

# Michael Hardt: New Forms of Power

Interview by Ognjen Strpic

ostrpic@inet.hr

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**Ognjen Strpic:** How do you think the theory you and Toni Negri proposed in the book relates to protestors in Genoa or Porto Allegre? They seem to have embraced your theory as their own. At the same time, you are very sympathetic towards the protestors' efforts.

**Michael Hardt:** The way I see it, these globalization movements and our book have proceeded on sort of parallel paths – in fact they've both been interpreting the same questions and reality and coming to the same conclusions. And this is at least in two regards: one central aspect of our concept of empire is that there is no center to power, or rather, that form of global power has changed, that it's no longer based on dominant nation-state on its own, and that it is now composed of a network of powers. This is our notion of empire. I think similarly these movements have not been organized around, say, a notion of US imperialism. Had they thought that, all of these protests should have been at the White House, or at the Pentagon, or on Wall Street. Rather, the way I think is that they've been experimenting with the new form of power. In other words, they've targeted international organizations like the G8, and super-national organizations like the WTO, or the IMF, or the World Bank. So in this way they've been trying to understand the new form of power, the way a movement understands something, which is some kind of experimental form. I think that in fact none of these organizations that they have targeted with the protests is itself the center of global power. In other words, IMF is not in control of globalization, in itself. And if we were to destroy the IMF tomorrow, it wouldn't make the world immediately a better place, in fact, it would probably be worse. So I think that one shouldn't try to read the protesters as they've identified the new sources of power; rather, it's a much more distributed and therefore seemingly amorphous system of power that they are trying to confront. So in a way each protest is sort of an adding experiment to that. It's in that sense I think that our analysis of the new form of power as empire, and the movement's analysis of the new form of power, are proceeding along the parallel path.

The other way in which our argument seems to me very similar to these movements' is that one of the political results of our analysis is that we think that the only adequate way to confront, say, the problems of globalization, or the forms of global domination under which we suffer now, is not by creating isolated local zones of protection, or even re-enforcing the powers of nation-states, we think that, rather, an alternative have to be proposed at an equally global level. I think that's

also true of at least what I understand as the dominant elements within these globalization movements. I don't think that the dominant elements are the ones that are properly anti-globalization. Rather, the movements themselves have been globalizing, constructing global relationships. In that sense, it doesn't make sense to call them anti-globalization movements, they are more properly understood as alternative globalization movements. In other words, they are protesting against the current forms of globalization, but in the name of, or in the desire for, alternative forms of globalization. So I think that in those two regards our argument, which is conducted in a very philosophical plane, and the workings of these movements, which are obviously conducted both theoretically and practically in a different register, have been moving on parallel paths, and that's why they in a way agree well with each other.

**OS:** Your idea of empire, at least in my reading, doesn't bear any particular ideological baggage by itself. Its reception however, perceives it as distinctively Leftist. How do you see it in this respect?

**MH:** Well, OK. The book is primarily an attempt of the analysis of contemporary form of power, and in that way, in simply naming the forms of power today – which is I think the primary object of the book – it could be appreciated by people of many different ideological formations. We conceive it as a communist project, we present it as a communist project, thinking here of “communist” in the tradition of, let's say of democratic globalization, the communist tradition that is not oriented towards formation of states and even of national control, but as a movement of increasing non-national democracy. In any case, there is a certain ideological position that defines our own efforts, but I think that such a book is not restricted to those of that ideological position. And in fact, what seems to me interesting about the reception of the book, is that it runs counter many of the assumptions about Left and Right, and that's why it has been a useful analysis for many to, say, disrupt what had seemed like the commonplace assumptions about globalization. Just for instance, many have assumed in the US that those who are on the Left are necessarily against globalization. And in many, sort of basic or profound ways, our perspective is completely for globalization. But the problem with our contemporary world in many ways is not that we have too much globalization, the problem is we have not enough. That, really, we need to globalize equal relationships, democratic relationships, the problems with our contemporary form: say, the control of dominant corporations, the control of the US military, of various other forms that constitute this imperial power. The problem is that in many regards it blocks globalization, it blocks the possibility of constructing democratic relationships across the globe. The first moment, I think, of a Left, or I would say democratic position, should not be against globalization: what interest me much more are the possibilities of globalization. I just presented it in one way which I think the perspective of the book has run counter to what people thought were necessary Left and Right positions, and that has allowed them to appreciate the argument even without, of course, agreeing with our perspective, which I think is not necessary for a book like this.

**OS:** In what respect, then, it is a communist project?

**MH:** First of all, one should say that the much of the European modern Enlightenment thought, but especially communist tradition, especially certain

element of the communist tradition, have been the first and most vocal proponents of globalization. Think of the slogans of First International, for instance, not only “Workers of the world, unite”, but “Proletariat has no country, its country is the entire world”, there are at least elements of the communist tradition, ones that most interest me, that have always been interested in globalizing relationships as a potential for liberation. This is also not exclusive for the communist tradition, it’s also part of other elements of modern European political thought. We argue that there are certain points that it’s in fact not capital, or it’s not the forms of liberal national governments, but in fact it’s the force of liberation and in some sense the communist tradition that has been leader in globalization.

The other way in which it is a communist book is that it argues for an absolute democracy, for democracy founded on relations of equality, freedom, and social solidarity. I think that those three code words belong to the French Republican tradition, but also belong, in my mind, to the best elements of the communist tradition. So, it also seems to me that it’s the way it is a communist book, but it is demanding an absolute democracy.

Then, the most fundamental way would be that its analysis insists on the fact that, while capital has historically brought many possibilities for liberation, that finally the operation of capital prevents the realization of democratic relationships. In other words, that it’s not an accident that the capitalist relations perpetuate poverty and wealth, disparities of both the wealth and power, and that they prevent democratic social constructions. It’s in fact intrinsic to capital and therefore the project for democracy will ultimately have to be anti-capitalist and develop a social form that is non-capitalist in that sense. That at least is recognizable as the communist project.

**OS:** Isn’t it Braudelian notion of capital as anti-market, as opposed to market, the one you really object?

**MH:** I don’t think that any capital functions without state regulation. I mean, this is just a factual, historical claim. All of the propositions of free market, and of capital based on free market, have been... false. I think that free markets are always constructed by political regimes. I think this was true in the nineteenth century hey-day of the ideology of free market, and that this is equally true in our contemporary neo-liberal phase; that it’s not, say, the autonomy of the economic, it’s not that the forces of capital or economic forces, or market forces, function freely. They always require state, or say, regulatory forms. In the academic framework, the general reference for this argument I have just made is Karl Polany’s book *The Great Transformation*, which argues precisely that. I would rather pose it differently: at least as an analytical tool, it’s useful to think of different elements of the current form of power, or elements of capitalist rule, some of which are potentially positive and some of which are clearly negative.

I would rather say that other elements that capital has brought historically are potentially positive, one I already mentioned is this extension in the sense of globalization of relationships. Another is what one could call socialization of production or the organization of social cooperation. I mean, capital has historically operated the function of bringing together workers, classically in the factory, bringing them together and having them cooperate together and proposing

the terms for that cooperation. And that social cooperation, it seems to me, has an incredibly liberating human potential. What I would say then is that capital, while creating and in certain sense historically proposing social cooperation, also limits social cooperation, and that one could imagine pushing social cooperation further beyond the bounds which capital can tolerate.

So, I think it's the same way with globalization in certain respects. Capitalist relations create globalization, but finally they restrict it, and I think that pushing them further might be the way to move. The same thing with social cooperation: the capital even obliges us to cooperate socially in certain ways, but then blocks the fuller pursuit of that cooperation.

**OS:** I'm now interested in two issues you don't write about in the book. One is contemporary discourse on justice in political theory. Another is multiculturalism. Do you think those two topics relevant to your proposal? I'm talking about the authors such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, James Scanlon, Brian Barry...

**MH:** I should start by saying that for us, or for me, the concept of democracy is much more central than the concept of justice. That said, I think it's not an either/or alternative. I think that in much of the work that is done under the rubric of liberalism and therefore the framework of justice, and therefore the framework of right – and that's the way it's posed in authors you mentioned – the general project is oriented towards a notion of right rather than a notion of good, and that's what defines it's liberalism in their general estimation. I think that entire project can be translated in something that resembles our project, I think that they're not in different universes. When one thinks of the original Rawls framework of his first book, *A Theory of Justice*, it is a procedural investigation, but it is also oriented towards, let's say, tendency toward equality in terms of both decision-making and distribution. I think it's an attempt at the constructing the basis of democratic relations. And it is in that regard that I would try to say that two perspectives, one that focuses on democracy, which is ours, and other, which focuses on justice, are not totally separate.

It seems to me that there is a certain amount of confusion with the term multiculturalism, and that very different things are included under that term. The term is used in entire tradition of critical race studies and therefore race struggles, in addition to gender studies and therefore feminist struggles. They are all included under the term multiculturalism and are thought of as streams or currents within multiculturalism. I think that they are central to our attempts of analyzing forms of power, especially within a cultural framework of the empire, but not only cultural. I think the problem with multiculturalism is that it is often assumed, by people using the term both for and against it, that we can separate the cultural from the economic and the political. I think that none of these are merely cultural, both as fields of analysis or as fields of political activity. In other words, I don't think that struggles or studies about and of sexuality – gay and lesbian studies, for instance, or feminist studies about sexism, or race studies – I don't think that any of these are cultural in a limited sense, I think that they are all always already also economic and political questions.

What I'm trying to do is to distinguish certain conception of multiculturalism from another; there's one conception that I think is not accurate, and it is true our

analysis doesn't deal with it. But there's another, which is very important to our kind of analysis. How so? Just for instance, part of analysis is trying to recognize, say, the new forms of racism that are implied within this new imperial structure. In other words, that there is a certain paradigm of racial oppression and therefore racial anti-racist struggle that served as a paradigm in previous stage, what might be called a stage, of imperialism and that also functioned in the United States throughout much of twentieth century. We think that the form of racial oppression has changed now and therefore requires different kinds of anti-racist struggles. Here we're drawing directly on work that is done in race studies, in critical race studies, and anti-racist movements. So, if that is what is meant by multiculturalism, than it's certainly central to our analysis.

As a more practical, movement question, it has to do with our concept of the multitude: especially in the US, but also in Western Europe and probably elsewhere, there seemed to be a choice between two kinds of political organizing, an exclusive choice. The one that I experienced in 1980's in the US, see if it resonates with you elsewhere, is that there were two choices of political organizing: on unity model, or on difference model. The unity model is really the one that seemed more traditional; party structures often function this way. There was really one central access to political organizing, and it could include different elements, but they were all subordinated. For instance, one could say class politics is central political struggle, and then we could have people interested in sexism and racism, and other social problems, but they were all secondary to one unity – so that's the unity model.

In reaction to that was formed, very powerful in the US, especially growing out in the sixties, developing in the eighties, what is often called identity politics, but is really organized around differences. In other words, we need a separate movement for black lesbians, and a separate movement for Central American gay men, so the difference of one's identity would determine the difference of one's struggles. Now I think that there was a kind of dead end of political organizing between these two models, and one could, I think, easily see the limitations of each. And both of them, although in a way they formed polar opposites, were fundamentally based on the notion of the alternative, of the exclusive alternative, of identity and difference.

Our attempt with this concept of the multitude is to recognize the possibility of a different kind of political organizing. Rather than been based on, say, alternative between identity and difference, it is based on continuity between multiplicity and commonality. In other words, multitude is meant to name a possible form of political organization that is internally differentiated; in other words, it is always a multiplicity, and yet it can act in common, which seems to me to be at least conceptually a different access to these two previous notions. And I think, moreover, that these globalization protest movements have functioned on this model of the multitude, rather than on models of identity and difference. For instance, groups that we have thought of in a previous way as objectively antagonistic, even contradictory to each other, say, trade unions and environmentalists, suddenly, starting in Seattle, function together, and the contradiction doesn't play out. One could say, as we often say, that in network structure every opposition is displaced, or is triangulated by third term, and then a fourth, in the web of relationships. So, the conception of multiculturalism as based on logic of difference in identity as the primary organizational conception of politics

isn't exactly the way that it's functioning today, in our analysis. If that's what one thinks by multiculturalism, then we're thinking of something very different.

**OS:** What exactly do you mean by multitude, and what is its role as a second central concept of your book, empire being the first?

**MH:** The book proposes two concepts, empire as a form of power, and multitude names both the subject that is exploited by empire, that is controlled by empire, the subject whose labor and activity supports empire, but it also is the subject that has the potential to create an alternative society. Now, it seems to me that the concept of multitude in our book is used in at least two ways – that itself constitutes one of contradictions in our book. In certain ways it's a very self-contradictory book, which is a good thing, I think.

In one sense, multitude is used to name the multiple human force of liberation that has always existed. In certain ways, it names that almost ontological force of human creativity and liberation that has certainly existed throughout the modern era, but even previously. It's the force that always refuses domination. This is one of, say, principles of our analysis that we propose as almost an axiom that we ask others to accept. But I think most accept that humans always eventually – and this is one of wonderful things about humanity – refuse authority, refuse domination, rebel against forms of oppression. And that is in a way the primary force of the multitude that we use it, reading as a sort of guide to history. It is the continual revolt of the multitude against forms of slavery, exploitation, and other forms of oppression. So, in that sense multitude always has existed and will always exist.

In a very different sense, the multitude functions in our discourse as something that has never yet existed and it's a project to construct now. And what multitude means in this sense is a political subject capable of creating a new society. In a way one could put the two together and say that seeds of human creativity, of a democratic humanity, of a liberated humanity have always existed and they've always been manifest in this continual revolt against forms of authority.

So, the second notion of multitude is really a realization of those seeds, the realization of those potentials that have always existed. What that means, slightly more concretely, is that this project of construction of the multitude is possible today. What the construction of the multitude would mean is what I would call a becoming communal struggles. In other words, rather than seeing the various forms of liberation as separate from one another, or even sometimes antagonistic to, or contradictory to each other, recognize how they can become common. Just in a way we were talking of traditional language of multiculturalism, struggles against racism, struggles against sexism, struggles against class structures, could be posed not as irrevocably different and separate, but recognizing their common project. I guess what multitude as fundamental concept is asking is that difference can exist within a society, even within a political subject, and that political subject can nonetheless act, without being unified. That it can remain a multiplicity, and still govern itself – that's what I think fundamentally democracy and freedom require, that we can find a way to govern ourselves without reducing the differences among us.

**OS:** One more issue remains to be addressed: the question of terrorism, political violence in its standard usage as killing or harming someone, probably innocent, as a means to express political views.

**MH:** I think there is another element of terrorism in a standard usage, which equally should be criticized. I mean, I perfectly agree with you that one should condemn the use of violence against innocent persons out of frustration or inability of political expression, that is certainly for one. The other thing I think is characteristic of terrorism as it's commonly conceived, and equally should be opposed, is symbolic acts of violence, because this seems to me characteristic of both Right and Left terrorism through the last twenty or thirty years. It's not just violence, it's that the violence is highly symbolic, and I think that those symbolic acts, violent and non-violent ones too, first of all have very dangerous implications, because they are really not directed at the act, they are directed at a symbol. And also they don't construct anything, they're completely negative acts in that sense. In both of those ways I think you're right, if I understand your suggestion, that one should in unreserved and full-hearted way oppose to terrorism.

One should also say, however, that we – I think I speak with the vast majority in this – we are not opposed to political violence. Political violence, it seems to me, is not so simple that we can say, in a categorical or principled way, that we are against political violence, because there are times, historically, in which political violence is necessary, not just justified. The struggle against fascism during the Second World War, for instance, required the form of violence. Most of the modern revolutions – revolution in the US, French Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, Algerian Revolution – required, I think, political violence. I would in such situations advocate use of violence and I think that vast majority of others would also.

The reason I point this out is that I think that the question of violence has to be decided in specific contexts; sometimes it's appropriate and useful, and sometimes it's not. That is a matter of political debate, unfortunately – it seems it would be simpler if we could answer the question philosophically and in a principled way, but I think rather it's always a political question. For example, there are many discussions within these globalization protest movements about use of violence. Here it is the destruction of property and the purposeful confrontation with the police. These are the two things that those advocating use of violence in these protests propose or insist on. And while I think it's a difficult question, I argue against use of violence in these cases, not because I have any great devotion to Starbucks or McDonald's or their windows, but because I think that it poses divisions between a movement that are false divisions, that it destroys the common projects of those involved and that's why it seems to me inappropriate and I argue against it.

On the other hand, those who argue for it have many convincing points. The first is that they argue that they should be free to do what they want. In other words, I or others who do not favor the violence shouldn't be able to tell them what to do. They should be able to do what they want, as long as they do it in a way that doesn't endanger the others. I think one should remain in discussion about this, but ultimately one is free to do what one wants.

A more powerful and unfortunate argument they have, though, is that the media, mainstream media especially, is really on their side, in the sense that the media only reports acts of violence. This is especially true in the US, but it's also true elsewhere: there can be a demonstration of a hundred thousand people, and if it's peaceful it won't get reported in the US media. If there are windows broken, it will get reported. In fact, the great media success of these movements so far has been precisely because there's been violence, and even when there's been serious injury, as in Gothenburg or death as in Genoa, that's what the media actually reports. So, those advocating the violence say: "Look, this is the way the system works, our entire struggle would be useless unless there were violence and it's reported." I think that is unfortunately a very convincing argument. My argument against it is that the representation in the media is not the most important aspect of these movements, that the internal construction of community, common projects, that is, the constituent aspects to the movements, are much more important than their media representation. But in any case, I think that this, like many cases – in this instance the question of political violence, and here not violence against persons, but violence against property – is a complicated one and one that requires political discussion, rather than principled objections.

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