



Can the Multitude Save the Left?

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**Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,
*Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age
of Empire* (New York: The Penguin Press,
2004), 427 pages.**

1.

The multitude, the hero of Hardt and Negri's 2000 book *Empire*, remained cloaked in shadows. The purpose of that book was rather to illuminate the multitude's enemy: Empire. Empire is the new sovereign power that governs the world. Empire comprises the concrete institutions and structures that regulate the global polity and economy: the United Nations, the U.S. military, NATO, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, etc. Empire also creates the languages, ideologies, and opinions that propagate the imperial order: e.g., that free markets generate free societies, that globalization movements have affinities to Al-Quaeda, that communism is entirely discredited. What makes Empire different and more sinister than earlier forms of capitalism and imperialism, according to Hardt and Negri, is the extent of its rule

according to Hardt and Negri, is the extent of its rule.

Empire encompasses the entire world, presents itself as the culmination of history, and produces the very bodies that it governs. Empire, cinemagraphically, is *The Matrix*: a global parasite that extracts the energy and labor of a subjugated humanity.

2.

In *Empire*, Hardt and Negri elaborate several features of the multitude that may combat this new global order. The multitude is the postmodern proletariat. It includes everyone exploited by capitalism, including the poor who vitalize society but are dismissed by orthodox Marxism. The multitude produces ideas, songs, books, and software, in addition to cars, tanks, and factories. It is nomadic, circulating the globe in ever-accelerating flows, and miscegenated, hybridizing identities and cultures. The multitude, performing cognitive, symbolic, and affective labor, is not the industrial working class, and its internal diversity and intelligence distinguish it from the people, the masses, and the mob. The multitude is a political subjectivity generating, and generated by, our time. Most importantly, for Hardt and Negri, the multitude desires freedom. The multitude seeks to possess citizenship

anywhere in the world, to earn a social wage, and to control collectively the means of production.

3.

Many readers of *Empire*, including several in Paul Passavant and Jodi Dean's edited volume, *Empire's New Clothes*, pressed Hardt and Negri for more details about the multitude.¹ Consider Kam Shapiro's thesis in "The Myth of the Multitude."² Shapiro begins by drawing

attention to the Christian images permeating *Empire*, including pre-modern Christians debilitating the Roman Empire and St. Francis's exiting early modern capitalism. Then, Shapiro identifies parallels between Hardt and Negri's commitment to spontaneous collective action and George Sorel's General Strike and Rosa Luxembour's model of revolutionary subjectivity. Finally, Shapiro notes Hardt and Negri's wariness to define the multitude too precisely or to identify any ongoing social movement as an embodiment of the multitude. Shapiro, observing the historical consequences of chiliastic Christianity and Communism, asks, reasonably enough, whether we ought to yearn for any global entity, immanent or transcendent, to deliver us from Empire. "Are we not at present caught between perfectionist utopias and catastrophic myths, both of which are linked to terrible violence?"³

4.

In interviews, Hardt and Negri acknowledged that they needed to elucidate the political subject capable of destroying Empire and building a better future.⁴ The aim of *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* is to accomplish this conceptually and empirically. One side of *Multitude*, then, updates Marx's historical materialism to show how the new world order spawns the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the multitude. In diverse ways, Hardt and Negri argue, the global state of war and the postmodern economy undermine Empire and prepare the multitude for absolute democracy. Take the global state of war. Contemporary insurgencies, knowing that they cannot triumph over Empire using conventional armies, organize themselves in distributed networks. Faced with network enemies, the military branch of

FACED WITH NETWORK ENEMIES, the military branch of Empire dismantles its traditional sovereign structures to become a network itself. The network struggles of the multitude, Hardt and Negri observe, are more effective and democratic than earlier models of popular or guerilla warfare. The multitude, for example, can organize itself horizontally, siphon support for Empire, and strike proficiently using the Internet. A similar process is at work, Hardt and Negri maintain, in the postmodern economy. Labor today is becoming increasingly collaborative, cooperative, and communicative. Nearly every profession, from agriculture to industry and entertainment, requires workers to travel, become technologically savvy, and work in groups. Empire encourages the production of the multitude's general intellect to maximize its power. The multitude's mobility and commonality, however, constructs a counter-Empire to oppose the hegemony of Empire. The Internet, once again, is a site of conflict between Empire and the multitude, as when young people use work computers to organize raves and demonstrations.

5.

The other side of *Multitude*, and one that will interest many readers of *Empire*, provides examples of the nascent political subjectivity in action. The multitude, Hardt and Negri claim, has begun to act for homosexual rights (ACT-UP and Queer Nation), social-movement unionism (the piqueteros in Argentina and Justice for Janitors in the United States), and the cause of global peace (the international antiwar protests of February 15, 2003). The greatest manifestation of the multitude up to now, however, occurred in Seattle in 1999. The globalization

activists who disrupted the Third Ministerial Conference of the WTO exemplify one definition of the multitude: singularities that act in common. In Seattle, diverse constituencies — environmentalists and unionists, anarchists and church groups — converged to protest the current form of global capitalism and to discuss alternative futures. The protestors in Seattle are not a perfect embodiment of the multitude because they are predominantly North Americans and because their positive vision is not yet fully articulated. The multitude

today is more a virtual political force than an actual political entity. The relevant question for Hardt and Negri, therefore, is not, "What is the multitude?" but: "What can the multitude become?"

6.

Hardt and Negri create the concept of the multitude to revive the Left. Hardt and Negri witness a world in which Empire pulls the levers of power and permeates our hearts and minds. There are objections and protests, of course, but these are isolated and incoherent — a march here, a riot there, an editorial elsewhere. For Hardt and Negri, the Left needs a political project to confront and replace Empire. The clay of the multitude already exists, but it needs to be shaped into a powerful body. The multitude needs to become conscious of its own strength. At the beginning of *Multitude*, the authors describe the figure of the Golem in Jewish mysticism.⁵ According to the Kabbalah, the Golem is unformed matter that is brought to life by a rabbi pronouncing the name of God over it. The Golem then arises as a monster that can destroy the persecutors of its creator or, perhaps, find redemption through love. Hardt and Negri carry this project into

postmodernity. "Today we need new giants and new monsters to put together nature and history, labor and politics, art and invention in order to demonstrate the new power that is being born in the multitude."⁶

7.

Can the multitude save the Left? That is, can the concept of the multitude animate a movement to challenge global capitalism and achieve absolute democracy?

8.

Hardt and Negri, I contend, help the Left in several ways. They bury the old Marxist conceits that the industrial working class or a vanguard party can lead a communist revolution. They point out that Anti-Americanism is a simplistic and dangerous state of mind. They urge Europeans to engage other cultures respectfully and challenge modernists to appreciate emerging forms of singular and common identities. They defend the legitimacy of utopian thinking and contribute to the Left's ongoing conversation about democracy, freedom, and equality. Their work, finally, provokes thought about many philosophical and political issues.

9.

The concept of the multitude, however, lays out a questionable and dangerous project for the Left. First, the concept assumes that every significant disagreement within the Left can, in their words, melt away. In Seattle, rank-and-file unionists joined environmentalists marching with green sea turtle puppets. This event, for Hardt and Negri, signals an epochal shift in the relationship between

these two groups.

The magic of Seattle was to show that these many grievances were not just a random, haphazard collection, a cacophony of different voices, but a chorus that spoke in common against the global system.⁷

10.

Enduring harmony between unionists and environmentalists in the Pacific Northwest would, indeed, be magical. Since the passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, these two groups have battled recurrently over the management of natural resources in Oregon and Washington. The most famous confrontation, perhaps, occurred when loggers burned spotted owls in effigy to protest environmental regulations protecting the animals' habitat. There are also ongoing debates over how to regulate the salmon and pollock industries.

11.

Though some unionists undoubtedly favor sustainable fishing and logging, there may be another explanation for why unionists marched alongside environmentalists in Seattle. The American fishing industry, according to Elizabeth R. DeSombre and J. Samuel Barkin, had an economic incentive to dispute the WTO decision vetoing the United States' prohibition of shrimp imported from countries that do not use "turtle excluder devices" (TEDs) on their nets.⁸ The U.S. law banning shrimp from countries such as Mexico acted, in effect, as a tariff. Spokesmen for the fishing industry, in fact, focused on the economic impact of importing cheap shrimp, not on the welfare of sea turtles. This does not mean that

the welfare of sea turtles. This does not mean that unionists and environmentalists cannot collaborate on legislation or policy. It does suggest, however, that conflict between environmentalists and unionists - over vision and strategy - may persist after the events of 1999 .

12.

Hardt and Negri do not seem to value deep disagreement (rather than deep diversity) within the Left. In the dispute between labor and environmentalism, Hardt and Negri seem squarely on the side of labor. In *Empire*, they criticize as "primordial" and "romantic" environmentalist claims about the sanctity of nature and biodiversity.⁹ But Hardt and Negri never discuss environmental politics at length in *Empire* or *Multitude*.¹⁰ The second problem with the concept of the multitude, thus, is the dogmatism it fosters in those facing dissent — in this case, about humanity's relationship to the environment. In an interview, Negri says the following about critics of or obstacles to the multitude: "Any attempt to stand in the way of this unification and the consequent recognition of common objectives is reactionary, or, rather, expresses sectarian and inimical operations."¹¹ What happens, though, when unionists and environmentalists stand on opposite sides of the barricades? Is it productive, then, to use the language of "sectarian and inimical operations"? It is odd that Hardt and Negri, who end *Multitude* with an appeal to James Madison, do not see the intimate connection between liberty and faction.

13.

The concept of the multitude, in short, seems more likely to harm the Left than to help it. The Left ought to engage

in the challenging, provisional, but necessary work of building coalitions rather than wait for a secular Messiah.

NOTES

- ¹ Paul A. Passavant and Jodi Dean, eds., *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- ² Ibid., 289-314.
- ³ Ibid., 309.
- ⁴ Antonio Negri and Danilo Zolo, "Empire and the Multitude: A Dialogue on the New Order of Globalization," *Radical Philosophy* 120 (July/August 2003): 23-37; Thomas Dumm and Michael Hardt, "Sovereignty, Multitudes, Absolute Democracy," *Theory and Event* 4, no. 3 (2000).
- ⁵ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, 10-12.
- ⁶ Ibid., 194.
- ⁷ Ibid., 288.
- ⁸ Elizabeth R. DeSombre and J. Samuel Barkin, "Turtles and Trade: The WTO's Acceptance of Environmental Trade Restrictions," *Global Environmental Politics* 2, no. 1 (February 2002): 12-18.

⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 45.

¹⁰ See William Chaloupka, "The Irrepressible Lightness and Joy of Being Green: *Empire* and Environmentalism," in *Empire's New Clothes*, 199- 216.

¹¹ Negri and Zolo, 29.

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