



# Introduction: Critical Forum on *Empire*<sup>1</sup>

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Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri begin their recent collaboration, *Empire* (2000), by staking a tremendous ontological claim. “Empire,” they write, “is materializing before our very eyes. Over the past several decades, as colonial regimes were overthrown and then precipitously after the Soviet barriers to the capitalist world market finally collapsed, we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges. Along with the global market and global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule—in short, a new form of sovereignty. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world” (p. xi).<sup>2</sup> The hope for *Empire*, as Hardt and Negri later described it, was thus to “write a new chapter of Das Kapital, a chapter that Marx could not write because the world that he analyzed did not allow him” (Hardt and Negri, 2001, 237).<sup>3</sup> What is more, they insist that the new subject of global governance which they call “Empire” is not merely a metaphor; it is a concept that describes something real (p. xiv), a means

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<sup>1</sup> © Scott Kirsch, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Page numbers refer to Hardt and Negri (2000) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> *Empire* builds on a diverse group of philosophers and theorists – Machiavelli, Spinoza, Luxemburg, Foucault, along with a number of contemporary Italian Marxists – but it is modeled explicitly after two works, Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) and Marx’s *Capital*.

of understanding an operative “logic of rule” that others before them, from dialecticians to postcolonialists, have been unable to see.

In many ways, then, we might say that the book was doomed to failure from the start. But this is what makes *Empire's* successes so interesting. By asking readers to accept, at least for the sake of argument, that there is such a thing as Empire, Hardt and Negri produce a sense of expectation in the book that, in turn, enables them to offer a suite of arguments that are as astonishing for their accessibility as for the breadth of their philosophical and historical syntheses. The effect is that of a new vista onto an emergent form of capitalist global sovereignty, one that (we concede) may be “materializing before our very eyes.” *Empire* is developed, in this sense, as an exercise in naming, narrating, and explaining the historical transitions, or passages of sovereignty and production, through which Empire has been produced, and the conditions through which, at the same time, a future transition to “counter-Empire” may become possible. Since there are no more outsides, we are told, the alternatives must lie within Empire, where the seeds of its own destruction have already been planted.

*Empire's* utopianism works through a number of evocative constructions, from “Empire” to the “multitude” to “counter-Empire,” but perhaps the book’s most compelling achievement is in how it constructs its own imagined community of readers, a global Left, with an awareness of itself as such, able to think through *Empire's* categories. Doubtless, the popularity and relative commercial success of the book reflect a certain need for this sense of community among Left intellectuals, along with a continuing need for utopian thought and prose. Indeed, like few other radical books in recent years, *Empire* has been widely read, across disciplines, outside of universities, and internationally; with editions now or soon-to-be published in more than 20 languages, it is clear that the book will continue to be read and talked about for years to come, as the text stretches into its own networks of multi-national production and consumption.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, *Empire* has been the subject of a great deal of conversation and debate, best reflected in its diversity in a special issue of *Rethinking Marxism* (Mustapha, 2001), and it has received much attention in newspapers, on radio, and on the internet as well. Of course, while many have been stirred by the text, many difficult questions have been raised about it too. “Rarely,” as Andy Merrifield (2003, 197) puts it, “has a left text so appalled and inspired radicals at the same time.”

This forum in *ACME*, which initially took shape as a roundtable at the Third International Conference of Critical Geography in Békéscsaba, Hungary, in June 2002,

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<sup>4</sup> First published in English, *Empire* sold some 40,000 copies in its first year. According to Harvard University Press, it has now been translated and published in Arabic, Chinese (Taiwan), Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian (now already in its 8<sup>th</sup> printing), Korean (in which 4000 copies sold in the first month of publication), Portuguese (Brazil), Spanish, and Turkish (now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> edition since 2002), with translations forthcoming in Chinese (China), Croatian, Danish, Finnish, Japanese, Portuguese (Portugal), Romanian, Russian, Slovenian, and Swedish.

is intended to advance these conversations, for the inspired and the appalled alike. Focusing, respectively, on the meaning of Hardt and Negri's challenging but problematic claim of "no more outsides" for current European-North American relations, the historical Euro-centrism of the theory, and the notions of global citizenship that the authors invest in the multitude, in the essays that follow Claudio Minca, Blanca Ramirez, and Joe Painter interrogate, in different ways, what might be called the limits of *Empire*, raising questions about the ontological limits of Hardt and Negri's "borderless world," and about the political limits of the concept as well. Empire is posed as more a philosophical concept than a historical one, and as such it allows for some rather profound ambiguities (Rofel, 2001); how else, in a world so evidently *full* of borders – boundaries existing in different scales of time and space, and invested with widely varying social efficacies – can we be said to live in a borderless world? In what remains of this introductory essay, I begin the collective endeavor by drawing out several of the book's spatial ambiguities, particular representations of spatial processes and distributions of power in *Empire*, that is, which are critical to its arguments and yet which remain in some ways sketchy and metaphoric.

This haziness may be the result of the authors' rather frustrating tendency to speak, on the one hand, of a universal "non-place" of power — a kind of de-centered hyperspace wherein the power to police and adjudicate are called into being, wherever crisis management is needed, in recurring moments of *permanent exception* — and yet, on the other, to define Empire and counter-Empire, and the passages between them, in explicitly spatial terms. Let me turn to three brief examples of these ambiguous spatialities in *Empire: globality, networks, and mobility*.

One of the fundamental conditions that sets Empire apart from other forms of sovereignty, for the authors, is its unprecedented globality. Working through theories of capitalist and imperialist expansion from Marx to Luxemburg to Lenin, the pair insists that, with capitalist planetary expansion more or less complete, a profound historical break has been achieved. If, as *Empire* borrows from Luxemburg, the expansionist dynamics of capitalism have made it "the first mode of economy which is unable to exist by itself, which needs other economic systems as a medium and a soil," (p. 224) then what happens, Hardt and Negri ask, when there are "no more outsides" for capitalism to internalize? The result, at least for now, is Empire, with the political and juridical bases of its power now continually *reproduced* by the need for the policing of "internal" conflicts. But this "irresistible and irreversible" globalization, for Hardt and Negri, is actually a quite *hopeful* process: Empire's expansiveness brings with it an extension of constitutionalism and a new language of global rights for the "multitude," however partial, disingenuous, and ineffectual, even as that expansionism is fueled by the ongoing need to realize people, places, and resources in the form of capital. To be sure, these rights remain to be won, and nothing is guaranteed for Hardt and Negri, but still they insist, with a bracing optimism, that the global scale of Empire's "networks of biopolitical production," and the de-centered nature of its infrastructure, will provide opportunities for new political subjectivities to arise and form from "within." *Empire* clearly has much to say, then, to debates over alternatives

within or outside of capitalism. And yet if this implosion of political forces is indeed made to turn on capital reaching its geographical limits, left only to turn inwards on itself, then questions about how these spatial limits are constituted, and about why we are shattering these boundaries just now, are left surprisingly unexamined in *Empire*. Geographers, among others, have been at pains to show that such observations of the “closure” of continental and global space have a long history of their own, especially evident in the history of geography and cartography, and these putative closures, whether anchored in progressive or conservative political values, often have a way of obscuring difference and projecting present trends into the future in a linear fashion. As Ramirez asks in her essay, do Hardt and Negri actually account for regions – like Latin America – with very different histories of colonialism, modernization, and hybridization than the European and North American contexts at the center of *Empire*’s story? Can one theory, or for that matter, a single logic of rule, be applicable everywhere?

Had Hardt and Negri chosen to pursue the question of global closure, or rather, the question of what the opening and closing of worlds has meant to the changing spatiality of capitalism and political sovereignty over time, then they might have been drawn to more spatially nuanced theories of the geography of capitalism, uneven development, and the production of space and scale. Instead the spatiality of *Empire* that they construct tends toward the metaphysical, a space of interconnected interiors that takes form in *networks* of production and communication, and in this they argue that all laboring practices “tend toward the model of information and communication technologies” (p. 291). The story of the internet extending beyond its military origins provides Hardt and Negri with an elegant spatial metaphor: the same *de-centered* structure of communications built to ensure survival under nuclear attack is now what makes complete control of the network — and the appropriations of immaterial labor (i.e., symbolic, affective, and intellectual work) on which *Empire* depends — so vulnerable (pp. 294-300). A spontaneous multitude of resistances, arising chiefly out of new social realizations of immaterial labor, thus becomes the barbarians at the gate for overcoming *Empire*, travelling in on the sturdy Roman roads of the internet and other infrastructural networks. And yet, the spatial metaphor of the network here may allow for considerable ambiguity in the analysis of the social relations of work. As Nick Dyer-Witherford (2001) has argued, the overly broad category of immaterial labor obscures some of the real challenges for any emergent global Left.

Negri and Hardt’s ‘incomunicado’ thesis declaring communication between global struggles both impossible and unnecessary should be not only abandoned but reversed! To the degree that ‘immaterial labour’ is a crucial component of revolt against global capital, perhaps its main contribution is that of weaving networks of communications between insurgencies (Dyer-Witherford, 2001, 77).

Networks may indeed facilitate such challenges, as models of de-centered power and also as actual social-technical and spatial structures. At the same time, though, the de-centering of power in networks might *also* be seen as a kind of *centering* or *fixing* of power (this is, of course, the space of flows that Castells has written volumes about). It is precisely this tension between fixity and mobility that

Hardt and Negri capture (in a far more radical sense than does Castells) and make the focal point of one of their book's primary political messages — namely, the advocacy of immigrants' rights within countries and an opening of borders between them. For whereas Empire exercises power by “restricting and isolating the spatial movements of the multitude to stop them from gaining political legitimacy,” they argue (p. 398), it is in the rights to both mobility *and* spatial fixity that the “multitude reappropriates space and constitutes itself as an active subject,” establishing, “a new geography ... as the productive flows of bodies define new rivers and ports” (p. 397; see also Cravey, 2003). The demand for *global citizenship* expressed in *Empire* — beginning with the claim to full citizenship rights in the country where one *lives and works* — reflects one clear political response for capturing this aspect of globalization, directed explicitly towards the wealthier countries. The joining of the right to move (in a world that demands mobile labor) with the right to stay in place as citizens, in this sense, is an important form of spatial politics to think through, even if the particular imaginings of global citizenship offered by Hardt and Negri, as Painter elucidates in his contribution, raise many more questions than they answer.

And this is the starting point for this forum on *Empire* in *ACME*: that the book does raise “big questions,” offering polemics for exploring the reality and unreality of global orders at a time when those issues must be talked about (whether or not we choose to speak in the terms of *Empire*). That *Empire's* “singular cognitive mapping,” as Minca describes it in his essay, will surely be proved wrong in myriad ways matters a great deal in the specifics, but it makes the book — as an exploration of the global and the general — no less valuable. At a moment when American global militarism and geopolitics — and those of its “coalition of the willing” — are at once increasingly activist and increasingly under challenge (Kirsch, 2003), the need for critical oppositional movements may be obvious, but the search for alternative forms of world governance should also be exhaustive.

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