

Interview

A multitude of possibilities

Daniel Leighton interviews Michael Hardt

Remarking on the general state of the left in the early 1990s German philosopher Jürgen Habermas crisply observed that there had been ‘an exhaustion of utopian energies’. It is due to their audacious attempts to reignite the left’s utopian energies that post-Marxist theoreticians Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri rose from relative academic obscurity to the bestseller lists from the late 90s onwards.

Their co-authored works on emerging systems of global power (*Empire*) and the possibilities of radical change that inhere within contemporary society (*Multitude*) made them the unlikely poster boys of the ‘anti-globalisation’ or ‘global justice’ movement. However their theoretical ingenuity has yet to be fully dissected and appropriated by social democrats. This is no doubt due to the sometimes disarming theoretical complexity of their project and the unapologetically revolutionary rhetoric that characterises their writing.

Garnering praise and sometimes damning critique in equal measure, their work is distinguished by two key facets. The first is a grand theoretical synthesis of post-60s attempts to make sense of changes in economic and political power, combining post-structuralism with insights from the radical Italian marxism of the *Autonomia* movement. The second is a boundless and often counter-intuitive optimism about the possibilities of radical social transformation in the new world order of globalised capital and culture. Regardless of whether one shares their revolutionary outlook there is much within their work that points to how the left might become an offensive rather than defensive or reactionary political force in the twenty-first century.

The following interview with Michael Hardt was conducted to draw out his views on how changes in the meaning and scope of capitalist production are creating new possibilities for social and political action. In particular it seeks to highlight why the notion of ‘the common’ plays such a pivotal role in their vision of radical democratic transformation. While this concept covers very similar ground to the idea of the commons discussed in this issue, Hardt and Negri prefer to use the term in the singular to highlight the novelty of new forms of shared capacities emerging from ‘immaterial production’, distinguishing it from pre-capitalist shared spaces that were destroyed by the advent of private property. They attempt to show how post-Fordist production depends upon and constantly expands new forms of communication, collaboration and creation. This stock of common relationships and values is being constantly re-appropriated for profit but at the same time requires

forms of sharing and openness that run counter to the exclusionary logics of private property.

Together with other analysts of the 'old' and 'new' commons, Hardt and Negri highlight how a new politics of ownership and property is challenging the understanding of the public and private that underpinned both liberal and socialist thought since the nineteenth century. These struggles, hitherto marginal in centre-left discourse, may be forming a crucial political terrain in which progressives can innovate with the grain of social change rather than the imperatives of neo-liberal privatisation.

Left nostalgia and the multitude

In Multitude you aim to develop concepts and social analysis that draw out the positive potential for radical social change within today's society. You contrast this project with what you characterise as a widespread and disabling nostalgia on the mainstream left. Before elaborating on your positive concepts could you explain your critique of left nostalgia?

Over the last decade or two we have often heard on the left voices of dissatisfaction or frustration with declining membership in various organisations, a seeming failure of the population to participate in traditional civic and community organisations. This stems from an understandable but I think misguided desire to protect or resurrect traditional social bodies that sustained the labour movement of the last two centuries. It is essentially a project of restoration. Until recently the desire to restore lost or eroding forms of community has been most associated with the right – in terms of the restoration of the family, the church and country.

This desire to resurrect or restore previous forms of social agency and community has now emerged as key theme on the mainstream left, though it manifests itself in different ways in Europe and North America. Take for example Robert Putnam's social capital-based account of civic decline. With the collapse of traditional community organisations and civic membership he sees the population not simply bowling alone but increasingly isolated and atomised – a kind of end to society as such. A similar tone of nostalgia and regret for lost community dominates studies about changes in work, in that factory and craft work used to provide stable employment and a set of skills that allowed workers to develop and take pride in a coherent lifelong career – together with the social connection with fellow workers centred on their jobs. The shift from Fordist to post-Fordist labour arrangements, characterised by flexibility, mobility and instability, has destroyed traditional forms of work and the forms of life they generated. This has led some to claim that this is leading to the erosion of character, trust, and loyalty and mutual commitment. These laments for lost forms of community can be linked to calls for patriotism from parts of the mainstream left, which pre-date but were strongly reinforced by 9/11.

The mainstream European left also I think shares this sense of nostalgia for traditional

social forms and communities, though this is played out less in laments about individualism and more in terms of sterile repetitions of community rites, often, though not exclusively, linked to stronger traditions of political parties and trade unions. Practices of 'community', which used to be seen as the preserve of the left and the social solidarity it stood for, have become empty shadows that can lead to senseless violence, from rabid soccer fan clubs to xenophobic nationalism.

For me in all these cases – civic associations, work, family, and country, the ultimate object is the reconstruction of a unified social body – in other words, the idea of 'the people' that underpins political forms of modernity. This constant attempt to resuscitate the social bodies of classical modernity results in a feeling of beating our heads against a wall, puzzling as to why people don't do what they used to do – join unions, national causes, join parties. In short, the left is in a state of nostalgia combined with a perpetual frustration. This is ultimately because this is an attempt to reconstruct the type of unified social body that no longer exists. This is a symptom of the need to fundamentally question whether previously effective organisational forms are adequate to the present time, in that they no longer keep pace with the contemporary forms of social life. Rather than continue to beat our heads against the wall, rather than think that people are inadequate to our existing forms of organisation, we need to change our thinking about forms of political and social organisation so that they fit more effectively with the way people think and live now.

Only once you let go of this nostalgic vision are you freed up to ask what contemporary social life might be able to do or become, based on what it currently is, rather than what once was. Just because forms of social life can no longer be seen as a unified whole doesn't mean people are not capable of acting in common. So part of our task in *Multitude* was to develop a new concept of social life that starts on the basis of plurality, and from that establish what kind of politics and social organisation might be possible.

How does the idea of the multitude give the left a more perspicacious understanding of the way socio-economic and technological changes are creating more positive and vibrant forms of agency? And to get a sense of perspective, how does this way of seeing social agency relate to other social subjects you critique the mainstream left for clinging on to, such as 'the people' or the working class?

The idea of the multitude is meant to construct an alternative to the uniform idea of the working class and the unifying social cohesion of the idea of 'the people' which animates some forms of left-wing nostalgia. It is meant to explore the gap between the false alternatives of collective uniformity and fragmented individualism. Clearly the concept of the working class has been used in many different ways. However there was a dominant usage, especially during an era dominated by industrial workers and their unions, of the working class as a unified subject, working under a centralised leadership, albeit with differences within it, with a unified agenda. What the concept of multitude tries to do is conceive of the multiplicity and plurality of labouring forms, desires, and views that cannot be reduced to unification.

We wanted to use the concept of the multitude to capture recent shifts in the global economy. Although the working class no longer plays a hegemonic role in the global economy, its numbers have not decreased worldwide. Yet production today has to be conceived not merely in economic terms but as a kind of more general social production, producing not only material goods but also the production of communications, relationships and forms of life. Rather than a unified class or people the multitude is composed of all the diverse forms of production and desire.

It is also useful to compare the concept of the multitude to that of the people. The concept of the people is thought of as unity – the English people, the French people – as a collective subject with a plurality of identities within it. In contrast the multitude is composed of multiple differences that cannot be reduced to a unity or single identity – different cultures, races, ethnicities, forms of labour and desire. If we accept this as the best way of characterising contemporary societies, the challenge posed by the concept of the multitude is for a social multiplicity to manage to communicate and act in common while remaining internally different.

Immaterial labour and the social production of the common

Could you explain the significance of what you call ‘the hegemony of immaterial labour’? In your work this notion plays a central role in understanding new forms of exploitation while also making possible new types of social relationship that somehow make the multitude capable of a transformative politics rather than being simply passive and fragmented.

Terms like post-Fordism, post-industrialism or the ‘information society’ highlight the way industrial labour lost its hegemony in production to what we call ‘immaterial labour’, labour that creates immaterial products such as knowledge, information, communication, relationships or the generation of emotional responses. Terms like service work or cognitive labour refer to aspects of immaterial labour but none capture its generality, which encompasses but goes beyond the products most associated with the ‘information society’. For us there are two key aspects of immaterial labour: one intellectual and analytical; the other ‘affective’, which produces and manipulates affects or feelings such as wellbeing, satisfaction and excitement. To be sure most forms of immaterial labour combine these forms: most communication combines symbols and information with the production of affect.

Our claim is that immaterial labour is becoming qualitatively rather than quantitatively hegemonic. Agricultural labour probably remains dominant in terms of sheer numbers and immaterial labour is concentrated in the dominant regions of the globe. None the less the claim is that immaterial labour is now in the same position as industrial labour was a hundred and fifty years ago. Although it only accounted for a fraction of production, all forms of labour and social organisation had to industrialise. Today labour and society have to informationalise, become communicative and affective. The main consequence is not that all labour is immaterial but that the qualities of immaterial production will be progressively imposed on other aspects of the economy.

With regard to the question of exploitation, the effects of the hegemonic position of immaterial labour must be distinguished from the late 90s utopianism of the ‘new economy’ that some thought would make all work satisfying and interesting. This shift does not end hierarchy and command in the workplace and polarisation in the labour market, or reduce alienation – if anything it makes much more sense to use that term when what you are selling is your ability to make human relationships at the behest of a boss or client. There are however real changes in the conditions of work that have profound effects on structures of exploitation, for example, in the way there is an increasingly hazy definition between work and leisure time where one is trying to solve a problem or create an idea. Yet it also has even more profound effects on what it is that is being exploited.

The hegemony of immaterial labour transforms the dominant organisation of production from linear relationships of the assembly line to the indeterminate relationships of distributed networks – information, communication and co-operation become the norms of production and the network becomes the dominant form of organisation. A central argument we make in *Multitude* is that exploitation today concerns not the expropriation of labour-time but the capture of value produced by co-operative labour, becoming common through circulation in social networks. By which I mean that capitalists organising labour no longer create the main forms of productive co-operation, rather it emerges from the productive energies of labour itself. Immaterial labour produces social relations, communication and co-operation. This leads to a second claim that immaterial labour creates common relationships more pronounced than in the past that lead to new possibilities for social organisation and co-operation.

How does the dominance of immaterial labour affect our understanding of the scope and meaning of the common?

The concept of the common here is much more complex than we had previously thought. If you go back to discussions of the common in the English political thought of the seventeenth century, the notion of the common was seen as something primary, that the world was given in common to man, and then from this arises the idea of society and property rights as a necessary subtraction from the common wealth. We thought of the common as a pre-existing good that could be most effectively preserved or used by being shared or owned privately – the argument for privatisation being due to the so called ‘tragedy of the commons’. Yet in the current context we need to shift our thinking to types of common that are continually reproduced rather than something pre-existing and static.

When we look at the production of ideas in the scientific community for instance, the scientific community always relies on a pre-existing set of common knowledge. If you were to take away or privatise that common stock of knowledge you would have no ongoing scientific production or much more limited versions of it. The result of scientific production is the production of new elements of the common, in a kind of expanding spiral that functions as the basis of the next round of the creation of ideas. If you apply that notion to other areas of social

production, if social production is itself creating the common then what is struggled over is the produced commons, which acts as the basis for further social production. Attempts to privatise commons act as barriers to further social production rather than an incentive.

Let me give what might seem like a far removed example. When economists talk about the values of property on urban real estate they try to figure the value of the property in terms of the intrinsic value of the space and construction elements. Yet as we know the value is not so much determined by intrinsic but extrinsic qualities – proximity to parks, relations in the neighbourhood and all kinds of other cultural and social circuits. What's external is in fact much more important than what is internal. Urban real estate economists are constrained to think of all of these things as externalities. Yet what is determining urban real estate value can be seen as forms of the common. Not just the natural common like parks, but the socially produced common in terms of community relations and culture. All of these things that are common to the city help determine the value of real estate as much if not more than nature of the property itself.

It seems to me the more complicated notion of the common, which results from these forms of social immaterial production, is becoming more central today than more easily quantifiable forms of material production. The question of ownership of this common and how we assign value to it becomes a central issue for contestation.

How does this expanded notion of the common fit into conventional understandings of the public and private sphere underlying both liberal and social democratic thought?

The concept of a socially produced common disrupts the standard assumption in legal theory about the distinction between public as the realm of the state and the private as the realm of the individual isolated from social interaction. The common stands in between these two ideas. You can get a sense of this in the traditional sense of the commons: common land is obviously not private in that anyone could use it to gather firewood and graze cattle and so on, but neither was it public in terms of being a structure of the state. With the idea of the common as socially reproduced it becomes much more complex and relevant for contemporary thinking, as a spiral of expanding social production and a realm that is neither public (state controlled or subject to public law or state organisation), nor private. This type of common creates a new terrain between the public and the private, which presents a challenge to legal thought and a challenge as to how can we organise this domain.

The challenge this represents to legal thought is seen in a range of struggles and paradoxes over patent and Intellectual Property (IP) law, in which goods such as genetic codes, knowledge, plants and animals are being claimed as private property, underwritten by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and trade agreements over IP. With the rise of immaterial labour we are seeing a vast innovation and expansion of new categories of property, with perhaps the most contentious concerning the ownership and control of genetic information. In this instance what was hitherto thought to belong to everyone as 'nature' is ceasing to be common and is controlled exclusively by its new owners. As we say in *Multitude*, it's no coin-

cidence that people studying IT and IP use terms like the ‘creative commons’ or the ‘new enclosures’ as today’s neo-liberal privatisations recall early processes of capitalist development. Yet this privatisation of knowledge is an obstacle to the communication and co-operation that is at the base of scientific and social innovation. The contention we make in *Multitude* is that ‘bio-political’ productivity is undercut and blocked by private processes of appropriation. Yet at the same time the increasingly common nature of production is eroding the legal definition of private property premised on the labour of isolated individuals. Debates over the common and the social production that creates and sustains it are raising all sorts of questions about the meaning of property and ownership in the era of immaterial production.

Compiling a global book of grievances

In Multitude you attempt to construct a contemporary ‘list of grievances’, making a deliberate nod to the list of grievances compiled in France on the eve the French Revolution, which provided the basis for Abbe Sieyes to construct the Third Estate as political subject with the power to topple the ancien regime. Could you elucidate what you found to be the common points in today’s multiple and disparate grievances against the current contours of neo-liberal globalisation?

Rather than asking the question what can be done, we should look to what people are already doing. It is a political challenge to recognise and understand what people are already doing and work from there, even if it is different to what we have traditionally understood as political and social action. The assumption that people are apathetic, that people are passive consumers, I think misunderstands the contemporary situation of what people desire. The start for any political exercise is to develop a catalogue of contemporary grievances over the organisation of politics and the economy. In *Multitude* we identify three core grievances globally: grievances of representation; poverty and exclusion; and war.

Grievances of representation can be seen as the flip side to the phenomena driving left nostalgia, in terms of people’s dissatisfaction with the lack of representation in classic structures of parliamentary democracy and parties at national and local levels. It is also made manifest by late 90s protest movements in North America and Europe over the lack of representation beyond the national space. The core of the protest has concerned lack of representation in supranational decision-making over the economy with the WTO and G8 becoming focal points. So we can see a variety of grievances coalescing around a crisis of representation at both the national and supranational level. This is not simply a grievance about a lack of representation but it contains vocal attempts to find forms of democracy that can either supplement or substitute traditional forms of representation.

The grievance against poverty and exclusion is more diffuse but equally as vibrant. We see this in the exacerbation of class divisions and the rise of global poverty as a mainstream political issue. That could be seen as a sign of the success of the movements of the late 90s. Certainly it can be perceived as a degree of success that politicians feel the need to speak a rhetoric of responding to such grievances.

The grievance against war and violence are clearly mobilising different populations, most obviously against wars in the Middle East and the so-called 'War on Terror'.

Crucially there is a category that cuts across and mutually implicates all the others – what we call grievances of bio-politics. We use this concept to highlight how divisions between life and power, or culture and biology, are increasingly breaking down. The environment and various ecological struggles are clear examples here. Yet bio-political grievances also include struggles over the building of dams in India and struggles over the ownership of scientific knowledge we have just spoken about – seeds, traditional knowledges, genetic material and new forms of life are becoming private property through the expansion of patents.

I think all of these come back to the need to understand these desires as an expression of a politically active population rather than a passive consumer mass. The idea of seeing all these struggles in terms of bio-politics helps us frame them as struggles over the production and ownership of social life itself. What these struggles are ultimately about is the capacity for people to autonomously control social life. This comes directly back to the question of the production and reproduction of the common and the type of political regimes that enable that to flourish most effectively. This is our way of trying to read in to the desires and actions of contemporary social struggles a common basis for political and social mobilisation.

Other analysts of contemporary society are much more ambivalent about people's capacity or desire for political innovation. You seem to pose the multitude as a wholly positive force, the flourishing of which is blocked only by the domination of a wholly negative empire of capital. What makes you so hopeful that such possibilities inhere within contemporary citizens where others see people increasingly plagued by anxiety and insecurity as result of changes in the economy?

There is a difference between simply re-describing what already exists, and developing political projects on the basis of reading off from existing capacities as to what might be possible. We are confronted by such enormous powers of repression and war that we need to argue for the existing possibilities for something better. When I teach Marx to students they always ask why there is a need to organise the proletariat if objective economic tendencies will undermine capitalism in any case. Yet imbuing a social subject with hope is as much a rhetorical device as anything else. By raising the objective possibility of change from within our society you open up possibilities for it to actually happen.

Finally I'd like to ask how you respond to critics who claim that the success and analysis of Empire was a fad of the late 90s that has been irrevocably undermined by the return of the imperial state post 9/11?

In response to people that argue the war on terror has returned to us to imperialism, I would simply point to the fact that the failure of the US in Iraq has exemplified what we set out to argue in *Empire*: that no single state, no matter how powerful relative to others, is capable of defining and maintaining global order.

In any case we are now much more interested in developing an alternative to Empire, in the possibility of democracy rather than constantly refining our understanding of forms of domination. It's worth noting that when we wrote *Empire* we implicitly relied on a concept of the multitude, which subsequently formed the basis of our second book. Our next project is to more effectively theorise the meaning and potential of the common, so we are constantly seeking to develop and refine our understanding of radical alternatives.

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