

# Marx or the multitude?

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***A review of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, 2004), £19.99***

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's first collaboration, *Empire*,<sup>1</sup> exerted a powerful influence on the anti-capitalist movement, especially on those sections describing themselves as autonomist. In it they argued that capitalism has entered a new historical stage in which the sovereignty of nation-states is withering away in the face of globalisation. A new, global form of sovereignty – Empire – is rising up in its place composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. Multinational corporations and global institutions like the International Monetary Fund or World Trade Organisation preside over this system alongside nation-states. Empire is not based on fixed boundaries or territorial centres of power. Instead power lies 'both everywhere and nowhere'. Accompanying this process, they argued, a new form of production, based on 'immaterial labour' is become dominant. Instead of producing things, immaterial labour produces 'a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication'. Such labour is not confined to the workplace. Just as capital spreads smoothly across the globe, so it spreads across the whole of society, seeking to absorb our creative powers: 'As labour moves outside the factory walls...the proletariat produces in all its generality everywhere all day long.' This new proletariat includes all those subject to the rule of Empire, not just wage labourers directly employed by capital.

Hardt and Negri's description of Empire was attractive to anyone who accepted the most extreme versions of globalisation theory, without sharing the reactionary conclusions of those who preached them. But

the main appeal of the book lay in the claim that a new counterpower to Empire was emerging. This counterpower – multitude- is a collection of distinct individuals acting in common. It seemed to offer a way of describing the forms of resistance on the streets of Seattle in 1999 and at subsequent anti-capitalist mobilisations, while avoiding the language of an old left, which was discredited or irrelevant in the eyes of many activists.

Hardt and Negri's *Multitude* continues where *Empire* left off, tracing the development of the multitude. But it also deals with a problem that has preoccupied the anti-capitalist movement for the past three years. The opening third of *Multitude* is devoted to a concept that did not even make the index of *Empire* – war.

Most of *Multitude* was written 'under the cloud of war' in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq. The authors explain how 'war is becoming a general phenomena, global and interminable'. They extol the achievements of the movement against the war, seeing it as a continuation of the cycle of protests that began in Seattle in 1999:

The pinnacle of this cycle of struggles thus far, at least in quantitative terms, were the coordinated protests against the US-led war in Iraq on 15 February 2003, in which millions of people marched in cities throughout the world.

In *Empire* the death of the imperialist system based on rival nation-states, and the rise of a global 'imperial' order, was a major theme. But here the authors argue:

We should not get caught up here in the tired debates about globalisation and nation-states as if the two were necessarily incompatible...today imperial administration is conducted largely by the structures and personnel of the dominant nation-states.

The retreat from the formulations of *Empire* is only partial. Hardt and Negri maintain that in the early 1970s war was transformed into "high-intensity police actions" aimed at "the construction and reproduction of the global social order"? This view downplays the extent to which the US has sought, through its recent wars, to improve its position in the global order relative to other major imperialist powers. But buried in an excursus to the penultimate chapter is an admission that "perhaps we

can read the Iraq War as an indirect attack against Europe—not only in the political way it was conducted but also in the threat to European industry posed by US control of Iraqi energy resources”. While they rightly put war at the centre of their analysis, they are torn between seeing the most important recent example of the phenomena as the harbinger of Empire and seeing it as the last gasp of a fading imperialist order.

The concept of the multitude outlined by Hardt and Negri is equally problematic. The authors use the term in two senses; to describe all those subject to the power of capital and to describe the counterpower capable of overcoming Empire. In the first sense multitude is counterposed to Marx’s idea of the working class:

Working class is fundamentally a restricted concept based on exclusions... The working class is thought to be the primary productive class and directly under the rule of capital, and thus the only subject that can act effectively against capital. The other exploited classes might also struggle against capital but only subordinated to the leadership of the working class. Whether or not this was the case in the past, the concept of the multitude rests of the fact that it is not true today...all forms of labour are today socially productive.

Hardt and Negri do not claim that the number of industrial workers has fallen. But they do claim that “in the final decades of the 20th century, industrial labour lost its hegemony and in its stead emerged ‘immaterial labour’. Immaterial labour produces symbols, codes, texts or ideas, or it takes the form of ‘affective labour’ producing and manipulating emotions or feelings. The first form of immaterial labour seems to fit most readily for media or IT workers, while ‘affective labour’ can be applied to “flight attendants and fast food workers”. The authors make two important claims about immaterial labour. They argue that it is hegemonic in the sense that other forms of labour tend to become more like it, and they claim that immaterial labour does not obey the laws of motion of capitalist society developed by Karl Marx in his economic writing.

Put crudely, for Marx the value of commodities – regardless of whether they are material goods or ‘immaterial’ services – reflects the average labour time required to produce them. But for Hardt and Negri the

concept of the working day as the basic measure of value no longer makes sense: “If production is aimed at solving a problem...or creating an idea or a relationship, work time tends to expand to the entire time of life.” Applying this to an example of an immaterial labourer they use, it implies that workers at McDonald’s spend their leisure time obsessing over how to improve customer satisfaction.

The authors also discuss the increasing casualisation of jobs, and in doing so they massively overstate the trends that they discuss. There is a tension between the desire of capitalists to force workers into badly paid, less secure work and their need for a stable, skilled and healthy workforce. The core of workers in secure jobs in the developed world has proved remarkably resilient.

There are other problems with their analysis. There is evidence that industrial workers are not just growing numerically, but that they also play an increasingly important role in world production as their productivity grows. The question of developing an industrial base continues to be a central concern of governments and capitalist elites around the world; not least as a prerequisite for them to wage war upon each other. In some areas of the world the service sector has grown. But these jobs are not part of a free-floating weightless economy based simply on ideas and concepts. The service sector involves workers like airport baggage handlers, postal workers and call centre workers, who all utilise large amounts of capital in their work and experience the same stresses and strains of work as industrial workers.

These trends are analysed in detail by Chris Harman in an earlier issue of this journal.<sup>2</sup>

I will instead consider the sector of the economy that seems to conform most closely to Hardt and Negri’s vision. Citing Eric Raymond’s *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*,<sup>3</sup> they describe open-source programming, in which the ‘source code’ is distributed copyright-free along with software, as an example:

[Non open-source] programmers had thought of their programs [as] pristine

cathedrals. [But] when the source code is open...more of its bugs are fixed, and better programs are produced... Raymond calls this, in contrast to the cathedral style, the bazaar method of software development, since a variety of different programmers with different approaches and agendas all contribute collaboratively. As we noted earlier with respect to 'swarm intelligence', we are more intelligent together than any one of us is alone.

This form of production is supposedly based on individual but cooperating programmers forming networks very similar to Hardt and Negri's model of the multitude. But the reality is rather different to the one they suggest. The most successful open-source product is the Linux computer operating system. Far from being developed by a network or swarm, its development is centralised through a 'core-development team' to whom suggested changes to the source code must be submitted. According to one analyst, only 1,000 people contribute changes to Linux on a regular basis. An even smaller group of 100 programmers contributed 37,000 out of 38,000 recent changes all of whom were paid by their employers to work on the operating system. The main employers willing to release staff to work on Linux include Intel, IBM, Hewlett Packard and other giants. They have a vested interest in competition with Microsoft's Windows operating system, and have accumulated vast amounts of capital, allowing them to dominate the world market.<sup>4</sup>

Nor is it clear that open-source programming produces better software. There is powerful evidence that, unless a high degree of centralisation is imposed, projects tend to develop slowly and to waste time as people work on identical problems. Most projects become fragmented between rival groups or fizzle out as people lose interest.<sup>5</sup> Those that succeed are rapidly absorbed into the capitalist market as a potential source of profit. Even in this sector, capitalists are still driven to extract profits from their workers, to compete with their market rivals and then to accumulate capital in order to increase their competitive edge.

Hardt and Negri's final argument is that material production...creates the means of life [but] immaterial production, by contrast, including the production of ideas, images, knowledge, communication, cooperation, and affective relations, tends to create not the means of social life but

social life itself?. This is an extreme form of idealism turning Marx's view that "social being determines social consciousness" on its head. It reflects Hardt and Negri's real aim – to replace concrete analysis of the capitalist system with a theory of pure subjectivity in which Empire equals power and the multitude equals creativity.

The weakness of the authors' economic theory means they cannot explain how capitalists are motivated, how capital is divided between different units or the uneven way in which it accumulates. So they offer no analysis of the weak points in the capitalist system or how best to strike at them. If Empire is 'smooth' then all points are equally vulnerable. If a homeless or unemployed person is as critical to the capitalist system as an industrial worker, simply by virtue of their 'extraordinary resourcefulness and creativity', then there is no need to assess the relative power of different classes in society. In short, there is no need for any kind of strategy to challenge Empire. Indeed, they argue, any attempt to form a party of the Leninist type could only undercut the struggles of the multitude by creating a new elite.

Hardt and Negri argue that the commonalities between different members of the multitude will allow it to come to political conclusions spontaneously in the same way as it comes together to produce 'cooperation, communication, forms of life and social relationships'. The book ends by suggesting the kind of conclusions multitude might reach: "Democracy today takes the form of a subtraction, a flight, an exodus from sovereignty." This echoes the calls by autonomists in the anti-capitalist movement to create a space free from the rule of capital.

There are powerful counter-arguments to this. Our rulers are hardly likely to allow us to create a democratic world free from their control and influence and, even if doing so were possible, it would involve leaving behind the vast productive capacity created by our labour. Hardt and Negri are unconcerned by these arguments. They imply that, once the swarm intelligence of multitude comes round to their conclusion, it will desert Empire, leading to its immediate collapse, give or take a little 'defensive violence'. Once free from Empire the multitude will not

require the productive forces of capitalism because it is their immaterial labour that creates social life.

This seems to be a dangerously complacent view of the challenges that will confront the movement against capitalism and war as it develops. Of course Marxists should not put up barriers to working with people influenced by Hardt and Negri's ideas, but we should be clear that the concept of multitude is more than a metaphor for the movement. It is a fundamental attack on idea of the working class as an agent for change, and upon the need for political organisations to fight for a strategy to overthrow our rulers.

## NOTES

1: M Hardt and A Negri, *Empire* (Harvard, 2001).

2: These trends are analysed in detail by C Harman, 'The Workers of the World?', *International Socialism* 96 (Autumn 2002).

3: Eric Raymond, *The Cathedral and the Bazaar* (O'Reilly, 1999).

4: Joab Jackson, [Linux Now a Corporate Beast](#)

5: Nikolai Bezroukov, [Open Source Software Development as a Special Type of Academic Research](#)