

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*  
 Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. and London 2000, \$35  
 478 pp, 0 674 25121 0

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## VIRGILIAN VISIONS

Over the last decade, a series of works offering a comprehensive vision of the state of the world after the end of the Cold War have enlivened the tenor of mainstream intellectual life. These have sought to capture the experience of American victory over Communism, and lesser adversaries at home and abroad. Conceived in the spirit of monumental portraits of old, depicting a princely commander gazing reflectively out of the canvas, a still smoking battlefield in the far background, the genre has been a speciality of the American Right (or indistinguishable Centre). Its various practitioners—Fukuyama, Nye, Huntington, Luttwak, Friedman, Brzezinski—have seized the opportunity to survey the full extent of the field of US hegemony in geo-politics, economics and mass culture. That was to be expected. Yet what is often most striking in this body of work is not so much its crass triumphalism—in some cases, an exaggerated charge—as the sporadically brutal candour with which it registers the harsh realities of the incoming American Century. A sub-tone of foreboding—a still hint of *sic transit*—lurks in the depths of the canvas. In varying degrees, it is the dangers of relaxation or hubris that are typically the leitmotif of concluding chapters.

Comparable totalizations from the Left have been few and far between; diagnoses of the present more uniformly bleak. At best, the alternative to surrender or self-delusion has seemed to be a combative but clear-eyed pessimism, orienting the mind for a Long March against the new scheme of things. In this landscape, the appearance of *Empire* represents a spectacular break. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri defiantly overturn the verdict that the last two decades have been a time of punitive defeats for the Left. After years of living in French exile, Negri is now serving out the sentence he received in Italy in the early eight-

ies, during the crack down on the Far Left, writing as an inmate of the Roman prison system that once held Gramsci under fascism. But the work he and Hardt have written owes very little to the precedent of the *Prison Notebooks*. Few messages could be further from that harsh strategic reckoning than the argument of *Empire*. Its burden is that, appearances to the contrary, we live in a springtime of peoples, a world overflowing with insurgent energies. In a period where others merely cast about for silver linings, Hardt and Negri announce a golden age.

*Empire* develops its rousing theme in an attractive variety of registers. The collaboration between American literary theorist and Italian political philosopher has produced a strange and graceful work, of rare imaginative drive and richness of intellectual reference. Theoretically, and to some extent architectonically, Hardt and Negri situate themselves in the line of Deleuze and Guattari's *Thousand Plateaux*. Their work freely crosses disciplinary boundaries, venturing reflections on law, culture, politics and economics with a repertoire of concepts ranging from the canon of European classical philosophy to the findings of contemporary American social science and cultural studies, not to speak of side-lights from Céline or Kafka, Herman Melville or Robert Musil. However counter-intuitive its conclusions, *Empire* is in its own terms a work of visionary intensity.

Hardt and Negri open their case by arguing that, although nation-state-based systems of power are rapidly unravelling in the force-fields of world capitalism, globalization cannot be understood as a simple process of de-regulating markets. Far from withering away, regulations today proliferate and interlock to form an acephelous supranational order which the authors choose to call 'Empire'. The term, as they use it, refers not to a system in which tribute flows from peripheries to great capital cities, but to a more Foucauldian figure—a diffuse, anonymous network of all-englobing power. Hardt and Negri claim that the sinews of this phantasmic polity—its flows of people, information, and wealth—are simply too unruly to be monitored from metropolitan control centres. Their account of its origins adds a few striking nuances to a now familiar story. An older, statist world of ruling class and proletariat, of dominant core and subject periphery, is breaking down, and in its place a less dichotomous and more intricate pattern of inequality is emerging. 'Empire' could be described as the planetary *Gestalt* of these flows and hierarchies. The logic of this volatile totality evades and transgresses all the inherited divisions of political thought: state and society, war and peace, control and freedom, core and periphery; even the distinction between systemic and anti-systemic agency is blurred beyond recognition. The advent of this Empire is thus not merely a momentous episode in world history, it is an event of considerable ontological importance, heralded here in the voice of impassioned prophecy.

The political order of this latest stage of capitalism has a universal mission of pacification, comparable to those Empires of the past that strove to embrace

the known world. Virgil is cited to convey the sheer magnitude of the change: 'The final age that the oracle foretold has arrived; the great order of the centuries is born again.' While Hardt and Negri discern a clean break between this system and the state-based colonialisms that preceded it, they place great stock in more ancient genealogies for this postmodern Empire. Those who want to understand the new universe should look to the writings of Polybius, who sought to explain to stupefied contemporaries how it was that Rome had risen to become master of the Mediterranean world. Polybius held that Rome had transcended the unstable cycles of the classical polis because its constitution mixed monarchy, aristocracy and democracy in proportions that checked the degenerative potential inherent in any unalloyed form of government. Hardt and Negri argue that the new world order can be envisaged as an analogous structure, in which US nuclear supremacy represents the monarchical, the economic wealth of the G7 and transnational corporations the aristocratic, and the internet the democratic principle—Bomb, Money and Ether composing the contemporary version of the constitution of the Roman Republic, on the morrow of its defeat of Carthage. But if this use of Polybius suggests an Empire at the threshold of centuries of ascendancy, other classical allusions—Montesquieu or Gibbon—imply eclipse or decline: tropes not just of universal order, but of decadence, transvaluation and crumbling *limites*. In this register, Hardt and Negri liken potential revolutionaries of today to Christians of the later Roman Empire, witnessing the inexorable hollowing out of the terrestrial order of things, and the beginnings of a new, rejuvenating era of barbarian migrations. Parallels with the Ancient World, central to the rhetorical strategy of *Empire*, oscillate between alternative meanings: do they point to the rising or the falling fortunes of global capitalism?

Overall, the book suggests the latter. Empire, its authors insist, did not emerge out of the defeat of systemic challenges to capital. On the contrary, its existence stands as a resounding, if paradoxical, testimony to the heroic mass struggles that shattered the Eurocentric old regime of national states and colonialism. Running through the work is the fervent belief that contemporary capitalism, although seemingly impervious to anti-systemic challenge, is in fact vulnerable at all points to riot and rebellion. The increasing importance of immaterial, intellectual labour in high value-added sectors of the economy is shaping a collective labourer with heightened powers of subversion. An ineradicable plebeian desire for emancipation is stoked by the increasingly apparent malleability of all social relationships and permeability of all borders. This global multitude, embracing all those who work, or are just poor, from computer scientists in Palo Alto to slum-dwellers in São Paulo, no longer imagines communities as integral nations. But mere heteroglossia or hybridization offer no trenchant alternative. For the ideology of Empire has become a supple, multicultural aesthetic that deactivates the revolutionary possibilities of globalization. Far from being oppo-

sitional, academic enthusiasts for diversity articulate the inclusive logic of a spontaneous order that no longer depends upon a metaphysics of natural difference and hierarchy.

Multiculturalists are not the only ones on the Left to be bluntly disabused. Hardt and Negri also question the notion that even the most blameless NGOs are agencies of a global civil society pitted against the established powers. Rather they can be compared to the Dominicans and Franciscans of late feudal society, functioning as 'the charitable campaigns and mendicant orders of Empire'. Media-staged crusades by Amnesty International or *Médecins Sans Frontières* play an essential role in mobilizing public opinion behind humanitarian interventionism. It is no surprise that their critique of its jargon relies heavily on the writings of Carl Schmitt:

The traditional concept of just war involves the banalization of war and the celebration of it as an ethical instrument, both of which were ideas that modern political thought and the international community of nation-states resolutely refused. These two traditional characteristics have reappeared in our postmodern world . . . Today the enemy, just like war itself, comes to be at once banalized (reduced to an object of routine police suppression) and absolutized (as the Enemy, an absolute threat to the ethical order).

Empire is a world order in a 'permanent state of emergency and exception justified by the appeal to essential values'. Although powerful and succinct, the formulation is difficult to reconcile with Hardt and Negri's insistence that Empire is a coherent constitutional structure, a self-enclosed legal system of the sort imagined by Hans Kelsen. A constitution engulfed in a permanent state of exception cannot form a self-enclosed legal system and is, in fact, only nominally a juridical order. But the attempt to define Empire as a constitutional system poses a second, even graver problem. What constituent power brought it into being, or decides how international law is to be interpreted, and when it can be suspended? It is generally thought that if the contemporary world system can be described as an empire, it is because of the overwhelming concentration of financial, diplomatic and military power in American hands. Hardt and Negri, however, reject any idea that the United States can be described as an imperialist power. For Empire in the upper-case sense, with no definite article, excludes any state-based imperialism. Although they acknowledge that the US is at the top of the international power hierarchy, they conjure away the significance of this fact with a series of dubious assumptions: a denial that the 'metaphysical' concept of sovereignty has any purchase in the postmodern era of Empire, coupled with a claim that a political system without a centre of decision may be plausibly called an empire; and finally, a declaration of faith that, contrary to all appearances, the constituent power of Empire, the force that brought it into being, and empowers its manifold networks of control, is the 'multitude', that is to say, the wretched of the earth. Not in the form of a 'people' or a 'nation'—these

being metaphysical figments of statism—but scattered, speaking no common language, and locked into job-cages: it is in this condition that the multitude is all powerful. The world's poor, its omnipresent have-nots, form an already existing collective subject, but are not cognisant of it. How, in that case, they could have constituted an Empire is not explained.

It is a reasonable conjecture that the messianic streak in this vision derives from an Italian past rather than an American present. Around the mid-seventies Negri came to the conclusion that the industrial working class was no longer an agent of social revolution. Out of a mounting ultra-left frustration in the face of deadlocked class struggles he drew an innovative re-reading of Marx's *Grundrisse*, which dissolved any hard proletarian core into a broader pool of the dispossessed and disaffected. The latter, he contended, were just as essential to the reproduction of capital, and more prone to volatile upsurges. His prediction that a new social worker was taking shape, although more attuned to reality than certain Marxist orthodoxies of the time, also encouraged a headlong flight forward into a drastically simplified conception of revolutionary strategy as a violent test of strength with the state. The failure of this attempt 'to transform the poor into proletarians and proletarians into a liberation army' did not lead Negri down the path of resignation. What seems to have happened instead is that he eventually came to reject any residual conception of politics as a strategic field. In the age of Empire, revolutionaries no longer need to distinguish tactics and strategy, position and manoeuvre, weak links and invulnerable ones; they can now rely on a pervasive, if diffuse, popular desire for liberation and an episodic intuition of friend and enemy.

While older class and national liberation struggles sent long-lasting shock waves across the interstate system, in the optic of *Empire* contemporary intifadas are of brief duration, media dependent, and do not fan out across national, let alone global, worlds of labour. In this celebrated age of communication, struggles have become all but incommunicable. Such a penetrating and sombre image of serialized outbursts of class anger warrants in-depth treatment. But Hardt and Negri dispel it, with a rousing vision of two, three, many Los Angeles riots. In this sense, their book reproduces the horizons of today's new activist counter-cultural scene, where a paralysing cynicism has been banished, but often at the expense of the ability to make a dispassionate assessment of the balance of forces at large, let alone conceive of a path to power. Hardt and Negri suggest such Leninist concerns are irrelevant to rebellions against Empire, which successfully capitalize on the symbolic logic of postmodern politics. In this alternative space, world history unfolds as a sequence of nearly magical serendipities. For happily, although local struggles no longer trigger off horizontal, upwardly spiralling revolutionary sequences, they can now immediately catapult up to the global level as unforeseen media events. By this more direct vertical route, the virtual centre of Empire can be attacked at any point.

For just because Empire is a media-steered system of political publicity, it is permanently vulnerable to the impact of destabilizing, marginal events that slip out of the control of those who manufacture consent. Empire is a society of the spectacle, seemingly powered by the pursuit of happiness—but in reality based on the mobilization of desires that are intimately wedded to the fear of failure, exclusion and loneliness. Intriguingly, Hardt and Negri suggest that this spectral social order, sustained by false promises and a distracted, vicarious mode of being in the world, is a void for the future. In an excursus on Machiavelli, they maintain the time has come to compose great manifestos which pry open an empty space for transformative intervention, and beckon the multitude to surge through. Taking their cue from Althusser, they maintain that Machiavelli invoked the masses in the transcendent form of an ideal prince because he assumed that collective action could only be imagined in the mediated form of a singular agent; but the task now is to demystify these ossified mediations—leaders, parties and unions—and reclaim their absconded power for the multitude. This is the politics of the society of the spectacle, in which the masses seek only the most immediate experiences of empowerment and agency, even if these are only ever episodic.

An epigram from Spinoza encapsulates the goal of the book: the prophet creates his own people. Machiavelli's thoughts on prophecy strike a different note, far from the comforts of any liberation theology, old or new:

It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things. For the reformer has an enemy in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in all those who would profit from the new order, this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favour; and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it.

We scarcely need to be reminded of the conclusion: all armed prophets have conquered, and unarmed ones failed.

In the seventies, Negri might have understood this passage as a clarion call to frontal collisions with the state. Decades later, *Empire* offers by contrast an optimism of the will that can only be sustained by a millenarian erasure of the distinction between the armed and the unarmed, the powerful and the abjectly powerless. It is not till near the end of the book that Hardt and Negri spell out what they take to manifest the primal power of the helpless multitude: Empire, seemingly in control everywhere, is unable to bridle the planetary flow of workers seeking jobs and a better life in rich countries. Reshaping social relations everywhere, immigration on this scale reveals both the hostility of the multitude to the system of national borders and its tenacious desire for cosmopolitan freedom. "The multitude must be able to decide if, when and where it moves. It

must have the right also to stay still and enjoy one place rather than being forced constantly to be on the move. The general right to control its own movement is the multitude's ultimate demand for global citizenship.' In keeping with its ontological background, *Empire* does not develop any sustained programme for the injured and insulted of the world. Logically, however, its most distinctive proposal (the right to a guaranteed basic income occupies second place) is for abolition of all immigration controls: *papiers pour tous!* For Hardt and Negri, this is a demand that opens up the possibility of rejuvenating the politically stagnant core of global capitalism. But the desire to live, work and raise families in more affluent lands arguably finds its true manifesto in the inscription at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, holding out the promise of entirely prosaic freedoms.

In *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman argues that globalization brings democracy in its wake in part because it feeds on a now irresistible desire of consumers and would-be consumers—his version of the multitude—to be a part of the system, in a dialectic that subjects democracy to an ever tighter market-discipline. *Empire* can be read as the *Lexus and Olive Tree* of the Far Left. Both books argue that globalization is a process powered from below. Friedman portrays a ubiquitous dispensation buoyed by pension-fund speculation, credit-card profligacy and the universal appeal of the American way of life. Crude and exaggerated, the book effectively portrays social realities that are not always more subtle, in its own fashion demystifying saccharine pieties of the hour. From an incomparably higher cultural level, Negri and Hardt often fail to achieve this level of realism, and end up recasting some of the mythologies of American liberalism. Friedman leaves not the smallest doubt about the paramount power of the United States as global banker and gendarme; indeed rubs in with chauvinist relish what Hardt and Negri would metaphysically sublimate. But while they downplay the mailed fist of the US in the global arena, they grant America a more gratifying centrality as a laboratory of domestic political innovation. As they see it, both the apogee and the antithesis of *Empire* lie in the inclusive, expansive republicanism of the US Constitution, which long ago shed the European fetish of a homogeneous nation. In this spirit, Hegel is cited—'America is the country of the future, and its world historical importance has yet to be revealed in the ages which lie ahead . . . It is the land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical arsenal of old Europe'—and Tocqueville congratulated for deepening him, with an exemplary understanding of the significance of American mass democracy. There is an echo of old illusions here. *Empire* bravely upholds the possibility of a utopian manifesto for these times, in which the desire for another world buried or scattered in social experience could find an authentic language and point of concentration. But to be politically effective, any such reclamation must take stock of the remorseless realities of this one, without recourse to theoretical ecstasy.