

## LECTURE 14

Powerlessness & Fighting The Empire

Throughout the history of socialism there have been attempts to discover means, hidden within capitalism that might offer the prospect of bringing forth socialism from within the body of the capitalist system. For Marx, the possibility of overthrowing capitalism resided in the way in which the socialisation of production initiated by capitalism brought the working class into existence and inevitably created a contradiction between the *forces* and *relations* of production that could only be resolved by the abolition of private property by the working class and the organisation of production on a collective or cooperative basis. Alternatively, Eduard Bernstein in his book *Evolutionary Socialism*<sup>1</sup> conceived of the manner in which tendencies within capitalist production itself would lend themselves to development and reform in a manner, which would open society up to a piecemeal, gradual, and peaceful transformation of capitalism into socialism.

There is a rich tradition of different reformist and revolutionary ideas concerning anti-capitalist tendencies, which have been thought of as immanent within the system itself. These ideas have ranged from the savagely apocalyptic to the identification of the most benign and glacially slow changes for the better. Inevitably, these diverse ideas concerning the way in which capitalism contains the seeds of its own destruction have emerged from profoundly different ways of conceiving of the system – profoundly different ways of analysing capitalist economic and social relations.

Bearing this in mind I want to look at the revolutionary ideas of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.<sup>2</sup> Their ideas are simply the most recent manifestation of this search for *emergent* possibilities within the capitalist system, which offer the prospect of bringing the system itself to an end and replacing it with communism. Working in circumstances in which both revolution and communism are profoundly discredited they have attempted to derive *from the practice of the anti-capitalist movement of the 1990s* a different way of conceiving of modern capitalist relations and therefore of a different way of overthrowing the system. Consequently, much of what they have to say is a kind of oppositional counterpoint to the communist or socialist tradition of which they are a part, and which they are attempting to revive in a manner consonant with contemporary realities.

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<sup>1</sup> *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie* was published in 1899 and in English as *Evolutionary Socialism* in 1907 by the Independent Labour Party. The full text is available at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000; Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Multitude: war and democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York: Penguin, 2004.

## [EMPIRE &amp; MULTITUDE]

OLD VIEW	NEW VIEW
IMPERIALISM	EMPIRE
FACTORY	METROPOLIS
INDUSTRIAL WORKING CLASS	MULTITUDE
SOCIALISED	COMMON
SOLIDARITY	LOVE

The ideal models of socialism and communism that I have been discussing in the last two lectures founded their notion of democracy on the self-emancipation of the working class. The working class was conceived of as the universal class because of its intrinsically socialised nature and its inherently collectivist or cooperative disposition.

This working class concentrated in vast industrial cities, organised in mass trade unions, and represented by the militants and cadre of the revolutionary party, held the keys to the overthrow of capitalism and to the socialist future.

Within this tradition Imperialism was conceived as *constitutive* of advanced capitalist nation states – states growing almost inevitably beyond the limits of their own economic resources. Imperialist states were those that sought investment opportunities, raw materials, and markets, in vast areas of the world, which they sought to control by a repertoire of military, economic, and cultural means.

This imperialism rested upon the national sovereignty of the powerful ‘metropolitan’ states and the projection of that power across subordinate and subaltern territories.

This form of imperialism was according to Lenin – the “highest stage of capitalism”<sup>3</sup> – and was predicated upon the hegemony of industrial production. The scale of industrial production burst the bounds of the nation state, creating vast industrial enterprises and monopolies that demanded, or rather desperately needed, the life-blood of expansion in search of investment opportunities, raw materials, and markets.

This hegemony of industrial production was expressed throughout capitalist society from at least the 1870s through to at least the 1970s. It was a world in which although millions of people might not be engaged in industrial production the society in which they lived, its rhythms, its cultural assumptions, ways of doing things were dominated not merely by machine production, but by the industrial process itself – the organisation of the

<sup>3</sup> V. I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Petrograd, 1917. Full text available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/imp-hsc/>

factory, the organisation of the production process, became the template for the organisation and production of everything from office work, to political mobilisation the administration of cultural institutions, to the organisation of leisure.

[CALLISTHENICS, CANTEENS & MASS FEEDING

- CHARLIE CHAPLIN *MODERN TIMES*
- *METROPOLIS – REVOLUTIONARY ROAD*
- 
- BUTLINS, THE STUDIO SYSTEM]

This world – the world dominated by industrial production has passed away. In Britain three million people work in manufacturing compared to six and half million who work in financial services. Industrial production in Britain counts for only 13 per cent (2007) of value-added output down from 33 per cent in 1970 and close on 40 per cent during the fifties.<sup>4</sup>

[Having said all this, Britain still remains the sixth largest industrial producer in the world.]

In France in 2007 industry accounted for 11 per cent of the economy. Industry occupies a roughly similar position in the US, France and the UK. In Germany and Japan, still great industrial powerhouses, industrial production still only accounts for around 22 per cent of their economies.

Despite all these changes it must be remembered that today there are more manufactured goods both in volume and value (and of considerably better quality) than have ever been produced in the world before. Even the poorest people on earth routinely use plastic buckets, machine-made clothes and textiles, and sandals made in factories. Human life is absolutely saturated with the products of factories and industrial processes in a way and to an extent never experienced before.

Yet, despite all this, and despite the industrial revolution in China and the huge potential of India and Brazil it remains the case that the hegemony of industry has ebbed away. Industry, the factory, the rhythms of industrial manufacturing have given way to the production of services and what Hardt and Negri, among others call: “immaterial production”. Economic and cultural life is dominated by the production of services and of intellectual production in the form of information, code and design.

These changes have, say Hardt and Negri, resulted in the hegemony of the so-called “immaterial production”. What they mean by this is that the

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<sup>4</sup> All the figures relating to industrial production cited here come from Peter Marsh, ‘Make and mend’, *Financial Times*, February 9, 2009.

hierarchies and modes of organization associated with the factory, with mass production, with the industrial world has passed or is passing away. New networks and forms of association have arisen in which the position of the producers has radically changed giving rise to the need for a new account of capitalism in which the altered state of class relations, of global politics, and of radical and revolutionary political struggle, demands the formulation of a radical new account of the system in which the creative power and potential of the masses in the struggle against capitalist is re-imagined and re-described.

Consequently, they have set out in *Empire* and *Multitude* and in a number of other places to attempt to describe the social relations of contemporary capitalism and the forms of resistance and opportunities for revolutionary transition to which they think it has given rise.

### REITERATION

#### [EMPIRE & MULTITUDE]

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For them ‘Empire’ does not represent the imperialism of old, resting decisively on the national sovereignty of metropolitan powers, but is in a sense, now diffused between a number of institutions and nodes on the networks of power that function globally through international companies, the World Bank, the IMF, the G8 (G20), etc. Although large and powerful sovereign states continue to exist, Hardt and Negri contend that these individual states, even a power as grand as the United States, can no longer pursue their programmes of domination independently of the new imperial networks which have arisen in the place of the old imperialist centres. So, for them ‘Empire’ is a centreless network of power which does not [in the Foucauldian/Foucault sense] reside anywhere, but is rather dispersed everywhere, saturating all relations throughout the world.

In a similar way, they believe that the ‘Metropolis’ – the city, has replaced the factory as the centre of production. Modern production, they argue, takes place across all the networks and nodes, which comprise the metropolis. The modern city as a whole – in its entirety – is the site of the newly hegemonic, “immaterial production”. The modern city is the site at which the ‘multitude’ produce ‘the common’, the values upon which the nodes and networks of the ‘empire’ and modern capitalist relations depend. The capitalists appropriate the values produced by the ‘multitude’ in ‘the

common' realm of the 'metropolis', privately. Here is an echo of the classical Marxist contradiction between the *forces* of production and the *relations* of production. Despite the difficulties which Marxists would see in the idea of "immaterial production" and in the altered relationship between the *social determination of consciousness* and *the production of social being* implied by Hardt and Negri's schema<sup>5</sup> it is clear in *Empire* and *Multitude* that they are striving to retain a revolutionary and an essentially communist view of the capitalist system.

However, in common with all thoughtful Marxists, communists and anarchists since at least the 1930s Hardt and Negri are haunted by the problem of revolutionary transition which in the past has always involved the substitution of one elite by another and by a conception of the *revolutionary militant* or *cadre* as a representative of the working class – a person who represents the General Will as opposed to the Will of All we discussed last week.<sup>6</sup> They fear the tyranny inherent in such revolutionary transitions – transitions which do not actually appear to have ever moved from tyranny towards the ideal of communist democracy – i.e. the popular self-management of social and economic life.

In opposition to the class and functional hierarchies of industrial society and of the communist tradition produced by the hegemony of industrial production Hardt and Negri conceive of the 'multitude' as a much more amorphous social grouping; a social grouping much wider of than the old Marxist view of the working class as a class defined closely "by its relationship to the means of production". By contrast, the multitude is conceived as the great majority of people in society engaged in creating value in 'the common' throughout the metropolis. In this sense, the entire life of the people who comprise the multitude is thought of as contributing to the values produced in 'the common'. Hardt and Negri dissolve the old Marxist distinction between productive and unproductive labour, between paid and unpaid work, into the 'multitude' and their life 'in common'. In so doing they seek to bring the unemployed, the women caring for children and elderly relatives at home, the computer programmers, counter clerks, shop assistants, actors, singers, flight attendants, baggage handlers, designers, bar staff and those toiling away in McJobs and postal sorting offices into the creative value-producing multitude along with workers in industry, construction, and transport.

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<sup>5</sup> See Joseph Choonara, 'Marx or the Multitude', *International Socialism*, Issue 105, January 2005.

<sup>6</sup> [The General Will vs The Will of All – the "will of all" is, of course inferior to the General Will because it is merely the sum of individual wills – whereas the General Will represents in more perfect form the will of society] [Jean Jacques Rousseau – *The Social Contract* 1762/ Bk.1.Ch 6/ Bk.2.Ch 3.]

In the place of the old working class the modern multitude, which Hardt and Negri have derived from a long tradition including Machiavelli, Spinoza, and most recently Foucault, is a positive collective social subject – its revolutionary and disruptive potential is immanent – it needs no mediation through a hierarchy of militants, parties or a specific section of the population. The multitude contains the revolutionary. The multitude embraces the audacity, the positive, the constructive, and the innovative creativity needed to overcome capitalism and create a democratic communist society.

However, as Michael Hardt explains in his 2007 lecture on love to the European Graduate School<sup>7</sup> he realises that the mass of people who make up the multitude are not in any sense ready for the self-governing democracy upon which any real communist society would be based. He agrees with Lenin that we cannot simply take the people of today and expect them to freely and democratically run the new society.

However, Hardt rejects Lenin's solution to this problem. He rejects the Dictatorship of the Proletariat because he argues that he cannot see how dictatorship can be employed to prepare people to govern themselves in a positive and constructive manner. Against Lenin and the broader Marxist tradition, Hardt has called for the development of love as a political concept. A concept capable of being employed by and within the multitude to begin the process of training for a new life – a new life of constructive democracy in which capitalism would be replaced by a collective and communalist form of society. Through the development of love as a political concept Hardt is arguing we can reclaim the idea of democracy besmirched by the capitalist class, and the idea of communism besmirched by Stalin and Mao.

This is evidently not a fully developed proposition, but in commenting upon the way in which Christianity has sought to subsume *Eros* in *Agapé*, and Psychoanalysis has sought to subsume *Agapé* in *Eros*, he evidently hopes to reunite *Agapé* and *Eros* in a political concept of love as a productive concept – love not as a passion, but as a creative act. He thinks, along with Spinoza, that love increases our powers to think and act.

For Hardt this means rescuing the concept of love from its enclosure in the couple and their children – rescuing it from love of family, race, and nation, – rescuing it from the subsumption of difference – rescuing it from Christian charity and the objectification of the poor.

Hardt wants love to be rethought as site for the multiplication of difference – the site of experimentation and celebration – in which difference is

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<sup>7</sup> European Graduate School University is situated at Leuk-Stadt, Saas-Fee, Wallis and New York. The lecture is available at [www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net](http://www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net/Documents/Empire,%20Multitude%20&%20Love)

creatively sought in place of the closure, subsumption, and exclusion, which currently prevent the concept of love from assuming a creative political role.

These ideas are challenging and I must say that I am not entirely convinced, however, they represent an attempt by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to distil the experience of the anti-capitalist movement over the last ten, fifteen or twenty years into a novel way of describing the reality of contemporary capitalist society, and a way of absorbing the lessons of a diffuse, networked, mode of creative resistance to the system.