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The Empire Strikes Back: On Hardt and Negri

A postmodern book

The French edition of *Empire* opens with the statement that this book is ‘an attempt to write a new “Communist Manifesto” for our times’. The same claim is repeated in the *feature* dedicated to the subject of the POLITICAL MANIFESTO¹ (I call ‘features’ those short chapters appearing in italics throughout the book). Frankly, I’m not totally clear as to why *Empire* should aspire to belong to the genre of the ‘manifesto’ when, as a matter of fact, it takes the form of a new literary genre – one which is much more in tune with our times. A ‘manifesto’ – be it political, artistic or philosophical – is, by definition, brief, original and radical. *Empire* is something quite different; in fact, it’s the opposite of a manifesto.

To start with, it is certainly not brief; it is a ‘mammoth’ of a book, almost 500 pages long. *Absit iniuria verbis*: to be fair, Marx’s *Capital* is a ‘mammoth’ work too, in fact much more so; a work which has shaped history (and not only the history of thought), perhaps to an even greater extent than *The Communist Manifesto*

¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 63–6.

ever did. But *Capital* is a rich and systematic work, and as such it must be read from start to finish, and only in this order, if one is to understand correctly its structure of argument (it was no accident that Marx gave such a lot of thought to the issue of *presentation*, that is, to the difficulties of translating into a sequential discourse a conceptual construction articulated in such a complex way). *Empire* bears no resemblance to *Capital*: leaving aside its size, it is a lightweight cultural production, inside which readers can ‘navigate’ with a certain degree of freedom.

What *Empire* resembles more closely are other, more recent, ‘mammoths’ coming in the main from the United States; I’m thinking here about books such as *The End of Work* by Jeremy Rifkin, or *The End of History and The Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama. *Empire* shares with such books a strong argument (I would say a clearly *exaggerated* argument), a wide-ranging but lightweight narrative, a popularising tone, numerous but rarely explored references and, above all, the quality of functioning almost as a *hypertext*. Indeed, here the strong argument almost becomes a mantra, so as to function as an easily identifiable (and easily expendable) slogan while, at the same time, becoming a link for accessing the various sets of arguments in the book that remain relatively independent from one another. The whole structure of *Empire* lends itself well to a reading in chunks and in any order whatsoever, without its fundamental meaning being affected in any considerable way. Indeed, the thought of the two authors can be assimilated in various ways and on various levels.

- (i) *By slogan*: in other words, by only learning the links, those keywords the grasp of which is anyway sufficient to spell out your allegiances to a certain ‘movement’ (I don’t wish to use the word ‘ideology’ here, which is too loaded with negative meaning). Keywords such as *alterity, autonomy, biopower, bodies, communication, communism, corruption, desire, deterritorialization, discipline, desertion, empire, exodus, hybridization, immanence, multitude*, etc. This listing is obviously not a complete one and its compiling – in alphabetical order, no less – is not of my making: the index at the end of the volume reflects a far from conventional choice, including names and keywords. As such, it is yet another tool for the hypertextual reading of the book (here’s a useful hint for all those who should choose to use *Empire* ‘by slogan’: in the index, the nested terms are in effect also all the strategic keywords you need).
- (ii) *By partial arguments*: in other words, (ii) selecting the set of arguments

closer to one's tastes, capabilities or background. For example, a young American radical will no doubt prefer the argument contained in Part 2, 'Passages of Sovereignty', which is a slimline summary (not that different from all those students' passnotes you can buy) of Western political thought, from Duns Scotus to Malcolm X, complete with all the names that count (once again, seeing the invaluable index is believing), and which is essentially an apology for the United States Constitution. This will allow our young American radical to develop a revolutionary ideology without causing any violent breaks with his school education, so that he'll be able to keep his Jeffersons, Franklins and Wilsons alongside his new heroes Marx and Che Guevara. Conversely, any young European dissenters, culturally closer to a Marxist tradition, will find in Part 3, 'Passages of Production', a soothing history of the development of capitalism, ruled by the usual dialectics between productive forces and relations of production (obviously in its original – but by now classical – workerist version, where the evolution of capital is driven by the struggles of the proletariat). There is here a slim summary of the theories of imperialism, in which the various positions held by Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin are presented side by side, with no suggestion of any contradictions and where, really, Kautsky was not that wrong either (but we can all breathe a sigh of relief: Stalin's still a baddie). This history continues without any breaks through Gramsci, the Frankfurt school, the regulation school, until we reach the long-awaited postmodern post-Fordism and the oh-so-trendy non-place, with all its flows of communication. Finally, should you prefer a more scholarly or literary approach to these mini-histories of the world – a bit too didactic if we're really being honest – have no fear: you can always use the set of *features* to be found throughout this book, but which are easily spotted thanks to their different typeface. Use them and you'll be able to quote your Célines, Conrads and Melvilles, or philosophers who are not yet included in any textbook, like Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze or Guattari; or, if you prefer, passages from the Bible, the Church Fathers, or perhaps Latin and Greek classics.

- (iii) *By a systematic reading*: in other words from the beginning to the end, in this order. This is the approach I've chosen to take (owing to my clearly old-fashioned background). But frankly, I don't recommend it, given the disturbing contradictions that emerge. With hindsight, I realise

now that the postmodern genre of the ‘American-style mammoth’ does not lend itself well to this reading. After all, it’s not fair to apply coherence at all costs to a work open to zapping, or apply too rigidly the principles of identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle to a text where the only logic is limited to the Boolean operators needed for search engines. But since it’s too late to remedy my mistake, I’ll briefly review some of the contradictions I’ve found.

A modern history (or two, or three)

The first contradiction – to be honest, a not insignificant either – is the contradiction between the *style* of this book, which as we saw is clearly postmodern, and its *conception of history*, which could not be more *modern*. *Empire’s* history is teleological, with a clearly identifiable direction (so much so that it even allows for predictions) and a dialectical movement in the most Hegelian sense of the word: a history that marches on through its beloved Theses, Antitheses and Syntheses, toward its (happy) End. A history working for good people (that is, for the liberation of the ‘multitude’), in which in the end the last shall come first and the ‘poor’² shall inherit the Earth. A history in which, as the words of an Italian song go, ‘we are History’, ‘a product of human action’³ (driven by a powerful and conscious Subjectivity).⁴ Althusser would have called it the little drama of the Subject, the Origin and the End, Lyotard a ‘grand narrative’, to all intents and purposes a secularised religion (and not that all secularised either).⁵ In a nutshell: everything that postmodernist thought has ever criticised, denied, prohibited.

² Indeed, from the *feature* entitled THE POOR, we learn that the ‘multitude’ is made up of ‘the poor’ – ‘every poor person, the multitude of poor people’ (p. 158).

³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 237.

⁴ This claim as to the character of history is contained in the *feature* called CYCLES Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 237–9.

⁵ Despite the value attributed to ‘immanence’, religious inspiration is quite visible, in the frequent references to *Exodus*, to Saint Augustine’s *Celestial City*, to gnostic suggestions (a symptom of which is the very word multitude – *multitudo* is the Latin translation of *pleroma*). It is also thanks to this point that *Empire* can be seen as a widely usable multicultural product. It is good for atheists (thanks to the ambiguity of the word ‘humanism’, which, in American culture, means in the first instance ‘a system of belief and standards concerned with the needs of people, and not with religious ideas’, and only as a secondary meaning does it denote ‘the study in the Renaissance of the ideas of the ancient Greeks and Romans’, see Longman, *Dictionary of English Language and Culture*). It is good for believers of various creeds (who,

It should be said that Hardt and Negri do not feel themselves part of postmodernity but are already well past it; they are, so to speak, post-postmodernists. It's for this reason that they find 'postmodernist critiques of modernity' (under which they group postmodern theorists in the strict sense of the word, from Lyotard to Harvey; postcolonialist theories like that of Bhabha; religious fundamentalists and the neoliberal ideology of the world market, see Chapter 2.4 'Symptoms of Passage') to be inadequate and ultimately useless, since they 'find themselves pushing against an open door'.⁶ This is so because they attack a logic of power that has already declined. At any rate, while the most outspoken modern authors are still looking for signs of a decline of the nation-state, Hardt and Negri are already talking about the decline and fall of that very same Empire,⁷ which according to their analysis is about to replace the nation-state (or has it in fact already replaced it? It's hard to keep one's bearings in these fast incursions into the future). To cut a long story short, perhaps the dialectics is not postmodern, but, for all we know, it could well be post-postmodern. Whatever the case, our two authors use it in large doses.

The history of Western thought presented in Part 2 is all along the lines of a Hegelian-style dialectics. It's almost a *Philosophy of Spirit* for North American consumption, since it's here that the Spirit reaches its apex: not in the Prussian state, but in the Constitution of the United States. Readers, do follow me please, as I tell you this story.

Thesis: Humanism and the Renaissance. This was a 'revolution' in 'Europe, between 1200 and 1600, across distances that only merchants and armies could travel and only the invention of the printing press would later bring together'.⁸ I urge readers not to try to be too clever and leave aside the question of the dates. Forget all those encyclopaedias that date the Renaissance in Italy

according to their religion, will be able to interpret the epic of the multitude as a journey of the chosen people to the promised land, as an episode of salvation, or as a celestial city for pilgrimage on Earth, or alternatively as the *pleroma-multitudo* re-ascending to a divine whole, etc). The Catholic world is well taken care of, since the hero eponymous with the multitude, the prototype and universal militant, is none other than St. Francis of Assisi, to whom the final *feature of Empire*, MILITANT (Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 411–13.) is devoted. But Islamists should not lose heart: they too have a small place, representatives as they are of *postmodernity* (I kid you not – see Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 146–50).

⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 138.

⁷ See Part 4, 'The Decline and Fall of Empire', Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 351.

⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 70.

only at the end of 1400. After all, one gets a bit confused with all these swift raids into the past, and anyway the ‘humanism’ described here is rather odd, a ‘hybridity’ to use the authors’ language – something that doesn’t quite tally with what we were taught at school. Looking closer, this Thesis is in turn an Antithesis, or to be more precise an Overturning: the overturning of Transcendence into Immanence, of the creator divinity into productive humanity.⁹ Anyway, this thesis-antithesis is the Origin that concerns us, so we’ll consider it as a thesis. Are you still following me now, my ignorant readers, or are you getting all mixed up? I’m warning you: you have to handle dialectics with due care.

So, let’s recap. *Thesis: Humanism*. Now you’ve understood that this ‘odd humanism’ was not a handful of men of letters, of scholars of Greek and Latin classics, but rather a ‘multitude’ of genius atheists like Pico della Mirandola, innovators like Schumpeter’s entrepreneurs and productive men like Stakhanov. This ‘multitude’ had an incredible potential, so it goes without saying that someone would want to profit from it in the end. *Antithesis: The Enlightenment*. From Descartes to Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant and Hegel . . . My dear reader, I’m telling you again: leave those encyclopaedias alone and stop being fussy about dates and definitions. If you haven’t got it yet, try to make yourself comfortable and be patient. So, we have the Illuminists (Descartes, Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel): a whole bunch of baddies scheming to create a mundane transcendence, to keep under control and – if possible – exploit, the industrious multitude who discovered immanence. The result of their efforts is the modern sovereign state, the ‘transcendent apparatus’ *par excellence* – ‘God on Earth’ in Hobbes’ definition.¹⁰

Now, pay attention, dear readers, for we must take a jump and break into a run for a while. From the history of philosophy we have to jump to that of political institution (jump), following (running) the evolution of the *European states* and the creation of that *modernity* which identifies itself with this history: from the great monarchies of the eighteenth century, through the nineteenth-century invention of the ‘people’, up to the nation-state which purports to

⁹ The greatest champion of this overturning was Spinoza, whose philosophy ‘renewed the splendors of revolutionary humanism, putting humanity and nature in the position of God, transforming the world into a territory of practice, and affirming the democracy of the multitude as the absolute form of politics’ (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 77). To my taste, this Spinoza is a bit too similar to Feuerbach, but let’s try not to be difficult.

¹⁰ Hardt and Negri 2000, see pp. 77–83.

rely on consensus but ultimately degenerates in the totalitarian régimes of the twentieth century. This goes to show how the Antithesis of power is not sufficient to contain the Thesis of the multitude. What is to be done? In the meantime, catch your breath.

As we all know, Reason (especially reason of the dialectical kind) is astute and, in fact, across the ocean it has already succeeded in creating a Negation of the Negation or, to be more precise, an *Alternative to the Antithesis: Empire*. The exodus of settlers toward the Americas – of a multitude fleeing modernity – ‘rediscovers the revolutionary humanism of the Renaissance and perfects it as a political and constitutional science’,¹¹ laying the foundations for a kind of sovereignty totally different from that which established itself in Europe. The American Revolution is a true revolution (unlike its French counterpart) and the United States (which, lest we forget it, is a federation) is from the outset – i.e. from the Declaration of Independence – an Empire, not a nation-state. Moreover, it is an Empire of the Good, or at least of the Lesser Evil.

At any rate, the modes with which power is exercised in the States are different from Europe. For example, let’s look at the way Europeans relate to the natives in the colonies. Theirs is a mode based on cultural dualisms, on antagonism between Inside/Outside, Self/Other.¹² These are the very sources of modern racism – the ferocity of which we know only too well. But let’s look instead at the way in which American settlers related to Native Americans: they didn’t regard them as a cultural Other, but as a mere natural obstacle to overcome, just like when you fell a tree or remove rocks from the ground to make room for cultivation:

Just as the land must be cleared of trees and rocks in order to farm it, so too the terrain must be cleared of native inhabitants. Just as the frontier people must gird themselves against the severe winters, so too they must arm themselves against the indigenous populations. Native Americans were regarded as merely a particularly thorny element of nature.¹³

Now, that’s so much prettier, wouldn’t you agree?

¹¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 162.

¹² See Hardt and Negri 2000, Chapter 2.3, ‘The Dialectics of Colonial Sovereignty’ p. 114 onwards. It should be noted that, in this chapter, the use of dialectics is so extensive (the authors employ it to explain both the modes of colonial rule and the fooling of the multitude by colonialists), that it results in statements such as: ‘*reality is not dialectical, but colonialism is*’ (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 128). A case of overdosing, perhaps?

¹³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 170.

Alright, alright, so it wasn't all roses. Then there's the issue of Black people, altogether not such an edifying affair; not to speak of certain relations with Latin America, so aggressive as to seem 'imperialist' rather than 'imperial' in the strict sense of the word. And then came the Vietnam war. . . . Let's put it this way: even our Alternative to the Antithesis on the other side of the Pond is deeply antithetical – it's dialectical: it has a good and an evil soul. Its evil soul tends to emulate European imperialist nation-states. This was, for example, the temptation for Theodore Roosevelt, who 'exercized a completely traditional European-style imperialist ideology'.¹⁴ The good soul is Woodrow Wilson, who instead 'adopted an internationalist ideology of peace'.¹⁵ What matters is that the good soul, the truly democratic soul, has prevailed (in the past, it was Tocqueville who grasped this; now it's Hannah Arendt who recognises it).¹⁶ It is the embodiment of a sovereignty that does not consist 'in the regulation of the multitude' by transcendence, but rather it arises 'as the result of the productive synergies of the multitude'.¹⁷ Control, if it exists at all, does not follow the principle of repression, but a 'principle of expansion' not dissimilar to that practised in Imperial Rome. Faced with conflicts, the European nation-states react by strengthening their borders, exasperating the distinction between Inside/Outside, between Self/Other; the American Empire moves these borders further, turning the outside into its inside, including the other into the self.¹⁸

We now come to the *Synthesis*: the modern *global Empire*, which 'is materializing before our very eyes'.¹⁹ With no more barriers to economic and cultural exchange, with no more distinctions between inside and outside, with no more spatial restrictions thanks to information technology and internet communications, Empire is now a *non-place*.²⁰ The United States *does not form its centre*,²¹ for the very simple reason that a non-place cannot have a centre. Moreover, the US is not a *world leader* either, 'and indeed no nation-state can today'.²² The United States has indeed inspired the birth of Empire, 'born

¹⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 174.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 164.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 166–72.

¹⁹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. xi.

²⁰ See Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 190.

²¹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. xiv.

²² *Ibid.*

through the global expansion of the internal U.S. constitutional project²³ and, for this reason, let's admit it, it does enjoy a 'privileged position'.²⁴ But the US too is itself absorbed and subsumed – and in the end extinguished – within a wider logic. Empire is the accomplishment of Wilson's internationalist and pacifist project – the crowning and the ultimate Aim of history. It is where the long journey (lasting nearly a millennium, if you choose to anticipate Humanism by just a tiny bit) through the Thesis (*Humanism*), the Antithesis (the European *Nation-state*) and the Alternative to the Antithesis (the American *Empire*), up to the supreme Synthesis of the *Empire sans phrase*, in which – true to the rules of our good friend dialectics – we shall find once again the Thesis, by now finally liberated and living happily ever after.

What's the matter, my dear reader? Are you disappointed perhaps? You don't actually believe that Empire is that 'internationalist and pacifist'? But, you see, *Empire* was published in 2000, when the war in Yugoslavia had already ended and the one in Afghanistan had yet to begin. Pardon? You're saying that other conflicts were foreseeable anyway? Come on: the job of prophets is to tell us how Universal History will end. They can't really waste their time with these little details. Tell me the truth, you little rascal of a reader: you actually liked the old (*sorry*, modern) category of 'imperialism', yes? Alright, then let me tell you another story.

'And so begins the second story I want to tell you all . . .'²⁵

By now, my audience of old-fashioned Marxists (all five of them . . . no, wait, four: one has already fled) must also be wondering where *capitalism* is to be found in this history. Well, it's nowhere to be found in the first story I've told you, save for a pithy statement: 'European modernity is inseparable from capitalism'.²⁶ Capitalism is the subject of a different story.

The history of capitalism, too, is a history with a capital 'H', a 'grand narrative'. Here it is not so much Hegelian dialectics that is at work, but rather the 'dialectics between productive forces and relations of productions' on which Marxist tradition has fed for so long. As is well known, on the basis of such dialectics, an evolutionary model of stages of development was built.

²³ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 182.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Words taken from an Italian popular song.

²⁶ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 86.

This is true both for humankind in its entirety (through an actual *evolution*, from that elusive ‘primitive communism’ to the ancient mode of production, and then from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production, until the future realisation of communism in its true sense, when in the End we shall find the Origin, by now in its unfolded form), and for the capitalist mode of production considered separately (where a *biological order* is actually at work, in which the various stages resemble closely the birth, growth, maturity, old age and death of living organisms). In Part 3 of *Empire*, we find ourselves in this second dimension and we now begin to follow not so much the history of humanity, but the various stages in the development of capitalism.

Empire does not throw anything away (or very little anyway),²⁷ so, to begin with, it is a matter of recuperating all that Marxists have already analysed. We are told that, from its *competition stage*, capitalism enters into a *monopoly stage* (a tendency which Marx had already predicted) and, with it, to *imperialism*. As Lenin said, following Hilferding’s analysis but discarding some notions that foreshadowed Empire – the idea of a world bank – as well as Kautsky’s ‘ultra-imperialism’: ‘If it were necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism’.²⁸ Is this a bit too hasty for you? Wait, there’s another explanation, as we shall see.

Anyway, among the theorists of imperialism, Hardt and Negri favour Rosa Luxemburg, whose well-known underconsumption theory is here cut back to the bone (low wages equal low consumption; the growth of organic composition, with the ensuing reduction in variable capital – ‘that is, the wage paid the workers’²⁹ – equals even lower consumption, therefore ‘the

²⁷ With a reconstruction that welcomes and appreciates practically all contributions to Marxist theory, disregarding any difference of interpretation (here there’s room for orthodox Marxism as well as heterodox Marxism, both for Lenin and Kautsky, for Gramsci, the Frankfurt school, Althusser, for the regulation school, and obviously also for ‘a group of contemporary Italian Marxists’ who write for the French journal *Futur antérieur* (see Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 55 and note 16, p. 422) – whose leader is not mentioned for reasons of modesty but whose surname starts with ‘Ne’ and ends with ‘gri’. The only clear ostracism is reserved for the so-called world-system school, and particularly Giovanni Arrighi, to whom *Empire* devotes an outraged *feature* (Hardt and Negri 2000, CYCLES, pp. 237–9). It’s not surprising that our two authors should find hard to swallow the idea of the cyclical nature and the recursiveness of capitalist dynamics proposed by this author, for it actually clashes rather violently with the ‘grand narratives’ used by Hardt and Negri, not to mention the strong subjectivism that has always characterised the workerist approach.

²⁸ Lenin 1996, p. 89.

²⁹ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 223.

realization of capital is thus blocked by the problem of the “narrow basis” of the powers of consumption³⁰ and now becomes the main contradiction of capitalism. It is in this problem that an explanation for all other ‘limitations’ and ‘barriers’ of capital can be found.³¹ Anyhow, Luxemburg’s approach lends itself well to an account of the tendency of capitalism to expand, to the ‘capitalization of the noncapitalist environment itself’³² and also to an explanation of how, ‘in the process of capitalization *the outside is internalised*’.³³ (Hang on: wasn’t this ‘internalization from outside’ a feature peculiar to the *American Empire*, nay, the very thing that distinguished it from *European imperialism*? Never mind . . . This is another story and it may well be not even coherent with the previous one.)

So, due to its internal contradictions . . . No, wait, forced by the struggles of the proletariat. . . . Have no fear, after all we have dialectics to sort things out, don’t we? Here’s how you do it: ‘Capitalist crisis is not simply a function of capital’s own dynamics but is caused directly by proletarian conflict’.³⁴ There you go.³⁵ Whatever pushes capitalism forward, eventually the imperialist stage is passed and a new stage of development begins. Its model is Roosevelt’s *New Deal*, born in the US and later exported to all Western countries after the

³⁰ See Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 223. This is on the basis of some quotations from Book III of Marx’s *Capital*, of which at least one – the one appearing in the text – sounds suspect to me. It’s impossible to verify it, since the accompanying note does not specify any page number. Without being too pedantic (it has to be said that nowadays we should actually refer to the critical edition of the works of Marx and Engels contained in *MEGA* – which has substantially cut Book III of *Capital*) or appealing to philology, it is nevertheless quite clear that to attribute to Marx any reading of the crisis along the lines of underconsumption is – to use a euphemism – rather reductive.

³¹ In so doing, *Empire* puts forward a drastic simplification of workerist lucubrations on the famous passages in *Grundrisse*, which this school of thought sees as fundamental and which it subjects to endless as well as obscure exegeses. Dialectical contradictions, intrinsic barriers, negations of negations: all is reduced to a problem of underconsumption: ‘all these barriers flow from a single barrier defined by the unequal relationship between the worker as producer and the worker as consumer’ (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 222). This is a really bold enterprise and, to me, it deserves applause (before blurting out ‘but why didn’t you say so before!’).

³² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 226.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 261.

³⁵ I’ve put this in simple terms so as not to scare away my old-fashioned Marxist readers (now down to three), but this operation to reconcile orthodox Marxist objectivism with workerist-style subjectivism is actually quite complex. For this genuine piece of acrobatics, which forces us to reconfigure ‘efficient causes and final causes’ (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 235), the authors have to bother Nietzsche and must rely on ‘the missing volumes of *Capital*’ by Marx (Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 234–7). A true circus act.

Second World War. Its features are the economic regulation carried out by the state, as well as Keynesian policies and the welfare state. And what is this new stage of development of capitalism called? ‘State monopoly capitalism!’ my old-fashioned Marxist readers will say at once. ‘Fordism!’ will say any passing follower of the regulation school. Wrong. It’s called *Empire*. See? We got there in the end, through a different route, but we got there anyway: all roads lead to Empire, just like once upon a time all roads led to Rome.

So, we discover that Lenin fooled us when he called imperialism the ‘highest stage’ (that is, the *last* stage) of capitalism. He fooled us knowingly, as he knew well (after all, didn’t he know all those ultra-imperialist theses?) that – faced with the very deep crisis culminating in the First World War – history could have taken two different paths: *Revolution* or *Empire*. He then prevented the outcome of Empire, so dead set was he on making the Revolution. He wanted to make it immediately, before capitalism reached its full maturity.³⁶ Once the Revolution failed, we found ourselves with Empire, with the true ‘highest stage’, for two reasons. Firstly, because in this stage factory discipline was imposed on the whole of society (good, I see you’ve spotted the good old workerist thesis): ‘The New Deal produced the highest form of *disciplinary* government’³⁷ ‘*a disciplinary society is thus a factory society*’.³⁸ Secondly, because, after the process of decolonisation, we went from the *formal subsumption* of the world to capital – a feature of the ‘extensive expansion’ of old-style imperialism – to the *real subsumption* of the world to capital, as capital today practices an ‘intensive expansion’.³⁹

‘And now to the climax of this exhilarating finale’⁴⁰

Well, my dear old-fashioned Marxist reader, the only one left to hear the end of this story (which is really also the end of all stories⁴¹ or of History *tout*

³⁶ See Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 233 onwards.

³⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 242.

³⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 243.

³⁹ See Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 271.

⁴⁰ Words of a popular Neapolitan song.

⁴¹ I’ve spared you another couple: that of the development of productive forces, through the epoch of Agriculture, the era of Industry (modernisation) and the age of the Service Economy (postmodernisation) – yes, the old and much maligned theory of development in stages is actually quite alright, provided you interpret it not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively and hierarchically (see Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 280–9). And then there’s that of the birth of the Revolutionary Subject, which I’m about to recap for you in a mere couple of lines (I swear).

court), it was really a good thing that Lenin's plans failed and that, in the end, Empire was able to develop and expand without any more boundaries on the planet. As Hölderlin's poem goes: 'Where danger is, grows also that which saves'.

First of all, Empire shall save us from environmental catastrophe: the 'real subsumption' of the world, i.e. its intensive exploitation actually coincides with the age of the *post-industrial*, which as we well know is clean, small and beautiful. This seems to be the real capitalist response to the threat of 'ecological disaster', a response that looks to the future'.⁴²

And, above all (hold tight now, we're there!), Empire has created the antagonistic Subject *par excellence*, the most powerful, creative and incredible Militant the world has ever seen: the *social worker*, who now replaces the professional worker and the mass worker of the past.⁴³ Whereas the professional worker (corresponding to the 'phase of industrial production that preceded the full deployment of Fordist and Taylorist regimes'⁴⁴ was engaged in *reappropriating* his own productive labour; and the mass worker (who 'corresponded to the deployment of Fordist and Taylorist regimes'⁴⁵ even dared to create 'a real *alternative* to the system of capitalist power',⁴⁶ the social worker (corresponding to the phase of 'immaterial labor') can finally express himself 'as self-valorization of the human', realising 'an organization of productive and

⁴² Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 272.

⁴³ In fact, after the transformation of the professional worker into mass worker and then 'social worker', Negri originally introduced further entities, such as *Mass Intellectuality* (the expression of the world of information technology and the finished incarnation of *General Intellect*) and, in his more recent writings, that of *Collective Entrepreneurship* (the expression of the decentralisation of production, of industry, of self-employed labour and of the industrialised North-Eastern regions of Italy). All these entities were created using the same process: once they were theoretically deduced from real or virtual developments in the organisation of labour under capitalism, these figures become, as if by magic, sociologically real (all you need at the very most are a few *ad hoc* examples, whose generalisable character is not up for discussion). In all these instances too – just as was the case with its interpretation of *Grundrisse – Empire* represents a kind of theoretical self-mutilation. However, the term *social 'lavoratore'* (instead of 'operaio') is actually sufficiently general to prove compatible with the ineffable Multitude whose millennium-long epic *Empire* chronicles. [Translator's note: In Italian, the word 'worker' can be expressed both as 'operaio' and as 'lavoratore'. The former denotes industrial/factory workers, the latter any working person in general. In the past, Negri used 'operaio' in all his various categories of *professional worker, mass worker* and so on, whereas today *mass worker* has become 'lavoratore sociale'.]

⁴⁴ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 409.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

political power as a biopolitical unit managed by the multitude, organized by the multitude, directed by the multitude – absolute democracy in action’.⁴⁷

Wow! Where? When? But here, now, at once! Empire shall fall, is about to fall, it’s falling, has already fallen! What’s the problem, after all? Deep down it’s just a matter of mental attitude: all you have to do is oppose (as Francis of Assisi – the subject of the last *feature* in *Empire*, MILITANT⁴⁸ – was already doing all that time ago) your *joie de vivre* to the misery caused by power. Beware, all ye powerful: a smirk will be the death of you. And you, multitudes, go in peace: the ‘mammoth’ has ended.

Translated by Barbara Rossi

References

- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri 2000, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Lenin, Vladimir I. 1996, *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, London: Pluto Press.

⁴⁷ Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 410.

⁴⁸ Hardt and Negri 2000, pp. 411–13.