenary sessions at Porto Alegre, promoted above all by the officials of the Brazilian PT and by the *chevènementiste* leaders of the French ATTAC. The other side—the 'democratic-globalization' viewpoint—was represented by the North Atlantic anti-WTO networks, by the more radical base of ATTAC groups and, emblematically, by the Argentinian neighbourhood committees that have sprung up in response to their country's financial collapse. Hardt describes these last as antagonistic to all proposals of national sovereignty, their slogan—*que se vayan todos*—calling for the abolition of the whole political class. To further illustrate the gulf between the two positions he suggests that, if a 'democratic-globalization' solution to the Argentinian crisis exists, it would reject any national defiance of the IMF in favour of seeking a 'continuity' between

¹ See 'Today's Bandung?', NLR 14, March–April 2002.

² *Ibid.*, p. 114.

³ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA 2000, pp. 83, 103, 133, 307, 43–6; 'Today's Bandung?', p. 117.

the practical experiments in democracy going on at *barrio* level—the *villa miseria* in Argentina—and the democratization of the global system.

Is he right? There were certainly plenty of *memento mori* at Porto Alegre in the form of Euro-Socialist politicians looking for photo opportunities; but most of these are ardent proponents of the neoliberal cause. Similarly, in the run-up to the Brazilian elections the PT leadership—which certainly hijacked a number of the sessions at Porto Alegre, but did not succeed in controlling its agenda—has been notable not so much for demanding sovereign control over capital flows as for its alacrity in complying with IMF demands on debt repayment. But the experience presented by activists at Porto Alegre—especially those from Latin America, where the neoliberal crisis is at its most intense—proposed a more modulated view of the specific units and gradations of power than Hardt’s ‘all or nothing’ approach. Rather than an intuitive uprising of the multitude against Empire, they suggested a more differentiated field.

The nation-state, precisely because of its role in pushing through the social engineering required by neoliberalism, remains an essential instrument for global capital—and hence a key zone of contestation. It is against their own governments that both South Africans and Latin Americans have been mobilizing to fight against water and electricity privatizations. Peruvians successfully resisted an electricity sell-off—this time at local-state level, in Arequipa—earlier this year; Bolivian ‘water wars’ rattled Banzer’s regime in April 2000; ‘Vivendi, go home!’ is the cry in Argentina. CONAIE, the national confederation of indigenous peoples, brought down the Ecuadorian government early in 2000, and after broken promises from the military and the new regime were back on the streets a year later to oppose austerity measures, deforestation, privatization of electricity and oil pipelines. There have been protests along similar lines in El Salvador, India, Nigeria, Ghana, Papua New Guinea. Last spring, the shantytowns of Caracas rallied to the defence of Chávez in order to fight US-backed plans for the privatization of their oil and the still greater reduction of their living standards.

‘The first question of political philosophy today’, write Hardt and Negri, ‘is not if or even why there will be resistance and rebellion, but rather how to determine the enemy against which to rebel’.⁴ The Latin

⁴ *Empire*, p. 211.

American mobilizations of the past few years display not a faith in the transcendent power of national sovereignty but, precisely, a grasp of the immediate enemy—and, often, a clear intuition of the forces that stand behind him. The architecture alone of most Third World US embassies—those massive, reinforced blocks that loom more ominously than any national government buildings—not to mention the plain facts of the local USAF military base, is evidence enough. It is a common enough contradiction today that a willingness to pursue ‘the radiant horizons of capitalist wealth’ can sit quite easily with a sour dose of home-grown cynicism about the uses of Yanqui power.

This is the great ambivalence at the heart of *Empire*. What is the role—the ‘privileged position’—of the US within the coming global sovereign power that Hardt and Negri depict? The actually existing United States constantly threatens to emerge from the pages of *Empire* like the face in a nightmare, and has to be perpetually repressed. Instructed that Empire exercises its control by means of ‘the bomb, money and ether’, we are warned that ‘it might appear as though the reins of these mechanisms were held by the United States . . . as if the US were the new Rome, or a cluster of new Romes: Washington (the bomb), New York (money), and Los Angeles (ether).’ But any such certainty is immediately withdrawn: the screen goes fuzzy—world power is much too ‘flexible’ for us to think of territorializing it in this way.⁵ ‘Empire’, we are continually assured, ‘has no Rome’—despite the fact that US defence spending is more than that of the next twenty-five governments combined. It has bases in at least fifty-nine countries.⁶

The US is, of course, no transcendent, deterritorialized sovereign force but only a mega-state within an international state system—as is all too clear to those who have felt its force. There are real debates to be had around questions of counter-globalization strategy at national and—

⁵ Although, on the very next page—the decline of the nation-state notwithstanding—we find a cool analysis of the ‘imperial’ tasks—‘the construction of information highways, the control of the equilibria of the stock exchange despite the wild fluctuation of speculation, the firm maintenance of monetary values, public investment in the military-industrial system to help transform the mode of production, the reform of the educational system to adapt to these new productive networks, and so forth’—that currently demand ‘big government’ in the USA. *Empire*, pp. 347 and 348.

⁶Center for Defense Information, *World Military Database 2001–2002*, <http://www.cdi.org/products/almanaco102.pdf>.

more commonly proposed today—at regional level. Via Campesina’s campaign for ‘food sovereignty’, for the right to raise protective tariffs that will prevent multinational companies wiping out local farmers by their dumping practices, is one example.⁷ It is widely acknowledged that the ability of the Malaysians and the pre-WTO Chinese to impose controls on capital flow during the 1997–98 financial crisis protected their populations from much of the devastation that ravaged Indonesia. Focus on the Global South has rightly counselled Vietnam against joining the WTO, pointing out the social and economic consequences this would entail. It suggests instead ‘deglobalization’ to build strong regional markets within the South that would have some autonomy from global financial interests.⁸ But the traditional Chevènement position is a straw man, at least at Porto Alegre. The real questions to be asked are not about the nation-states from which sovereignty is draining away, but the one it is being sucked into.

Measures of power

For Hardt, the division at Porto Alegre between the ‘national-sovereignty’ and the ‘democratic-globalization’ positions corresponds not to Third World vs First World outlooks but to a conflict between two different forms of political organization: ‘The traditional parties and centralized campaigns generally occupy the national-sovereignty pole, whereas the new movements organized in horizontal networks tend to cluster at the non-sovereign pole’. This, he suggests, may explain why ‘an old-style ideological confrontation’, a clear debate between the two positions, did not take place at the 2002 WSF. Whereas the formally constituted organizations have spokespeople to represent them, the new groups do not—‘Political struggle in the age of network movements no longer works that way’:

How do you argue with a network? The movements organized within them . . . do not proceed by oppositions. One of the basic characteristics of the network form is that no two nodes face each other in contradiction;

⁷ See interview with José Bové, ‘A Farmers’ International?’, NLR 12, November–December 2001, pp. 94–5. While *Empire* famously promotes the subversive effects of mass migration, Hardt and Negri also defend, more poignantly perhaps, the right of the ‘multitude’ to refuse to move. In this instance, a strategy for Asian and African farmers—some third of the world’s workforce—to defend their livelihood through some form of regional counter-sovereignty becomes imperative.

⁸ Walden Bello, ‘Pacific Panopticon’, NLR 16, July–August 2002, pp. 77–9.

rather, they are always triangulated by a third, and then a fourth, and then by an indefinite number of others in the web . . . They displace contradictions and operate instead a kind of alchemy, or rather a sea change, the flow of the movements transforming the traditional fixed positions; networks imposing their force through a kind of irresistible undertow.⁹

One difference Hardt seems to miss is the question of scale. Many seemingly traditional bodies at Porto Alegre were actually mass organizations. The Brazilian Sem Terra is a case in point. It counts in its ranks over a third of a million landless families—and this is not a passive, card-carrying membership but one defined by taking action: risking the wrath of *latifundiários* and the state by occupying land. Within this layer there are, again, around 20,000 activists, the most energetic and committed, who have helped to organize their neighbours and who continue to attend courses and participate in regional and state-level meetings that elect the local leaderships. Over 11,000 delegates attended the MST national congress in 2000. Spokespeople—accountable to the membership—become a necessity with numbers of this size.¹⁰

The North Atlantic networks, by contrast, are more likely to count their active core as a few dozen or less. The Ruckus Society, for example, has a full-time staff of four, and between twenty and thirty volunteers in close orbit around that; about 120 people will attend an annual camp. Other organizations like Fifty Years is Enough and United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) are run by less than half a dozen full-timers, who call other organizations into action. Rather than sweeping away and transforming all fixed positions, these networks often feel more at risk of being dissolved themselves into the powerful flows of American capitalism. Does size matter? For the authors of *Empire*, ‘we are immersed in a system of power so deep and complex that we can no longer determine specific difference or measure.’¹¹ To the resounding reply of Sem Terra leader João Pedro Stedile—asked what Northern sympathizers should do to help the landless farmers of Brazil—‘Overthrow your neoliberal governments!’, their book provides no echo. Yet Stedile’s demand surely suggests a scale by which the movements can take stock of their opponents, and reckon their own strength.

⁹ ‘Today’s Bandung?’, pp. 115–7.

¹⁰ See interview with João Pedro Stedile: ‘Landless Battalions’, NLR 15, May–June 2002, p. 85.

¹¹ *Empire*, p. 211.

Hardt's maritime metaphor—the 'sea' of networks—raises a further question, crucial to the 'mutual adequation' of the current movements: waves do not speak. How, if it cannot argue but only 'sweep away' its opponents, is Hardt's network—or multitude—to hold an internal conversation, to debate and decide its strategy? For the Sem Terra, the question of how to develop democratically accountable forms of leadership and coordination, while avoiding the traps of 'presidentialism' and bureaucratization, has been literally a matter of life and death; militant farmers' leaders in Brazil have traditionally been gunned down by land-owners or the state. The attempt to answer it has led them to stress the importance of collective, elected bodies at all levels, from the village occupation committee up.¹² As a result, enormous efforts are put into gathering together the far-flung activists, most of them working farmers, for regional, state and national decision-making meetings.

For North American pressure groups, radical NGOs and networks, while there is often a strong commitment to transparency and to rotating leadership, a different sort of process often prevails. Often these are run by a small group of dedicated individuals who tend to lead by default, by dint of their accumulated skills. 'Obviously', as the director of the Ruckus Society puts it, 'those closest to the centre get more input than people who are further away from it. For example, I took the decision to hold the WTO camp [in Seattle in 1999], and that's how a lot of the decisions have been made since'.¹³ USAS also embraces consensus building in decision-making, with all of its pitfalls; it has only one annual meeting of its university affiliates. With their relatively small numbers and higher educational level, the North American groups have focused on the quality of consensus-making around specific actions. David Graeber has described the patient and ingenious methods—spokescouncils, affinity groups, facilitation tools, breakouts, fishbowls, blocking concerns, vibe-watchers and so on—that have been developed to devise summit-protest tactics, for instance.¹⁴ But it is not clear how these could be extended to cope with strategic issues, or projected onto the vast scale of Porto Alegre, where the star system—as much that of the new movements as of the traditional parties—posed another set of problems for internal democracy.

¹² 'Landless Battalions', pp. 85–6.

¹³ John Sellers, 'Raising a Ruckus', *NLR* 10, July–August 2001, p. 75.

¹⁴ 'For a New Anarchism', *NLR* 13, January–February 2002, pp. 71–2.

Given these disparities, should we welcome Hardt's project of an ever-expanding network as the form that the 'movement of movements' should take? It seems more useful to conceptualize the relation between the various groups as an ongoing series of alliances and coalitions, whose convergences remain contingent. Genuine solidarity can only be built up through a process of testing and questioning, through a real overlap of affinities and interests. The Turtles and Teamsters will no doubt meet again on the streets of North America, but this does not mean they are in the sort of constant communication that a network implies. The WSF provides a venue in which churches and anarchists, punks and farmers, trade unionists and greens can explore issues of common concern, without having to create a new web.

North–South adequation

Focusing on questions of national sovereignty and organization, Hardt neglects other areas where there is perhaps a greater need for 'adequation', in some form. If—in the age of Malaysian skyscrapers and New York slums—the distinction between North and South has more to do with power and elite lifestyle than geographical location, it still denotes a significant split in current experience and historical perception. One obvious difference for activists is that the repressive nature of capitalist state power is posed much more starkly in the South. In Argentina at least 30 protestors have been killed since March 2001. At least fourteen Sem Terra activists have been murdered and hundreds jailed. Since January 2001 four protestors have been killed in the Ecuadorian Amazon and at least twenty-five shot and wounded in the highlands. In El Salvador, the death squads are back at work. In June 2001 four Papuans were killed by the state during protests against austerity measures and privatizations.¹⁵ Genoa notwithstanding, Northerners stand a better chance of getting home safely after a demonstration.

In the end, divergences over the economy and the environment may prove more crucial than the Left's organizational forms. The 'green production' laws for which North Atlantic groups have campaigned have, in practice, often worked as a form of protectionism, favouring Northern capital—and labour—while increasing poverty and unemployment in

¹⁵ For further details of numbers of protestors killed—many fighting IMF austerity measures—see *States of Unrest II* (2002) at <http://www.wdm.org.uk/cambriefs/Debt/Unrest2.pdf>

the South. Walden Bello and others have spoken passionately of the need to redress this, calling for a visionary strategy that would protect the jobs of Northern workers at the same time as strengthening the rest of the world's working class—forging a common front against the re-stratification of labour that global capital is currently trying to push through. In place of 'green protectionism', they have called for a positive transfer of green technology to the South, coupled with support for indigenous environmental groups.¹⁶ Significantly, few of the big Northern trade unions were present to hear this case put at Porto Alegre.

Agriculture, of course, remains far more labour-intensive in the South, where a just redistribution of land is still the central issue. The threat of GM terminator seeds menaces the livelihood of hundreds of millions of small farmers across Africa, Asia and Latin America. *Pace* Hardt's strictures on national-sovereign solutions, African governments that have refused to accept the poisoned gift of Monsanto's unmilled, self-sterilizing corn have for once been acting in the interests of their citizens. Via Campesina—itself a North–South alliance of working farmers—held its own mini-forum at Porto Alegre, in a park near the city centre; Monsanto and Coca-Cola logos were ritually burnt at its closing ceremony. First World environmentalists need to listen attentively to these Third World farmers and indigenous groups, who unite powerful ecological concerns with a highly critical perspective on international capital.

A third division—here, no longer on North–South lines—was over the question of global capitalism itself. While almost all the speakers and participants were critical of the IMF, World Bank and WTO, there was disagreement over whether these institutions could be reformed, or whether they were inherently linked to a system that is fundamentally unequal, corrupt and unsustainable. For all the attention paid to these general issues, however, there was far less debate on the current world political situation. When the questions on which any global opposition might be expected to raise its voice were discussed—the US war in Afghanistan, the Middle East, the threat to Iraq—it was often away from the central plenaries and official platforms, though such issues did surface after the initial presentations.

¹⁶ 'Pacific Panopticon', p. 80.

The debate over the WSF needs to remember, too, the exhausting logistical problems that global organizing presents to the dispossessed. Time, money and a daunting sense of distance present real obstacles to students, activists, trade unionists, the rural and urban poor—in stark contrast to the well-funded global infrastructures of the ruling class. For all his reservations about the Brazilian PT, Hardt must acknowledge that, without its municipal government in Porto Alegre, the WSF would never have taken place. Naturally, most of the participants were from Latin America—Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay between them fielded over 7,000 delegates, Italy and France around 1,200. Travel problems precluded many more. The hard-working interpreters—translating into Portuguese, the host language, and English, although Spanish might have been a more natural *lingua franca* for most of those present—often went unpaid for their skills.

Organizing from below is a fragile process, at threat from numerous different forces. A micro example: when LA-based activists recently sought to get in touch with *maquiladora* workers in Mexico, they first had to negotiate their way through a series of blocking attempts by the moderate NGOs that controlled the funds for transport and translators, and wanted to run the agenda too. When finally the Angelenos met with their Tijuana counterparts, they found that what the *maquiladoristas* needed most was computers—to send information out but, above all, to get news in. The US side could come up with the computers; what they couldn't produce was electricity, decent phone lines, Spanish-language software and technical help.

Hard as it is, this sort of grass-roots organizing remains crucial for building up relationships of mutual support, coalitions of resistance. In these nano-level processes of forging solidarity the WSF—and especially perhaps its informal side: the youth camp, fiestas, lunches, marches—can play a vital role. 'Chaotic, dispersive, unknowable' as they may be, these messy, mass-scale face-to-face encounters are the life-blood of any movement—an element that telecommunications metaphors can never attain.