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Empire and Multitude: Shaping Our Century

An Interview with Michael Hardt

*Twenty-first-century crises demand twenty-first-century social movements. What would such movements look like, and how might they align to foster a meta-movement for transformational change? Political theorist Michael Hardt, co-author with Antonio Negri of a series of influential volumes, including *Empire* and the recent *Assembly*, talks with Tellus Senior Fellow Allen White about the new global order and the democratic, interconnected movement it calls for.*

How did your education and early experiences influence your evolution as a social and political theorist?

I studied engineering in college and worked in the alternative energy field before pursuing a graduate degree in comparative literature. As an undergraduate student, I had political desires, but I couldn't find a way to get involved in politics. At the time I only managed to see campus politics as an exercise in moralism, with various sides assuming a certain rectitude and purity in relation to their respective viewpoints. This was probably due to my own lack of understanding and imagination. In any case, only after I graduated did I begin to get involved directly, particularly in the sanctuary movement, which protected refugees coming to the US from El Salvador and Guatemala who were fleeing death squads and political violence supported by the US government in the 1980s. This work—and, in particular, the contact with the Central Americans—awakened me to the joy of political struggle. For me, activism paved the way for scholarship.

Your collaboration with Italian political theorist and philosopher Antonio Negri has been remarkable for its productive longevity. How did you connect, and how has this partnership flourished for so long?

My collaboration with Toni probably is unusual. Especially in the social sciences and humanities, collaboration often proves challenging and difficult to sustain. In some ways, our ability to collaborate remains a mystery, even to me. We often say that it is a condition of our friendship that there will always be another book in process. That gives us a good excuse for weekly phone

calls and periodic visits. The books, I suppose, are by-products of the friendship.

In the mid-1980s, I began to learn about the revolutionary movements in Italy in the 1970s and was intrigued by what they could mean for the US. Toni had been a leading figure in those movements, and his blend of scholarship and activism greatly appealed to me. At the time, he was living clandestinely in France, a fugitive from Italy. What chance did a US graduate student have to approach a well-known Italian political exile?

I translated his volume on Spinoza in order to meet him. Through a mutual friend, we arranged to meet in Paris to discuss translation questions. We got along right away, and so, it began. He was incredibly generous, treating me immediately as an equal, and that began a relationship that has lasted for thirty years.

Your most well-known book with Negri was *Empire*. How does the understanding of the contemporary world structure it presents differ from conventional definitions of globalization?

Three hypotheses constitute the foundation of the book: (1) that no single nation-state is able today to determine global order, (2) that, instead, a mixed constitution is emerging, and (3) that global capital and the world market are determining factors in shaping the global order.

First, we argued that neither the US nor any other nation-state can unilaterally control the global order. In shorthand, we said, imperialism is over. This proposition was tested, in a sense, by the US war on terror following September 11 with the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq in which the US tried unilaterally to “remake the Middle East” and reorient geopolitics by force. But those old-style imperialist operations failed miserably, and we now see that such unilateral ambitions, for the US or any other nation, are now impossible.

Second, the emergent global order instead takes the form of what we call a mixed constitution in the sense Polybius described upon arriving in Rome: at once a monarchy, an aristocracy, and a democracy. In this framework, nation-states still matter, of course, but they are no longer the sole or determining actors. Think of contemporary world order in terms of a three-dimensional chess board, to use an image proposed by political theorist Joseph Nye. On the top, military level, the US is in some sense monarchical. On a middle, economic level is the aristocratic (or, really, oligarchic) play among capitalist corporations as well as the dominant nation-states. Finally, on the bottom level, various NGOs, the media, subordinated nation-states, non-state actors, and various other forces compete. To understand contemporary global order, then, you have to grasp not only the relations on each of the three levels but also the dynamics among the levels.

And, third, the realization of the world market and the emergence of a properly global form of capital play critical roles in shaping the global, neoliberal order. Just as the nation-state was the necessary guarantor of the collective, long-term interests of national capital, *Empire* is made necessary by the advent of global capital.

In some respects, social movements have advanced these same hypotheses. A few months before the publication of *Empire*, in November 1999, alterglobalization protests shut down the WTO Ministerial Conference in Seattle. The protestors understood that power was no longer concentrated in Washington—if it were, the demonstrations would have been there. Instead, the targets in the subsequent years were the World Bank, the IMF, the G8 meetings, and free trade meetings. Each protest illuminated a different node in this new network of global power. Since 1999, the struggle to understand and respond to the forces of globalization has continued through various phases. Activists are engaged in a long-term process of rethinking the social and geopolitical dynamics of the twenty-first century, in the US and in a global frame.

Your next book with Negri was *Multitude*. How did this book build on the ideas presented in *Empire*?

Although we were relatively satisfied with the broad overview of the globe and the forces of domination that *Empire* articulates, we felt we had not sufficiently developed the possibilities of liberation and democracy in this new context. Just as we must recognize the multiple axes of oppression today, we must also theorize revolutionary subjectivity not as a single identity but as a multiplicity. In past liberation and revolutionary movements, for instance, the people, the class, and the party have each primarily been understood as unified subjects, defined by a single identity. *Multitude*, in contrast, is a concept meant to understand political subjectivity as internally differentiated. How can a diverse coalition act coherently and effectively in common? That's one of the questions we posed. In many respects, with the concept of multitude, we were exploring the same questions that black feminists engaged through the concept of intersectionality, which similarly strives to understand multiple axes of domination and the political need for coalition.

In *Commonwealth*, your next collaboration, you expand the conventional concept of the commons to include languages and social practices. What is the significance of this social commons for understanding—and transforming—the contemporary order?

The commons is often recognized in terms of the earth and its ecosystems, which we all, in some sense, share. That is certainly an important project of contemporary political thought and activism, but Toni and I are also focused on a second form of the commons, which is produced socially. A wide range of products of human creativity, from cultural products to scientific knowledges, and from affective relations to urban space, are (or can be) shared as commons.

We approach the commons, conceptually, in contrast to private property. Whereas property implies limited access and a monopoly over decision-making, the commons is openly shared and managed democratically. That definition provides a good point of departure, but it really just opens toward a series of questions. How, for instance, can we manage democratically the various forms of social wealth?

In *Commonwealth*, Toni and I pursue such questions largely in theoretical terms, but we also explore them through various examples of contemporary activism. The struggles against the

privatization of water and gas resources in Bolivia in the years leading up to Evo Morales's 2005 election, for instance, were an inspiring instance of struggles for the commons. Water and gas should not be private property, activists argued, but shared by all.

Another challenging example is provided by the various encampments and occupations in 2011 from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park to the Puerta del Sol square in Madrid and, in 2013, Gezi Park in Turkey. Activists in these movements argued against the various forms of neoliberal privatization, but they also sought to transform a portion of the city and, temporarily, made it common, that is, open to all and subject to collective, democratic decision-making—often by establishing general assemblies or similar decision-making structures. Such experiments with the commons were a large part of what made those encampments feel magical to those who participated.

Your most recent works—*Declaration and Assembly*— spotlight social movements and the potential for transformative action. What would you say is your central insight about social movements today?

Along with many others, we were inspired by the movements that emerged beginning in 2011 in Egypt, Tunisia, Spain, Greece, the US, and later Brazil, Turkey, and elsewhere—so-called leaderless movements. We admired especially their profound democratic spirit and how they experimented with and demanded new notions of democracy. Why, though, we asked—and many activists asked this too—have these movements that express the dreams and desires of so many not been able to bring about a lasting transformation and a more just society? Many sympathetic observers and some activists themselves came to the conclusion that in order for the movements to become effective they would have to develop leadership structures and return to traditional centralized models of organization. Toni and I have thought instead that “leaderlessness versus leadership” was not the right way to understand the issue—that this was a false alternative.

You argue for developing movements that invert the traditional structure of leaders-as-strategists and followers-as-local-tacticians. How would this reversal work?

First of all, we do not propose the elimination of leaders. Rather, we reframe leadership as dynamic and temporary, deployed and dismissed by the multitude as conditions evolve. Leaders can serve as tacticians, guiding small-scale to large-scale decisions, particularly when special expertise is required or when expediency is essential.

The other side of this framework is more complex and more challenging. How can the multitude develop strategic capabilities to make collective long-term decisions regarding the most critical social issues? This is very close to a longstanding question of political theory: How can people become capable of democracy, a veritable democracy in which all participate equally in collective self-rule? That is one element required, in fact, for the multitude to be capable of strategy.

One way to explore these questions is to investigate contemporary political experiments that tend in this direction. How much can one recognize an inversion of the traditional roles

of strategy and tactics in the Podemos party in Spain or, more significantly, in the municipal government of Barcelona? Does it make sense to think of aspects of the Black Lives Matter movement as experimenting with such an inversion? Toni and I do engage such practical examples, but our investigations are primarily theoretical, in particular exploring aspects of social cooperation in contemporary economic relations that can serve as the basis for constructing new forms of political organization. That's a complicated matter that involves the core sections of *Assembly*.

One of the primary tasks in all our books, I think, is to question the terms we use to talk about politics. Our political vocabulary has been so corrupted that its central concepts such as democracy and freedom have virtually lost meaning. The accepted understanding of democracy today, for instance, seems to consist of periodic electoral spectacles financed by corporations in which one is forced to choose among candidates that are all wedded to a neoliberal and militaristic paradigm. One important thing that works in political theory like ours can do, I think, is to reinvent our political vocabulary. Sometimes, that means creating new terms to match our new social reality, but equally important is struggling over the meaning of the concepts that have been handed down to us.

One particularly difficult problem with which Toni and I have struggled with is the political concept of love. Love, of course, has a long political history in the premodern world. In Corinthians, for instance, Paul talks about love as the basis of community, and all the major theological traditions pose love as a primary political concept. Machiavelli, of course, in a very different register, addresses love as a political concept. In modern political theory, however, love has most often been banished from politics. And yet, activists today, especially young activists, frequently understand their own political engagements in terms of love. That is just one indication that we need and are lacking today an adequate political concept of love, which can address the challenges of our contemporary world. Toni and I, as well as a series of other authors, have made some suggestions in this direction, but it seems to me that this remains an open project.

GTI seeks to nurture a plural but unified Global Citizens Movement as the historical change agent for transforming planetary civilization. What advice would you offer to those seeking to make that concept a reality?

There are certainly a wide range of ecological, political, economic, and social projects aimed at addressing the challenges of the various forms of global domination and destruction. I would put the accent on plural rather than unified. As I said, our concept of multitude is meant to identify and analyze a problem: how a wide range of political struggles, without being reduced to a single identity or homogeneous subject, can act in common in a way that challenges effectively contemporary forms of domination. This, of course, is not a matter of inventing a new movement but rather should start with existing movements and the ways that, in each society and internationally, they link together in powerful networks. We certainly will need more and more powerful networks of this type to face the challenges in the years ahead.

About the Interviewee



Michael Hardt is a political philosopher and Professor of Literature at Duke University. His writings explore the new forms of domination in the contemporary world as well as the social movements and other forces of liberation that resist them. He is co-author, with Antonio Negri, of *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004), and *Commonwealth* (2009). The two have also written *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-form* (1994), *Declaration* (2012), and the recent *Assembly* (2017). He holds a PhD from the University of Washington.

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