



*Empire Goes to War, or, The Ontological Shift in the Transatlantic Divide*¹

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Most Europeans do not see the great paradox: that their passage into post-history has depended on the United States not making the same passage. [...] The United States, with all its vast power, remains stuck in history, left to deal with the Saddams and the ayatollahs, the Kim Jong IIs and the Jiang Zemins, leaving the happy benefits to others

Robert Kagan (2002, 15-16)

The above citation is taken from an article that is disturbing both in its militaristic and masculinist rhetoric, as well as in the insurmountable chasm in U.S. and European relations that it professes as inevitable. Its thesis appears to contradict, at first glance, many of the arguments presented in *Empire*: for one, by rejecting Hardt and Negri's theorisation of a post-modern world order. The author of this by-now influential piece angrily sustains that it is *only Europe* that has made the transition to a post-modern, post-historical age, while the United States of America remains "stuck in history": a history *still* made up of places, nation-states and, above all, a guiding role for military power. It is also a history *still* made up of radical alterities that must be defeated, of menacing "outsides" that threaten American and Western supremacy.

Robert Kagan's violent call to arms has enjoyed significant support among Washington's conservative elite, while raising not a few European eyebrows. There

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are two reasons for which I believe it can serve as a useful point of departure for a discussion of the controversial geographies of *Empire*. First, Kagan's article offers an interesting perspective on the new global politics in the aftermath of September 11th ("A year on", 2002) and, especially, a pioneering theorisation of shifts in the American geopolitical vision ("America's Security Strategy," 2002; Booth and Dunne, 2002). Adopting languages and concepts that are unabashedly imperialist in tone (Colley, 2002), Kagan traces global geographies that appear to confute those envisioned by Hardt and Negri, prompting the question whether the Empire theorised within the volume has, indeed, been accomplished — or whether it is regressing, perhaps irreversibly. The wide diffusion of Kagan's piece also highlights, however, a second question worthy of reflection: the adoption of certain metaphors, popularised by *Empire's* astonishing success. In recent months, the book has been contemporaneously invoked *both* as a new anti-capitalist metanarrative (for example, by some factions of the Global Social Forum — see Occone, 2002; Vecchi, 2002), while also examined with growing interest by a significant portion of the American conservative establishment — the attention afforded the volume and its authors by *Time* magazine is just one indication of this (see the comment by Vattimo, 2001), as is the recent popularity of the term (Empire) among Washington pundits to describe U.S. foreign policy in the months and years to come (Tonello, 2001).

Empire is certainly an important and complex work. It weaves a broad metanarrative, adopting the *globe* rather than the *map* as a guiding geographical metaphor in order to re-codify the world and its processes. It is a work that offers many potentially intriguing theoretical challenges for geographers; I will limit myself to but a few of these in the limited space of this piece. I would like to focus my comments especially on two broad questions: the first centres on the geographical implications of the disappearance of the "outside" theorised by Hardt and Negri; the second looks to the consequences of the Bush administration's "war on terror" on the accomplishment of Empire, noting the ways in which the ontological shift in transatlantic relations posited by many American conservatives (see, for example, Fukuyama, 2002; Kagan, 2002) can offer a potentially interesting geo-political re-interpretation of this transition.

We Have Never Been ... Outsiders

We should be done once and for all with the search for an outside, a standpoint that imagines a purity for our politics.

Although modern sovereignty emanated from Europe, however, it was born and developed in large part through Europe's relationship with its outside, and particularly through its colonial project and the resistance of the colonized.

In a post-modern world all phenomena and forces are artificial, or, as some might say, part of history. The modern dialectic of inside and outside has been replaced by a play of degrees and intensities, of hybridity and artificiality.

It seems as if there is no place left to stand, no weight to any possible resistance, but only an implacable machine of power.

Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (2001, 45, 70, 187-188, and 323)

According to Hardt and Negri, we have entered a post-modern world, a world that no longer relies upon the construction of a constitutive “outside” around which all identity claims and strategies of domination are based. It is wrong and misleading, the authors argue, to continue searching for such an “outside” within which to locate our imaginaries of alternative worlds, our search for “a purity in politics”, or for a space of evasion from the logic of capitalism. The new “whole” has no exterior, no clear and identifiable borders, no centre and no margins. The space of global capitalism produced by Empire no longer relies on a constant expansion of its horizons into the outside/other but, rather, on an intensification of the control and exploitation of its “inside” and its bio-political subjectivities.

I must admit that I find this global geography imagined by Hardt and Negri rather problematic, and marked by what appear to me to be some fundamentally *modern* contradictions. The modern project may have been, indeed, constituted through the invention and material and symbolic control of infinite “outsides.” Nonetheless, *even* the spaces of the modern colonial (that Hardt and Negri often refer to) were marked by hybridity and ambiguity, a point made forcefully by recent post-colonial critiques (see, among others, Mitchell, 1988, 2000; Rabinow, 1989; Morton, 2000).

The narratives of the world produced by modern geographical thought itself relied precisely upon this dichotomy of an exterior/interior (Dematteis, 1985; Farinelli, 1992, Zanetto, 1991). As Timothy Mitchell (1988) has argued, it was the modern “metaphysics of representation” that allowed for a conflation of the epistemological and ontological fields, framing the paradox underlying the entire modern project (for a critical analysis of this paradox in geography, see Farinelli, 1990). With the advent of post-modern and post-structuralist reflection what disappears is *not* the “outside” – which *never* really existed in the form imagined, for it was merely a rhetorical device that bolstered the modern project – but rather that “special effect” of modernity that allowed us to locate ourselves through a highly sophisticated exoticised and often violent geography of “outsides.” Yet although the modern “effect” may be dead and buried within geography and the social sciences more broadly, this does not mean that the capitalist economy has stopped producing territorial “insides” and “outsides” – or that “other” cognitive spaces no longer exist (perhaps not “pure” in Hardt and Negri’s sense, but still, nonetheless, “other”); spaces from which to imagine alternatives. The idea that there exists an exhaustive metaphorical and material space within which we are all inexorably immersed – “Empire” to use the authors’ words – on the one hand risks heralding the end of modernity (including the end of the “values” of a first mode of modernity such as “a tendency towards democratic politics, posing humanity and desire in the centre of history” (Hardt and Negri, 2001, 69-74). On the other, it risks elevating (and even celebrating) the sublimation of a second mode of modernity “that poses a transcendent constituted power against an immanent power, order against

desire” (Hardt and Negri, 2001, 74). This is the face of modernity that the authors radically contest — and yet they maintain what is, perhaps, its most repressive legacy from a geographical point of view: the cartographic ideal of a finite space, of an already-accomplished and bounded world (albeit networked and characterised by mobile internal boundaries); a metanarrative, an omnicomprehensive gaze, a single global cognitive mapping. The globe is, after all, also a *measure* of the world. It is an “interior” that forgets its nature as such. An Empire that is everything and everywhere, that allows for agency only within its categories and spaces is all too similar to a (modern) cartographic nightmare of a world in which “the system” (read: Empire) engulfs even its critique; a system whose reproduction is assured for there is no metaphorical or physical space imaginable outside of it. Is it not simply an *extreme* form of the modern, systemic geography of the world that has now transferred its imaginaries from map to globe, in a search for increasingly “perfect” models?

In a roundtable debate on *Empire* organized by the Italian journal *Micromega* (featuring, among others, Toni Negri), Salvatore Veca questioned whether by accepting the idea of Empire, do we not resign ourselves to a unitary vision and representation of the world where the only spaces of resistance are tactical ones (Esposito, Negri and Veca 2001). If we believe in the power of representations also in *constructing* the world, does not the vision presented in *Empire* — and, above all, its prescriptions for political praxis — rather than liberating the multitudes from the illusion of an “external” space of resistance and spurring them on to confront the Empire with their bio-power, does it not simply contribute to further strengthen the feelings of powerlessness and anguish of a world with no way out?

Counter Empire

That which unites Europe and America is much more — both in quantity as well as in quality — than that which divides them. And yet the divide that is opening is alarming. It is an ontological chasm. It is increasingly focused on the very nature of being.

Bernardo Valli (2002)

The US-European split reflects fundamental disagreements which won't go away [...] Yet an enormous gulf has opened up in American and European perceptions about the world, and the sense of shared values is increasingly frayed. Does the concept of the 'west' still make sense in the first decade of the 21st century?

Francis Fukuyama (2002)

As is often the case with works that attempt to offer metanarratives and holistic visions of the world (see Rovatti, 2002), *Empire* relies upon a series of simplifications that are troubling for a geographer. For one, the disappearance of an “outside” should have also erased from the vocabulary of the Empire (both the “really-existing” one as well as the one described in the book) a series of geographic “objects” such as America, Europe, Islam etc. As we all well know, there is no such thing as “Europe”

— there are multiple visions and geographies of Europe, diverse and often contradictory among them, above and beyond the many places within which these diverse visions are produced. And although there may be an “official” vision of Europe produced by the institutions of the European Union, this vision too is highly contested and certainly does not allow us to assume Europe as taken-for-granted (for a discussion of some of these debates see Amin, 2002).

Similarly, there is no singular and monolithic political and geographical subject called “America.” To assume, for example, that the geopolitical vision of the Bush administration coincides with “America” is both ingenious as well as rife with contradictions (see, for example, Brecher, 2002 and Smith, 2001). To argue that Empire is not the same thing as the United States (as the authors of *Empire* affirm) while at the same time *continuing* to think within broad geographical “containers” is contradictory. It maintains a geopolitical vision *still* based within cartographic logics: a vision of territory as block, as bounded entity (just as the idea of the disappearing outside presumes that there once existed a definable, mappable “inside”). The continuing presence of a cartographic imagination confutes the authors’ affirmations that “the topography of power no longer has to do primarily with spatial relations but is inscribed, rather, in the temporal displacements of subjectivities” (Hardt and Negri, 2001, 319), or that “economic geography and political geography both are destabilized in such a way that the boundaries among the various zones are themselves fluid and mobile” (p. 253).

What we are faced with, indeed, is a troubling and contradictory geography: on the one hand, apparently characterised by a loss of spatial categories and by territorial fluidity; on the other — as in the Pyramid of Global Constitution — structured within an ultra-modern geopolitical stratification composed of A-, B-, and C-rank nation states and international organisations. If the birth of Empire requires new vocabularies to narrate the global space, it certainly cannot continue to adopt, in entirely unproblematic fashion, such broad, modern, geographical containers. This is perhaps one of the points in the book that could have greatly benefited from dialogue with recent geographical literature in order to develop in much more nuanced fashion its reading of the geopolitics and constitution of Empire.

My second point of contention — this one more explicitly political — centres on the fact that the de-territorialised Empire described in the book appears to be crumbling today under the combined weight of terrorist attacks, American nationalist propaganda, the severe limitations placed on the freedoms of movement and expression (see “Civil Liberties” 2002), the return of bloc-thinking, and the rhetoric of “either with us or against us”:

The notion of a networked global empire, freed of geographical boundaries, and spatial differences — a decentralized and deterritorialized empire which ‘establishes no territorial centres of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers’ (Hardt and Negri, 2001, xii) — has surely collapsed with the same finality as the World Trade Center (Smith, 2001, 636).

At the same time, however, the Empire described by Hardt and Negri does, indeed, mirror many characteristics of the new American imperial dream, from the “war on terror” to the “axis of evil” (Bush, 2002; *America’s Security Strategy*, 2002). The concept of a “just war” (Hardt and Negri, 2001, 12) is present in many of the Bush administration’s pronouncements — although the probable/impending invasion of Iraq does suggest that even this moral justification may soon become obsolete; intervention becomes “global policing”, with the FBI and American “experts” running to the aid of local governments around the world, wherever the terrorist threat manifests itself. The world becomes a space gripped by permanent crisis: a global territory always and everywhere (potentially) in need of pacification: “Today the enemy, just like war itself, comes to be at once banalized (reduced to an object of routine police repression) and absolutized (as the Enemy, an absolute threat to the ethical order)” (Hardt and Negri, 2001, 12).

As perceptive as the above description may be, we are faced today with a series of American global strategies that not only shed doubt on the successful realisation of Empire (in the fashion imagined by Hardt and Negri) but that, increasingly, appear to be heading in a rather different direction. What Empire does the Bush administration have in mind? Is the war on terror actually a sign of a *retreat* from the realisation of Empire? Is it a return to modernity? A way to militarise its crisis? Does not the unilateral turn of the U.S. administration over the past two years negate *the very principles* of Empire (based within a recognition of global law and order as prescribed by international organisations)? Does not the U.S. administration’s decision to withdraw from the Kyoto protocol and from the anti-ballistic-missile treaty, its failure to ratify the Rio pact on biodiversity, its reactionary opposition to the ban on landmines, the biological warfare convention and the creation of the international criminal court, its progressive delegitimation of the United Nations and its new vision of NATO’s world role — do not all of these actions fundamentally undermine the realisation of Empire’s global geography? Are we not being faced, perhaps, with an attempt to create a *counter*-Empire, characterised by a militarised globalisation and monolithic imperialism — a far cry from the domination of a biopolitical system of uncertain boundaries and high mobility that Hardt and Negri describe — and invite us to combat “from the inside”?

A final question raised by the book centres on another crucial issue — at least from my Italian perspective. Is the European project an integral part of — or an alternative — to the constitution of Empire? Is the European Union a “post-modern”, “post-historical” laboratory for new forms of capitalism and new conceptions of sovereignty? This is, after all, Robert Kagan’s (2002) caustic suggestion — but also the hope of many European intellectuals. Or is it simply a first periphery of the Empire — as the authors of *Empire* seem to suggest, to my mind? Many Europeans (and not only) see the Union’s attempts to recreate itself as a strong (geo)political subject (with all the shortcomings and weaknesses of this enterprise) as a “last stand” of sorts, the last remaining “hole” in the net, the last possible “outside” to global neo-liberal capitalism: an “outside” that may be more ideal(ised) than real, but one in which the welfare state *still* offers some protection, in which genetically modified foods and the

death penalty are (still) banned, in which the bombs of Empire do not (yet) dictate absolute law.² Why is it that right now so many Europeans fear the Empire, if they are, according to Hardt and Negri, a constitutive part of it?

[C]lose friends have objected both from a European perspective and from a Chinese perspective that this claim that Empire has no outside and that the US is not its centre has taken away from them the possibility of conceiving an alternative. The Europeans hope that the construction of a united Europe can form a political alternative to the power of the USA, an outside to challenge its global hegemony, and the Chinese similarly conceive of China or an East Asian block as a possible democratic alternative to US domination. When we cease to conceive the USA as the hegemonic power, however, and claim there is no outside to Empire, then the foundation under any such regional alternatives becomes suddenly precarious. This is a very interesting question and one that deserves serious consideration. (Hardt et al., 2002, 180)

The declaration with which I have chosen to open this piece has been reiterated in recent months by many conservative American commentators, noting the cowardice and weakness of “the Europeans” (see, for example, Dershowitz, 2002). Such remarks have been met with growing unease — if not anger — on the part of commentators on this side of the Atlantic, particularly with regard to the increasingly arrogant unilateralism of the Bush administration. Both sides now proclaim an ontological divide, and question the idea of a unitary “West.” Such a scenario differs fundamentally from the world described within the pages of *Empire*. The winds of war blowing in recent months confirm only in part Hardt and Negri’s perceptive prognoses on the constitution of Empire; they signal, rather, new reactionary geographies that express only the Empire’s *most violent* characteristics.

If the new global capitalism does, indeed, rely on the reproduction of bio-power within fluid and open spaces, free of the constraints of the national state (as Hardt and Negri sustain), what we are witnessing today is perhaps nothing else if not a militarised attempt to *combat* such new forms of accumulation and to install/restore an imperial regime exquisitely modern in its mapping of the world and its control through censure and the continuous threat of strategic warfare. I wonder, then, if such a militarisation of Empire will not, ultimately, strangle the creativity of immaterial labour that (according to Hardt and Negri) is constitutive of Empire?

² By way of illustration, it would be important to note here the powerful role played by Europe — or, better yet, the *ideal* of Europe, as a space of rights, social and economic well-being, political and cultural freedom — both in the candidate countries of Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans, but also in North Africa. For these “outsiders” of the Empire, Europe represents the hope of an alternative project to that offered by American capital.

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